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# Reflexivity and the change in women's status: the case of Arab Bedouin women in Israel

Khawla Zoabi<sup>a,b</sup> and Carol Fuller<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Institute of Education, University of Reading, Reading, UK; <sup>b</sup>The Arab Academic College for Education in Israel, Haifa, Israel

## ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a sharp decline in the birth rate among Arab Bedouin women in Israel, despite the traditional prevailing patriarchal norms that advocate for large families. What has been behind this reduced birth rate? To answer this question, we build on the reflexive theory of Beck et al. who referred to the occurrence of increased reflexivity during increases in feelings of uncertainty and instability as a result of social transformation. This paper examines through in-depth interviews the reflexive discourse that Arab Bedouin women engage in regarding social conventions that harm their security, stability, and status and lead to a decrease in the number of children in the family. Theoretically, this paper articulates a new conceptual framework proposing that reflexivity processes on critical social subjects that pose uncertainties and threats to women have the power to lead to desired social changes. Accordingly, the high birth rate is a critical reflexive subject for women, since it poses social, psychological, and economic threats to women. Thus, through reflexivity on the birthrate subject, women apply new social strategies to change their existing social reality, free themselves from the patriarchal social structures and seek mastery over their lives. Due to the women's reflexivity process, they were able to lead a significant social shift in decreasing their birth rates, one of the dominant patriarchal conventions, achieving better social status and improving their economic and social security, certainty, and stability.

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## Introduction

Among the Arab Palestinian population in Israel, which numbered approximately 2.1 million at the end of 2022 (CBS, 2023), birth rates were, until recently, the highest in the world. Nonetheless, these rates have fallen among the Muslim, Christian, and Druze Arab groups. In Muslim women, the rate dropped from 4.74 children per woman in 2000 to 3.32 children in 2015. In the Druze community, the rate went from 3.07 children per woman to 2.19, and in Christian Arabs from 2.55 to 2.04. However, it appears that the most dramatic decline occurred among Bedouin women in the Negev, where the rate declined in the same period from 9.77 children per woman in 2000 to 5.40 children in 2015.

This paper focuses on the latter group, the Arab Bedouin women, where the sharp decline has taken place despite the traditional prevailing patriarchal norms, which is a "system of social relations privileging male seniors over juniors and women, both in the private and public spheres" (Joseph, 2000, p. xv; Maktabi & Lia, 2017), and which advocate for large families, which is considered a vital source of social strength and power for the collective group, the extended family, and the tribe (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2017; Yahal & Abu-Ajaj, 2021).

What is behind this reducing birth rate and what, if any, is the role of women in this? Existing literature on birth rate has paid little attention to women's perception of the decline in the birth rate and their role in it. Studies have been quantitative with a focus on the socioeconomic factors alongside external variables

**CONTACT** Khawla Zoabi  [khawla\\_zoabi2011@hotmail.com](mailto:khawla_zoabi2011@hotmail.com)  Institute of Education, University of Reading, The Arab Academic College for Education in Israel, Haifa, 5 Grove Cottages, Emmer Green, RG4 8RB Reading, UK

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such as modernization, urbanization, and structural changes in industrial and postindustrial economies (Bongaarts, 2001, 2002; Cherlin, 2009; Guzzo & Furstenberg, 2007; Klüsener et al., 2013; Lundberg & Pollak, 2014; Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001). Despite comprehensive research on the subject, there is a lack of research dealing in particular with the Arab Bedouin women's perceptions of the decrease in the birth rate when the social-tribal patriarchal expectation is to increase it and not decrease it. How do they perceive the issue of birth and what is its significance and implications for them? What was behind the decrease in the birthrate? Answers to these questions may contribute to a broader understanding of the phenomenon of declining birth rates and even shed light on the role of women in the struggle for social change. Therefore, this article seeks to fill the gap and examine women's personal perspectives on the recent decline in birthrates and what was behind the lowering of it, despite the patriarchal society they lived within.

To address these questions, we build on the *reflexive modernization* theory of Beck (2009), Giddens (1990, 1991), and Lash (1993). This theory allows us to track major social changes through reflexivity and Giddens' concept of the self as a reflexive project shaped by individual responsibility and cognitive awareness. *Reflexive modernization* suggests that mounting uncertainty is accompanied by increasing reflexivity, which is the increasing ability of agents to reflect on structure (Lash, 1993). Accordingly, the more uncertainty rises, the more agents acquire the ability to reflect on the social conditions of their existence and in that way change them (Beck, et al., 1994; 2003). In late modernity, the agent is "freed" from previous "traditional" societal structures and has increased opportunities to self-reflect and deconstruct the social world through which it was constituted (Lumsden, 2019). Furthermore, as "modernity radically alters the nature of day-to-day social life and affects the most personal aspects of our experience," self-identity in the post-traditional order becomes reflexive (Giddens, 1991, p. 2). Through reflexivity dynamics, structure, and hierarchies can be overturned (Beck et al., 2003), where individuals increase their "mastery consciousness" (Latour, 2003: 36) through their reflexivity-oriented actions, believing that mastery and change are possible.

In this paper, in line with reflexive theory and the construction of self-identity, we argue that high birth rates is a reflexive subject, where having a large nuclear family poses social and economic threats and uncertainties to women and impacts their everyday life and status. Therefore, through the reflexivity process on birth rate, women produce strategies and tactics to reduce its rate to transform their status and improve their lives. We propose that the dynamics of reflexivity prompt changes in individuals' practices and perceptions towards existing social structures and norms and challenge them to make the changes and seek to construct other new ones. We argue that despite the power of the patriarch, Bedouin women's reflexivity positions the focus on their needs according to their individual interests rather than the patriarch's social will. Furthermore, we argue that reflexivity takes place in the form of bargaining with the patriarchal system and taking actual action to confront the prevailing traditional norms that advocate for a high rate of births.

This paper is composed of four sections. The next section briefly presents the reflexive modernity theory. Then the paper analyzes the social characteristics of the Arab Palestinian society in Israel and of Bedouins in particular, followed by a description of the research method and findings. The final section discusses the findings and presents new theoretical insights regarding reflexivity with regards to birth rates and the possibilities of changing women's social status in a patriarchal society.

## **The Arab Bedouin society in Israel**

There is extensive literature that analyzes the social, cultural, economic, and political conditions and transformation of the Palestinian Arab minority in Israel. Therefore, in this section, we organized the relevant literature regarding the social conditions of the Arab and the Bedouin women in Israel according to four categories, which we found helpful for understanding the conditions and changes among this group. We will mainly refer to the social structure and status of the woman in the context of women's perception of the issues of birth and rates of these.

### ***A collective-traditional society***

Extensive literature suggests that the Palestinian society in Israel has a collective-traditional and patriarchal characteristics and which is undergoing social changes related to those characteristics (i.e. Abu-Baker & Dwairy, 2003; Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2014; Haj-Yahia, 2019; Joseph, 2018; Lavee & Katz, 2003; Meler &

Marnin-Distelfel, 2023; Sabbah-Karkabi, 2022; Smootha, 2019). This society also integrates traditional into modern characteristics (Abu-Baker, 2016; Sabbah-Karkabi, 2022), where we might find combinations of people located on the axis of collectivity-individualism (Dwairy et al., 2006). In other words, we find combinations of a person who is completely immersed in the collective family structure and a person who strives for his well-being and independence and is not bound to the patriarchal family frameworks (Joseph, 2018).

Sabbah-Karkabi (2021) pointed out that there is a considerable increase in women's education and at the same time the patriarchal norms regarding gender division and maintaining the family are very present and relevant. Abu-Rabia-Queder (2017) claims that this point is relevant to Palestinian Arab Bedouin society in the Negev, so the integration of women in higher education depends on the consent of the fathers: if the studies are outside the borders of the country, male relatives must accompany them. This conduct is on the one hand the realization of a desire to learn and develop, and on the other, is conditioned by social approval. It is indeed possible to regard the processes occurring in Palestinian society as contradictory (Sabbah-Karkabi, 2021), but it can be seen as a transitional process moving along the axis of collectivity individuality. According to Abu-Baker (2016), the Palestinian society citizens of Israel are simultaneously characterized by traditionalism, modernity, conservatism, and changing processes that occur and exist in harmony. Bedouin society, with the addition of the patriarchalism that characterizes it, has been described as tribal (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2017; Abu-Saad et al., 2007; Yahal & Abu-Ajaj, 2021), identified by social cohesion and a lifestyle determined according to tribal norms (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2017; Yahal & Abu-Ajaj, 2021), where respect and the dignity of the individual are conditioned by obedience to the group that individual belongs to and loyalty to the tribe (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2007). However, it is undergoing changes in significant central factors, such as young women pursuing higher education (Abu-Saad et al., 2007).

The extended family continues to be a source of support and a mechanism of control, the collective family identity is clearly present and aimed at preserving family ties and reciprocity between them (Abu-Baker, 2016; Joseph, 2018). Furthermore, the Palestinian extended family is a powerful resource arising from their minority status in Israel (Sa'ar, 2017; Sabbah-Karkabi & Stier, 2017), which is still responsible for the well-being of its members. The interdependence of the family and between family members, the collective identity, and seeing the good of the group – all of these are still significant in the lives of individuals and in the individual's self-perception (Al-Krenawi, 2009; Haj-Yahia, 2000; Joseph, 2018; Malach-Pines & Zaidman, 2003; Zoabi & Savaya, 2012, 2016).

### **Religiosity**

Giddens (1991) argues that the transition to late modern society results in religion becoming more popular and that post-modernization results in the nature of religion changing, but not necessarily decreasing in importance. In this regard, the Palestinian Arab society in Israel is divided into three religious groups: a Muslim majority (83%), Druze (9%), and Christians (8%) (CBS, 2023). Religion plays a significant role in Palestinian society in Israel, as in many other societies, and has a considerable influence on social, cultural, and political life. Scholars suggest that religion is a system for maintaining order and tradition, a control device, and a force that opposes and suppresses liberal changes in Arab society (Dwairy, 2010; Yahal & Abu-Ajaj, 2021). Abu-Baker (2016) argues that mechanisms that are based on religious rules and traditions served as a means for institutionalizing gender discrimination and distributing resources in favor of men. Religion is a measure of perpetuating the patriarch power. One example is the decree issued by the religious leaders in the Druze community that prohibits women with getting driver's licenses and their families from entering the house of prayer, i.e. religious ex-communication (Abu-Baker, 2016; Weiner-Levy, 2009). In recent decades, the power of religion among the Bedouin community has intensified, especially due to the combination of the power of religion with the forces of the tribal field as a defense mechanism against state attempts to change the rules of the tribe (Yahal & Abu-Ajaj, 2021).

### **Male gender hierarchy**

Palestinian and Bedouin societies as patriarchal societies, and the sociocultural concept is expressed in gender-biased expectations in all areas of life: in the opportunities provided, gender practices, gender

division of roles, sexual relations, family size, and preference for males over females (Meler & Marnin-Distelfel, 2023). The proper role of women is seen as that of a wife and mother, committed to her husband, children, and home. The man is the accepted authority both in the household and outside of it (Abu-Baker, 2003; Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2011; Haj-Yahia, 2010).

In the last decade, significant changes have taken place in Palestinian society, such as an increase in education rates, a rising rate of women working outside the home, an increase in age at the time of marriage, and a decline in birth rates (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2017; Meler & Marnin-Distelfel, 2023; Sa'ar, 2017; Sabbah-Karkabi, 2021; Sabbah-Karkabi & Stier, 2017). Women treat studies and education as a way to increase their autonomy, redefine self-identity, and stand up to gender inequality and sociocultural oppression (Abu-Baker, 2016; Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2017; Sabbah-Karkabi, 2022). Education has the greatest potential to undermine patriarchal gender roles and gender relations (Meler, 2017).

Due to the spatial and temporal change imposed on women through modernization, they struggle for their identity since they have difficulty combining their past life with their present one (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2007, 2014). Despite the efforts that the women make to improve their status, the sociocultural boundaries are homogeneous and traditional, where patriarchal norms and values still shape the private and public spaces (Haj-Yahia, 2010; Sabbah-Karkabi, 2021). Abu-Rabia-Queder (2007) argues that acquiring an education does not guarantee a release from traditional roles, especially as society encourages women to study professions that are close to their traditional roles such as teaching and nursing. Educated and working, women remain subject to the gender order (Meler, 2017).

Furthermore, gender inequality in Palestinian society in Israel results from the intersection of the factors stemming from the policies of Israel as a state towards the Palestinian minority on the one hand, and the patriarchal factors influenced by the special considerations of the Palestinian society in Israel towards males and females on the other hand (Abu-Baker, 2016). Palestinian Arabs are an underprivileged minority group that faces mechanisms of inequality, discrimination, and exclusion (Jabareen, 2008, 2015b; Jabareen & Switat, 2019; Meler, 2017; Smootha, 2019). The patriarchal structure still defines women's duties and rights, encourages them to avoid entering the job market, and sees them as belonging more to the private sphere (Sa'ar, 2017; Sabbah-Karkabi, 2021). Abu-Rabia-Queder (2007) claims that the Bedouin woman experiences dual discrimination, as she belongs to an Arab minority within the Jewish Israeli majority and as a woman who belongs to a community dominated by Bedouin men.

Palestinian women pursuing higher education and consequently joining the labor market has always been accompanied by significant challenges (Abu-Baker 2016; Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2014; Jabareen, 2015a).

Gender plays a dual role in the lives of Bedouin women. Her reproductive role hinders her equality with men and, at the same time, strengthens her position as the organizer of the household, caretaker of the family, and bearer of society's traditions. Therefore, traditional Bedouin law protects her, and trespass against her could lead to revenge by her relative, the collective male (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2007).

### ***Sexual conservatism***

In honor-based patriarchal societies such as those found in Arab culture, the female body and sexuality are collectively owned by the family and society and judged according to traditions (Begikhani et al., 2015; Ghanim, 2015; Mernissi, 2000a, 2000b). Premarital and extramarital relations by females are considered taboo and subject to severe punishment, often killing (Mernissi, 2000a, 2000b). Any expression of romantic feelings outside of marriage is prohibited as they are suspected of involving prohibited sexual behavior (Mernissi, 2000b). Cultural practices and traditions are perceived as affecting women more in societies particularly controlled by men or patriarchal (Begikhani et al., 2015).

Controlling sexuality by defending "honor" is a social structure that exploits and subjugates the female body (Ghanim, 2015). The culture of honor is a rigid political, social, and economic ideology designed to control a segment of society that is powerless and is perceived as socially inferior due to its sex (Awwad, 2011). Respect is a gender concept that places different expectations on men and women (Tas-Cifci, 2020). Men's honor depends on being reliable, diligent, fulfilling the needs of their families, and keeping them safe from any danger, while women's honor is conditioned on their maintaining the honor of the collective by appropriate sexual behavior according to the tradition and

norms of the collective society (Ghanim, 2015; Tas-Cifci, 2020). Thus, women must remain virgins and maintain their sexual purity (Ghanim, 2015). A woman's transgression against tradition and social norms harms the status of the family and directs the blame mainly on the mother who failed to educate her daughter (Tas-Cifci, 2020). This type of offense can cost a woman her life under such patriarchal customs and a culture of silence (Begikhani et al., 2015; Mernissi, 2000b). The cultural taboo concerning women's sexuality results in the activation of a mechanism of restraint and control over women's behavior from the age of puberty in order to maintain collective honor (Awwad, 2011; Ghanim, 2015). The activation of this type of control mechanism reinforces patriarchal dominance by enhancing traditional gender norms and overwhelming male dominance (Begikhani et al., 2015; Ghanim, 2015).

Sexuality plays a dual role in a woman's life. As a tool for procreation, it is both marginalized and important. Her primary reproductive role emphasizes her connection to ungovernable nature, which limits her ability to be morally equal to men. But her procreative power also makes the woman the center of homemaking and the bearer of tradition; as such, she is highly protected by traditional Bedouin law (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2017).

As an expression of the patriarch's control in the context of sexuality, women and girls avoid contact with men and are required to dress modestly (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2007). The Bedouin woman's marriage takes place within the boundaries of the tribes, and they are meant to serve the collective by having a child that expands the extended family and strengthens its power. The intersection of the codes of collectivity and sexuality hinder Bedouin women's access to the public space, especially accessibility to education, higher education, and employment (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2007). Girls are prevented by the patriarch from attending schools for fear that meeting boys from other tribes may bring shame on their own (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2011).

Arab Bedouin women live in a patriarchal society where they need to face the power of the patriarch in order to change their status. Women are struggling against their exclusion and marginalization through the application of various strategies and practices such as cooperation with tradition and community (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2007, 2011; Helie-Lucas, 1993). The question this paper raises is how these women reflect and take some control over giving birth, which is one of the central taboos of the collective society, in such harsh social and political conditions. The rest of this paper presents an empirical study through which it seeks to address this question.

## Reflexivity and the construction of self-identity

Theories of reflexive subjectivity describe how people relate to themselves as "a kind of active biographical work" that provides the basis for understanding their actions in the world (Farrugia, 2013: 284). In fact, "each of us not only 'has,' but lives a biography reflexively organized in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life" (Giddens, 1991: 14). In late modernity, high birth rates are accompanied by increasing uncertainties, where the individual asks, "how shall I live," act, behave, and move under the mounting uncertain circumstances of having a large nuclear family? It seems these questions have to be answered through day-to-day decisions and "interpreted within the temporal unfolding of self-identity" (Giddens, 1991: 14).

Thus, reflexivity, which describes active self-reflection and personal biographical management based on active engagement with uncertain conditions of risk and a changing world (Farrugia, 2013), takes place through bargaining and negotiating with the patriarchal system, triggering the development of new practices to change the existing social reality. This combination of personal reflection and active practice makes reflexivity significant for theoretical and empirical explorations of people's practices and perceptions in dramatically changing conditions.

In late modernity, the self is a reflexive project shaped by individual responsibility and cognitive awareness. Thus, the construction of identity is a dynamic and continuous process that occurs through psychological processes of self-formation and psychological needs, which provide the parameters for the reorganization of the *self* (Giddens, 1991: 75). The reflexivity of the individual is realized through a personal narrative intended for the formation of his/her autobiography which distinguishes her from other people (Giddens, 1991). The personal reflexive narrative creates a trajectory for a renewed construction of identity

that depends on integrating life experiences within the narrative of self-development. Reflexive narrative allows the individual to hold a dialogue with time, which is the very basis of self-realization because it is the essential condition for achieving satisfaction at any given moment – of living life to the full (Giddens, 1991: 77). The dialogue allows the individual to arrange the future by those reciprocal active processes that allow for temporal control and interaction while integrating within it the narrative of the self.

Furthermore, the self's development line is internally referential: the only significant connecting thread is the life trajectory as such. Personal integrity, as the achievement of an authentic self, comes from integrating live experiences within the narrative of self-development: the creation of a personal belief system by means of which the individual acknowledges that "his first loyalty is to himself." The key reference points are set "from the inside, in terms of how the individual constructs/reconstructs his life history" (Giddens, 1991: 80).

As "modernity radically alters the nature of day-to-day social life and affects the most personal aspects of our experience," self-identity in the post-traditional order becomes reflexive (Giddens, 1991, p. 2). The "self is seen as a reflexive project for which the individual is responsible," where "we are, not what we are but what we made of our self ourselves". The self is not considered "a passive entity, determined by external influences that forge their self-identities, but rather "individuals contribute to and directly promote social influences that are global in their consequences and implications" (Giddens, 1991, p. 2). The self is not regarded "as entirely empty of content, for there are psychological processes of self-formation and psychological needs, which provide the parameters for the reorganization of the Self" (Giddens, 1991: 75). Thus, self-identity is a coherent phenomenon, which sustains "an integrated sense of self" (Giddens, 1991: 76).

Furthermore, "the self forms a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipation of the future. The individual appropriates his past by sifting through it in the light of what is anticipated for an organized future" (Giddens, 1991: 75). Self-development is related to overcoming and facing life's barriers or sources of uncertainties.

For Giddens, "reflexively organized life-planning, which normally presumes consideration of risk as filtered through contact with expert knowledge, becomes a central feature of the structuring of self-identity" (Giddens, 1991, p. 5). As such, "reflexively organized life planning, which usually assumes consideration of risks as they are filtered through contact with expert knowledge, becomes a central feature of the structure of self-identity" (Giddens, 1991; p. 5). Therefore, reflexivity is about discursive consciousness, which "involves the ability to give reasons for what one does and attribute reasons behind other people's actions—where one stipulates intentions, purposes, goals, needs, and dispositions to explain one's actions. Therefore, "agents are normally able, if asked, to provide discursive interpretations of the nature of, and the reasons for, the behavior in which they engage" (Giddens, 1991; p. 35).

## Research methods

This is a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews. A qualitative approach was chosen due to the desire to explore and understand the perspectives of the women spoken to, to clarify and delve into their meaning making and to ensure these women were also given a voice.

## Data collection

The interviews were carried out in women's homes, in Arabic, and were semi-structured in nature. Interviews were selected because these allow you to delve deeply into a topic, whilst their semi-structured nature allows for a comparison of views and beliefs. Interviews focused on women's perceptions of birth-rates in their society. They explored why they answered the way they did and what factors influenced the issue of birth rates. Each interview lasted approximately an hour and a half.

## Sample

Twenty Muslim Arab Bedouin women between 24 to 40 years old took part in this research. All lived in the Negev in southern Israel. The Arab Bedouin population numbers approximately 300,000 (ICBS, 2023)

and constitutes the youngest population in Israel, with 51% of them under the age of 18. The participants were selected through snowballing, with the first interviewee providing the names of friends and each friend doing the same. All the interviewees had either a Bachelor's or Master's degree and worked outside the home.

## Data analysis

Data were analyzed using the following stages (Jabareen, 2009): transcription of the interviews; content analysis to locate the key themes; identification of the themes emerging more inductively; verifying the identified themes with the interviewees (by showing them the draft wording of the themes and asking them to indicate the extent to which it reflected what they had said in the interview); revision of the wording in accord with the interviewees' comments and insights and; drawing up of the final list of the themes that emerged from the interviews.

## Ethics

Ethical approval was sought prior to the start of this study and all guidelines complied with, including that all participants gave their informed consent and were assured anonymity and confidentiality, and all names of the interviewees appearing in the present study are pseudonyms in order to protect their privacy.

## Findings

The qualitative content analysis reveals that the participants conduct a reflexive narrative criticizing the cultural-social conventions related to birth and child rates. These conventions harm their status and increase the uncertainty of being in a protected space in the universal reality. Specifically, women reflect on those existing social structures and practices that constitute real obstacles to their control over their lives and the achievement of a more certain future. They seek to reduce uncertainty through this reflexive process. The participants referred to the reflexivity they exercised regarding a variety of relevant cultural conventions in their society that led to a decrease in the number of children in the family. Below are the reflexive themes that emerged from the interviews with the participants. The intersection of all the themes may explain the phenomenon of decreased childbearing: (a) reflexivity on a traditional convention; (b) reflexivity regarding marriage within the tribe; (c) reflexivity on mothers suffering and an aspiration for a better life. Each of these are addressed in turn in the following sections.

### *Reflexivity on a traditional convention*

This theme presents the reflexivity of the participants regarding the conventions around tradition, that which encourages multiple children as well as society's attitudes towards those who do not behave according to the conventions as offending tradition. This criticism was reflected in the words of Mona, a 36-year-old kindergarten teacher and mother of five:

Tradition encourages birth and multiple children in the family, but I must act according to my faith and the reality in which we live. Conducting myself according to society's expectations means not considering my wishes and that is impossible. I have five children but compared to the number of my brothers and sisters and my husband's, we are a small family. Being a mother of five children is still following tradition but only partially. I need to keep my desires and make time for other things in life, not just giving birth and raising children. Life changes and the children are not the only security for me. I need to advance in my work and be financially organized to feel safe caring for myself and my family in the face of the changing reality. My goals and aspirations may be trampled due to the birth of more children.

Mona is well aware of the existing circumstances and manages a reflexive narrative between the local culture and the global reality. Her choice of a small family is anchored in criticism of the conventions based on a tradition which calls for multiple children in the family. She points out that following the

conventions in full could put her in a situation of economic uncertainty and would result in her being unable to support herself and her family. According to her, few children in the family will allow her to better manage financially and will give her space for personal development and patience to face the changing reality.

Roba is a 29-year-old Arabic teacher and a mother of four children. In her reflexivity, she employs to verses from the Quran to strengthen her own desires in contrast to the demands of tradition. According to her:

Reality has changed and is different from reality in the past. In the past, it was necessary to have many children, but today it is different. The demands of life have changed, and the individual's aspirations and desires are different. Due to my studies, I was exposed to a wider and more attractive reality that makes me want to learn, develop and fulfill myself because it gives me strength in addition to raising children. Our religion commands us to take care of ourselves and our children, as it is written in the Quran: "Allah commands you regarding your children." Educating the children as it is necessary to teach them to be good people is the religious commandment that I follow. When they succeed and pave their own way, I am calm and feel that everything is under control.

Roba refers to time and she emphasizes the difference between the needs, ambitions, and demands of the individual in the past compared to the present. Similar to what Mona said above, she chooses a small family to allow space for personal development for self-fulfillment and to increase her personal security. In her reflexivity, she employs religion to stand against tradition in the process of social change that she is enacting.

Sanaa, a special education teacher, aged 26 and mother of five children, agreed with Roba and claimed:

that it is true that tradition encourages childbearing, but that religion also requires us to act responsibly, as the Prophet Muhammad, may God's peace and blessings be upon him, mentioned in a Hadith: "All of you are shepherds and every one of you is responsible for his herd" and as it is written in the Quran "do not let your own hands throw you into destruction." I am aware of my own ability and accordingly I behave in order to protect myself. Being a mother with five children is a situation that gives me certainty and stability. If my husband takes another wife because he wants more children or if I lose him, I will still be able to manage and raise the children and control the situation. Each individual will act according to his ability, therefore he will decide what is good for him and there is no need to judge his choice. He will choose whether to have five or more children according to his ability.

In reflexivity, the Arab Bedouin women do not go against tradition but use the commandments in a broader way, which contains the change they wish for. Instead of treating tradition as a coercive external force, in their reflexivity, they expand its meaning.

### ***Reflexivity regarding marriage within the tribe***

The reflexivity of the participants referred to the social convention regarding consanguineous marriages within the tribe. They see this traditional convention as harming their status and increasing their insecurity. Noha, a 32-year-old parent training and mother of four children, said:

I am married to my cousin on my father's side. From childhood, I was raised that he would be my future husband and with him I would start a family with the aim of expanding the tribe by starting a big family. We got married when I was 21 and I had my eldest son when I was 22. Today I have four children. I continued my studies after I got married and today I am employed as a parent instructor. The marriage of blood relatives within the tribe robbed me of the right to choose and decide for myself. I assimilated the decision of my father and uncle and saw no other option. Despite the good relationship, I reflect on the conventions of marrying cousins and see injustice in that custom. This hurt my self-image and undermined my confidence and status. I was seen as a woman whose fate was decided by others, which is really sad. What I am sure of is that I am not part of these conventions, so I decided with my husband to start a family of four children. This was an opportunity to decide for me and improve my status as a responsible and independent woman.

The decision regarding Noha's marriage was a negative experience despite her good relationship. Her decision to reduce the number of children in her family came as an expression of resistance to social conventions on the one hand and an opportunity to regain power and control over issues relevant to

her life on the other. Samar is a nurse, 34 years old, and mother of three children. She is married to her cousin, and according to her,

The married woman in the family faces a complex burden. I fulfill two roles: at home and a role at work. In addition to my role as a mother, I take care of my father-in-law and mother-in-law who live one floor below our house. When the son's wife is a relative such as in my case, She is also required to respond to the demands and requests of the husband's family to help them and take part in the household work. A view that is not relevant to a woman who is not from the same family. My husband's parents do not perceive us as a separate unit. This reality has a significant part in our decision to start a small family. With a larger family, there was no chance that I would perform any of the roles I mentioned and I would be putting my health at risk. My job as a nurse requires me to work night shifts at the hospital. Although it is not easy, it is still financially rewarding. Our security, stability, and adaptation to the vicissitudes of reality require financial stability.

Samar criticizes the cultural conventions reflected in the commitment and response to the demands of her husband's parents in the manner described in her words. To escape from the pressure, she found reducing the number of children an option that would help her deal with the existing burden and give her security and stability.

In the women's reflexive narrative, their initiative to reduce the number of children in the family was evident to reduce the risks of diseases and disabilities that exist due to hereditary problems and marriage between relatives. Miriam, a 36-year-old social worker and mother of three children said on this topic:

As a result of marriages between relatives, babies with special needs are born, and some babies are born with birth defects due to diseases and hereditary disabilities. In our society, children with special needs are not looked upon with a proper eye and with respect. A family with a special child in our society, especially the mother, suffers a lot because sometimes You are seen as guilty of the child's condition. My husband's sister has two children with birth defects, which aroused my fears and doubts. I am aware of the investment that the mother is required to make in the event that she has a child with special needs, especially in the absence of suitable facilities around the child. I did not want to be in such a situation and I decided on reducing the number of children in my family because I saw it as reducing the chances of an abnormal birth. Before and during the pregnancies, I performed tests beyond what was required, just to be sure that everything was normal.

Consanguineous marriages carry with them a considerable burden from the point of view of the women and it causes them worries and unease. Due to their critical reflexivity regarding the cultural convention of consanguineous marriage, they reduce the number of children in the family to increase their sense of security and control over their lives. It turns out that the women's reflexivity is activated for different reasons.

### ***Reflexivity on the mother's suffering and aspiration for a better life***

In addition to the reflexivity of the participants in relation to the cultural conventions, they present a critical narrative about their mothers' suffering and about the quality of life they aspire to after being exposed to their mothers' quality of life.

The mother is seen among the research participants as a suffering figure, as a result of her subjection to cultural conventions and especially from the efforts she invests in raising and satisfying the needs of a family with many children. A significant part of the women's desire to reduce the number of children in the family is presented as resistance to experiencing the same fate as their mother's. They saw how it affected their mothers' health and learned a lesson about maintaining their own.

Nadia, a 30-year-old social worker and mother of four, said:

I came from a family of nine. My mother worked hard to help support our livelihood. She literally sacrificed herself for her family and gave everything to meet our needs. Anyone who sees the fatigue my mother has will learn well how difficult it is to raise a large family. Pregnancy and childbirth exhaust the body and sometimes cause mental fatigue. My mother is already destroyed, and I learned from my experience with her that too many of these actions can harm the body and mind. The mere thought of the possibility of being in her

situation already raises concerns and anxieties in me. I cannot and do not want to be in her situation, so I settled for four children to avoid the suffering she experienced.

Beyond the desire to avoid suffering, as part of the reflexivity of the participants they imagine where their mothers would have been if they had grown up in a different society. This is a narrative that distinguishes between different spaces, the local within the boundaries of society versus the global to which the participants are exposed. It also distinguishes between different tenses, the past versus the present with a view to the future. Due to their exposure, they are aware of what their situation could have been, what their situation is now as women who are exposed to the local life and compared with the global reality and what they strive for in the future. This can be seen in the words of Suad, a speech therapist and mother of five:

I don't know how my parents managed with eleven people. I remember as a child that we hardly saw my mother, even though she worked at home. She was always busy fulfilling our needs. Today I see that even though she is still young, she looks tired. In other societies, women of her age after the children have grown up start to enjoy themselves. They talk, and travel, with their friends. I see my mother with almost zero strength, and I really feel sorry for her. That's why I want to invest in a small family so that I will have the strength to enjoy life, them and my grandchildren in the future.

In the reflexive narrative of the participants, there is a desire to achieve a quality life. The voice of the women in the interviews shows an awareness and concern for their mental well-being and the fulfillment of their needs, in addition to their concern for their families and raising their children. Their aspiration for mental well-being and self-fulfillment is expressed by emphasizing the importance of their self-satisfaction. This can be seen in the words of Manal, a nurse, 38-years-old, and mother of four.

I want to do more things in life, not just raise children. For me, work is fun and gives me satisfaction. It is important that I make sure that I am satisfied because it gives me strength and security and creates a positive atmosphere in the whole house. After my children grew up, I started more circles of studies and development and I am still planning future things. We need to think about the future and the right ways to fulfill ourselves and do well ourselves.

Mona continued Manal's words and said:

Life changes and conditions change, and the social precedent and the perception of women do not change. It is our job to gradually bring about change and good for ourselves. I started a relatively small family, and I invest in it and manage to keep strength for myself. I continue to progress at my own pace in work and studies, and this gives me a sense of satisfaction.

Miriam added to what was said above and said, "in our society, they think that women are an infinite and omnipotent source of power; we women need to change their perception and learn how to protect ourselves."

From the discourse of the women, it is possible to point to a voice with a self-awareness of the complexity of reality, a reflexive perception according to space and time, and a future vision for a better life, as reflected in Nadia's words:

I am very happy and satisfied with myself that I did not give up and did not submit to the rules and society's expectations of women. I don't just work inside the house and raise a wonderful family, I am also a provider, responsible, and a partner in important decisions. I raised my children and I did not neglect myself. Although it required a lot of strength, it is possible. I see how the children grow up and integrate into life, and I also have my own occupations.

## Discussion

This study, drawing on the theory of reflexivity of Beck (2009), Giddens (1990, 1991), and Lash (1993) to frame it, enabled the understanding of the noticeable change in "birth rate decline" through the reflexive lens and the self-perception of the Arab Bedouin women who act out of awareness and individual responsibility towards themselves.

In this article, high birthrate is seen as a reflexive issue, where having a large nuclear family poses social and economic threats and uncertainties for women and affects their everyday life and status.

According to the women participating in the study, high birth rate is a threat in various areas such as the realization of their desires, promotions at work, and their ability to provide for the family, their right to choose and decide for themselves about their future, their social image and self-image, their health, the possibility of giving birth to healthy children, their happiness and their quality of life.

Therefore, through the process of reflexivity on the number of children wanted, women develop new practices to change the existing social reality by restructuring their biographies and self-identity by giving terms of intentions and purposes different meanings. The reflexive discourse allows women to free themselves from traditional social structures and conventions (Beck et al., 1994, 2003) and re-present a different self-identity that reflects their desires and interests (Giddens, 1991) with strong mastery over their own consciousness (Latour, 2003).

Unlike other studies that refer to the social change among women in Arab society due to their education and integration into the job market (i.e. Abu-Baker, 2016; Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2014; Sabbah-Karkabi, 2021), the present study specifically refers to the practice used by women in leading social change in general and to the change in their position in particular. Change occurs due to a reflexive narrative they maintain regarding social conventions perceived as harmful and hindering their personal development. Due to the women's reflexivity, they were able to lead a significant social shift (i.e. a decrease in birth rates) in one of the dominant cultural characteristics, having multiple children.

The research findings indicate three themes: (a) reflexivity on a traditional convention; (b) reflexivity regarding marriage within the tribe; (c) reflexivity on mothers' suffering and an aspiration for a better life. This shows where social assumptions harm women, undermine their security, and increase their sense of uncertainty and instability. According to the women, the requirement based on cultural conventions to establish a family with many children harms their desire to fulfill themselves, to develop, to pursue advanced studies, to advance at work, and to establish themselves financially. Having many children also harms their ability to provide a good education for and invest in children and causes problems for her as a mother in the future, in her perception as a responsible and independent woman, keeps her from fulfilling her duties and harms her health, enjoyment, and aspiration for a better quality of life.

The Arab Bedouin women's exposure to different cultural norms and practices during higher education contributed to them re-examining their personal situation, and their identity and re-sharpening their agency (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2014). It allowed them to weave a reflexive narrative regarding the patriarchal conventions that harm their status, advancement, and self-fulfillment. Following the theory of Giddens (1991) in the post-traditional society, tradition loses its hold, therefore the individual understands reality anew through a discourse that allows him or her to maneuver within a diversity of lifestyles. From the women's critical narrative, it is possible to point to a voice that is self-aware of the complexity of reality, when reflexivity takes into account the culture they come from. They are conducted in accordance with the term *entrisms* which was coined by Helie-Lucas (1993) whose understanding is that women are helped by tradition and use practices from it to achieve their goals. The women in the study employ religion to strengthen their positions and justify their activities. Studies show that women wear the veil in public spaces to receive legitimacy and charity from their families and society (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2006). Bedouin women lead social change by collaborating with tradition and community (Helie-Lucas, 1993). Through cooperation with tradition, the women feel stronger in front of the patriarchal and more confident in their reflexivity regarding specific conventions because they maintain the social order (Kandiyoti, 1988), and their behavior is perceived by society as positive. As women exercise their powers through practices accepted and approved by society, they are seen as contributing positively to that society (Lips, 1991).

## Conclusion

This paper concludes that reflexivity processes on critical social subjects that pose uncertainties and threats to women have the power to lead to desired social changes. Accordingly, in our case, the high birth rate is a significant reflexive subject for women since it poses social, psychological, and economic threats to women in realizing their desires and achieving better social status. Thus, through reflexivity on the birthrate subject, women apply new social strategies to change their existing social reality, free themselves from the patriarchal social structures and chains, and seek mastery over their lives. Due to

the women's reflexivity process, they were able to lead a significant social shift in decreasing their birth rates, one of the dominant patriarchal conventions, achieving better social status, reducing future uncertainties, and improving their economic and social security, certainty, and stability.

Our theoretical insights regarding the phenomenon of the recent drop-in birth rates and what was behind the success in lowering these numbers despite the patriarchal power placed before them. The innovation of these insights stems from the use of the reflexive theory, which has been developed for understanding reflexivity in second-modernity in the Western context (Beck et al., 1994, 2003), to be applied in the Arab context, which gives a special platform to women's perception and their explanations regarding the phenomenon of the decline in birth rates in the society to which they belong.

The phenomenon in this study is examined from the point of view of the women while referring to the practice they use in leading social change in general and the change in their position in particular. Thus, this study is applicable more broadly to understanding social transformations among women by applying its approach of reflexivity as this study does. This article shows how a radical social transformation is seen as a reflexive issue.

This paper is based on an initial preliminary study that provides information about the recent drop-in birth rates and what was behind the success in lowering these numbers despite the patriarchal power placed before them. The limitation of this study lies in the fact that its participants were only academic Arab Bedouin women in Israel. Thus, the study captures the recent drop-in birth rates among highly educated women, leaving behind the larger women population outside this range of the study. Therefore, the study conclusions are related to those specific Academic women.

## About the authors

**Dr. Khawla Zoabi** is a Visiting Scholar at the Institute of Education, University of Reading (Reading, UK) and a Senior Lecturer at the Arab Academic College for Education in Israel, Haifa, Israel. She has a Ph.D. in social work from Tel Aviv University. Her research focuses on the evolution and tactics of Arab women to improve their social status. In addition, she examines and conceptualizes cultural-biased intervention strategies used by education counselors, social workers, and other practitioners during the treatment process.

**Professor Carol Fuller** is Head of School for the Institute of Education. She is a professor in the sociology of education at the University of Reading. She is particularly interested in ideas connected to how and in what ways society shapes self identity. Key areas include poverty, status, confidence and sense of self. She uses theories of symbolic interactionism, cultural reproduction and existentialism.

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