

The Working Group on the Status of Palestinian Women Citizens of Israel
مجموعة العمل حول وضع النساء الفلسطينة المواطنات في اسرائيل
קבוצת העבודה בעניין מעמד האישה הפלסטינית בישראל

Statement by
The Working Group on the Status of Palestinian Women Citizens of Israel
To the Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
On the Third Periodic Report from the Government of Israel,
With regard to Bedouin Women in the Negev/Naqab
July 5, 2005

Thank you, Madam Chair, for giving me the opportunity to speak to the Committee. My name is Hannan al-Sanna, and I work for the Sidreh Association, a member organization of Maan, the Union of Bedouin Women's organizations in the Naqab, which is part of the Working Group.

With specific reference to Article 14 of the Convention, I would like to elaborate on the multiple forms of discrimination Palestinian Bedouin women are faced with in the Naqab. In my statement, I will only introduce the major areas of concern, namely unrecognized villages, employment, education, and health.

1. Unrecognized Villages

About 140,000 Bedouin live in the Naqab, a desert area in southern Israel. Approximately half of this population lives in unrecognized villages – what the state refers to as "illegal villages". Accordingly, all construction in these villages is treated as subject to demolition. Moreover, the unrecognized villages are denied all public services, including water and electricity. The State pressures the inhabitants to move to the townships set up for the Bedouin population. This transfer plan is a gross violation of the Bedouins' rights as an indigenous population to pursue and foster their traditional lifestyle. Since 2001, at least 120 houses were demolished, and many crops were destroyed by aerial spraying and bulldozers. With respect to the Palestinian Bedouin women citizens of Israel, the State grossly violates Article 14 of the Convention, in addition to its disregard of most other Articles of CEDAW. Traditionally, Bedouin women played a central economic role within the family in agriculture, herding, and handcraft. Nowadays, Bedouin women are deprived of their status within the family because of the lack of land and cattle. It should further be noted that due to the State's denial to take responsibility for its citizens in the unrecognized villages, no official statistics are available on socio-economic indicators in these villages.

2. Employment

The unemployment rate among working-age Bedouin women reaches 85% in some localities – both recognized and unrecognized. Factors that inhibit economic activity include the lack of land, limited budgets, low levels of education, and lack of public transport. Seven out of the ten poorest localities in Israel are recognized Bedouin communities. We strongly recommend that immediate action is taken with regard to Article 4.1 of the Convention and General Recommendation No. 25 to provide remedies for the extreme disparities in access to labor for Bedouin women in the Naqab, including investment in traditional craftwork and small enterprises in the Bedouin villages. There are local women's organizations that currently employ 400 women artisans. With financial support, at least 1,000 women could find employment there.

3. Education

One of the main factors leading to the devastating economic situation among Bedouin women is the extreme low level of education. The estimated illiteracy rate among Bedouin women in some unrecognized villages is 85%. Moreover, drop-out rates among Bedouin girls are high, up to 77% among

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Bedouin girls. The first reason given by girls for dropping out is the long distance between their homes and schools. In the recognized localities, where secondary education is available, Bedouin girls in high school even outnumber the boys. On university level, the Ministry of Education offered 18 scholarships to Bedouin girls, however, one partner NGO of Maan, alone offered 150 scholarships in the past three years. We strongly recommend that immediate action is taken with regard to Article 4 of the Convention and General Recommendation No. 25 to provide remedies for the extreme disparities in access to education for Bedouin women in the Naqab, such as opening secondary schools in the unrecognized villages and offering more literacy projects in the Bedouin communities, according to the high demand among women.

4. Health

Discrimination with regard to access to health care is another major factor impacting on the lives of Bedouin women in the Naqab. Again, it needs to be noted that there are no statistics available, combining an ethnic with a gender breakdown. In 2000, infant mortality rate among the Palestinian Bedouin population in the Naqab was almost four times higher than that of the Jewish population. The State quotes marriages within the family as a main factor; however, we would like to maintain that 38% of Bedouin infant mortalities are due to malnutrition and environmental causes. Moreover, Bedouin women have limited access to health care during pregnancy. Therefore, we suggest that recommendations are made with regard to the provision of health care facilities and health education in the villages; services in Beer Sheva, the major town in the Naqab, are not accessible to rural women due to lack of public transport and publicity. In order to monitor developments, accurate, gender and ethnically disaggregated data have to be provided by the government.

I would like to conclude with our Working Group's position on Israel's presentation of its comprehensive plan for the Bedouin sector – also referred to as the Sharon Plan – as being designed for the common good of the Bedouin population. Firstly, we strongly disagree with Israel's denial of basic public services to its citizens by simply claiming that the Palestinian Bedouin choose to live in illegal villages – villages which in many cases predate the establishment of the State. Moreover, we find that resources earmarked for house demolitions and crop destruction do not qualify for the definition of "being for the common good" of that population. Finally, I would like to kindly ask the Committee to enquire about the "extensive resources allocated by the Government for providing the Bedouin living in the illegal villages with basic infrastructures and municipal services", as stated in its response to Issue No. 13.

Thank you very much for your attention.

The Working Group members are:

Adalah: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel – www.adalah.org

Al-Tufula: Pedagogical and Multipurpose Women's Center – www.tufula.org

Arab Association for Human Rights (HRA) – www.arabhra.org

Kayan: A Feminist Organization – www.kayan.org

Maan: The Union of Bedouin Women's Organizations in the Negev

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