



The power of femininity

Exploring the gender and ethnic experiences of Muslim women who accessed supervisory roles in a Bedouin society

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Abstract

Purpose – The current paper aims to tell the stories of six female supervisors who have successfully managed to access this high-level position in the Bedouin educational system, putting forward some implications for understanding and exploring the lives and career of women in patriarchal, minority groups.

Design/methodology/approach – Six female Muslim supervisors, who work in the Bedouin pre-school system in Israel, participated in semi-structured interviews conducted by the authors.

Findings – The stories illustrated a connection between “power” and “femininity” in leading positions in a patriarchal, tribal society different from the one constructed in the western literature on leadership. Thus, in spite of the inferiority of femininity in the traditional Bedouin society, the female supervisors perceived their femininity to be an advantage and powerful in, among other things, minimizing tribal-professional conflict characterized by a contradiction between traditional and rational codes, and in taking on a social role in the empowerment of Bedouin women in all spheres of life.

Practical implications – The paper puts forward some implications for the recruitment and employment of women leaders living and working in patriarchal social groups within a multicultural society.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors’ knowledge, this is a first attempt to document the lives and careers of female leaders in Bedouin society which is embedded with entrenched norms in respect to gender and the “place” of women in the society. The paper, then, provides insights into alternative interpretations of female leadership, power and career.

Keywords Women, Ethnic minorities, Leadership, Management power

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The issue of female leadership has been discussed in the educational administration literature of many western countries for the last two decades (e.g., Blackmore, 1999; Law and Glover, 2000; Oplatka and Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2006; Regan and Brooks, 1995; Shakeshaft, 1989). Interestingly, as far as principalship is concerned, a “feminine style,” one area of interest in the research on female leadership, has been perceived as an advantage over a “masculine style” of leadership by some feminist writers (e.g., Gosetti and Rusch, 1995). They claimed that the emphasis being given in the construction of “feminine style” to issues of caring, emotional attachment, ethnicity, equity, equality, anti-racism, empowerment, participation and the like is more compatible with major



educational values, and thereby contributes much to school effectiveness. A “feminine leadership style” seems to be related to a “feminine” nature and world, which in turn considers this sort of style as a part of women’s nature.

In this paper we would like to offer a new perspective to analyzing a female leadership style that takes into account cultural and ethnic contexts to the discussion of female leadership. To this end, the career accounts of women supervisors who work in Bedouin society are analyzed and presented here. In our view, female leadership can be culturally reactive in that a “feminine leadership style” can be shaped, at least in part, by cultural patterns. Female leadership in Bedouin society seems to be powerful due to the cultural position of the woman in this tribal, Islamic society.

Based on data gathered from interviews with female supervisors in a Bedouin tribal society in Israel, the current paper tells the stories of six female supervisors who have successfully managed to access this high-level position in the Bedouin educational system. Four questions merit highlighting:

- (1) What are the prominent career issues of female supervisors in Bedouin society as they are reflected from their career accounts?
- (2) How do the experiences of the women supervisors reflect the impact of culture, gender and race on leadership practice in supervision?
- (3) What competencies are perceived as most critical for survival and success in supervisory positions by the women supervisors in Bedouin society?
- (4) What are the strategies used by women supervisors to balance gender and ethnic expectations both within Bedouin society and with external constituencies?

Our study stems from a feminist approach (Harding, 1987) that aims at making heard the neglected, silenced voice of marginal women, i.e. to shed light on the lives and careers of women leaders in the context of traditional Bedouin society, and to examine the relations between male-based traditional society and women who are located in leadership positions in this kind of society.

An inquiry into the lives and careers of female supervisors in a tribal society is beneficial on three levels. First, while most of the studies conducted among Bedouin women have revolved around barriers to entering institutes of higher education and their struggle/confrontation in the academic sphere (e.g., Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2004; Passata-Shubert, 2003), research on Bedouin society has elucidated scant reference to women’s career development and experience. The reported study sheds light on the career experiences of Bedouin women who have succeeded in entering into management roles (supervisors), but who have not received much attention in the academic literature.

Second, and arising from the first contribution, the understanding of women’s career development and experiences in terms of ethnicity and gender in Bedouin society may provide insight into the effective strategies used by this unique group of pathfinder women to balance social values and ethnic dilemmas with career aspirations and leadership styles. In so doing, their stories may provide us with more information about effective ways to handle leadership by women in traditional society, thereby equipping other women with suggestions for fulfilling their desires and needs in the public sphere.

Finally, most supervisors in the Israeli Bedouin society are part of their community, a community within which women's public emergence or contact with men is a new phenomenon. Therefore, Bedouin women supervisors might experience, among other things, three role conflicts: working in a traditional, male-dominated society; working with Bedouin men (principals); and being Arab Muslim(?) women working with Jewish employers. Understanding the essence of these kinds of conflicts might tell us more about the factors facilitating these conflicts, as well as their potential consequences to women's careers.

By examining the ethnic and gender characteristics of the lives of women supervisors in Bedouin society, we believe light will be shed on the issue of female leadership in the educational context, a leadership that challenges the hierarchical relations in this male-dominated society, where women lead and men (principals) are led, where women give the orders that men are expected to follow.

Note that since we are dealing with women in a different and unique cultural set, it is less plausible to base our discussion merely on "gender," but also on ethnic and racial relations. We, therefore, commence with a discussion of the potential contribution of culture to gender analysis in postcolonial societies.

Gender and cultural differences in post-colonial societies

The main contribution of the post-colonial feminist dialogue concerning the examination of women's actions in post-colonialist and patriarchal societies is through the redefinition of a previously uniform category known as, "all women and any women." The post-colonial feminist dialogue recommends that gender concepts also be examined in relation to additional categories such as ethnicity, status, race and culture (Alexander and Talpade-Mohanty, 1995; Oplatka and Hertz-Law and Glover, 2000a).

To put it differently, one is less likely to assume any women's alliance based solely on gender, but to shape and reconstruct it using concrete historical and political analyses. Talpadeh-Mohanty (1988) pointed to the difficulty of talking about female perceptions that are common to all Muslim and Arab societies without paying attention to their historical power structure and local ideologies that shape the construction of woman's rights in every society.

Feminist discourse in non-western societies is usually adapted to the contextual reality of a specific culture. Since life experiences in a given geographic area determine the sort of agency carried out in that area, Kandiyoti (1988) suggests using the concept of "local dialect" that enables understanding the unique characteristics of various types of feminisms, including aspects of silencing, elimination as well as active or passive resistance. For instance, Muslim feminists in Iran call for the adaptation of western concepts into the local culture. They use the term "gender complementary" instead of equality, because it defines gender roles without making the women's position inferior to that of the men. Yet, Muslim women struggle for women's rights without losing the family belonging which gives them protection and respect.

The common starting point of post-colonial feminism is the idea of using cultural resources and cooperating with the social structure as a means of agency. Literature on agency in the Middle East focuses on the ways men and women contest the boundaries of their transformative capacities. In analyzing such agency, it is important to consider social structure and to contextualize experience, because "actual experience and its

mediation through the narrative are hard to separate with reference to the structure or dimensions (such as tradition and power)” (Muge and Balaghi, 1994, p. 4). This agency refers to the diverse creative mechanisms people use to further their interests and negotiate power relations.

For, as Muge and Balaghi (1994) claimed, the tradition legitimates hegemony and reproduces power; it is an active co-opting agent and the most powerful means of social incorporation. Middle Eastern women create agency through tradition, employing it as a means of empowerment and finding a voice.

In this sense, the concept of power gains a different and distinctive meaning in post-colonial societies. As Oleson (in Nelson, 1974, pp. 553-4) has suggested, “the notion of power implied in the concept of the negotiated order is the potential for levying sanctions, the potential for influencing further actions of others (as well as one’s own) and the behaviors of others”.

The debate over power from a feminist perspective poses a number of questions: What are the normative frames that facilitate or limit “the negotiation”? What are the sanctions that to which women are susceptible? How do women influence men? To what extent are women aware of their abilities to participate in decision making? The current study illuminates some kind of negotiation between a status of “externality” (an outsider to Bedouin society) and that of “internality” (an insider to Bedouin society), as a kind of negotiation over the construction of a feminine power.

Women and education in Bedouin society

The term Bedouin is derived from the Arabic word for desert, *badia*; that is, a Bedouin is a desert dweller (Abu-Rabia, 2001). The Negev Bedouin are part of the Palestinian Arab Muslim people who remained on their land after the 1948 War of Independence, and today they constitute part of an ethnic minority within the State of Israel, numbering approximately 140,000. They have inhabited the Negev Desert since the fifth century CE and were traditionally organized into nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes that lived by raising sheep and engaging in seasonal agriculture.

During the late 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, the Israeli government built seven villages for the Bedouin in the Negev Desert in order to settle them. These villages, called “permanent settlements,” were populated by about 50 percent of the Bedouin, but only years later at the beginning of the 1990s. The other half stayed on their lands, in a move considered illegal by the Israeli state.

Those remaining illegally on the land did not benefit from any basic services such as running water, electricity, sewage or schools. They lived in approximately 40 “unrecognized” villages are not marked on any map. Their residents use generators instead of electricity, have septic tanks instead of plumbing, and fear imminent destruction of their homes at any given moment (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

Consequently, formal education for the Bedouins of the Negev had not begun before the late 1960s and early 1970s. Until then, the Negev region was under military administration and, therefore, the Bedouin were isolated from other Arab populations in the country. As most of the region’s schools were closed during this period, Arab education was only available in the north of Israel. Thus, in order to gain education and employment opportunities, Bedouin had to apply for special permission. As a result, an entire generation of the Bedouin tribes, let alone Bedouin women, had virtually no access to formal education.

Schools in the unrecognized villages were built on a makeshift basis, in that they did not symbolize any recognition of the illegal villages, but rather constituted a temporary response to an immediate need for education. These schools were built from shacks, lacking any electricity or water, and with an absence of any educational equipment such as libraries, laboratories or teaching equipment. The roads to these schools were not paved, and students could not attend school year round because their attendance was dependent on road conditions. Thus, most students did not benefit from normative learning conditions (Meir, 1997).

As a result of these political-historical conditions, female education[1] in Bedouin society began only at the late 1980s (by 1998 there were only 12 female Bedouin students in higher education as compared to almost 200 in 2002). In 2007, female Bedouin students constitute about 60 percent of all Bedouin students[2]. Bedouin women's entry into the public sphere is a new phenomenon, accompanied by struggles within the traditional society, just as happens in the case of many Muslim women living in other Middle Eastern countries.

Because of male domination and a lack of workplaces in Bedouin villages, most Bedouin women are unemployed and those who have academic degrees usually work in the field of education as teachers in elementary schools or kindergartens. Very few women have reached leadership positions in Bedouin society (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2006). In 2000, there were only two Bedouin women principals and six kindergarten supervisors. However, since 2004 there is also one Bedouin woman who is formally responsible for youth activities in this sector, and one who occupies the position of counselor; both are Muslim women.

Thus, female leadership in Bedouin society is not a common phenomenon and is just at its incipient phase. A study conducted by the first author (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2006) on the first female Bedouin principal showed that female leadership is not appreciated in Bedouin society, to say the least, and that women leaders have to face tribal and traditional obstacles since leadership is conceived of as a male domain. Consequently, women have "to prove" their professionalism by acting in a more "masculine" way when they hold an ostensibly "male" position. According to this study, men in a Bedouin society appear to value women leaders who adopt a "masculine" leadership style.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to collect and analyze empirical data. Following Erickson (1986), who claimed that the conceptions in qualitative research are revealed during data analysis, no defined hypothesis was tested in the study. However, based on the literature on women in principalship and superintendency (e.g., Bjork, 2000; Ortiz and Kalbus, 1998; Tallerico, 2000), it is assumed that gender and ethnicity play a key role in the lives and work of women supervisors in Bedouin society in Israel.

Participants

The sample of the study consisted of six women supervisors who worked in the Bedouin educational system in 2005-2006[3]. From a preliminary exploration of the number of women supervisors in this educational system, we found that four of them are Muslim Arab-Bedouin women and the other two are Muslims (non-Bedouin) from

the north of Israel. One woman from the latter group is married to a Bedouin man and the two others are married to “northern”[4] men, all living in Beersheba, the largest city in southern Israel, where the Bedouin society is located. Two of the supervisors are in their 30s, three are over 45, and one is over 60 years of age. Two of them have been in the local educational system only for the last two years and the others have been in the system for more than five years. Only one has been in a supervisory position more than ten years. All of them work as supervisors in the pre-school educational system.

In accordance with “snowball” sampling (Paton, 1990), informants who had some information about the participants were asked to make contact with the supervisors to increase rapport and trust between researchers and participants. We believe that this kind of sampling is necessary given the confessional nature of the life-story interview, the methodological strategy chosen for this study.

Procedure

Life-story interviews aiming to examine the subjective meaning of lives from a holistic standpoint (Plummer, 1995) was the research strategy of the reported study. In a story, events and actions are drawn together into an organized whole by means of a plot. A plot is a type of conceptual scheme by which a contextual meaning of individual events can be laid out. It is the narrative structure through which people understand and describe relationships among the events and choices in their lives. With these features in mind, the method enabled us to identify ethnic and gender influences throughout the women supervisors’ career cycles, as well as to expose the explicit and implicit associations between their womanhood and career experiences or leadership styles.

The female supervisors’ career stories were disclosed through open interviews in two meetings, each lasting between 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, with their contents and evolution not defined a priori. Each supervisor was asked to divide her professional life into subjectively defined periods. Each period was explored in depth, and the interviewees were asked to account for the transition to the next period. Then, the interview included a reflection on the woman supervisor’s professional life, as well as the place and meaning she attaches to her gender/ethnicity in her life and to her growth. The female supervisors were interviewed in the local language and a professional editor translated their interview transcripts into English.

The analysis of this study followed Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) grounded theory procedure of open, axial and selective coding. We initially read through the data several times and took notes in a search for patterns and regularities. The data were coded into categories. This procedure consisted of a comparison of each new element encountered in the data with those coded previously in terms of emergent categories and subcategories. Then, the categories were grouped and compared to create the “story line” of the data, resulting in the evolution of a conceptual model grounded in the data. We examined the data for information discovered by the other researcher that tended to refute or challenge previously analyzed information. Questions such as “How is it that this outcome came about and what events and actions contributed to this solution?” guided the analysis. This cooperation is assumed to increase the credibility and authenticity of the data, a procedure that is recommended by Marshall and Rossman (1995), mainly because the two authors live in different ethnic and religious groups – the first is an Israeli Bedouin woman and the second is an Israeli Jewish man.

The structured analysis and peer review, it is believed, built confidence in the analytic procedures. However, consistent with most qualitative researchers who assume that those they study interpret reality from multiple perspectives for varying purposes (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993), we are interested in revealing participants' subjective ideas about reality, rather than finding some objective reality. Support for this attitude is provided by Arkinson (2002, p. 136):

Realistically, life story interviewers should remember that it is possible that what they are getting from those they interview is not the whole truth. They can be pretty sure, however, that what they are getting are the stories respondents want to tell.

In that sense, the systematic data collection procedure employed in this study contributes, we believe, to the credibility and authenticity of the data.

The power of femininity in educational leadership roles

A common theme arising, surprisingly, from the supervisors' accounts, is the advantage of their femininity in Bedouin society. Thus, in spite of the inferiority of femininity in the traditional Bedouin society, the supervisors perceived their femininity to be an advantage and powerful in four domains[5]:

- (1) In minimizing tribal-professional conflict characterized by a contradiction between traditional and rational codes.
- (2) In using feminine leadership styles as a necessity in their work opposite the male educational community.
- (3) In taking on a social role in the empowerment of Bedouin women in all spheres of life.
- (4) In cooperating with Jewish female colleagues despite ethnic differences (unequivalences).

Nevertheless, being a woman who works in a Bedouin society has disadvantages that cannot be ignored. The female supervisors are well aware of their inferior status as women in the public sphere of Bedouin society and of the entrenched values according to which women do not deserve to be in a leadership role, since this role is wholly defined and constructed as "male-based."

In the next pages, the four themes are elaborated. We present the supervisors' inferiority and the way they use their femininity to solve many of their problems at work. Their "feminine" power stemming from their marginality is highlighted.

A. "cultural" femininity as a resolution to tribal-professional conflict

Bedouin society is characterized by a tribal social structure in which the group's interests are above the individual's interests, even when it comes to professional issues (Abu-Lughod, 1998). For instance, in local political elections taking place in Bedouin society, one's decision making at the poll is influenced, at least normatively, by tribal considerations rather than by personal ones. This situation prevails also in the educational system.

One of the main conflicts that women supervisors have to deal with in the Bedouin community is the attempt by Bedouin role incumbents with whom they have consistent work relations (such as male principals, local authorities directors and land

owners from whom the Ministry of Education rents buildings for kindergartens) to weaken the boundaries between tribal and professional considerations. In most cases, these Bedouin role incumbents are likely to prioritize tribal rather than professional values and ideologies, a tendency that has already been found among principals in developing countries (Oplatka, 2004). The women supervisors seem to feel discomfort with this situation and use their powers of femininity to confront it.

In order to understand the advantage of their femininity in this respect, we first present the supervisors' discomfort, as it is expressed in their stories.

What is tribal-professional conflict in the position of supervision? Because of a lack of sufficient public infrastructure in Bedouin villages, the local Ministry of Education authorities tend to rent private buildings to use as kindergartens. But, in many cases, the Bedouin owners view the kindergartens in their buildings as their property, and therefore they might interfere in the recruitment of the teachers, putting pressure to recruit only teachers from their own tribe, even if the applicants hold no proper certification. One of the kindergarten supervisors illustrated this situation, saying that "the Bedouin education system does not progress because of tribalism. Everyone who has a kindergarten near his house thinks he owns it, (and) it does not matter if the teacher is qualified or not."

The tribal code's penetration into professional arenas appears, by and large, in the following story:

Every kindergarten teacher brings in her substitute, her neighbor, when she goes out on a birth leave. There are some [substitute] teachers who stay in the kindergarten and don't want to stop working, despite the fact that I did not give them the job, as they were not appropriate. I don't think they are qualified for this kind of work . . . Every teacher that I send; they kick her out, either the parents or the whole family that owns the building.

To persuade the supervisors to appoint a teacher from their tribe or from their social group (e.g., the extended family), some community members turned to the female supervisors' fathers in order to take advantage of his control over his daughters for their nepotistic interests, or as one of the supervisors said loudly: "They went to my family, to my father."

In light of this situation, one might ask how the female supervisors cope with this conflict and how their cultural positioning as Bedouin or non-Bedouin women generates a "feminine advantage." The answer to these questions is manifested in the experiences of both the Bedouin and non-Bedouin female supervisors.

The Bedouin supervisors strive for professionalism. Having felt dissatisfied with the central place of tribalism in Bedouin society, the female supervisors strived to diminish the influence of tribal considerations in the Bedouin educational system and at the same time tended to highlight professional codes.

To this end, they seem to take advantage of traditional and tribal norms and values in relation to femininity. Being a woman (not only a supervisor) in the Bedouin culture means being protected by cultural rules and norms in a wide variety of areas. Thus, in spite of their social inferiority, the protection women are entitled to in Bedouin society means that no man can insult them in a public arena; to the contrary, he must give them respect. Any offense, whether verbal or nonverbal, might lead to the offended woman's tribe taking revenge against the offending man's tribe.

Thus, the power of femininity is expressed through the entrenched norms of men-women relations inscribed in Bedouin society, as one of the Bedouin supervisors remarked:

It is in the way men treat me. Because I am a Bedouin and also a local resident, so they don't offend me because they know they can't do it, there are Bedouin rules and we can prosecute each other.

Keeping an honorable distance between a Bedouin woman supervisor and her Bedouin male colleagues is also seen in work meetings where a woman is alone within a group of men. One commented:

Sometimes . . . you don't feel comfortable when you are sitting alone with ten men. [The men] don't give you a feeling of being a woman; they treat you as a supervisor or as a woman in a certain role. For instance, I would not enter a meeting with men only in my home in the place [reserved for] men [*shig*] only, which is a men's living room, were men and women are segregated. I would not enter there, I would not feel comfortable, but when I come as the supervisor, then I don't have any problem with that.

Respecting women's honor is expressed not only by keeping distance but also by the norms of protecting the "local" woman, i.e. the Bedouin woman. One briefly explained:

. . . Yesterday we had a meeting, and I was the only woman in the room. I looked and laughed, I said: "You don't have another woman here?" They said: "Why? You are a man like us, you don't have to be afraid. We will protect you".

The position of the female supervisor in the social and cultural mosaic of Bedouin society is a crucial element in the resolution of tribal-professional conflict. But, whereas a Bedouin woman has the advantage of her femininity in the cultural structure of the Bedouin society solely, her non-Bedouin counterpart has another advantage: the position of outsider.

Being an outsider in Bedouin society, a non-Bedouin woman is perceived as someone who does not understand cultural rules and, therefore, is not expected to adopt tribal codes in her work (as opposed to the Bedouin supervisor). One of the non-Bedouin supervisors illustrated this position explicitly and clearly:

There was a fight between students from different tribes which eventually led to a murder, and the kids saw it . . . we thought that school as an educational system should interfere and provide intervention for the students. [But], there were some principals who said: "No it's ok, they are used to these cases," and there were some principals who asked for my help. Being a non-Bedouin woman . . . they accept me as a professional figure. I think that being a non-Bedouin person helps me to be perceived more as a professional woman, as a woman who knows what she is doing, and not as a supervisor from one tribe or another who is coming to a school with latent intentions. So, this makes it easier for me to deal with the principals who don't perceive me as being one from their society.

The outsider's position of the non-Bedouin supervisors in Bedouin society makes it easier for them to present themselves as professional women, whereby they are less likely to be involved in tribal obstacles. A non-Bedouin supervisor manifested this point:

It really helps them [Bedouin male colleagues] that I am not part of their society, that I don't belong to any family, to any tribe [and] that I am not influenced by anybody, it is really easy

for me to make contact with high-status figures in Bedouin society because I'm coming as a person ... as a woman supervisor, who has a professional role ...

On this point, it is apparent that femininity and ethnic identity play a key role in the lives and careers of women supervisors in Bedouin society. As women, they are protected by strict traditional rules of this society that clearly determine gender relations and the position of men and women in the world. To the outsider, this external status helps her find her place in Bedouin society. Both groups harness their femininity and position to underscore professional codes and values rather than nepotistic and tribal ones. In some sense, the respect given to women in traditional Bedouin society enables them to promote their values and ethics.

B. A feminine leadership style: an advantage in a male-dominant society

The female supervisors emphasized the advantages of employing a "feminine leadership style" when working with Bedouin men. Note, however, that whereas a feminine leadership style has been conceptualized in the western-based literature as a style of caring, nurturing, and developing of social relations, personal closeness and so forth, the Muslim female supervisors in this study gave this kind of style a slightly different meaning. In their view, being a woman who is considerate to others' needs and who emphasizes mutual dialogue with men is a result of the "male reality" that does not support women in leadership positions.

As being a woman in a leadership role in Bedouin society is a new position to which men are not accustomed, coupled with common traditional beliefs in the inferiority of women in the public arena, the female supervisors had to prove their professionalism by using a masculine style rather than a feminine one alone, since the former style was considered to be effective in their community. This incompatibility led many of the supervisors to adopt a feminine style also, even in a moderate form as compared to the archetype constructed in Anglo-American writings. In some sense, their feminine leadership style was necessary in order to promote their success and display it in their male-dominated community that holds negative attitudes towards the participation of women in public decision making. Thus, the advantages of the "feminine leadership style" and its positive outcomes in the supervisors' view are widely manifested in their accounts.

To illustrate this kind of particular interpretations, we first present the women supervisors' constructions of the male-dominated community's norms of the "correct" position of women in Bedouin society. Then, we present the ways these women succeed in overcoming their inferiority through a more "masculine behavior." The ways they moved to a more "feminine leadership style" and how it became an advantage in their role is discussed at the end of this section.

Perceptions of inferiority. A woman in a supervisory position (as in any managerial role) is perceived in Bedouin society in a different way from a man in the same position, as one of the supervisors explained:

It is difficult to accept a female leader. People think that a leader is only a man, not a woman, because she is a woman. It does not matter if she has these qualities or not. In their eyes they would think about her as a charismatic woman, that she is persuasive, but she still remains a woman.

Leadership in Bedouin society is perceived as a male arena, not as a feminine one. This is manifested in a female supervisor's voice:

I don't take it personally . . . but this is a male society, all the men and women to whom I am responsible are used to obeying their father's decisions, their brother's or a male teacher's. Even the percentage of male teachers is higher than that of women teachers. All their experiences from childhood till puberty are run by male discourse.

The widespread belief that women are incapable of holding leadership positions appears already in the job interview. A female supervisor experienced this cultural discrimination when she first turned to supervising. In the job interview, her gender was discussed publicly. She said:

On the day of the job interview they reminded me that I am a woman and asked how a woman was about to do in this job, how is it that a woman applies for this job? How would I cope with patriarchal society, and how would I cope with the population of principals who are all men. There are only two women principals. This job is done by men principals.

The interviewees' voices made it clear that Bedouin society is embedded with explicitly gendered views of the world, according to which men are more suitable for managerial and leadership positions than women. More accurately, women are not considered in the Bedouin culture to be capable of holding managerial positions, let alone to succeed in this kind of position. The female supervisors in our study were very much aware of this dominant cultural script.

The disadvantage of using a "masculine" style. Since women in leadership positions are perceived as weak and ineffective, a tension was created between using feminine and masculine styles, as one of supervisors confessed:

[The kindergarten teachers] think that if my personality is strong, then I am a bad person. This is what I first heard from (them). But when I contact them personally they say: "We did not know that you are like that, nice." They found this out. Sometimes in districts where I enjoy working I feel that I am myself, me is me. But in other places I am aggressive, but it's not my real personality . . . when they reach the red limit, then I become aggressive. I don't surrender to the teachers. There are some kindergarten teachers who don't want to work, and also I cannot be a policewoman. This is a real problem in kindergartens, I never wanted to act aggressively, but I feel that I have to put limits on them, otherwise the whole system would suffer from a big mess.

No doubt the supervisor is likely to have to cope with contradictory demands: On one hand, she depicts herself as tender, soft and friendly. However, the external conditions and the dominant value system in Bedouin society makes it necessary for them to adopt a more "masculine" leadership style that is expressed by assertiveness, formality and hierarchy.

To make things even harder, a supervisor who tends to use a more masculine style, i.e. expresses tougher behavior and imposes her authority more bluntly, is called a "bulldozer" by her subordinates. Having discussed the dilemma of masculine versus feminine leadership style, she commented:

It was necessary to impose some limits on people. In the first year it was necessary to prove that you can do otherwise, that a woman can do the job.

Another supervisor tried to demonstrate her need to hide her femininity by saying that she "should know (her) limits in the job." She elaborated:

You can't make friends at work because it would end your career. They think that they deserve everything and you can't control it.

Losing their femininity is seen as the price the female supervisors had to pay in order to be conceived of as effective leaders in the male-dominated Bedouin society.

The necessity of a feminine style. Despite the tension created between these two modes of style, in the end all the supervisors succeeded in employing their feminine style for their own benefit and using it in their interaction with Bedouin male principals. This was seen as a key factor in their professional success. One supervisor was particularly illustrative of this issue, highlighting the importance of dialogues and collaboration at her work:

... It was necessary for me to appoint counselors who would be accepted also by the principals. I gave the principal the opportunity to interview him, be impressed by him and also I participated in this process, I gave him the respect that if he would not like to work with him, then I will place him in another school. I think that they [principals] valued this very much, that I am cooperating with them, and am not signing the document and sending them the worker I like ... I remember that during my first month in the job, I was not familiar with the documents ... a principal opened his office door saying: "Look, I want this person and it does not matter what you say to me." I looked at him like this and said: "Why are you screaming? Let's sit and talk." The approach of "I am not fighting with you head to head" succeeded eventually.

It is likely that by employing a feminine style in their interactions with male counterparts they increase their opportunities to succeed at work. By negotiating with male principals and administrators in Bedouin society calmly and gently, they maximize their safety and the scrutiny they undergo, as Kandiyoti (1988) commented. Notably, the female supervisors have realized that conflicts and disagreements cannot be solved in a masculine manner only, mainly due to their inferior status in Bedouin society. Another supervisor elaborated on this point:

You have your own attitudes, you have your position, your principles and it is always in your mind. But, sometime you don't do exactly what you believe in, but you need it to be done. You fight for your principles, but the field is burning. If I insist, then I try to share my thoughts with other people, I speak to people who have some influence in the community and can make compromises that will satisfy me and satisfy all the partners involved ... Sometimes you give the edge of the line and then pull it back a little bit. I see that we, the women, know how to manipulate situations. We know how to take more and more tasks on our shoulders, and we do. I will speak on behalf of myself, I know how to navigate in my work schedules and overload. If you give a man many many tasks, like my husband, he will lose direction. So I think that we succeed in the long run.

Female leadership as an advantage in Bedouin society. It seems that the need to use a feminine style in interactions with male counterparts and principals is seen to be an advantage in the supervisors' eyes. One supervisor drew a parallel between this sort of leadership and the captain of a ship. In her words:

Someone who leads can't do it only by himself, I do lead but the people in the (kindergarten), they are the people who do the work and I should cooperate and discuss their work with them. It is like a captain who cannot sail the ship alone – he needs all his team. And here what is important is that he will have the ability to gather all his team together and mobilize them towards the same goal.

Given all the advantages of the feminine leadership style depicted in the supervisors' accounts, they explicitly attached its effectiveness to the female character, as one of the supervisors illustrated:

Being a woman is an advantage as I see it. Why? Because I have personal abilities as a woman and as a human being, I think that I have a lot of patience, I have a lot of faith, I always have some hope as to how to improve the existing situation, I don't give up, I have a good personal contact with people. I think this is the secret of my success. I communicate well with people, I believe in them, I trust them, I give them some hope and motivation to work despite all the difficulties around. "Social" supervision: Femininity as a necessity in supervision.

In the view of our interviewees, being a woman supervisor in the Bedouin society does not mean being in charge of educational and pedagogical assignments or adhering to occupational tasks alone. For them, as women, their role is also to provide other women with support, assistance and empowerment. This kind of support is expressed by the women supervisors' awareness of the Bedouin kindergarten teachers' distresses and personal problems. In doing so, our interviewees believed they had managed to pave their way into the women's hearts and souls. For them, being a woman is likely to make the supervisor more considerate and empathic towards the particular world of the Bedouin female teachers, mainly in those aspects that are related to women's inferiority in a male-dominated society.

In order to understand the subjectively-held strengths of femininity in supervision, we first present the meaning of male domination as it appears in the supervisor's narratives, and then we present the supervisors' "social" strategies to cope with this issue in their career.

Social-professional male domination. Male domination is part of the social structure of the patriarchal Bedouin society. This domination is not limited to the social level, but characterizes also the professional, educational level, as it is also seen in the principal's control over the women teachers in the pre-school system. One supervisor remarked:

There is oppression. First of all, the budget is at the hands of the principal, [and so] it doesn't get to kindergartens. It is only for the school. It's like a donation that the principal gives to the kindergarten teachers: a little clay, a little paper, paint. [But] sometimes he does and sometime he does not. We never received cleaning materials, not even glasses or plates. I brought it all from my children's things. I also remember that when I got my first kindergarten, before I became a supervisor, nothing was in it, no furniture, no equipment, nothing. Where does all the money go? They [principals] gave us nothing because they don't care.

The last quote demonstrates the inferior position of women in Bedouin society, even of those who entered high-status roles in the educational system. The kindergarten system, which is run mostly by women, is of secondary importance in the male-dominated society. For this reason, the principals, whose many kindergartens are formally connected to their premise, are less likely to transfer funding and resources to this institution. Perhaps, women's strong caring attitude, expressed by the supervisor's own decision to complement missing equipment from her own resources, enables principals to continue the discrimination against the pre-school educational system in Bedouin society.

"Social" supervision: a response to male domination. In light of the above quotes, one of the main aims of the women supervisors was to empower other women, i.e. young

women and female kindergarten teachers living and working in Bedouin society. This is reflected in the following quote:

I chose to be a supervisor because I wanted to lift up our area, our girls, our women teachers. It is very important that the supervisor will be from the Bedouin sector because she is familiar with the problems and she knows how to help.

The female supervisors saw their role as an opportunity to assist other women through using the power of their role in order to promote women at work. In this way, supervision in Bedouin society receives a social meaning; the supervisor's role is strongly associated with the lives and careers of female teachers.

Likewise, the female supervisors consider their gender to be an advantage for Bedouin women, because, in their view, the women look at them and learn from them, and, therefore, are empowered in their struggle against cultural images that put them at the bottom of the social ladder. One supervisor explained:

All of the problems that women kindergarten teachers have, even in their homes, with their families, children and husbands, I know. Suddenly, [a woman teacher] approaches me, or calls me on Saturdays and says: "It does not matter, we must hear something from you." They ask me some questions, consult me about different matters. And I help [them]. I support them even if I need to go to their homes. I don't hesitate. I come and solve the problem. I already know all their husbands and their families.

Women's empowerment seems to be related to the supervisors' gender in terms of personal closeness to other women, caring and understanding of others. This advantage is clearly observed in the following quote:

I have known a woman teacher for the last four years. Suddenly, her husband does not want her to teach. Why? She has three children and he prevents her from coming to the kindergarten . . . When I saw that I could help and be involved, I went to visit her husband and tried to persuade him [to change his mind].

The female supervisor's role as a social empowerer of subordinate women has also penetrated into the domestic sphere in general and that of motherhood in particular. The empowerment of mothers has been made through the educational sphere:

The first thing that I want to organize is a mothers' meeting. I have to see them. I have to know what is going on in their minds. They have to know what their child does in the kindergarten from morning till noon. Before I see the child I must give the mother support. I want the mother to be part of the child's educational process.

Mothers in Bedouin society have been deprived of access to the educational arena for many years due to traditional values eliminating women from any public sphere, including education. The women supervisors' femininity is depicted in their accounts as a means to extend the Bedouin mothers' responsibilities over their children, mainly because mothers can only interact with other women. Admittedly, few female supervisors in so-called "modern" societies would have adopted this kind of task in their role.

It is likely, then, that the women supervisors possess a feeling of social mission that can be implemented only by women: promoting the status of Bedouin women even to a limited extent. One interviewee constructed a link between gender and women's advancement in society:

Because I am a woman I feel I have a mission toward women from my society. I see my personal progress as their progress, I see myself as a positive model for them, that they can progress and I can help them if they need me to. In my village they are all proud of me, that I have achieved a high status. And also they are proud of me as a woman and as their relative. Personally, when I hear that a woman had progressed in her life, I am very proud of this, that a Bedouin woman reached this status. I want to erase the stereotype of the Bedouin woman. I want Bedouin women in my community to have all their opportunities, to attain education, to work in the educational field, to be good mothers, to raise well-educated children. I want people to give her the right to choose, that they won't say that she was not promoted because she is an Arab or a Bedouin woman.

D. The advantage of femininity for Jewish supervisor colleagues

One of the vexing issues in the Bedouin educational system is the financial discrimination it suffers compared to the larger Jewish educational system. Yet, when it comes to the appointment of a woman into a job that has always been held by male incumbents, the Jewish majority seems to facilitate this change in Bedouin society.

Furthermore, the simple fact that most of those responsible for the Arab supervisors in the organizational hierarchy of the Israel Ministry of Education are Jewish women, who live in a liberal, "western" culture, makes the gender of our interviewees, in their view, an advantage. In some sense a women's professional sisterhood overrules ethnic differences. Thus, despite ethnic differences, an operational and mutual support was reported to prevail in the relations between supervisors from both ethnic groups, chiefly due to the supervisors' femininity. One supervisor felt that:

We are all women, even the District head at the Ministry of Education. They are all women. I never felt inconvenience among Arabs or Jews or among men or women. It's like we are a team, a team for everything, and I felt it from my first day.

However, in spite of this professional sisterhood, the Bedouin female supervisors felt a kind of deficiency, even inferiority, in comparison to their Jewish counterparts. A female supervisor explicitly and clearly manifested her feeling in this respect:

First of all, Jewish supervisors are all certified. They receive guidance, advanced study, they get help, they have guidance in the field. They receive budgets, they have funds, they have books, programs that are all in their Hebrew language, and we have nothing, we don't have anything. When I started [my job] I had nothing . . . I came from pre-school teaching, and they told me, come and take the job. Be a supervisor. I came but I did not know anything. I didn't know what supervision was, I didn't receive any guidance, any training for the job. I used to go to Jewish kindergarten teachers, they had training, and I used to ask them about basic things, like math, because everything was in Hebrew. I used to read it in Hebrew and translate it into Arabic . . .

And another supervisor added:

Look, there are difficulties in all sectors, but budget problems in the Bedouin sector are more evident than in the Jewish sector, there are less qualified people, fewer professionals in the Bedouin sector . . .

Note that the professional sisterhood is borrowed in the supervisors' accounts to strengthen their belief in the advantage of their femininity in Bedouin supervision. Being women who interact with female superiors in a female environment is perceived as a way to promote issues at their work and for the sake of Bedouin society. But, that

is not to say that a feeling of inferiority does not exist in their relations with their Jewish counterpart, rather the contrary. They feel that the Jewish supervisors work under better conditions and in a more conducive atmosphere. A feeling of discrimination appears throughout the interview transcripts.

While gender is brought up in the supervisors' accounts as a major determinant of their comfortable relationship with their Jewish counterparts and superiors, a female supervisor a year prior to retirement exposed a different picture when it comes to the relationships within the group of female supervisors in the Bedouin sector. This unpleasant situation is best demonstrated in the next extracts:

... There are more tensions that are felt in Bedouin society because there are fewer women who reached this status, or who attained higher education, so I feel the tension, the ... let's say, jealousy of: "Why you," "why not we." It was expressed through gossip. With Jews I live in peace. Not so much with my [Bedouin] roommate ... Sure, they cause the discrimination. The Arab supervisors by themselves, they don't like each other, one dislikes the other. If there is a tender, they all apply for it. It is the opposite from the situation of Jewish supervisors who all are united.

In the view of the supervisor, administrative discrimination against the Arab sector in Israel is likely to generate conflicts among Arab supervisors in the Bedouin sector due to their need to compete for scant resources.

Discussion

The stories of women leaders in a patriarchal, tribal society illustrated a connection between "power," "femininity" and "culture" in leading positions that is different from the one constructed in the western literature on leadership. Three theoretical directions seem to stem from this study as follows: What is "power" in tribal society? What is the "power of femininity"? And what can we learn from the previous discussion about the impact of cultural values on female leadership?

Female leadership in this study has been affected and constructed through cultural resources that women use in order to lead others in a male-dominated world. What is common to all Muslim women in this study seems to be conformism to dominant social values necessary to legitimate their leadership.

One of the "cultural" resources women use is their feminine role as shaped in their societies. In nomadic societies, the cultural feminine roles of women (usually perceived as marginalizing them) are seen as ways that turn them into powerful women who can influence men. Nelson (1974) reviewed several studies on nomadic societies that show how women use their feminine roles to affect and negotiate gender power relations. She referred to such tactics as playing men off against one another, seeking alliance and support from other women, using sorcery (in Chaquia society, for example, men fear women who can divine the future), and using such female roles as midwife, ceremonial cook and religious leader to gain status in their community. Another feminine role that Nelson (1974, p. 559) elaborated on in the nomadic societies is being a daughter, sister or a wife and mother; in these roles, the women act as "information brokers" who mediate social relations within the family and the larger society. In their positions as women, they can channel information and use it to influence decision making about alliances and marriages, and they can inform the male members of their family what is going on in the community.

A similar use of cultural constraints to gain power and status can be seen in how women in Arab nomadic societies play their roles as honorable wives, especially through gossip, to influence their husband's image in the community, which depends also on his wife's behavior. In this sense, the women use their most important cultural elements – shame and honor – to influence their husbands (Nelson, 1974).

Women in Bedouin society, who are not supposed to hold leadership positions, are found to employ two strategies in their role. The first one – femininity – seems to be a very useful strategy not only in the Muslim supervisors' domestic arena, as it is used among women from nomadic societies, but also in the public arena, i.e. in their workplace. By acting according to the "honorable," respected, traditional model of femininity constructed in the Bedouin culture (i.e. respect men through sharing with them the decision-making process, give men the space they need, etc.), they transfer the "feminine-domestic" model into the "public" sphere. Therefore, they are less likely to threaten the male public sphere (after all, leadership is considered in Bedouin society to be only for men) and allow themselves more "leading space" inside the "male space." Likewise, the female supervisors have to pretend to keep strict gender relations in the public sphere, or else they might impede their likelihood to succeed in their feminine leadership.

Particularly striking is the interviewees' use of their ethnic status (position) as "outsiders" or "insiders" of Bedouin society in order to manipulate their profession. The women studied in this research use their ethnic-cultural positioning as a way of negotiating with the male-dominated world. Their cultural status as "outsiders" or "insiders" to Bedouin culture are illustrated in the way they deal with male leaders. As we saw, there are no expectations of non-Bedouin Muslim women to be familiar with entrenched local norms, and, consequently, men leaders are likely to consider them merely to be professional women with no relation to their tribal affiliation. On the other hand, this is one of the biggest obstacles the Bedouin female supervisors confront. They seem to cope with it through local norms that forbid offending or hurting a Bedouin woman. This dimension is not mentioned in western literature of leadership and it seems to be unique to patriarchal cultures.

Thus, the question that should be asked refers to the meaning of "feminine leadership" in patriarchal societies. The female supervisors' voices reveal how cultural scripts and behaviors perceived by many western scholars to maintain women's inferiority in a certain society might virtually be constructed in terms of women's power, strength and authority in patriarchal societies. Hence, great significance should be attached to diverse social and cultural interpretations of concepts used in the analysis of women's stories from different societies. Our interviewees' voices highlight how careful we need to be before taking any unified, ostensibly universal stance towards women leaders' experiences and behaviors. A "right" value for one culture is "wrong" for another.

As indicated in other studies of women leaders in patriarchal societies (e.g., Oplatka, 2006; Oplatka and Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2006; Schein, 2001), where much gender discrimination exists, women in leading roles are more valued as long as they act according to their expected feminine model. Furthermore, in patriarchal societies not only do women in leading roles behave in a more feminine manner, but they also turn their leadership into "feminist," not only "feminine" leadership, at least in part through the use of their powerful position in order to help other women. This is more frequent

in patriarchal societies (see Hertz-Lazarowitz and Shapira, 2005; Oplatka, 2006) where female leaders are themselves discriminated against by male domination, and therefore they empower other women from their society. They take their roles very seriously and with social responsibility, seeing themselves as role models who encourage more women from their community to follow in their paths.

In sum, the story of the female supervisors in Bedouin society extends our knowledge of the lives and careers of women working in patriarchal, sometimes minority groups that compose the multicultural society. The particular constructions of leadership, power, femininity and masculinity provide insight into the need to develop theories and models of leadership that are not based only on gender, but also on cultural constructions of gender difference. The female supervisors' career accounts are an example of the strong influence of culture and heritage on leadership styles and orientation, a pattern that has been shared by many women principals living and working in patriarchal societies (Oplatka and Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2006).

Notes

1. Education in Israel is segregated by nationality and degree of adherence to religious practice, with separate educational systems for religious and secular Jewish children and for Arab children, with each sector including both state and non-state schools. Non-state private schools for reform (moderately religious) Jews and ultra-orthodox Jews as well as Arab church-affiliated schools receive partial government funding (Oplatka and Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2006, p. 7).
2. For many reasons, there are no statistical data that are based on ethnic background in Israel but on religious one only. In 2004, 9.8 percent of the BA students were Arabs, 5.1 percent of the MA students were Arabs (source: Central Bureau of Statistics, 2006).
3. Since all women live and work in the Arab community in the Negev, and because of the small sample of interviewees, it is important to maintain their anonymity; thus we cannot provide personal details for each interviewee, and they will be described in general terms only.
4. The Arab society in Israel consists of Muslims, Christians, and Druse. Most of the Arabs living in the Negev are Muslim Bedouins, while the other groups, including non-Bedouins, live in the North of Israel. Some of them moved to the Negev for occupational reasons. Despite some differences, the Arab society shares similar gender-based values, which are traditional in nature and originates many Islamic rules.
5. Because of a shortage of space we cannot elaborate on the personal influences on the women's lives. But most of them mentioned that without their husbands' and families' support and help in managing their family-career conflict, they would not take the position of being a supervisor. This issue can be deeply elaborated in another paper.

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