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Poetry as women's resistance to the consequences of Bedouin displacement in Jordan

Maira Seeley

Despite the significant displacement that Jordanian Bedouin families have undergone in recent generations, Bedouin women are able to mitigate some of the consequences of that displacement through the opportunities and influence they have gained as Nabati poets.

Bedouin populations in the Middle East have experienced significant displacement through loss of assets or of access to assets, leading to a loss of livelihood during the past six decades. Bedouin in rural Aqaba and Ma'an governorates in southern Jordan have been prevented from following migratory routes because of a reinforced border with Saudi Arabia and government initiatives that sought to induce Bedouin settlement. Very few Jordanian Bedouin today rely on herding for subsistence, and most families' survival depends on male wage labour (for example in the tourist industry), military pensions and state benefits.

This displacement from a migratory lifestyle has significantly affected Bedouin women's social and family roles. The transition to sedentary life and greater geographic and spatial proximity to non-relatives has required women to take measures to avoid contact with unrelated males. In the densely settled contexts into which Bedouin have been displaced, this has serious consequences for women's mobility, restricting their ability to contribute economically to their families and limiting their participation in public activities and decision making. Women's labour was formerly critical to family survival in a herding context, as women were responsible for caring for animals, milking and processing dairy products, as well as for the care, mobility and erection of tents. Women's activities also occupied a larger spatial range in herding contexts, with fewer restrictions on movement.

Because most families no longer depend on domestic animals and the vast majority of wage earners in Bedouin households today are male, women have been largely sidelined

as economic contributors and their influence in their own household's economic decisions has consequently been reduced. Political activity is also difficult for Bedouin women due to restrictions on their public movement and interaction with unrelated men.

The traditional art form of Nabati poetry (*al-sha'r al-Nabati*), a genre of oral poetry composed throughout the Arabian Peninsula by both men and women, has proved to be an acceptable means of resistance. Nabati poetry creates an avenue of resistance in several ways: by increasing women's spatial and geographic mobility, by providing opportunities to voice political and social criticism, and by allowing some women to establish careers as poets and thus garner respect, influence and financial benefits.

Unlike many rural Bedouin women, a female poet (*shā'irah*) may travel many driving hours from home to participate in a poetry evening (*umsiyyah*) or contest (*mahrajān*), accompanied by her husband or another trusted individual. This contrasts strongly with the restrictions on many non-poet Bedouin women's movement which prevent them from appearing even in the village outside their home. A female poet, however, can recite her work before an audience of as many as 500 men without attracting criticism of her morals. The most successful female poets may even, if they have the resources, travel abroad to participate in international poetry events such as the Emirati televised competition '*Shā'r al-Million*' ('Millions' Poet'). During and after such events women poets may converse and eat with unrelated men and in the context of a poetry evening this does not usually generate social disapproval.

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Nabati poetry events also enable such displaced Bedouin women to participate in public political and social debate. Much of the poetry women compose addresses contentious issues such as political corruption and perceived disloyalty, the Arab Spring movements and the nature of being Jordanians. Bedouin women's limited opportunities for higher education often bar them from political leadership but not from composing influential poetry. One female poet's family strongly opposed her

official participation in politics but they supported her political action through a widely disseminated and controversial poem criticising political figures. Renown as an accomplished poet is also a means for women to establish a position of social prestige as contributors to family honour and reputation and as savvy intellectuals who may join in men's political discussions.

Maira Seeley *maira.seeley@hmc.ox.ac.uk* is a student at the University of Oxford.