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## New hotline for Beduin women

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Around 200,000 Arabs live in the Negev, more than half of whom are women. The Arab women of the Negev are caught between a rock and a hard place – the former being government policy and the latter the strict cultural mores of Beduin society.

Since Arab women are part of Israel's Palestinian minority, they have not had much success in exercising their rights, even the most basic ones.

Their rights are doubly violated since they belong to a patriarchal, traditional society in which polygamy and domestic violence are common phenomena and are socially accepted. Often, the needs and desires of these women are not taken into consideration either by the state or by their community.

Many of these women believe this attitude is a natural and inevitable part of their fate and are not aware that they are eligible for legal protection.

For this reason, Ma'an, the umbrella organization of Negev Beduin Women's Organizations, was founded in 1999 by Arab women from various organizations to promote Arab women's rights.

Ma'an's aim is to initiate joint programs and to discuss complex issues that affect the Negev Arab community, such as violence against women, polygamy – issues that any single NGO could not cope with on its own.

We at Ma'an strive to bring about significant social change and to contribute to a democratic and just society that supports the rights and equality of all of its members, and women in particular. Our work, which has received generous support from sources such as the European Union, is based on a humanistic conception of human rights that is based on international conventions.

The forum's projects are carried out synergistically and are built according to the specific needs of Arab women in the Negev. In 2006, a legal aid center was inaugurated that offers advice and legal counsel to women in all aspects of "personal laws," provided by qualified lawyers. Numerous cases in which physical and sexual assault were involved have been reported to the center.

These women come to the center seeking psychological, therapeutic and legal support, as well as referrals to other centers that are better qualified to deal with their issues.

Since one of our goals was to deal with complex social sensitivities that up until now were not being dealt with locally, we decided there was a need to set up a hotline.

This hotline, called Aman, is available to all Arab women living in the Negev who were victims of sexual and physical abuse. It is the first and only hotline that offers advice and guidance by native Arabic speakers.

The impetus for the hotline was the numerous requests from women to the legal center, and the desire by women who participated in the workshops to increase awareness regarding women's rights given by the legal center's lawyers. The center has not been able to keep up with the multitude of calls from Arab women in the Negev who wished to speak with someone who understood their complex cultural and societal situation.

The creation of the Aman hotline is a pioneering and unique step in the Arab Negev community's struggle. Great efforts went into the founding of the hotline, both in terms of fundraising, as well as encouraging women to break the silence barrier.

At the outset, the hotline will operate once a week by trained volunteers. Women will be able to call in to receive the help they need and to have someone to talk to. Volunteers have been instructed to offer the caller a variety of assistance options, such as psychological, legal or medical aid. The caller can then pick which type of aid she wants.

Currently, there are no safe houses for Beduin women in the Negev to go to in an emergency.

We often hear in the news about Arab women who were murdered due to what is called, "murder to protect family purity." These women are not only victims of the environment in which they live, but also of government policy that is not doing anything to help protect them.

As an NGO with limited resources, Ma'an strives to serve several hundred women a year through its hotline. This will be a great improvement to the security of Beduin women, but it is just a first step. There is still tremendous need for government policy change dealing with the serious problem of violence and abuse in the Negev Beduin community.

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