

Reconstruction: The voices of Bedouin-Arab women on the demolition of their homes in the unrecognized villages of the Negev¹

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ABSTRACT

Forty five Bedouin-Arab villages in the Negev are deemed illegal settlements by the State of Israel; thus, the residents' homes are subject to demolition. In 2007, more than 200 buildings were destroyed. Based on in-depth interviews, the study investigates the impact of house demolitions on Bedouin-Arab women. It shows that, related to socioeconomic and sociocultural factors, the family's home is of essential meaning for the lives and identity of Bedouin-Arab women. The state policy of house demolitions therefore inflicts terror and severe trauma on women, exacerbated by the manner in which these demolitions are executed. Moreover, women bear the main burden of rebuilding homes and family life. The forms of resistance that Bedouin-Arab women find—despite limited resources and contradictory gender norms—strongly reflect their role as mothers. They thus transform alienation and enmity against a state that is perceived as discriminatory, oppressive and hostile into constructive forces of caretaking and rebuilding.

Introduction

It's not just the destruction of the home; it's the destruction of humanity and the individual. It is destruction of life, future and dreams.... The individual whose house is destroyed is oppressed and abused, her foundation is destroyed. There is no life after a house demolition, no family like there was before. It is possible that the family is crushed because it lost the most important and most basic [thing] (Woman No. 4 from anonymous writings by the participants of a women's group; cited in Almi, Forthcoming).

Forty five villages in the Negev, inhabited mostly by Bedouin-Arab citizens, are not recognized by the State of Israel as legal settlements, even though they existed prior to the state's establishment. The authorities pursue the goal of making the villages' residents move to designated government-planned townships and turning their lands

into (Jewish) urban development, agricultural or industrial areas or military zones. House demolitions are a violent means to force the Bedouin-Arab communities off their lands, compared to other means of “subtle coercion,” like the denial of infrastructure and even basic services—e.g., water, sewage, electricity, roads and transportation, not to mention social and health services (Almi, 2003; Yiftachel, 2002). According to non-governmental organizations the state has demolished nearly 500 buildings in the so-called “unrecognized villages” since 2001, including homes, businesses, agricultural structures and mosques. According to the Regional Council for the Unrecognized Villages in the Negev (RCUV), the Negev Coexistence Forum (Dukium) and Human Rights Watch (2008), 227 buildings were destroyed in 2007 alone.² These were not simply illegal structures; they were the homes and personal spaces of individuals and families.

The goal of our study was to investigate how, from a human and health rights perspective, house demolitions in the unrecognized villages violate women’s basic rights and impact their well-being. For this purpose, we conducted in-depth interviews with residents of the unrecognized villages who have experienced the destruction of their homes or whose homes are threatened by pending demolition orders. The interviews addressed the specific meaning of the home for Bedouin-Arab women and the repercussions of Israel’s house demolition policy. Our data and analysis are additionally based on Orly Almi’s (Forthcoming) research on the impact of house demolitions on the residents of the unrecognized villages. We expected to find that house demolitions inflict a unique and especially severe burden on Bedouin-Arab women, related to socioeconomic, sociocultural and sociopolitical processes and norms.

The opening sections of this paper provide background in terms of the position of international and Israeli legislation on the right to housing and on house demolitions; data illustrating the magnitude of Israel’s house demolition policy in the unrecognized villages; a brief description of the current socioeconomic and sociocultural context of a woman’s life in an unrecognized village; and a review of existing literature on woman-specific implications of house demolitions. Subsequent sections provide our analyses of testimonies from affected persons³ in the unrecognized villages. Our analysis was mainly guided by key issues as they emerged from our interviews: the meaning of a home; life under the threat of a pending demolition order; the act of demolition and its aftermath; physical and emotional trauma; and resources for resilience, resistance and reconstruction.

Background

The right to housing in international and national legislation

The human right to adequate housing, which is thus derived from the right to an adequate standard of living, is of central importance for the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights (General Comment 4(1), UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1991).

The right to housing is guaranteed under a number of international covenants,⁴ emphasizing the integral connection of housing to the right to health and the right to live in dignity. According to General Comment (GC) 4 to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), the right to housing should be interpreted in a broad sense as “the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity” (UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1991). Israel’s policy of house demolitions clearly breaches these regulations by interfering with the villagers’ enjoyment of fundamental health and human rights.

The above covenants have not been incorporated into Israeli law. However, the right to adequate housing is recognized as an element of the right to human dignity, which is enshrined in Israeli Basic Law. The Israeli Supreme Court’s former president Aharon Barak affirmed:

Human dignity is injured when a person is forced to live in humiliating conditions that negate his inherent humanity and transform him into an object.... The right that one’s basic needs for human existence be met constitutes part of human dignity and liberty (cited in Almi, 2006:5).

Nevertheless, Israeli legislature has passed a number of resolutions, laws and amendments to justify and fund house demolitions (Swirski and Hasson, 2006; Yiftachel, 2002; Zaher, 2006).

Israel’s house demolition policy

The Ministers’ Committee sees the need for a comprehensive and interdisciplinary solution for the Bedouin sector... [that] will encourage the relocation from the dispersion to permanent settlements.... In parallel, the state will work diligently to protect its right to the Negev land, against invasion and illegal construction.... Treatment of the problem in the Bedouin sector in the Negev will be given priority. In order to implement this decision, special budgets have been allocated (Ministers’ Committee for

Matters of the Non-Jewish Sector, 2004, from Knesset report summarizing governmental resolution 881 to prioritize enforcement of Planning and Construction Laws against the Bedouin-Arab communities in the Negev).

The policy of house demolitions in the unrecognized villages revolves around the question of land ownership, an issue that has remained unresolved since Israel's establishment. Academics, political activists and, last but not least, the villagers themselves agree that the government's policy towards the Bedouin-Arab communities of the Negev serves an ethno-political agenda of Judaization by minimizing the space they occupy and reallocating their lands (Almi, 2003; Yiftachel, 2002). The government's terminology reflects its approach to the residents of the unrecognized villages as a "problem" whose aspired "solution" is the population's concentration in government-planned townships. The status of non-recognition denies these communities the essential requirements for legal construction (as defined by the regulations and standards of the Israeli Building and Construction Law of 1965): a local authority to issue building permits and an established master plan that allocates land. In the same way, possibilities for "legal construction" in Arab-Israeli communities in general has been undermined (Amnesty International, 2004). In a July 2007 letter to Human Rights Watch, the Ministry of Justice identified 45,000 illegal buildings in Bedouin-Arab communities, adding that 2,000 legal procedures and 700 valid demolition orders were pending (Human Rights Watch, 2008). This exorbitant number fails to explain that these homes are erected "illegally" not by choice, but in absence of an alternative due to discriminatory policies that leave Bedouin-Arab families without any option to build homes in a legal manner.

Amendments and legislative decisions have incrementally legitimized house demolitions in the unrecognized villages and provided the authorities with means for their execution:

- 2001: Creation and funding of the "Green Patrol" under the Unit for Surveillance on Open Spaces with the mission of "preserving the state's open spaces"; i.e., detection of construction activities and execution of demolitions (Decision 898, November 11, 2001).
- 2003: Merging of all surveillance and enforcement agencies and creation of a geographical information system to enforce the Planning and Construction Law (Decision 85, March 25, 2003).
- 2003: Enactment of a five-year plan, prioritizing enforcement of Planning and Construction Laws in the Bedouin-Arab sector (Resolution Arab/15 of the Ministers' Committee for Matters of the Non-Jewish Sector, September 17, 2003; and government decision [resolution 881], September 25, 2003). Out of the 2003 budget whose purpose is "To alter and improve the situation of the Bedouin population in the Negev [and] relieve its distress...", 40% is allocated

to house demolitions and relocation. Execution by a special task force under the Israeli police is to be established in the following year. There is no earmarking of funds for the construction of new housing (Zaher, 2006).

- 2005: An amendment to the 1981 Public Lands Law strengthens the Israel Land Authority's means to implement its ownership. "The amendment is expected to have an adverse effect mainly on the Negev Bedouin" (Swirski and Hasson, 2006:69).

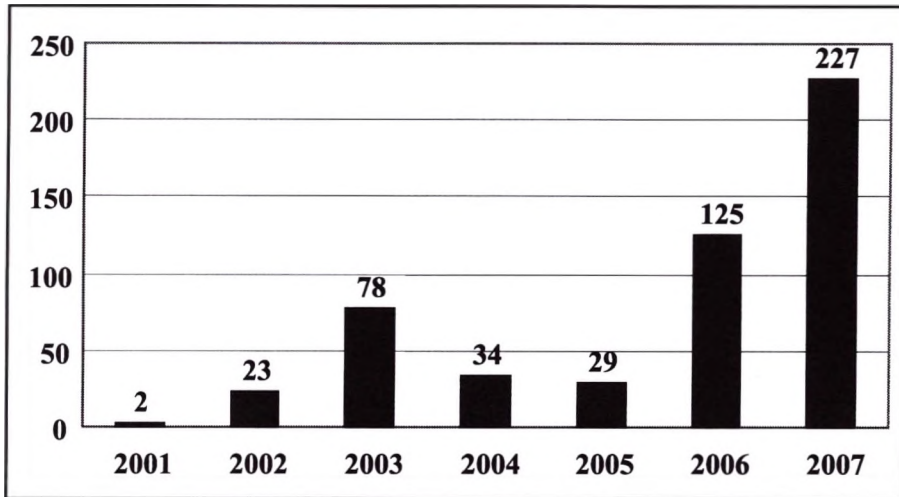
These resolutions endorse house demolition in the Bedouin-Arab communities despite an inter-ministerial committee's⁵ recommendation to apply fines as means of enforcement rather than house demolition: "...enforcement should be implemented by mechanisms such as collection agencies (and not by bulldozers)" (Knesset Center for Information and Research, 2005).

House demolitions in the unrecognized villages

If they really wanted us to move to another place, they would offer, but they want to destroy and destroy and destroy. To destroy you from the inside, you.... It's a mechanism to destroy the actual person (Muna A. K., Bir Alhamam).

In recent years, the policy of house demolitions in the communities of the unrecognized villages has gained speed and magnitude. After the allocation of new budgets, massive forces have been leveling homes and entire villages nearly every week (see Figure 1). Since 2005, it has been possible to place a demolition order against a structure without the family's presence or knowledge. The government justifies this by claiming that house demolitions are directed against an "illegal" building rather than its inhabitants, but this policy actually reflects Israel's continued refusal to recognize the very existence of the persons and families whom it renders homeless. Contrary to the government's claims, none of our interviewees characterized the demolition as property damage, but as a means of terror that inflicts severe individual and collective trauma.

Some families whose homes are destroyed are fined for their "offense." To avoid these fines and the violence surrounding the act of demolition, some families destroy their homes themselves after receiving demolition orders. Based on governmental data, Human Rights Watch reports 213 such demolitions between 2004 and 2006 (Human Rights Watch, 2008), but one must assume that not all "preemptive demolitions" are included in the statistics and thus their true extent is unknown.



Source: Regional Council for the Unrecognized Villages of the Negev (RCUV).

Figure 1: Number of buildings demolished in the unrecognized villages (2001–2007)

Literature review: Women and house demolitions

The home is where women most acutely invest their time, build their safety nets, advance their talents and hobbies, carry on their work of looking after the family, and carry on with their life responsibilities. Once the home is destroyed, women are left with the metaphoric and symbolic burdens—which are no less real than the material loss of a safe place to live—of not having a sense of safety and place of belonging.... The destruction of the home changes women's previous gender roles sharply and requires them to face new challenges, carry the burden of rebuilding a new house/home and cope with all the incontinences of moving, with the entire economic, social and psychological load it entails (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2006).

Most literature on house demolitions in the region focuses on the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs) (Amnesty International, 2004; B'tselem, 2004; IHLRI, 2004; Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, www.icahd.org). The situation of the residents of unrecognized villages differs in that they are Israeli citizens, yet they are subject to constant and violent attack from part of their own state against their property, families and most fundamental rights. Nevertheless,

much can be learned from the published literature on the impact of house demolitions on women in the OPTs.

The domestic sphere constitutes the center of Arab women's lives, in contrast to men, who spend more time outside the home due to work and social engagements. Arab women feel inextricably connected to their homes and, in turn, experience the trauma of an intrusion into or the demolition of their houses as an assault against the most personal and intimate space: "Every time they invaded my home, I felt totally naked... as if they raped me... they actually raped my home" (quoted in Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2003:122). House demolitions transform the most private sphere into a political space and impose spatial dominance, demonstrating that "there are no safe havens left" (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2005, 2006).

Gender roles in Arab communities assign to women—concretely and metaphorically—the work of rebuilding the household and family life "out of the rubble" (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2005; Working Group on the Status of Palestinian Women Citizens of Israel, 2005). Prior to the (physical) reconstruction, women have more difficulty in finding alternative housing arrangements. Palestinian Arab women explain that

It was easier for their sons or brothers, who could at least sleep over with family or friends; but for them or their daughters (mainly due to the social restrictions on girls), who were vulnerable, it was always much harder to survive these violent dislocations (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2006).

A significant increase in tensions and conflicts within the family, including higher occurrence of violence against women, has been documented for the period following the home's destruction (Amnesty International, 2004).

Women in the unrecognized villages

[House demolitions impact] us more. We are the ones who build the tent (Sausan A. T., Laqiya).

While the men can go to Beer Sheva, we are here. The home is the most private thing. It is where I feel most comfortable (Dunya E. N., Bir Almshash).

The Bedouin-Arab communities are the most impoverished population group in Israel.⁶ Deprivation of their lands has led to rapid socioeconomic transition and loss of livelihoods. This has stripped Bedouin-Arab women of their previous productive roles in herding and agriculture, and thus also of their economic powers. Today, their role is largely restricted to the fulfilment of responsibilities in the household, as

a mother and caretaker of the family's well-being. Very few Bedouin-Arab women work outside the domestic sphere, compared to about 80% of Jewish Israeli women aged 15–54 (Abu Bader and Gottlieb, 2007; Cwikel, Lev-Wiesel, and Al-Krenawi, 2003; Israeli Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women, 2006; Working Group on the Status of Palestinian Women Citizens of Israel, 2005).

Up to 77% of Bedouin-Arab girls drop out of school. This is related to the absence of schools, especially beyond the elementary level, in the unrecognized villages⁷: sociocultural norms and restrictions do not allow girls to pursue their education by commuting to a distant school. Survey results on illiteracy rates among women from the unrecognized villages vary between 35% and 80% (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2006; Gottlieb, 2005; Working Group on the Status of Palestinian Women Citizens of Israel, 2005). Fertility rates among Bedouin-Arab women are amongst the highest worldwide (Shoham-Vardi, 2004)⁸; morbidity rates reach approximately 57% for urinary tract infections and 47% for anemia; and 48%–66% suffer from gender-based violence. Prevalence rates of psychological conditions like depression, anxiety and somatization are around 30% (Al-Krenawi, 2004; Cwikel et al., 2003). Infant mortality rates (IMR) persist at threefold averages compared to the local Jewish population: in 2007, they were 12.5 per 1,000 live births, compared to 3.9 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2008). Various studies have found that 47% of Bedouin-Arab women forgo seeking health care in case of need, and only 2% use mental health services (Abu-Saad et al., 1999; Al-Krenawi et al., 2004; Cwikel et al., 2003; Gottlieb, 2005).

The meaning of a home

The house is the safest place. It is the most intimate and personal.... The destruction of a house is the destruction of the most personal thing (Jamila A. H., Um Bateen).

...the significance of house demolition is the termination of a sense of security. The house ends. The house, which is the most important thing that a person has. It protects us. When we lose the protection, we break down, we collapse and are destroyed. We lose the security, we get lost and we live in fear of loss. House demolition is the real death (Woman No.1 from anonymous writings by the participants of a women's group; cited in Almi, Forthcoming).

The home is equated with intimacy, security, future hopes and dreams. It represents a Bedouin-Arab woman's private and social domain. It is the place around which her personal and social life revolves, where she spends much of her time, where she works and invests her energies and ambitions, and where she builds a home for her

family and her children. Our interviewees emphasized the connection between home and their personal identity. Hence its demolition violates the Bedouin-Arab woman's sense of self and privacy. It is experienced—and imprinted in the individual and collective memory—as a physical injury, as a traumatic loss and as death.

Life under constant threat

They break your hope that you can do anything. You create something new and they break your motivation...because you know that at any moment they can come and destroy... [I feel] not stable. I never buy anything for my house.... If I want something nice like a dining table, the thoughts are always "Don't buy because we will have to move, it's just temporary".... If I want to plant trees or flowers, [I think] "Why would I do such a thing if I am not going to stay here?" (Muna A. K., Bir Alhamam).

Not only does the violent act of the demolition itself cause physical and mental injury, but uncertainty and fearful anticipation also impair daily life. Our interviewees expressed a constant sense of insecurity. Some families never unpack their belongings, which they have saved from their demolished homes. Amira's family now lives in a metal shack with walls built from water pipes covered with cloth. The closet is still in pieces in the corner and the clothes are still in boxes. Once when women heard of a nearby demolition, "They took everything out of the houses because they were scared they are coming to demolish [here]. Then they brought things back inside. They just hear that demolitions are occurring, and they take everything outside" (Suleiman A. A., husband of Amira, Atir-Umm al-Hieran). Assia describes how when her relatives hear bulldozers, they throw everything onto the pile of rubble left over from previous demolitions "so that the policemen will think that there is nothing left to destroy.... We are scared to leave, because they may come to demolish" (Assia A. A., Atir-Umm al-Hieran).

The forces that arrive to place a demolition order are also sources of violence and trauma. Raniya explains, "They come with huge forces and frighten the children. Really huge forces and surround the entire village" (Raniya A. A., Atir-Umm al-Hieran). Thus, even before the bulldozers roll into the village, the policy of house demolitions and the manner of its execution instill fear and terror in the entire community that permeate daily life down to the level of decisions about if or when to leave the house, how much food to buy and whether to invest in one's home, family and standard of living.

Demolition and the aftermath

The last demolition was two months ago. They arrive at the house in the early morning when the man is gone and only the woman and children are here. They come especially when just the women and children are here, it's intentional.... Five thousand [soldiers] came next to the school. The children saw all of this. It is a method to scare them in order to control them. When my child sees an officer or soldier, he is scared (Muna A. K., Bir Alhamam).

It's like a war (Layla A. A., Atir-Umm Alhieran).

Demolitions usually occur in the morning hours when the men have left for work. Therefore, the women and children experience the aggressive act of the demolition directly and most intensively. Our interviewees recount how bulldozers, thousands of armed police officers and helicopters encircle and invade their village. They describe feeling under siege. The militant execution of house demolitions reflects the state's view on residents of the unrecognized villages as criminals who have usurped state lands.

Soon it'll be winter and where will we go then? ... Your dog couldn't live here.... The tents do not protect from the sun.... There is no water. No electricity... I was stung twice by a scorpion. [Q: What do you do in winter?] We wrap with plastic. We were here last winter and you need plastic to cover everything (Sausan A. T., Laqiya).

After a demolition most families have to move in with relatives. For a Bedouin-Arab woman, the deprivation of her own place implies also a deprivation of status and power. Other families build a temporary shack or tent, until funds can be raised to build more permanent housing. These improvised accommodations fail to protect from heat or cold and may lack adequate hygiene. Living conditions are characterized by overcrowding, inconvenience and stress, reinforcing the trauma and tensions within the family, thereby also increasing the risk of conflicts and violence against women and children: "They came and destroyed everything. And took our things [Ali]. Took our water [Zarab]. The containers you see, they tried to make holes, break them and spill the water on the ground [Aeish]" (Ali, Zarab and Aeish A. K., Atir-Umm al-Hieran).

The demolitions exacerbate the lack of infrastructure in the unrecognized villages. If the residents had laid water, gas and electricity connections, these are cut. Interviewees explained that they had difficulties to ensure food safety, because they were left without options for proper storage and preparation. Women often carry the burden of rebuilding not only in terms of workload, but also with regard to funding.

It is important to emphasize that the government does not provide any alternative solution, after rendering families and entire villages homeless; neither are the affected families offered any material or psychosocial assistance, redress or support. After the bulldozers drive off, they literally leave nothing behind.

Physical and emotional trauma

The child was in my womb when they demolished.... I was eight months pregnant and they beat me and also my grandmother (Najah A. G., Atir-Umm al-Hieran).

There is an old woman whose sons' homes they demolished. She came to hit a policeman and they returned her beatings. [She is] 70 years old (Dunya E. N., Bir Almshash).

Several interviewees reported incidents of physical violence and assault in the course of house demolitions. For instance, in August 2007, during the demolition of two homes in the village of Alsurra, sixteen persons, including two pregnant women, were injured by police forces and had to be evacuated by ambulance (Greenberg, 2007).

It impacts me psychologically. I experience it as humiliation. We don't have rights. They ridicule us and humiliate us; they steal our lands and it affects me in a negative way because I see this country as racist that excludes us (Woman No. 2 from anonymous writings by the participants of a women's group; cited in Almi, Forthcoming).

When you see that they are destroying your house... it says that the government doesn't care about you.... It gives people a feeling of discrimination.... Any person, if he suddenly lost his house, even if it's due to a natural disaster, it's a bad feeling. But when it's [destroyed] by people, it's even worse. People feel like they don't belong if [the state] doesn't care about them (Muhammad A. A., Wadi Alna'am).

One of the results of house demolition in the unrecognized villages is deep distrust of and alienation from the state. In our interviews, feelings of humiliation and loss of belonging prevailed, as interviewees expressed that they were denied recognition, respect and protection. Demolitions are viewed as just another manifestation of discrimination, oppression and exclusion. Resorting to house demolitions to push through political goals—rather than promoting dialogue—further widens the chasm between the Bedouin-Arab communities and the state. It

demonstrates very dramatically that, even though on paper the Bedouin-Arabs are Israeli citizens, in reality there is no place for them to live in dignity either in the Negev, or in the Israeli state and society.

Impact on children, impact on mothers

The children are in shock. They see police officers as the enemy. I don't know how to educate the children that this is their country. What sort of belonging can they have? When a police officer comes with a gun to destroy his house? ... When a child doesn't have a country, he doesn't feel like he belongs. He feels like everyone is an enemy and everyone comes to destroy. They don't let us live in peace. I don't know what to do with a child that grows up to hate the country and who hates the people who belong to the country (Abir A. N., Bir Almshash).

You feel everything that your children suffer.... It hurts her more because she feels what can happen to her children if her house is destroyed. The house is something basic. How do you live without a house? It doesn't make any sense (Muna A. K., Bir Alhamam).

Bedouin-Arab women emphasized the impact of house demolitions on their children, and secondarily on themselves as their main caretakers. They were especially concerned about how to raise children who experience such violence and trauma at a young age and who consequently develop fear and hatred towards the police and the military forces—and towards the state and society as a whole.

Resistance, resilience and reconstruction

The police removed the children from the house when they were all still asleep. I didn't want them to take the beds, so I tried to approach and they wouldn't let me. In the end they pulled the child and I pulled from the other side and in the end nine men and a woman hit me. My brother came and pulled me away from the police officers. I asked them, "I have seven children, where will I put them?" They said, "It's not our problem" (Hiba A. B., Atir-Umm al-Hieran).

It is remarkable that Bedouin-Arab women describe acts of active resistance only for the sake of their children. These are mainly attempts to defend some sort of home and sense of security, be it symbolically by saving objects that represent

continuation of family life. Likewise, the discourse with which the women approach the executing forces reflects the inner world of a caretaker.

I feel I have pressure in my head. That there is no will to live.... We won't build again because it is a waste of time and money. They said it was okay, a small tent like this (Itaf A. T., El-Araqib).

My uncle's wife is in shock. She really has mental issues, depression from all the building, demolishing, building, demolishing. Is that a game?!... "There's nothing you can do," she now says, "I won't oppose anything" (Muna A. K., Bir Alhamam).

Some interviewees expressed complete hopelessness and helplessness. Bedouin-Arab women's general deprivation of material and social means should be borne in mind, together with the fact that gender norms do not encourage them to play an active, let alone a confrontational role in the public sphere. The above accounts point to a complete depletion of material, social and individual resources to oppose or cope with continuous retraumatization. Together with this, our interviewees describe their surrender, after having lost any conception of a better future.

We won't move. Only if they give us another place. They will demolish, we will build, until they give us a place. Until they give a solution. Where should we go? (Sausan A. T., Laqiya).

We will stand for what is ours. I will stay here even between rocks.... To hell with a state that doesn't treat its citizens equally. We will stay here even if they [try to] throw us into the Dead Sea.... Even if they demolish, you build again and thus continue your life. Emotionally it's more complicated... [but] like our parents who lived here, we will continue to live. They demolish and we build. They demolish and we build. We continue to live (Dunya E. N., Bir Almshash).

Other interviewees seem to draw resilience and strength precisely from the traumatic experiences that are inflicted on them by their home's demolition. The sense that "there are no other options" is underpinned with the historic and political concepts of the Bedouin-Arab communities' collective struggle for lands and identity. The women perceive house demolitions as yet another manifestation of the state's discriminatory policies against the Bedouin-Arab communities in the context of Israel's enmity against Arabs in general. This provides the basis for transforming trauma and despair into sources of resilience, strength, cohesion and collective identity—defined, however, in opposition to a hostile and oppressive Other.

Conclusions

Israel's house demolitions in the unrecognized villages have unique and especially severe implications for women, which are related to gender roles and the division of space and labor in the Bedouin-Arab communities. The State of Israel ignores the human and gender-specific aspects of its house demolition policy. It thus actively violates the most fundamental rights of an especially vulnerable group, to whom it promises special protection and support (Israeli Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women, 2006; Kalay-Klaitman, 2004). The home occupies a central role in Bedouin-Arab women's lives and identities. Genderized division of space and labor modulate the differential impact of house demolitions on Bedouin-Arab men and women; on the latter, demolitions inflict especially traumatic pain and loss. Before the actual demolition, constant insecurity, helplessness and terror permeate women's daily lives. The aftermath confronts them with the practical and metaphorical burdens of rebuilding their family's life under highly difficult circumstances.

In accordance with Almi's (Forthcoming) conclusions, our results indicate that Bedouin-Arab women are very aware of the larger political context, and that they see Israel's house demolitions as just another drastic manifestation of the state's marginalization and oppression of their communities. House demolitions demonstrate, concretely and symbolically, that there is no place to live in peace, security and dignity for the residents of the unrecognized villages, either in the Negev or in Israeli society (Almi, Forthcoming). The destruction of homes translates into the destruction of belonging, especially for women, thus reinforcing alienation from state and society, and their rejection as a whole.

Bedouin-Arab women have at their disposal very limited means to effectively resist their home's demolition or to cope with repeated uprooting, traumatization and the burdens of reconstruction. Understandably, some react with frustration, despair and surrender. Others seem to draw psychosocial resources—mainly identification with a joint cause, a collective narrative, belonging and struggle—precisely out of the experience of their home's demolition and the lack of any alternative or solution. This identity is shaped in opposition to the state as the hostile Other. This finding is, ironically, supported by a study which the Israeli army conducted on the “effectiveness” of house demolitions in the OPT, against families of persons involved in terror acts. It came to the conclusion that, even from this perspective, house demolitions did more harm than “good” “because the deterrence, limited if at all, paled in comparison to the hatred and hostility toward Israel that the demolitions provoked” (Harel, 2005).

Nevertheless, it is first and foremost in their role as mothers and caretakers that Bedouin-Arab women actively resist house demolitions, in order to defend or save some sense of home and security for their children. Shalhoub-Kevorkian comes to similar conclusions when she writes about women in the OPT:

By utilizing very limited resources, they managed to defy Israel's policy, continuing to search for new ways of coping with the extreme sense of loss, fear and sadness.... Women were found to construct new counter-discourses and counter-spaces to cope with the constant and unpredictable changes affecting the family.... Women's ways of fighting back were not based on physical confrontation, but rather on using their own powers to protect their families (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2005).

Thus, in the face of the violent destruction of their family home, it is actually—and paradoxically—through the fulfillment of their role as mother that Bedouin-Arab women change gender norms and take up active roles in the resistance against oppressive and destructive policies that target their families and communities.

NOTES

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² In the absence of one official source of reliable data, this paper relies on various sources that provide slightly divergent figures. According to governmental sources, the number of demolished houses in the unrecognized villages in 2004–2006 was 322 (168, 22 and 132, respectively); during the same period, 213 structures (64, 81 and 68, respectively) were destroyed by the owners and families themselves (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

³ Names have been changed in order to avoid identification.

⁴ The right to housing is outlined in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; Article 14(2) of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); and Article 11(1) of the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR).

⁵ Known as the Gazit Committee, this inter-governmental committee was established to examine illegal construction in Israel.

⁶ Eighty percent of families in the unrecognized villages live under the poverty line, compared to 25% among the general Israeli population.

⁷ The unrecognized villages have a population of 59,000–84,000 persons (Ministry of Interior and Regional Council for the Unrecognized Villages, cited in Weissbley, 2006), of which 60% are under the age of 18. Yet, there are only 24 elementary schools and, just recently, two high schools there (Al Krenawi et al., 2004; Weissbley, 2006).

⁸ Bedouin fertility rates in 2007 were 7.1, compared to 2.7 among the local Jewish population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2008).

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FIGURE CAPTION

Figure 1: Number of buildings demolished in the unrecognized villages (2001–2007)