

# The effect of forced transfer on Bedouin women

**בִּמְקוֹם بِمَكُوم BIMKOM**

מתכננים למען זכויות תכנון (ע"ר) מחפזות מן אגל חקוק התחפוט Planners for Planning Rights

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## Summary

Many Bedouin communities in Area C of the West Bank today are threaten with eviction and forced displacement from the areas they live in, and this forced transfer threatens to bring disaster upon them and deteriorate their already precarious situation. The main reason for the forced transfer and the expulsion of communities from the areas in which they have lived for decades is Israel's intention to realize its own interests in the West Bank: the establishment and expansion of settlements, the paving of roads, the establishment of infrastructure and the construction of "defence envelopes" (fences and walls) around Jewish settlements. One of the new sites intended to receive those being transferred, is the town of Nweima, which Israel plans to build north of Jericho. According to its plan, some 40 communities from three different tribes will be uprooted from where they currently live in the central West Bank and will be transferred to this planned densely populated locality.

This position paper examines the results of similar moves in the past, in which the state forcibly transferred the members of the Arab al-Rashaida tribe and later the members of the Arab al-Jahalin tribe to villages that were established especially for them. The paper also discusses the effects of the forced transfer on Bedouin women and girls who have been removed by Israel from their natural habitat, and on whom a new spatial and social reality has been imposed in recent decades.

Bedouin women suffer from double marginalisation, both outside the community and within it (Suleiman, 2002) : they are subject to a mechanism of military control with no ability to influence fundamental decisions about their fate, and they are also part of a traditional conservative society in which the status of women is not equal to that of men. In this respect, the failure to include them in fateful decisions serves to intensify the subjugation by the Israeli authorities. The forced transfer has harmed the women's lives in two ways: they are traditionally responsible for the management of flocks, and this roles has been lost due to the transition, such that their functioning has been adversely affected; changes in construction and building patterns in the new villages, which are characterised by high density, are not consistent with their social norms of privacy and the protection of women from exposure to men.

This position paper was written against the backdrop of Israel's plans to establish a new town north of Jericho - a town called Nweima - and to relocate some 2,000 families from several tribes within its limited area. Bimkom filed objections to the plans, in the name of 100 women from these tribes. The position paper is based on meetings and conversations with Bedouin women in the Judean Desert, who have been forcibly relocated in recent decades.





# 1. Introduction

One of the human rights recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) is the right to a residence: "Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state." (Article XIII). Bedouin women living in Area C in the West Bank face the threat that this basic right will be denied, as their communities are subject to constant threats: home demolitions, evictions and forced transfer, and restrictions on movement. Plans to forcibly displace thousands of Bedouin residents from the lands in which they live, and to concentrate them in restricted areas, negates their way of life, and seeks to enforce a lifestyle that is contrary to their character and culture.

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Bedouin women who have been displaced from their homes describe its impact on their lives. We bring here the words of women from the villages of Al Rashaida (Arab al-Rashaida tribe) and Al Jabal (Arab al-Jahalin tribe). Because of geopolitical barriers, these women are a minority that is somewhat isolated from other Palestinian communities, and therefore they are subject to a number of circles of oppression: in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict they are members of the weaker people, and in Palestinian society they are the weakest and the most isolated group. Manal Jahalin (a pseudonym), a young Bedouin woman describes the experience of eviction: "As a result of the eviction we were forced to come here. We were productive women of value and status, but today we have become a burden on society. All our rights have been taken from us, and we no longer produce anything. We supported our spouses and felt equal to the men, but today we have no value and no status, even with our husbands we have no status or value."

In response to the claim that living in the new village allows Bedouin woman to rest, Manal said:

"It is true that life in the village allows us physical rest, but it has put a great psychological burden on us. [...] The situation in which they have put us is very difficult. This life doesn't offer enough for our children or for us, and as a result all our social interactions have been damaged, so that even brothers quarrel with each other as a result of the crowded area we now live in."

Manal, who was born in 1983 and has seven children, lived with her family and with other families in the area on which the Ma'ale Adumim settlement was established and afterward expanded. In 1998, they were forcibly transferred to Al Jabal, and no one denied that this was done to allow Ma'ale Adumim to expand and to reduce the number of Bedouin in the area.



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## 2. Al Rashaida - background

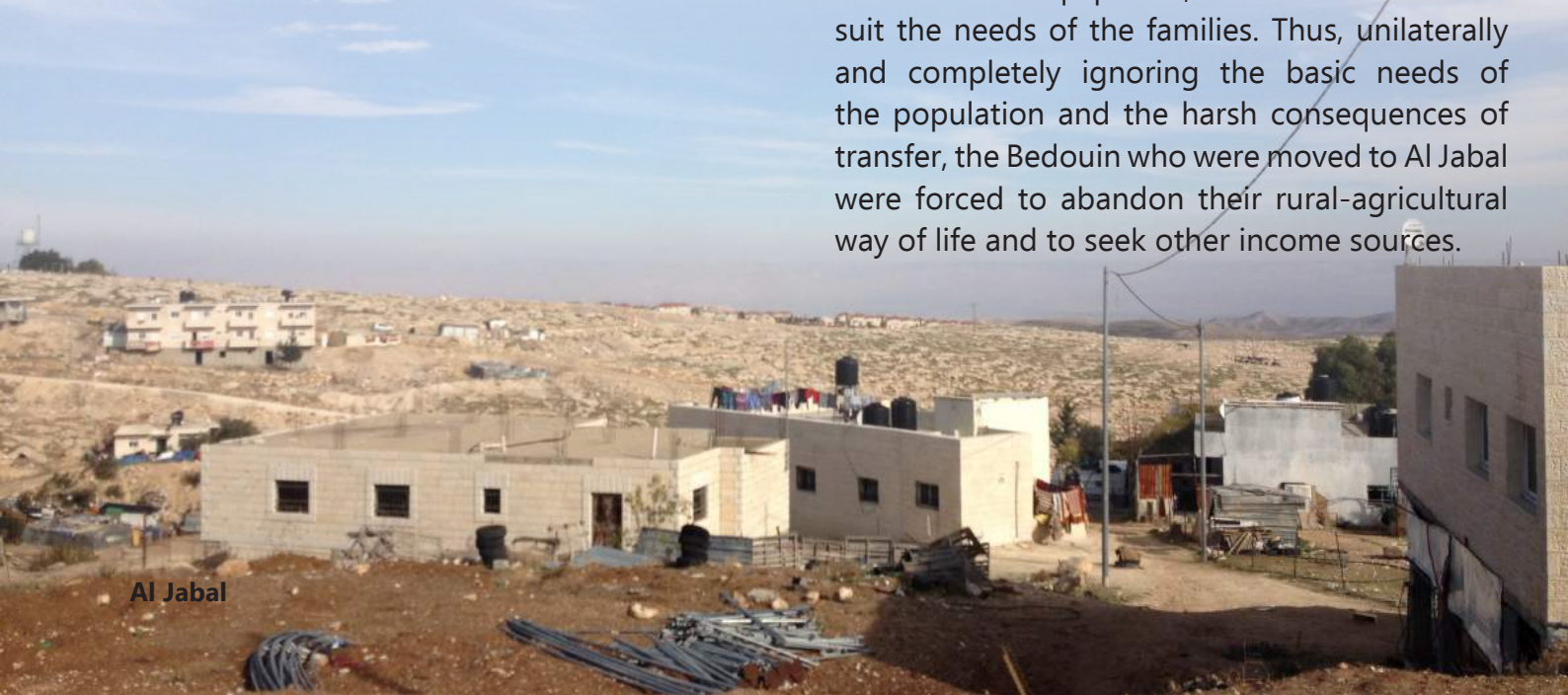
The members of the Arab al- Rashaida tribe used to live in the area of Ein Gedi and were expelled from it a few months after the outbreak of the 1948 war. The expulsion forced them to move to the "dira" lands, which they used to use for summer grazing, south-east of Bethlehem. After 1967, these lands were declared a closed military zone. Although entry to the area was forbidden, the residents continued make use of the land until the military government allocated them other lands in which it was planned to concentrate the tribe and thus reduce their dispersal throughout the area. The residents were forcibly relocated to the area of Khirbet al-Menia , southeast of Bethlehem - a place completely inappropriate for their lifestyle - and overnight they were cut off from the lands that they had been familiar with and from which they had earned their livelihood. The move created difficulties and friction - among themselves, and between them and their neighbours, residents of Sa'ir, on whose land they had been placed. A few years later, the Arab al- Rashaida tribe decided to leave the area and force the army to accept their desire to return to their lands. They were willing to compromise and agreed to return to only part of the land, in accordance with a plan that would designate a defined and regulated area. Negotiations were held throughout 1980 to 1983. Meanwhile, the tribe left Khirbet al-Menia and moved to the Hasasa area, where they now dwell in a village named for the tribe of Arab al- Rashaida.

## 3. Al Jabal - Background

Another case of forced relocation was the transfer of members of the Arab al-Jahalin tribe from the Ma'ale Adumim area, and their concentration in Al Jabal, a village that Israel planned on the land of Abu Dis west of Ma'ale Adumim settlement in order to enable the settlement's expansion. Al Jabal is a semi-urban locality to the east of Ezariya village and adjacent to the Abu Dis dump site. The forced transfer to Al Jabal was made in three waves between 1997 and 2007, and the final displacement was preceded by threats, arrests and attempts to demolish buildings.

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The demolitions and evictions were made only a few days after a Supreme Court decision approved their displacement from the area. Their belongings were transferred to the area of Al Jabal in containers placed near the plots that had been allocated to the families. These containers, which had no windows or fans, served not only as dwellings but also for cooking and storage of household equipment, and their size did not suit the needs of the families. Thus, unilaterally and completely ignoring the basic needs of the population and the harsh consequences of transfer, the Bedouin who were moved to Al Jabal were forced to abandon their rural-agricultural way of life and to seek other income sources.



Al Jabal



## 4. A description of women's life and role in the community before the displacement

Bedouin communities are arranged in clusters of homes, and the physical proximity of clusters to one another is determined by familial-tribal proximity. A Bedouin community may have several clusters which share a common space, and have mutual inter-relationships.

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The livelihood of Bedouin families was largely dependent on the herding of sheep and goats, and the women did most of the work related to the flocks: caring for the animals, milking and producing milk products, in addition to sales and marketing. Some of them went to market themselves to sell the dairy products to regular customers or distributors. In these roles, they shaped the social fabric of the tribe and contributed to its development. They were the backbone of the family and an important factor in the economic structure of Bedouin society, while at the same time benefiting the Palestinian economy as a whole.



Bedouin women lived in the heart of the desert in harsh conditions: significant physical effort was expended in exhausting work in desert weather, especially in the absence of connection to infrastructure, also causing psychological difficulties. These stresses were dispelled in meetings and conversations between the women who drew social support from one another, and moving about in nature contributed to alleviating the pain and burden. Walking with the flock and to and from the water cisterns was second nature to them, and moving from place to place according to seasonal and other needs enabled them to deviate from their routine.



The altered kitchen of the Kurshan Family, near Nabi Musa.



## 5. The change in economic situation and its impact on women's roles

In meetings with the women, it was evident that the forced transfer most severely affected their unique, traditional way of life and the main source of income for the women and their families - herding of sheep and goats. Two factors have caused the decimation of the families' herds: the lack of grazing areas, and the sale of flocks to finance the construction of houses in the new locality. In the absence of herds and without a permanent economic substitute, many families have been deprived of the economic security they had in the past, and women are deprived of their limited economic independence: the ability to take care of their own needs and the needs of the home. In other words, while in the past they had income from the dairy products they prepared and sold, they now lack income and depend on men for their livelihood. One woman described the situation in these words: "This situation [is] like being in prison, the man may or may not bring in [money], everything depends on him."

As noted, in the past the economic burden was shared among all members of the family and the women were productive, but after forced displacement and with the loss of the flocks, women have lost their economic role and no longer have the possibility of participating in the working world.

*"This situation [is] like being in prison, the man may or may not bring in [money], everything depends on him."*

One woman said:

Nowadays I feel bored. In the past I used to wake up before sunrise, and despite the hard work I enjoyed it. Today I wake up for the sunrise prayer and then go back to sleep and wake up again around 7:30. There was something beautiful in the exhaustion we used to have, the very fact that we created and produced something made us happy.



Another said:

We had everything out there [in the desert], we felt that we were doing something, we always had something that helped us pass the time, we used to sit with a neighbour, we used to bake, and milk the flocks, today we don't talk to the neighbours. [...] In the past we would do everything by hand. Mentally, I don't feel good, most of the time I don't do anything, my husband brings everything, and if I go to the market in Ezariya then it's something special.

Another aspect of the change in the situation of women in the new villages is that the transition to permanent housing in solidly built houses has changed their way of life and isolated them in the domestic sphere.

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One of the women said: "Work is healthy and better than sitting still, but nowadays we suffer from diseases. During the rest-times we would gather together, but not anymore."

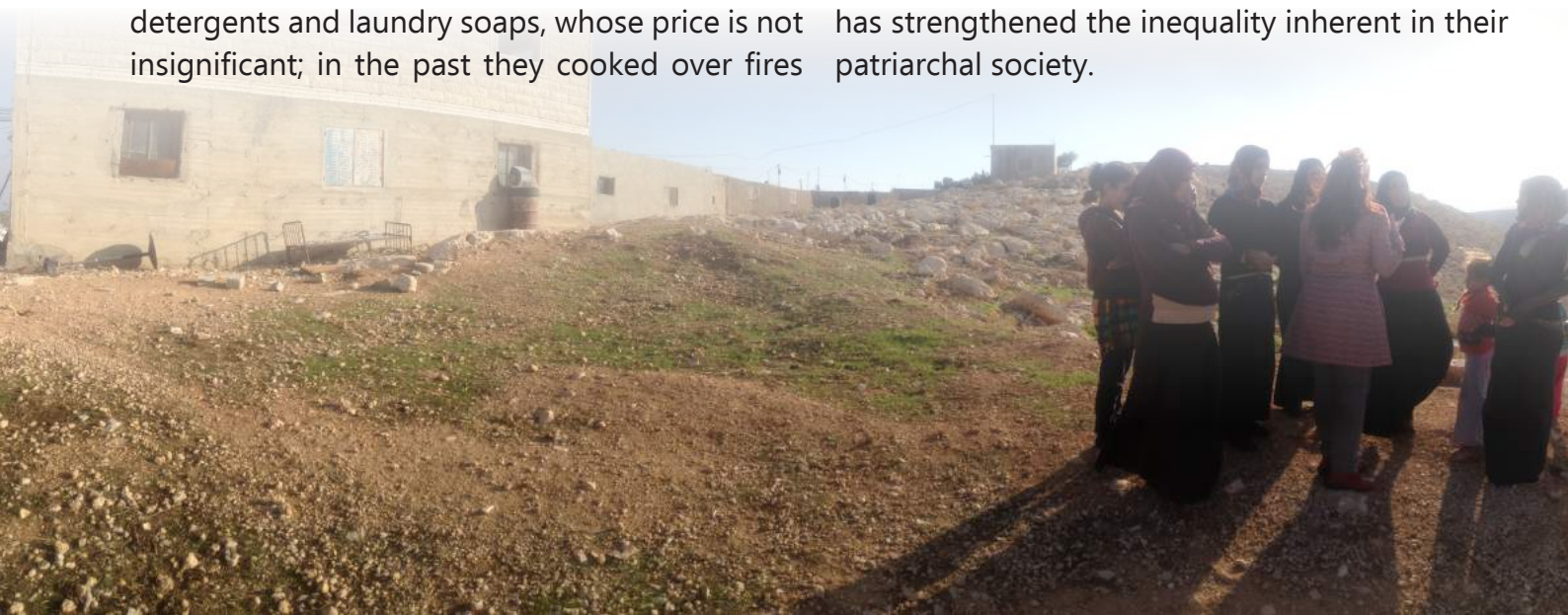
Adaptation to modern life has increased household expenses: In the past, they only bought such things as olive oil soap and dishwashing liquid, while today they use a wide variety of detergents and laundry soaps, whose price is not insignificant; in the past they cooked over fires

and collected wood from nature, while today of necessity they cook with gas or electricity which must be paid for.

In summary, although in the past, in addition to housework without modern conveniences, women took on the demanding tasks of caring for the flocks, women feel that their lives have changed for the worse, since the work of grazing and dairy production gave them status, their husbands and family valued them, and their self-esteem was high. In male-dominated Bedouin society, women gained satisfaction from their productivity and their contribution to the family.

*"Work is healthy and better than sitting still, but nowadays we suffer from diseases. During the rest-times we would gather together, but not anymore."*

The loss of productivity in the new villages has thus also upset the balance between men and women in terms of work and livelihood, and created tensions between them, especially in view of the increased economic expenses necessitated by modern life. Moreover, the forced transfer has not provided women with any alternative to their previous status. The place to which they were transferred against their will made their professional expertise redundant but offered no substitute, and therefore their perceived worth in the eyes of others, and in their own eyes, has changed for the worse. Thus, the damage to their ability to contribute to supporting their family, and their effective removal from the family structure (which is a type of business structure) has strengthened the inequality inherent in their patriarchal society.





## 6. Building patterns in the new villages and their implications for women

The transfer has enforced on the Bedouin not only uprootedness from the known and familiar lands, but also forced a fundamental change in the pattern of construction and in spatial-behavioural codes that were inseparable from their way of life. The main difference between the construction patterns of the Bedouin village

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in open areas and those of the semi-urban Bedouin village, is the reduction of living space and the setting of land designations with rigidly defined boundaries. The flexibility necessary for the Bedouin lifestyle has been lost, and has been replaced by rules that dictate a lifestyle incompatible with the socio-cultural values of the Bedouin.

The women who have been transposed into a new spatial reality paid a heavy price in losing the open space and the freedom to walk around in the family compound and meet with family members while sharing daily tasks. Today, due to the density of house construction, and the proximity to public spaces and to the public road system, women rarely leave their homes in the new villages, and when they leave, they avoid walking on the main roads, rather seeking side-streets and concealed ways in order to walk freely and feel protected from strangers. In both villages, women complained that the proximity of the houses to each other prevents them from leaving their homes, and that the spatial layout chains them and makes them feel that they are in prison or in a refugee camp. One woman said: "I feel shackled in the house, in the desert there is more freedom. [...] It was hard for me to get used to living in the house that we built in Al Jabal, unlike the house in which we lived in nature. It's like taking someone out of town and forcing them to live in nature, they're likely to have difficulties."





Another woman said:

"The physical proximity between the homes, and the lack of open spaces has caused a lack of privacy which can lead to disagreements between neighbours, and makes people wary of one another. It's made a rift in our social interactions – people prefer to avoid problems or unwanted disagreements. Now people only visit each other for parties or events."

The plans prepared for the Arab al-Rashaida and the Arab al-Jahalin were made according to the authorities' concepts of space, without

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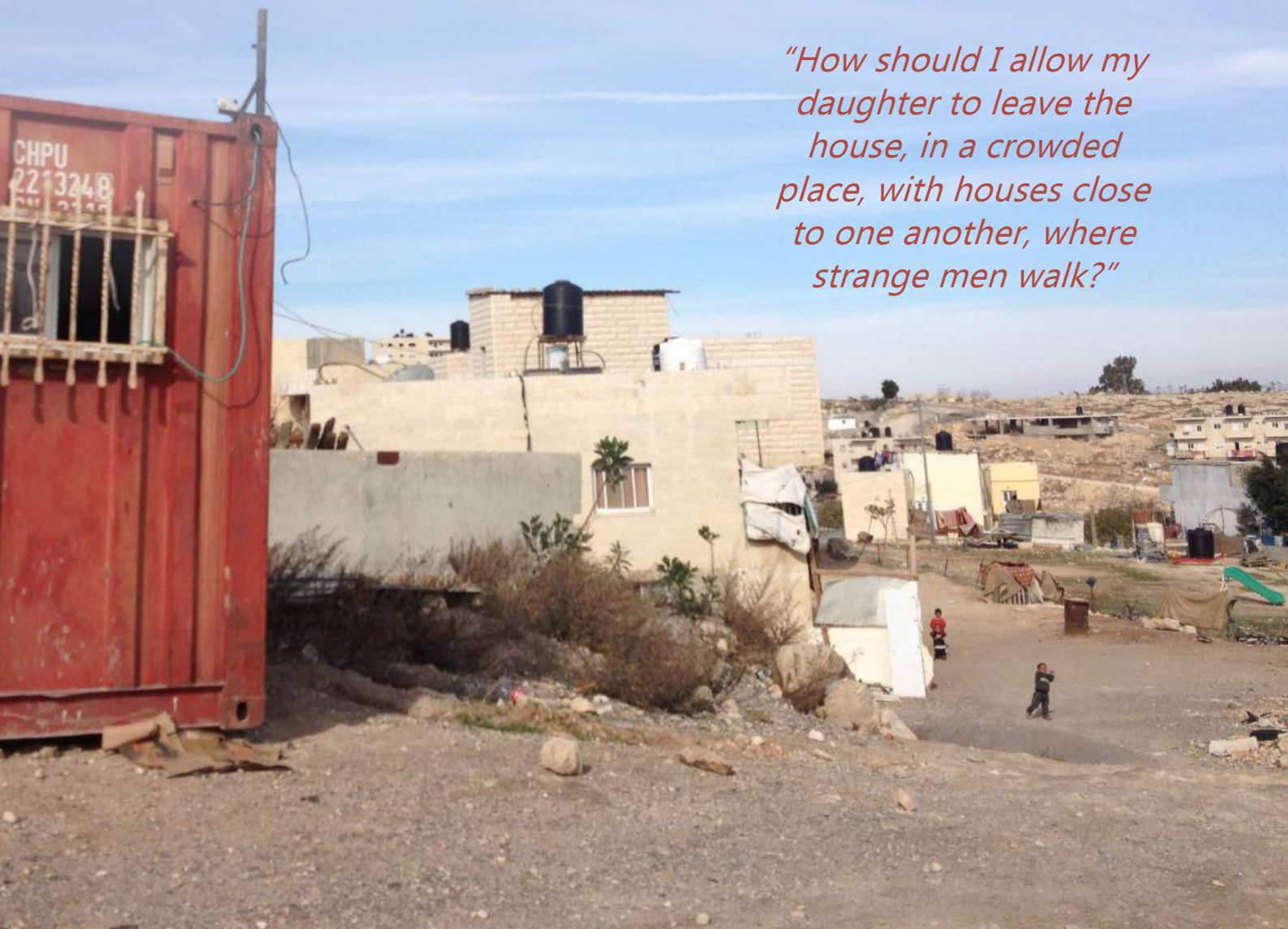
consulting the community members and without any consideration of the unique lifestyle and cultural components of Bedouin society.

The subdivision of the land and the zoning were formulated in line with urban norms which are completely foreign to their lifestyle and culture.

The new plans provided the women with no grazing areas or protected open spaces where they could move freely and meet with family members, and these new construction patterns harmed each age-group in different ways: the restrictions on young women are far more stringent than those on older women. Abu Ismail, the mukhtar of a village whose residents' lives are about to change following the establishment of the town of Nweima, said: "How should I allow my daughter to leave the house, in a crowded place, with houses close to one another, where strange men walk?"

This is a warning signal of what awaits women in light of the changes planned by the State of Israel: the double suppression of social norms and the Israeli authorities.

*"How should I allow my daughter to leave the house, in a crowded place, with houses close to one another, where strange men walk?"*





## Conclusion

A recognized village has advantages that cannot be ignored: modernization and improvement in infrastructure and services. Today, women no longer have to carry water or wood on their backs, many of their tasks are lightened by electric appliances, and the new villages have clinics and other services that make women's lives easier. The establishment of educational institutions within the Bedouin areas has opened up the possibility of schooling and even paved the way for higher and academic education, but it is hard to say that these changes have benefited women significantly. Now, as in the past, men determine women's freedom of movement and their way of life, and they follow traditional social norms that do not allow women to freely choose or make decisions about their lives.

Moreover, despite the advantages of modernization, forced transfer has affected women more than any other group. The loss of the flocks has made their expertise in managing the pastoral-agricultural production system unnecessary, and their economic role within the family has ceased to be primarily productive and has become that of consumers. Because of these extreme changes, the move to the new villages has required greater adaptability of women who had previously played traditional roles in rural areas. Women in families that had no choice but to give up their flocks because of the forced transfer have become dependent on men for their livelihood, and the generation of women who were born and who married in the rural communities has had their main responsibilities, which defined their family roles, taken from them. Even the younger generation is not necessarily successfully in integrating into the labour market because they are faced with two high barriers: from the outset they are bound by the constraints of their traditional society; and in the structure of the new village, where there are no open spaces in which women can move freely, they have no privacy except in their own homes, and therefore they are forced to close themselves in and hide there. These changes have naturally led to restrictions on movement and the women have lost their independence.

The plans currently under way, which threaten to move Bedouin communities to towns like Nweima, are not essentially different from the plans of the villages of Al Jabal and Al Rashaida, and their impact on women's lives may be even more negative, since it can be estimated that the large scale and living conditions outlined in these plans will only exacerbate their hardships. Therefore, we strongly reject any attempt to forcibly displace Bedouin communities from the places in which they now live.

**Their living conditions are indeed difficult, but this need not be the case. A way must be found to improve their living conditions, but any change must be made at their own pace and without coercion, and planning process must be carried out in coordination with them, while providing a platform for the hidden voices - the voices of women, which are too seldom heard.**