Chapter 10

Values, Constraints, and Maneuvers: Processes of Academization among Ultra-Orthodox Women and Beduin Women in Israel

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ABSTRACT

For about a decade, ultra-Orthodox and Bedouin women have been applying to higher education academic institutions in Israel in order to study despite bans from their conservative communities. Academic studies instill learning and culture, create an encounter with knowledge for the individual and thus carry a high degree of threat to the rigid conservative enclave. This article examines how conservative societies cope with the wheels of change as the process of higher education for women expands. The case studies in this article are 60 educated women from Jewish ultra-Orthodox society and from Negev Bedouin groups in Israel. As shown by the findings, a theoretical flow model based on three parameters emerges: value-constraint-maneuver. In summary, it appears that this model reflects the development of a new conservative female model that combines traditional values with contemporary indicators.

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INTRODUCTION

The past decade has witnessed a substantial increase in the number of women who apply to study in academic institutions from both ultra-Orthodox and Bedouin societies in Israel. These women enter a variety of occupations, or return to their communities and integrate into the workforce there.

The process of acquiring a higher education is extremely complex, both in terms of values and practices. One of the main sources of indecision in these societies is the appropriate attitude towards the acquisition of academic education in general. Academic education is one of the characteristics of the modern, “outside” society (Kalgay, 2007) and is a source of creation and dissemination of modern values (Sivan, Almond and Appleby, 2004). This places it in tension with the value of self-preservation, so inherent in conservative societies.

This essay describes the way two conservative groups in Israel cope with a changing political-social ideology. Both of these communities have difficulty with absolute identification with the Jewish nation. The ultra-Orthodox do not identify with the principle of a Jewish nation-state where the religious aspect is not foremost. The Bedouin do not identify with the Jewish nation out of sympathy with the Arab population. This lack of identification with the values of the society, within which they reside, is related to their social and emotional isolation. This separation is reflected in the Israeli economy where they have a significantly lower participation rate than the rest of the Israeli population (Yakobson & Rubinstein, 2003).

In the national, political realm, there have been attempts, for many years, to increase the participation and employment rates of these people. This has been done in accordance with objectives set forth by the government, those of promoting employment and increasing earning potential among these groups. For the policy makers, education is a key tool for both individual and socio-economic change. Consequently, various initiatives have been formulated to encourage a higher education for minority groups and their integration into the economy (Kay, 2009).

In fact, the case studies in this paper show how the women of the two societies deal with the ideology of political, socio-economic change. As I will demonstrate, the acquisition of a profession and the consequent upgrading of human resources, do not express a desire to participate in a national or political revolution, rather they express a need for economic survival in a rapidly developing consumer society.

This chapter seeks to examine how conservative societies cope with processes of change resulting from the expansion of higher education for women. The case studies are 60 women from ultra-Orthodox or Bedouin societies who have been educated in public institutions of higher education in Israel. The research focuses on women because they are a significant link in processes of conservation in their
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