**Intersectional Inequality of middle-class Palestinian women in the Israeli labor market**

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This study examines the mechanisms that create a paradox of marginality among middle-class Arab-Bedouin[[1]](#endnote-1) professional women in Israel by applying an intersectional analysis of their everyday professional life. It shows that the paradox of their marginality – despite their possessing high educational capital in their society, comparable to that of highly educated professional Jewish (men and women) and Arab-Bedouin male colleagues – is reproduced through the differential validation of embodied cultural capital based on women’s cultural roles solely as a symbol of their professional inferiority. The study indicates that when their professional capital intersects with other power axes within the public sphere – for example, ethnicity/racism, gender, religious norms and tribalism – it is not accorded recognition or legitimacy by male Arab-Bedouin professionals or by Jewish professionals, colleagues and clients, thus giving rise to representational intersectionality.

Most research on Arab women at work primarily attributes their lack of participation in the labour market to quantitative factors in two frames (see Yonai and Krauss, 2010): (1) Cultural, in which Bedouin economic stratification has been structured within a modernistic cultural frame that gives rise to permanent disparities between ‘backward’ Arab-Bedouin culture and ‘modern’ Israeli culture. This perceived dichotomy perpetuates differences and engenders a legitimate discourse in which purported cultural inferiority is blamed for Arab-Bedouins’ ability to adjust to labour market demands. (2) Institutional, according to which Israeli institutions and policy are responsible for these women’s inequality in the labour market.

Addressing these two frames alone, however, overlooks multiple intersecting mechanisms of control that could be revealed in an intersectional analysis of Arab-Bedouin women’s everyday experiences as middle-class professionals. In contrast to the literature focusing on quantitative aspects of Arab-Bedouin working women, this paper directs attention inward, towards their everyday professional practices, examining the structuring of their professional marginality through their daily interaction with various actors in the professional sphere.

The study relies on *intersectionality as a theoretical and methodological* approach to inequality. Inequality is examined according to its ‘relational’ nature, perceiving modes of stratification across the board, shaping the entire social system in ‘processes that are fully interactive, historically co-determining and complex’ (Choo and Ferree, 2010: 129). The intersectional approach helps determine how multiple discriminatory systems create a complex configuration of inequalities that structure the relative positions of Arab-Bedouin professional women (see Hancock, 2007). The purpose of this analysis is to examine how various intersecting social divisions are subjectively experienced in Arab-Bedouin women’s daily professional lives in terms of inclusion and exclusion, discrimination and disadvantage.

intersectionality provides methodological tools for facilitating our understanding of how race, class, gender and other social divisions are theorised as lived realities and provides a complex ontology of real, useful knowledge that systematically reveals the everyday lives of professional Arab-Bedouin women who are simultaneously positioned in multiple structures of dominance and power (Mirza, 2009: 3). It is also important to determine which new categories might arise from analysis of a specific context (Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Instead of adhering to the essentialist approach that characterised research on Naqab Arab-Bedouin women, this study applies intra-categorical analysis, as proposed by McCall (2005), that calls for focused cross-analysis of a given social group and attempts to reveal an unmarked group – in this case the group of middle-class professional women. The group is not assessed as ‘non-normative’ vis-a-vis the dominant group as a standard. Rather, as Mirza (2009: 3) claims, I seek to ‘demonstrate the ways in which regulatory discursive power and privilege are “performed” or exercised in the everyday material world of socially constructed “Arab-Bedouin women”’.

The study focuses on 50 college-educated Arab-Bedouin women, both married with children and single, in their mid-20s to mid-30s, employed in the public sector in Arab-Bedouin localities and nearby Jewish towns. The population includes teachers, school counsellors, social workers, nurses, physicians, scientists, researchers, lecturers, attorneys, psychologists, executives and pharmacists who have been employed for the past 5–10 years

The group examined in this study is part of a developing population of middle-class privileged professional women compared with less educated Bedouin women and the vast majority that do not participate in the formal labour market. Although their salaries are higher than the minimum wage (~$1000/month) in Arab-Bedouin society and the average number of children they have (two to three children) is lower than the Arab-Bedouin average (7.1) (Negev Bedouin Statistical Data Book, 2010), they remain a marginal, reduced minority group within their society, accounting (in 2010–2011) for 9 per cent of the Arab sector population (Flug, 2012), 5 per cent of the Bedouin sector and 49.9 per cent of the Jewish sector (Ghara, 2015: 120).

the *findings* show that when working Arab-Bedouin women’s professional capital intersects with other power axes within the public sphere – ethnicity/racism, gender, religious norms and tribalism – they are not accorded recognition or legitimacy by male Arab-Bedouin workers or Jewish co-workers, colleagues and clients, thereby strengthening what Crenshaw (1989) calls representational intersectionality. Crenshaw (1993: 1283) explains representational intersectionality as the ‘cultural construction of marginal/black women’. In this case, representation is significant in providing a more thorough understanding of the mechanisms that replicate gender and racial hierarchies and thus intensify Black/minority women’s marginality. I demonstrate how actors in the multi-level professional sphere continue to reinforce this structured representational inferiority of Arab-Bedouin women by relying on ‘cultural’ orientalist markers of binary distinctions that seek to perpetuate women’s cultural roles in public space. Such discourse inevitably reinforces social power patterns which produces inequality against women in the labour market.

The intersection of these power structures is inherent in their common practice of clustering to block recognition of the professional capital that these women introduce into the public sphere, giving rise to the paradox of marginality of the professional middle class in Bedouin society. Intersectionality reveals the point at which these power structures intertwine and intersect and give rise to a multiple force that refuses to recognise women’s capital as professionals in all relevant spheres, causing clashes between this capital and the dominant power structures. The common denominator of these power structures is the operation of an apparatus of non-recognition of these women’s professional capital along all axes analysed.

This is the essence of the efficacy of intersectionality, as it uncovers covert layers of oppressive power mechanisms while revealing unmarked power structure categories (such as the tribal penalty discussed earlier). Non-recognition creates the paradox responsible for the ethno-economic marginality of professional women in the split labour market, as this professional group – which attempts to advance and develop despite its status as a small minority in Naqab Arab-Bedouin society – is in conflict with other power structures. The professional capital bears status and prestige that challenges the ethno-colonial and gender representation of women as perceived in both Israeli and collective Arab-Bedouin public discourse. Arab-Bedouin professional women who attempt to enter hegemonic spheres as equals (not only economically but also in terms of public consciousness), are liable to upset the symbolic triangular balance of ruling power within the minority to which they belong: they challenge the symbolic boundaries of ethno-colonial power relations (between the Arab minority and the Jewish majority), threaten gender power relations (between women and men in the working world) and undermine the tribal power of the collective in favour of individual-professional power which is also manipulated by colonial powers.

This study enriches literature on employment of women and minorities in four respects: first, the study problematises the chief category examined – professional women – regarding a priori assumption of a link between academic education and equal work participation. In the case at hand, there is a paradox between Arab-Bedouin women’s manifestation of the highest capital in their society – comparable to that of Arab-Bedouin professional men and Jewish men and women – and their marginalisation by these actors. Second, it reveals another mode of discrimination called tribal penalty, resulting from a clash between tribal and professional codes (reinforced by Israeli institutions), that has not been discussed in literature on minority and employment to date. This penalty not only endangers Arab-Bedouin professional women’s jobs but also places their clients (women and children) at risk. Third, it questions the advantages of ethnic economic enclaves for minority women by showing how unsafe this space is for professional women, who will be unable to manifest their professionalism to the fullest as tribal-patriarchal demands and threats penetrate this realm. Forth, it expands other studies (see Lawler,2005: 797) indicating that inequality in the labour market is not measured solely in economic terms but also in symbolic and cultural terms of representation and recognition. Non-recognition is expressed in repeated attempts by the power structures actors to regulate women in the public sphere by employing various cultural markers of differential distinctions, thereby replacing professional markers with ‘cultural’ markers, through which gaps between Arab and Jewish professionalism in Israel are preserved.

1. Arab-Bedouin are Palestinian citizens of Israel. the choice to define them Arab-Bedouin aims to emphasize their unique tribal structure that intersects with their marginality. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)