**From Silence to Security:**

**Raising Voices of Bedouin Women to Combat Violence They Face**

One of the most serious issues facing Bedouin women in the Negev is the pervasive and severe phenomenon of violence against them. Since the establishment of Itach-Maaki’s Center for Bedouin Women's Rights in the Negev, our staff has been overwhelmed by the number of women who expose issues of violence – close to 90% of those turning to us for assistance on a wide variety of issues. The violence and the threat of violence faced by Bedouin women, numbering 70,000, translate into a life of fear and severe oppression. Each act of violence that is committed reminds Bedouin women from traditional communities of their vulnerability and their lack of independence. They are subject to the strict expectations of the patriarchal society and, for many, their freedom is severely restricted. Many are married when they are very young, sometimes against their will, many do not dare divorce because of fear of retribution and/or total isolation, others are afraid to assert their independence in minor ways: talking on the phone, wearing makeup, etc.

Further, the fact that there is almost no protection from the state authorities means that Bedouin women victims have nowhere to turn. Enforcement of laws against violence and polygamy are not enforced, appropriate welfare resources for Bedouin women and their children are lacking and there has been no planning for safe shelter or public housing for Bedouin women victims of violence.



*From Silence to Security: Raising Voices of Bedouin Women to Combat Violence They Face*: Itach-Maaki’s initiative aims to integrate issues of Bedouin women and their right to a life free of violence in the public agenda. Our staff works to influence Bedouin communities in the Negev, local police and welfare authorities, national decision makers and the general public to become aware and to create change.

Via a hotline and drop-in center, our Bedouin women lawyers and volunteers assist women to understand their rights and to address the violence they face. Our staff provides guidance for women wishing to submit complaints to the police, follows up during the process of investigation, monitoring victims’ rights and helping women obtain restraining orders, etc. We analyse how each case is handled by police, the intervention of welfare authorities and the following involvement of the state attorney. Via this information, our staff advocates on behalf of individual women and collects information to advocate for change.

On the basis of the ground breaking research carried out by Itach-Maaki on Bedouin women and violence, we advocate vis-à-vis public bodies for greater oversight on police’s handling of cases of Bedouin women, for establishing safe spaces for Bedouin women, for welfare services that are culturally appropriate, for socio-economic benefits for Bedouin women victims of violence, among other issues.

A **new aspect** of our work is the launch of a coalition of Bedouin women activists working to advance the rights of Bedouin women within the community and to foster solidarity. This coalition, which was initiated by Itach-Maaki, includes both Bedouin women who are already active in rights issues/organizations and others who share our values and want to be part of the activist community. The group will work to influence Bedouin women, and thus Bedouin communities, with a feminist voice and a discourse about rights, including employment, health and healthcare, education, and violence. Further, the group will provide peer support for its members, as feminist and progressive Bedouin women face opposition within their communities, and seek a forum in which they will be supported and understood.