

Silenced Voices: Bedouin Lebanese Cultural Identity Through Young Women's Lenses

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The research papers examine how artistic and cultural practices can preserve memory, respond to crises, and strengthen the social, economic, and creative roles of culture. They also explore cultural organisation and collaboration, the relationship between art, archiving and documentation, and comparative experiences of artistic production in Syria and Lebanon.



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Picture (2) A group photo of the lead researcher and co-researchers

Table of Content

Acknowledgements	2
1. Introduction: Setting the Scene	3
2. Literature Review: Dialogue with the Text	6
3. Theoretical Framework: Explorative Tools	10
3.1. Intersectionality Theory	10
3.2. Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)	12
3.3. Photovoice	14
4. Photovoice Methodology: Research Process and Implementation	20
Phase 1: Recruitment, Parental Consent, and Introduction to Photovoice	20
Phase 2: Discussing the Research Question and Selecting the Themes	22
Phase 3: Training on Cameras, Conceptual Framework, and Ethics	24
Phase 4: Printing, Photo Display, and Sharing Stories	26
5. Qualitative Findings – Storytelling	28
5.1. Data	28
5.2. Verification and evaluation session	61
6. Conclusion: Learning and Growing Through Stories	64
Theme 1: Identity and Intersectionality Between Tradition and Modernity	65
Theme 2: Gender Identity Between Education, Empowerment, and Orientalism	67
7. Concluding Remarks: The Struggle Between Public and Private Space	72
8. References	74

1. Introduction: Setting the Scene

As a researcher, a woman, and an activist, I ground my work in my personal principles and my deep concerns about power. I situate my research within a world marked by profound injustices - a world where dominant narratives prevail and many voices, especially women's, remain unheard. In Lebanon, this reality is shaped by persistent narrative control, where the official version belongs to those in power. Colonialism, too, has played a decisive role in erasing and distorting narratives, and the state has carried this erasure forward within a patriarchal system that marginalizes the voices of both women and men.

I believe that research should not be confined to academia, nor should it replicate extractivist models that take knowledge from communities - particularly in colonial contexts - without reciprocity. As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) remind us, research is never neutral; it is always entangled with power. "Studying" a community cannot happen without the community itself, and the role of the researcher should be to engage in ways that reduce, as much as possible, the existing power imbalances. This means creating spaces - and adopting methodologies - where the community can speak for itself, rather than having its perspectives mediated or replaced by the researcher's own voice.

I therefore reject colonial research approaches that position the researcher as an outsider who imposes their own agenda. Instead, I approach my work as a process of entering the community, listening, and working together - without forcing participants to conform to external priorities.

Accordingly, I chose to explore the cultural identity of a historically and politically marginalized group: the Bedouin community in the Bekaa region of Lebanon, with a particular focus on young women. Given the complexity of identity and based on the statements above, interviews and textual analysis alone would be insufficient. Therefore, I adopted a participatory methodology that aligns with my stance on the research process: Photovoice.

Developed in the 1990s, Photovoice is a method that employs photography as a data collection tool, allowing participants to capture images of their daily lives and narrate their stories through their lens. It grants them agency over their culture and heritage, helping to extract the essence of identity without imposing predefined meanings. Moreover, it positions them as co-researchers, contributing to the research process "on equal footing with the lead researcher," from planning to execution. Participants are also actively involved in formulating the research question and selecting topics that matter to them. At the same time, the intersectionality framework adopted in this study helped participants shape their research and - within certain limits - guide the process of taking photographs and commenting on them afterward. Intersectionality is a concept used to understand how different social identities (such as race, gender, class, and sexuality) intersect and overlap, creating unique experiences of discrimination and privilege (Lee, n.d.). It emphasizes that people's experiences and social positions are not shaped by a single aspect of their identity but rather by multiple, interconnected layers. The framework was first formally introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, when she used intersectionality to describe how Black women's experiences are shaped by both gender and race, which intersect to create distinct challenges different from those faced by white women or Black men (Crenshaw, 1989). This concept

underscores that social systems and structures - such as sexism and racism - do not operate independently but are deeply intertwined, affecting people in complex and cumulative ways. A key element of this framework is its critique of traditional single-axis approaches to oppression (such as focusing solely on race or gender), which risk overlooking the ways in which these axes intersect - ultimately excluding the most marginalized voices from discussions and policymaking.

As the principal researcher, I have extensive experience working with Bedouin communities. I was involved in a project called Cultural Corridors of Peace, funded by the British Council and managed by the American University of Beirut (alongside other partners), focusing on the Bedouin community in Lebanon - particularly the Abu Eid tribe. This project served as both the inspiration and case study for my master's thesis, which explored the Photovoice methodology and developed a guideline that accounts for the cultural sensitivities of this community. It was through this work that my interest in the Bedouin community, particularly the younger generation, deepened.

During fieldwork, I observed that young Bedouins code-switch depending on their audience. When speaking with me, they used the Lebanese Baalbek dialect, but among themselves, they spoke the Bedouin dialect. Their clothing choices also shifted based on context - dressing in what might be considered "modern" attire similar to mine in certain settings, while adhering to different dress norms within their communities, particularly at weddings, funerals, and other social events. Unlike their ancestors, these young Bedouins have never experienced a nomadic way of life, as they were born and raised in Lebanon. However, they speak about it with enthusiasm and pride. Many express a strong sense of identity as Bedouins and, for those who have it, a feeling of privilege in holding Lebanese citizenship.

The generational divide within the community was also striking. The older generation, for instance, often has facial tattoos, speaks only the Bedouin dialect, and wears traditional Bedouin clothing. Interestingly, while all members of the community are Muslim, older Bedouin women do not wear the common style of hijab in Lebanon, unlike the younger generation and the broader Lebanese/Mashreq/Arab Muslim society. This community has always intrigued me, particularly the way its members have adapted to the land rather than forcing the land to adapt to them. They belong to the land that goes beyond colonial borders, and the land has never belonged to them as opposed to the colonial land ownership forced on us. Their lifestyle is distinct, and their identity is deeply rooted. What fascinated me even more was how young Bedouins, despite never having lived a nomadic existence, still strongly identify as Bedouin. I wanted to explore how they conceptualize this identity amid the historical, political, social, and cultural transformations that have shaped their lives.

These observations led to a series of questions that ultimately formed the basis of this research. I chose to focus on women because Bedouin literature rarely centers their experiences. Recognizing my own positionality - I am Lebanese and from Baalbek, the same region where many Bedouins reside, and being interested in visual storytelling- I sought to minimize bias by adopting a participatory methodology. This approach ensures that young Bedouin women are not merely subjects of research but active participants with the authority to shape the study. In line with the Photovoice methodology, I did not begin with a predetermined research question. Instead, I collaborated with community members - whom I prefer to call "co-researchers" - to develop the guiding question together. Their contribution to this research is as significant as my own.

This academic research aims to bridge this gap by centering Bedouin women as active agents and exploring how they perceive their identities within both Lebanese society and their own Bedouin community. Specifically, the study seeks to develop a deeper understanding of the intersecting factors that shape and influence the identity of Bedouin women. Very little is known about the younger generation - those born and raised in Lebanon who have acquired citizenship and a sense of belonging to the Bedouin community, despite the fact that Bedouinism as a way of life is no longer practiced. The primary objective of this study is to amplify the voices and experiences of young Bedouin women, who hold a distinct identity shaped by multiple intersecting factors, and to provide them with a platform to share their stories and perspectives.

A potential next step could involve policy changes or further research based on the findings of this study. For instance, participants expressed frustration over the loss of their heritage as elders pass away. This signals an urgent need for action - whether through initiatives to document and preserve Bedouin heritage or further research into its transformation over time.

The main research question guiding this study was formulated with the participation of the research participants and is as follows: **What are the intersecting and interwoven factors that shape the identity of young Bedouin women in the Bekaa region of Lebanon, and how do they express their perception of this identity through the Photovoice methodology?**

2. Literature Review: Dialogue with the Text

Why are the Bedouins marginalized? This section outlines the context of Bedouin marginalization and examines the factors that have contributed to the neglect of Bedouin women. Establishing this foundation is essential for articulating the research problem and formulating research questions. Understanding the root causes of marginalization strengthens the study by addressing a critical gap in the literature. The review begins with a historical overview tracing the factors that led to the forced settlement of Bedouins in the Bekaa region and the price they paid for this transition - examining the structural causes of their marginalization. It then explores the Lebanese government's policies toward the Bedouin community and their impact. Following this, it analyzes existing stereotypes about Bedouins and how these perceptions contribute to the continued suppression of their voices. Finally, the review draws on relevant literature to examine the identity and roles of Bedouin women. While these discussions are not exclusive to the Bedouins of the Bekaa, they provide a broader perspective on the challenges they face and the perceptions they navigate across different Bedouin contexts.

The Bedouin community has historically faced - and continues to experience - political and social marginalization. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the Bedouins of the Bekaa Valley were forced to abandon their traditional nomadic pastoralism in favor of a settled agricultural lifestyle, a process that has accelerated over the past fifty years (Suzanne E. Joseph, 2013). Traditionally, their winter pastures were located east of Homs in the Syrian Desert, a vast area stretching north from the Nefud Desert in Saudi Arabia, covering western Iraq, eastern Jordan, and southeastern Syria. This region, known for its grasslands and shrub vegetation, was essential

for Bedouin pastoralism (Joseph, 2013). This shift was largely driven by state-led agricultural expansion, motivated by the need to sustain growing urban populations. During the French colonial rule of Greater Syria in the 1920s and 1930s, policies were implemented to secure land for economic exploitation, mirroring strategies used in North Africa. These included the establishment of armed camel companies to control the Bedouins and impose military dominance by 1930, facilitated by the demarcation of Syria's borders with Türkiye and Iraq (French Mandate policy). The introduction of national borders restricted the mobility of nomadic communities, making it increasingly difficult for them to maintain autonomy from government control.

With military dominance established, the colonial agenda shifted toward demographic and economic development strategies aimed at increasing the indigenous population and expanding the agricultural workforce. These efforts included medical assistance, initiatives to encourage Bedouin settlement, and migration and housing support - particularly for Christian refugees and minority groups - as a means of countering the Arab nationalist movement. The 1932 census conducted by the French in the newly formed Lebanese state failed to register most Bedouins, leading to their political marginalization (Chatti, 2011, 2013). Many Bedouins remained unregistered due to their seasonal migrations, while others refused to cooperate with a colonial administration they considered illegitimate (Chatti, 2011). The French further exacerbated this exclusion by selling off Bedouin grazing lands, accelerating a wave of forced settlement and the transition from pastoralism to agriculture.

By the 1960s, Bedouin pastoralism had undergone a significant transformation. Camels, traditionally used for transportation, were replaced by pickup trucks. As Dawn Chatty (1986) explains, this shift was driven by improved roads that were unsuitable for camels' flat feet, the challenges of monitoring livestock amid the expansion of orchard farming, and the adoption of mechanized transport. Although some Bedouins managed to obtain Lebanese citizenship during the 1960s, many remained wary of state authorities. Despite the 1958 law granting "in-training" citizenship status to those unregistered in the 1932 census, and the 1994 naturalization law under the Hariri government, only a small portion of the Bedouin population was granted Lebanese citizenship. The process was further complicated by legal challenges and by the inability of those who had obtained citizenship to pass it on to their children. In 2000, the Lebanese Maronite League appealed the 1994 law, arguing that it undermined Lebanon's sectarian balance, leaving approximately 10,000 Bedouins in a state of legal uncertainty (Joseph, 2013).

In terms of land ownership, by the 1970s, seasonal migrations had ceased, and Bedouins began purchasing land and constructing homes in the Bekaa Valley. Despite this, more than eighteen Bedouin villages and communities in the Bekaa remain unrecognized and absent from official maps (Joseph, 2013). A study conducted by Suzanne Joseph, which surveyed 224 women, indicated a shift from pastoralism in the early twentieth century to agricultural land-sharing by the mid-century, with most families beginning to acquire land for housing by the 1970s.

Today, most Bedouins reside in the peripheral agricultural areas of the Bekaa Valley, with an estimated population of between 100,000 and 150,000 - approximately 2.5% to 3% of Lebanon's total population. A significant portion remains stateless, effectively rendering them without legal recognition and preventing their access to subsidized healthcare, education, or formal employment (Chatty, 2013).

In the postcolonial era - where "modernity" and "authenticity" have become central to political thought in the Middle East - "it is very common for the culture-producing classes to overlay new identities with the legitimacy of old genealogical traditions, and vice versa" (Shryock, 1997, p. 6). Amidst these ideological contradictions, tribes frequently portray themselves - or are portrayed - as "remnants of another age, completely atypical in their traditionalism and marginal to the national cultures in which they live" (Shryock, 1997).

Arabs and Arab civilization have long been framed as "backward," "corrupt," and inherently prone to crisis. Eastern culture - its language and traditions - was believed to be in decline as a result of centuries of Ottoman rule. There is significant overlap between these narratives and Orientalist discourse. Orientalism, as conceptualized by Said (1978), can be understood as a form of white supremacy, in which European colonial powers developed a self-justifying academic field and discourse about the "Orient," supported by colonial institutions, bureaucracies, and military forces. Within this framework, the peoples and societies of the region were depicted as "alien," "dangerous," "homogeneous," "fixed," and, above all, "inferior." The East was perceived not only as incapable of representing itself but also as incapable of modernization, liberation, or "civilization" on its own. This "civilizing process" was thus framed as requiring the supervision of European - and later American - colonial powers. Orientalist caricatures, which depict Arabs as camel riders, violent, and "uncivilized," take on a distinctively racialized tone when applied to Bedouin tribes.

The tribal peoples of the Fourth World (as cited in Joseph, 2013) are frequently regarded as existing at the "lowest" stage of human development. Cultural imperialist narratives portray tribal peoples as both vulgar and noble savages, further reinforcing their perceived inferiority. Joseph (2013) describes how non-Bedouin peasants in the Bekaa view Bedouins with disdain. They are often labeled "unclean," "unhygienic," and "dark." Despite being Muslim, Bedouins are criticized for their appearance during prayer, with peasants describing them as "dirty" because their shoes are covered in mud. Additionally, Bedouin facial and hand tattoos are viewed by non-Bedouin Muslims as religious blasphemy. They are also stereotyped as "liars," untrustworthy, and "difficult to understand."

Joseph (2013) provides numerous examples and testimonies illustrating how racism, class discrimination, and perceptions of inferiority shape discourse about Bedouins in peasant society. Even more extreme expressions of inferiority exist among Beirut's urbanites, who ridicule the Bedouins' perceived "enthusiasm" for procreation. Many urbanites fail to distinguish between Bedouins and Gypsies, relying on Orientalist stereotypes. Joseph (2013) cites demeaning representations such as descriptions of Bedouin children as "children whose names the father does not even remember" and sexualized caricatures of Bedouin men as "lecherous figures surrounded by wives in a harem."

Beyond the class inequalities between nomadic Bedouins and settled peasants, there are also class-based demographic disparities. More significantly, class divisions exist within the Bedouin community itself. Joseph observed these internal distinctions - though Bedouins were reluctant to discuss them - particularly in the way women dress, a topic explored in the following section.

Bedouin women play a fundamental role within their communities, carrying out responsibilities that span pastoral, agricultural, and domestic spheres. They engage in herding, construct and maintain Bedouin tents (bayt al-sha'r), and participate in farming activities such as planting, cultivating, and harvesting crops. Additionally, they care for poultry and goats, raise children, and oversee food production, among other essential duties.

Despite the scarcity of oral histories documenting Bedouin women's experiences - particularly those of Lebanese Bedouin women - some scholars have explored their expressions of identity and agency through oral poetry. Lila Abu-Lughod (1986, 1993, 2002) has made significant contributions to the study of Bedouin women's oral traditions, shedding light on themes of honor, gender, and sexuality. In *Veiled Sentiments* (1986), she examines how Bedouin women from the Awlad 'Ali tribe in Egypt's Western Desert use oral poetry to express personal emotions that challenge the moral codes governing their lives. These moral codes, rooted in honor and humility, "justify social hierarchy and inequality in the freedom of individuals to make decisions about their lives and to influence others" (Abu-Lughod, 1986, p. xx).

In the chapter titled *Modesty, Gender, and Sexuality*, Abu-Lughod (1986) explains that Bedouin women are excluded from fully embodying these moral codes because of their association with menstruation and sexuality. Among the Awlad 'Ali tribe, male children hold greater social value than female children. This preference is reflected in societal norms and practices, as illustrated in oral accounts such as: "Men bring women together [marry wives] to have sons. Daughters are worthless." The birth of a son is met with widespread celebration - relatives rush to inform the father, and the entire household rejoices. In contrast, the birth of a daughter is met with disappointment, often acknowledged with the resigned phrase, "Everything God brings is good."

Abu-Lughod (1986) attributes this preference for sons to the structure of tribal society, which is based on "agnatic paternalism and solidarity." Strength within the tribe is measured by the number of men, reinforcing the desire for male offspring. However, Bedouin women develop strong emotional bonds with their daughters, valuing them for companionship, household assistance, and caregiving. Still, many prefer to have a son first, as it provides them with social security and strengthens their status within their marital community. Another key reason for this preference is that if a daughter marries outside the tribe, she is believed to permanently belong to her husband's family, unable to return unless permitted by him.

While Bedouin women experience patriarchal restrictions within their communities, they are also silenced by Eurocentric feminist narratives that claim to advocate for their emancipation. Before delving into gender dynamics within Bedouin society, it is necessary to address the colonial discourse surrounding Third World women. Joseph (2013) critiques how Western feminists often interpret high fertility rates among Arab and Bedouin women as indicators of subjugation, framing them as "subordinate" and "inferior." She argues that these narratives dehumanize Arab men and construct Arab women as subjects in need of "liberation." In reality, Bedouin and Arab women are also oppressed by these colonial discourses, which impose rigid definitions of agency and overlook alternative perspectives. Joseph (2013) explores how Western feminism often fails to consider that a woman might choose to have a large family, viewing it as a source of fulfillment rather than a burden. The fourth chapter of her book critiques gender inequality while simultaneously challenging the misrepresentations of childbirth and family structures in Third World societies.

Similarly, Abu-Lughod (2002) later challenged the Orientalist feminist portrayal of Muslim and Arab women as passive recipients of patriarchy, arguing instead for a more nuanced understanding of their agency. Furthering this critique, Abdo and Masalha (2018) argue in *An Oral History of the Palestinian Nakba* that gender roles were significantly shaped by colonial intervention. Through collected oral histories, they demonstrate that before British colonial rule, men and women held authority within distinct domains. While male dominance existed, it was not "patriarchal" in the way it is understood today. According to Abdo and Masalha (2018), settler colonialism played a pivotal role in restructuring gender hierarchies, with patriarchy intensifying after the Nakba - despite historical evidence of women's active presence in public spaces.

Moneera Al-Ghadeer (2009) explored women's oral poetry in the Arabian Peninsula, specifically focusing on Bedouin women's poetry in Saudi Arabia. She argued that these oral compositions shed light on a critical yet overlooked historical period, offering insights relevant to postcolonial and globalization theories concerning contemporary issues in the Middle East. More importantly, Al-Ghadeer demonstrated how the poetry of Saudi Bedouin women "directly responded to men and tribal hierarchies." While acknowledging the tribal legacy that imposes restrictions and sanctions on women's sexual autonomy, she challenged the stereotype of Bedouin women as "silent, submissive, and passive in the face of social injustice." Despite the deeply personal nature of oral poetry, Al-Ghadeer (2009) noted in Chapter Two of her book how female poets actively engage with themes of gender politics and traditional perceptions of femininity.

Additionally, Joseph's *Fertile Bonds* (2013) provides valuable insights into the transformation of gender roles before and after sedentarization. For instance, Bedouin women once decorated and rode camels. However, with the transition from camels to pickup trucks, only men drove them, as vehicular mobility became symbolically and socially associated with masculinity (Joseph, 2013). Another notable shift following sedentarization was the increasing participation of men in mosque prayers, an activity they had traditionally avoided due to their nomadic lifestyle. With the shift to a settled existence, men began attending mosques, which led to the exclusion of women from communal prayer spaces, relegating them to praying at home instead, as mosques enforced gender-segregated prayer (Joseph, 2013).

(It is possible that these were the prevailing cultural norms, and no research has been conducted on young Bedouins regarding this issue.)

3. Theoretical Framework: Explorative Tools

3.1. Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality theory, as conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1991, has intellectual roots that extend further back, particularly in the work of African American scholars who examined the interconnected nature of social identities. These scholars recognized how race, class, and gender collectively shape individuals' experiences and opportunities. This perspective gained prominence in the 1970s through Black feminist critiques of mainstream feminism, which largely prioritized gender equality while overlooking the compounded oppression faced by women of color -

especially those from lower economic backgrounds. Black feminists argued that emancipation could not be achieved solely through gender equality but required an acknowledgment of how race, gender, and class intersect to shape lived experiences.

Emerging from a commitment to social justice, intersectionality theory centers the experiences of marginalized groups and encourages a more nuanced understanding of identity. Rather than viewing gender as the primary or sole dimension of oppression, intersectionality considers a broad range of intersecting factors, including race, education, migration status, and age. This approach allows for a more in-depth analysis of the challenges faced by specific groups, such as migrant or refugee women, who experience overlapping layers of discrimination due to immigration status, socio-economic conditions, and family dynamics.

Intersectionality values the complexity of human identities and experiences, moving beyond rigid ideological frameworks toward a more dynamic, participatory exploration of power, voice, and representation. Prins (2006) offers a constructivist interpretation of intersectionality, emphasizing the active role individuals play in shaping their social identities. This perspective focuses on the relational and dynamic nature of power and identity, arguing that identities are not static labels but are embedded in personal narratives - stories that are often fluid, complex, and even contradictory (Prins, 2006). By providing a framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of oppression, intersectionality stresses the necessity of participatory research approaches that acknowledge the interplay of intersecting identities.

As Bharati Sethi Ms (2014) explained in her thesis that explored the intersectionality between health and employment among immigrant/refugee women; while gender analysis is crucial to understanding the challenges faced by Arab Bedouin women, stopping at gender alone would provide an incomplete picture. Davis (2008, as cited in Ms, 2014) cautions, "At this particular moment in gender studies, any scholar who neglects difference risks having his or her work seen as theoretically misguided, politically irrelevant, or simply fanciful." Nationality, race, social class, and power dynamics must also be considered when examining their lives and histories. Thus, this study is grounded in an intersectional framework that is compatible with gender analysis and further enriched by feminist and anti-colonial theoretical perspectives.

African American intellectuals were among the first to note how the interplay of race, class, and gender shapes individuals' lived experiences and social opportunities. This perspective gained prominence in the 1970s, when Black feminists critiqued the mainstream feminist movement for its exclusive focus on gender, pointing out that women of color - particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds - experienced oppression in ways that were inseparable from race and class. Angela Davis's *Women, Race, and Class* (1983) was instrumental in articulating how these forces intersected to shape Black women's lives. Building on these ideas, Kimberlé Crenshaw formally introduced the concept of intersectionality (1989, 1991), offering a multidimensional framework that has since been widely applied in gender and women's studies, including in methodologies such as oral history. Intersectionality emerges from a commitment to social justice, prioritizing the lived experiences of marginalized groups and rejecting simplistic categorizations of identity. Unlike approaches that center gender as the primary axis of analysis, intersectionality accounts for a broader range of interwoven factors - including race, education,

and age - allowing for a deeper exploration of how these elements shape individual and collective experiences.

This flexibility makes intersectionality especially valuable in understanding the compounded challenges faced by specific groups, such as migrant women - or in this case, Bedouin women - who navigate additional layers of difficulty related to migration status, family structures, and social expectations. Furthermore, the theory acknowledges the complexity of human identities, moving beyond static ideological frameworks toward a more dynamic and engaged approach to investigating power, voice, and representation. Prins (2006) offers a constructivist interpretation of intersectionality, emphasizing the active role individuals play in shaping their social identities. By calling for an approach that integrates both personal and historical narratives, Prins expands the scope of intersectional inquiry, enriching our understanding of identity and social dynamics.

3.2. Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)

(Portions of the literature review in this paper draw on work previously conducted by the author in “Photovoice for Development and Social Change” (2022). The material has been adapted and updated to reflect the current research focus.)

Among the many research methodologies available, one approach stands out: Participatory Action Research (PAR) or Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). This approach has been widely applied in both developed and developing regions, including Latin America, Asia, Africa, Brazil, Tanzania, and India, before gaining prominence in the United States (Minkler et al., 2006). CBPR is considered one of the most ethical research approaches as it directly addresses power imbalances within traditional research paradigms (Khalil, 2022). In contrast to academic models that treat knowledge production as the exclusive domain of scholars, CBPR legitimizes knowledge generated by community members themselves. By adopting this approach, research participants collaborate with scholars and practitioners to drive social change and development. While CBPR may introduce new power imbalances (for instance, between different members of the community), it nonetheless provides a space for communities to assess their own needs and work toward solutions.

In response to societal development dynamics and conflicts, Participatory Action Research (PAR) has emerged as a particularly effective approach for achieving sustainable change (Khalil, 2022). This method is rooted in the principle of empowerment, allowing individuals to take control of their lives and enact meaningful improvements. PAR is a reflective and action-oriented approach that places culture, history, local context, and social relationships at its core (Baum et al., 2006). It transforms participants into co-researchers, balancing traditional power dynamics between researchers and community members so that participants are no longer treated as mere subjects of research (Baum et al., 2006). PAR is often positioned as an alternative to the positivist research model (Wadsworth, 1998).

As the phrase goes, “Nothing about us without us” (Burris & Wang, 1996). This ethos, which inspired Burris and Wang’s work in community development, also led to the creation of the Photovoice methodology - a method that this study will explore in greater depth.

As previously mentioned, research methodology is not just a tool for data collection but also a means of fostering solidarity and agency in community development. Within the PAR framework, this study places particular emphasis on Photovoice as a methodological approach aligned with the study's broader commitment to participatory research. However, it is important to note that, like other PAR approaches, Photovoice envisions a self-defined research space, distinct from externally imposed narratives (Khalil, 2022). As Wang and Burris (1994) argue, Photovoice offers a method of capturing stories that challenge "dominant narratives" (Latz & Mulvihill, 2017, p. 180).

By prioritizing community-led storytelling, this methodology mitigates the risks of political co-optation often associated with the discourse of "community development" and instead provides space for communities to critically reflect on their lives and engage with policymakers. Nonetheless, this study does not assume that Photovoice is inherently resistant to political manipulation, nor does it ignore the risks of failure or corruption that may arise within its application. Rather, within the scope of this study, Photovoice is considered a tool for amplifying the voices of marginalized communities through the use of photography as a research technique.

CBPR - also referred to as Participatory Action Research (PAR) - is a collaborative approach in which researchers and community members work as equals throughout the research process (Smith & Smith, 2025). This method has gained widespread recognition for its ability to address local issues while embedding principles of justice, cultural humility, mutual learning, and social equity within researcher-community relationships (Smith & Smith, 2025). While CBPR differs in some respects from applied anthropology, it shares ethnographic principles such as relationship-building, sustained engagement with communities, and recognition of local knowledge. Although there is no universal agreement on the degree of community involvement required for research to qualify as CBPR, at a minimum, community members should have a role in defining the research questions, advising on cultural and social contexts, and providing input throughout the project.

CBPR's dual historical origins reflect its evolution as both a practical and emancipatory approach - drawing from the pragmatic social psychology of Kurt Lewin in the 1930s and the liberatory pedagogy of Paulo Freire in the 1970s. Within CBPR projects, Community Advisory Boards (CABs) play a critical role in ensuring that the research reflects the community's interests and priorities at every stage - from study design to the dissemination of findings. The establishment and maintenance of trust between researchers, CABs, and the broader community is essential to the success of CBPR initiatives.

It is worth noting that CBPR is often used interchangeably with "participatory research," "participatory action research (PAR)," "action research (AR)," "collaborative inquiry," "participatory evaluation," and "empowerment evaluation." (Ms, 2014). As cited in Ms' work (2014) a defining characteristic of CBPR is that community capacity-building is a collaborative process. Researchers and community members work together to identify community strengths, address social injustices, and enhance social cohesion (O'Fallon, Tyson, & Dearth, 2000, p. 18). Biggs (1989) identified four modes of community participation in the research process: contractual, consultative, collaborative, and collegiate.

3.3. Photovoice

(Portions of the literature review in this paper draw on work previously conducted by the author in “Photovoice for Development and Social Change” (2022). The material has been adapted and updated to reflect the current research focus.)

First, why photography? Photography serves as a mirror - revealing reality as well as the unseen. As cited in my previous work (Khalil, 2022), photography reflects what Walter Benjamin (2015) describes as the “visual unconscious”: “It is another nature that speaks to the camera rather than the eye: the ‘other’ above all in the sense that a space enlightened by human consciousness gives way to a space enlightened by the human unconscious.” (Benjamin, 2015, p. 91).

However, without a proper methodological framework, photography alone cannot drive meaningful change. On the contrary, it can become a tool of exploitation, reinforcing harmful narratives about marginalized communities rather than amplifying their voices. For this reason, Photovoice is considered the most ethical and suitable methodology for integrating photography into research, ensuring that it contributes to both development and social change. Before delving into the Photovoice methodology, it is important to first recognize photography’s power as a medium - when used effectively - as a transformative tool (Khalil, 2022).

To introduce this section in my previous research (Khalil, 2022), I borrowed a set of questions from Latz and Mulvihill (2017) in *Photovoice Research in Education and Beyond*, a book in which the authors develop a practical guide to Photovoice, moving from theory to application. Their exclusive focus on Photovoice methodology stemmed from the lack of dedicated scholarly works on this approach. In the chapter discussing the significance of photography, they pose the following questions as a way to explore its role in our daily lives (Khalil, 2022):

"What is your relationship with photography? Do you have pictures on your wall, on your desk, inside your wallet, or safely tucked away? A shoebox full of old photographs? What about photo albums? Digital spaces filled with images? Do you take pictures? How often? Of what? Why? How? Are your pictures shared online? What about social media? Do you use photography to share aspects of your life? And has this relationship changed over time?"

Historically, photography has been used for archival and evidentiary purposes - to document, report, and illustrate social, cultural, personal, and family histories (Latz & Mulvihill, 2017). In more recent times, photography has also been widely recognized as an art form (Heisley & Levy, 1991). However, categorizing all photographs under the label of "art" is an oversimplification. It is crucial to consider how socially engaged photography can serve as both an artistic and an activist practice. Latz and Mulvihill (2017) emphasize this point by discussing the work of photographer James Mollison, as cited in my previous research in 2022.

In 2010, James Mollison published *Where Children Sleep*, a book that explores global inequalities through visual storytelling. In the introduction, he explains:

"I hope that the pictures and stories in this book speak to children. Yes, so that children who are fortunate (like me) can better appreciate what they have. But more than that, I hope that this book

will help children think about inequalities - within and between societies around the world - and perhaps begin to see how they can respond to them in their own lives."



Image (3) Where do children sleep, Molesen (2010)



Image (4) Where Children Sleep, Molesen (2010)

Moreover, "photography helps people see," as American photographer Berenice Abbott once said. Photography can open the eyes of the person behind the lens to details that might otherwise go unnoticed. When holding a camera, one naturally begins to see differently through the lens. A

photographer is able to perceive distinct and unique elements that can convey a message - or tell a story. Wang and Burris (1997), who developed the Photovoice methodology, integrated visual imagery into research precisely because of its ability to communicate messages that may be difficult to express through words.

It is worth noting, however, that not all photographers intend to send a message through their work. Some approach photography purely as an art form. Still, a sequence of photographs can undoubtedly convey meaning. For instance, a single blurry image may seem insignificant - but a series of blurry images suggests intent, hinting at a message the photographer may be trying to communicate.

While photography can be a powerful tool for social change and development, it has also faced criticism - particularly for “aestheticizing” the world, privileging images over the “real thing” (Sontag, 1997). The authenticity and objectivity of photographs have been called into question. In many cases, photographers documenting marginalized communities have gained fame and financial reward, often at the expense of the very people they photograph - even if their work generates “impact” by exposing uncomfortable truths to the world.

Most photographers who engage in documentary work about marginalized communities are outsiders - often Westerners - which can raise questions about their motives or how they interpret the images they capture, especially in the case of photojournalists. Take, for example, the widely circulated image of “the teary-eyed African child, dressed in tatters, swarmed by flies, with an expression of despair that the caption readily amplifies” (New York Post, 2013). This may depict one version of reality - but it is not the full picture.

The child in that photo - Edward - is, in fact, a successful tobacco farmer and mechanic who also works at a basket-weaving company. As quoted by The Daily Nation (2010): “NGOs come to the village here to take pictures of people - in the church, in the market, on the road, at meetings. Only those dressed poorly.”

In an article by Katherine Hansen (2009), such images of poverty, hunger, and skeletal figures are described as “poverty porn” - a term used to critique the way humanitarian narratives can rely on dehumanizing and sensationalist imagery for profit. Poverty porn, as Cullen (2009) explains, “exploits the condition of the poor to generate the sympathy needed to sell newspapers, increase charitable donations, or support a particular cause.” This type of portrayal is damaging because it robs individuals of their dignity and humanity, reducing them to spectacles of suffering.

That said, if we accept that photography can indeed be a powerful medium for social change and development, then the most ethical and effective photographer is someone from within the community itself. This is precisely where the significance of Photovoice lies. This methodology is empowering - first, for its use of photography as a transformative tool, and second, and more critically, because it positions the photographer as a member of the community.

If photography is a tool for transformation, imagine the impact when the images are taken by those demanding that very transformation - individuals who live the experience and envision the change.

Photovoice was first developed by Caroline C. Wang and Mary Ann Burris in the 1990s. The method was inspired by their work with a community in Yunnan, China, where they were assessing the health, social, and economic conditions of rural women. They asked participants to document intangible concepts - such as love or anxiety - using their cameras. Initially, the method was called a “photo (image) novella (story).”

Photovoice is based on giving cameras to selected individuals from local communities, allowing them to reflect on their lives, document their experiences, and communicate through the photographs they take - photos that can, in turn, promote social development and transformation (Wang & Burris, 1997). The methodology is grounded in both artistic expression and qualitative research.

Wang and Burris designed Photovoice around three core objectives:

1. To enable people to document and reflect on the strengths and concerns of their communities;
2. To foster critical dialogue and knowledge-sharing about important issues through group discussions of the photographs;
3. To influence policy by reaching decision-makers (Wang & Burris, 1997).

Photovoice is built upon the strengths of three foundational theories:

1. Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy, which emphasizes education as a means of empowerment through observation and reflection. Freire (2015) argues that critical consciousness is difficult to achieve without facilitation from informed educators. This approach seeks to dismantle power structures that typically silence communities. Photovoice empowers participants from the earliest stages of research - from planning and data collection to analysis and dissemination - giving them a central role in shaping the process.
2. Feminist theory, which assumes that knowledge is experiential and aims to cultivate political awareness in response to gender inequality (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). Feminist critique emerged in response to the male dominance of research spaces, where men often spoke on behalf of women. Since photography is accessible to all genders, Photovoice enables women to speak for themselves. The rural women of Yunnan affirmed women’s capacity to participate meaningfully in research.
3. Photographic technique, which gives voice to those who are typically voiceless. What sets Photovoice apart from traditional documentary photography is that participants themselves take the photographs, rather than being passive subjects captured by outsiders (Wang & Burris, 1996).

Together, these three frameworks form the foundation of Photovoice. Unlike other visual methodologies such as photo-elicitation, Photovoice is distinct in its explicit political agenda - a commitment to social action (Sutton-Brown, 2014).

Because Photovoice is a methodology designed to promote community development, it is adaptable across various contexts. It is particularly geared toward marginalized, voiceless communities, offering them the opportunity to reflect on the issues they face in their daily lives, and to communicate - with one another, with researchers, and with policymakers - using their own perspectives and visual language.

Originally used in the field of public health, Photovoice has since been adopted across a wide range of disciplines, including education, disability studies, and refugee studies, thanks to its wide applicability (Sutton-Brown, 2014). More recently, it has also been employed in criminology, particularly to explore artistic forms of crime (Smith, 2021).

Archaeologists have also applied the methodology in cultural heritage preservation projects, involving communities in documenting their heritage through photography. This allows communities to communicate the stories and values that matter to them, and - supported by researchers - identify issues they face and convey them to policymakers. The long-term goal of this process is to contribute to social change (Deidrick, 2018).

Wang and Burris (1997) identified ten advantages of the photovoice methodology in their work. First, unlike traditional methods such as surveys and focus groups, photovoice allows participants to represent issues in their daily lives from their own perspectives rather than from the vantage point of those typically in control. In doing so, it legitimizes knowledge produced by people distant from the realm of conventional “scientific knowledge.” Photovoice envisions “a self-defined space that differs from images created by outsiders and imposed against a culturally charged backdrop” (Wang & Burris, 1994). As such, photovoice holds significant potential for generating new knowledge through counter-stories - narratives that deviate from dominant discourses (Latz & Mulvihill, 2017).

Second, photovoice facilitates the transmission of knowledge produced by communities themselves. Given that many vulnerable communities may not be literate, photovoice offers an alternative and accessible form of communication. By using cameras, participants can document social and cultural spaces that may be inaccessible to professionals. For example, in their work, Wang and Burris observed that Yunnan women brought their cameras into markets, funerals, election halls, and neighborhoods - thus capturing the complex social fabric of their communities. The methodology also has a sustained impact, from the early stages of evaluation to implementation. While traditional methods often involve participants only in the initial phase of a study, photovoice involves them throughout the entire process. Participants help define the goals of the project and convey those goals to others in their community - in their own words. By photographing others, they can initiate conversations, ask questions, and circulate the stories and explanations attached to the images they produce. This process also helps build deep social networks among community members. Unlike traditional methods that may provoke feelings of “powerlessness, inferiority, and resentment,” photovoice fosters a sense of ownership, pride, and responsibility.

Ultimately, and as a result of all these aspects, photovoice can serve as a catalyst for social change - empowering people to become advocates and experts on the well-being of their own

communities. It is also worth noting that photovoice can be used beyond needs assessments and applied to project or research evaluation as well.

The advantages of photovoice as presented by Wang and Burris (1997), and further affirmed by other researchers, have also been validated from the participants' point of view. While many studies have explored the potential of photovoice to generate individual change, few have examined how participants themselves experience the methodology - what it means to them, and how they interpret it. To address this, Budig, Diez, Conde et al. (2018) conducted a study to evaluate and describe photovoice from the perspective of women who had taken part in a project. They argued that such a study is essential not only to understand the concept of empowerment, but also to improve photovoice as a methodology, which is meant to function as a "place-based social change project." Their findings revealed positive outcomes. Since empowerment is difficult to measure, the researchers assessed it across three dimensions: first, the knowledge and critical awareness participants gained; second, the shift in participants' self-perception due to increased social recognition from others in their communities; and third, their ability to build new social networks - both within the community and with external actors such as researchers, decision-makers, and others.

By situating photovoice within the framework of community development, this methodology fosters both solidarity and agency among marginalized individuals. It strengthens local capacities and gives voice to silenced communities, ultimately serving the goal of community empowerment and social transformation.

Despite being the most participatory visual method adopted by social scientists, as noted by Higgins (2014), photovoice is not without its critics. The methodology offers participants control over what is considered important or appropriate to photograph, and enables them to prioritize which social issues should be explored. As a result, participants are often required to make political decisions and take action (Wang & Burris, 1997) - in addition to navigating the political agendas of potential funders.

This raises an important question: how likely is it that bias will emerge from community members themselves, compared to the bias that may be introduced by outsiders? In other words, when a community member offers a personal judgment - such as a woman reflecting on her own life - it may be relevant and insightful. But when an outsider passes judgment, it risks shaping the entire study in a biased or even harmful way.

Furthermore, as Prosser (1996) has noted, "many commentators on research methodology argue that image-making is ill-suited to research." This criticism stems in part from the explosion of image-based social media platforms and the increasingly public nature of personal photographs and life narratives. The inherently subjective nature of images, along with the assumption that the researcher also functions as a photographer, raises questions about objectivity. Prosser (1996) observes that "there is a general belief that photographs are unacceptable as a means of objective knowledge because they distort what they claim to illuminate." While this critique may have merit, photovoice challenges such assumptions by asserting that "the image is meant to symbolize the participant's response to the prompt" (Latz, 2017).

Finally, as Strack et al. (2004) caution, “participating in a photovoice program will not lead to full empowerment.” The methodology can become a source of disappointment for participants if it fails to influence policy or capture public attention (Purcell, 2009). Therefore, it is crucial to remain attentive and avoid any potential harm to participants, particularly if their expectations are not met.

4. Photovoice Methodology: Research Process and Implementation

This section offers a descriptive overview of the steps followed to implement the Photovoice methodology:

1. Phase 1: Recruitment of participants, obtaining parental consent, and introducing the project and the Photovoice methodology.
2. Phase 2: Discussing the research and its central question with the participants, and selecting thematic areas.
3. Phase 3: Training on camera use, the adopted theoretical framework, and ethical considerations specific to Photovoice.
4. Phase 4: Printing, displaying photographs, and engaging in narrative discussions.

Phase 1: Recruitment, Parental Consent, and Introduction to Photovoice

The research employed the snowball sampling technique to recruit participants. This method relies on personal recommendations from current participants to identify and invite others who meet the study’s criteria (Lohr, 2010; Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). The process begins with a small group of trusted and known individuals, who are then asked to refer others. Like a snowball gaining mass as it rolls, the participant pool gradually expands until the desired sample size is reached.

This approach is particularly useful for accessing communities or groups that may be closed off or cautious toward external researchers. Compared to other recruitment strategies, snowball sampling is more time- and cost-efficient, requiring fewer logistical resources.

However, snowball samples may not fully represent the broader community, as participants tend to nominate individuals within their own social circles. This can introduce selection bias, potentially overlooking people who don’t align closely with the initial cohort. To mitigate this, we provided guidance to the initial participants, encouraging them to recommend individuals from a range of backgrounds within the community to enhance the sample’s diversity. Each referral was also reviewed to ensure it met the study’s inclusion criteria.

To evaluate the sample's effectiveness, we conducted periodic assessments using evaluation questionnaires to identify potential biases and assess representativeness. We also interviewed participants to understand their motivations and the basis on which they recommended others.

Recruitment through personal recommendation fosters trust between researchers and participants, which contributes to more honest and accurate data collection. It also gives researchers the flexibility to adapt their sampling strategies in response to early findings or developments in the field. Using this method allows for the exploration of topics and experiences that might otherwise remain inaccessible through conventional academic research, adding depth, rigor and nuance to the study.

We began implementing the snowball technique by reaching out to Ms. Hamra Abu Eid, who served as a focal point in the community and had been a partner in a previous cultural heritage project. She was provided with specific selection criteria, including age group, gender (women), extended family name (Abu Eid), location (Bekaa, Baalbek district, Housh al-Rafqa), Lebanese nationality, and a commitment to participate in fieldwork for a period of no less than two months.

Ms. Hamra obtained consent from two participants who met the stated criteria. These two participants, in turn, reached out to other women in the community - until six interested participants were identified.

Due to time and budget constraints, the final number of participants was limited to six. This number was considered sufficient to represent a meaningful segment of the community, or at the very least, to offer a general understanding of community perspectives through the participants' experiences. While the sample does not provide comprehensive representation of all community members, it does offer insight into the views and lived experiences of the target group.

This project can be considered a pilot study for a potential larger-scale project in the future. The data and findings gathered from this initial sample provide an opportunity to assess key themes and trends relevant to Bedouin women. Other researchers may also use the outcomes of this project as a springboard to further explore specific issues or delve into new aspects of Bedouin women's lives.

The project also served as an opportunity to gather information about the concerns, strengths, needs, and interests of Bedouin women, using the Photovoice methodology, which aims to empower participants to express themselves through photography and personal narratives.

1. Depth vs. breadth: Qualitative research - particularly methodologies like Photovoice - emphasizes depth and close engagement with individual experiences over broad coverage. A focused, small group allows for more detailed exploration of each participant's story, leading to a deeper understanding of both personal and collective contexts.
2. Resource constraints: It is important to clarify how limitations in time, budget, and logistics shaped the decision to work with a small group. In qualitative studies, in-depth data from fewer participants is often more meaningful than a larger volume of surface-level data.

3. Data quality control: Limiting the number of participants allows for better control over the quality of collected data. It also enables more precise analysis and ensures that each participant's voice is adequately represented in the final findings.
4. Sustainability and continuous engagement: For a project that requires ongoing interaction and extended fieldwork, selecting a small group makes sustained engagement more feasible and increases the likelihood of consistent participant involvement.

Ultimately, six women participated in the study, ranging in age from 18 (minimum age) to 22 (maximum age). All were from the Abu Eid tribe - one of the largest in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. They all held Lebanese citizenship and resided in Housh al-Rafqa, also known as Housh al-Arab, an area known for agriculture and livestock. None were married, one woman was divorced, and the rest were single.

As for education, three were still pursuing vocational education in the fields of architecture (1) and nursing (2). One was training in beauty and makeup arts, while two had left school.

Initial visits were conducted with the participants' families to explain the project and obtain their consent - an important and culturally appropriate step in this community. All families welcomed me (the facilitator) and expressed appreciation for the project's purpose. After that, a small introductory session was held at the meeting site, where the six participants were introduced to each other, to the facilitator, and to the project.

In this first session, all participants agreed to take part and expressed genuine interest in the project.

Phase 2: Discussing the Research Question and Selecting the Themes

Few scholars have combined the theoretical lens of intersectionality with a participatory research design in their projects. Given the complexity of identity, this study brought together intersectionality and participatory methods to better understand the intersectional identities of Bedouin women - from their own perspective. The participants voluntarily shared their concerns and personal stories, and contributed to formulating the research question. While they expressed strong pride in their Bedouin identity, they also noted the misconceptions and stereotypes held by the surrounding community.

Among the many possible themes that intersect with identity - within both the intersectional framework and other conceptual frameworks referenced in this research - the researcher reviewed and explained each one carefully to the participants. As co-researchers, the participants then collaboratively selected six themes that felt most relevant to their Bedouin context:

1. Identity and intersectionality: This topic was chosen because Bedouin women always differentiate between being “Bedouin” and “Lebanese,” as they were chosen according to criteria that impose Lebanese nationality on them.
2. Tradition and Modernity: This topic was chosen because the Bedouins have valuable traditions that are still practiced today and they are proud of them. They also differentiate between “Bedouins” and what they call “civilians,” “urban,” or “peasants.”
3. Family and community: This is an interesting topic that affects Bedouin identity. They are very attached to their families and respect them a lot. They also always mention society's opinions and stereotypes and how many stories they have about that.
4. Education and Empowerment: This topic was chosen because participants are very proud of their level of education and consider it a strong qualification to defend their identities.
5. Gender Roles and Expectations: All participants are women and cite their mothers and grandmothers as role models. It is also very important, given the existing literature gap, to give women an opportunity to talk about women.
6. Finally, Hopes and Dreams: This was chosen because participants always mention what they hope for the future and what they aim to change. This is a good reflection of their identity.



Image (5): Discussing the research question with participants and selecting themes during the second session

Phase 3: Training on Cameras, Conceptual Framework, and Ethics

In the third session, the facilitator introduced the Photovoice methodology along with the art of storytelling. The participants appreciated the Photovoice approach and were especially excited about using cameras. By the end of the session, they received disposable cameras and were given practical training on how to use them, along with a few tips.

They were also introduced to the intersectionality framework and provided with notebooks to help organize their thoughts. With the facilitator's guidance, they wrote down the six main themes selected for the project: Identity and intersectionality; tradition and modernity; family and community; education and empowerment; gender roles and expectations; and hopes and dreams.

This framework was adopted to support a holistic exploration of identity. The six themes were not meant to be restrictive, but rather to help participants organize their ideas and images. The framework served purely as a reference - this was made clear during the session. The facilitator also emphasized that participants were free to explore other topics if they wished. (It's worth noting that during the second session, many of the stories participants shared naturally aligned with these six themes, which contributed to their selection.)

After organizing their notebooks, the facilitator worked with the participants to generate guiding questions under each theme - questions that could be answered through photos, stories, or personal reflections. In keeping with Photovoice methodology, participants were encouraged to express both positive and negative aspects for each theme.

The meeting space was kindly offered by Mrs. Hamra Abu Eid. She lives alone and had an empty room available within walking distance for all participants, which made access easy. While the room was private, occasional visits from community members during sessions posed a minor challenge - but one that reflected local customs and community dynamics. At times, Mrs. Hamra's mother would bring coffee or breakfast and join for part of the session, offering her thoughts as well. Rather than compromising privacy, her presence added a warm, communal atmosphere to the gatherings, with participants expressing joy at hearing other perspectives and "receiving advice" from someone seen as a maternal figure. Everyone knew and respected the host.

To wrap up the session, the participants joined the facilitator on a short field trip to practice using their cameras outdoors. Once the facilitator confirmed that everyone was comfortable handling the cameras, the session concluded.



Picture (6) A group photo of the researcher and co-researchers

The following week, another meeting was held. The facilitator checked in with the participants about the photo-taking process and whether they had encountered any challenges. While they had no difficulty using the cameras, they expressed uncertainty about what images to capture. They shared their concerns with one another and learned from each other's experiences. The facilitator also presented examples of other Photovoice projects similar to theirs, while ensuring not to influence or steer the direction of the images or outcomes. By the end of the session, participants said they felt more at ease with what they needed to do and where to focus their attention. The facilitator granted them another week to complete the assignment. However, later that week, the participants requested additional time, and an extra week was given.

Phase 4: Printing, Photo Display, and Sharing Stories

Three weeks later, the cameras were collected and the film was developed. The printed photos were handed out during the next session. Unlike the previous sessions, this fourth session was recorded - specifically to capture the participants' reactions and the dynamic exchange that took place as they shared their photos and accompanying stories. All participants gave their consent to be recorded, and were repeatedly asked - especially during emotional moments - whether they wanted the recording paused. Everyone was comfortable with the recording except for one woman who was sharing a deeply personal story. In her case, the facilitator stopped the recording out of respect for her wishes.

It's worth noting that several participants lost some of their photos due to underexposure (i.e., dark images). The facilitator promised to provide a new camera so they could retake their photos, but asked them in the meantime to go ahead and share the stories connected to those missing images. Although the participants were disappointed - noting one of the challenges of using disposable cameras - it did not negatively impact the session.

All participants used their notebooks to write down their stories in relation to the suggested themes. However, many of the stories they shared did not neatly fit into the six categories, and they expressed confusion about how to classify them. The facilitator reassured them that the categories were only meant as a loose guide, and that the classification itself was not important - they should feel free to tell their stories as they are.



Picture (7-8) of the notebooks on which the participants wrote down their notes, taken by the researcher

The photos were displayed on a board prepared by the facilitator. She introduced a method called “SHOWED” (Gant et al., 2009) designed to guide participants in describing their images, using five key questions:

1. What do you see here?
2. What's really going on here?
3. How does this relate to our lives?
4. Why do these conditions exist?
5. What can we do about it?

Interestingly, the participants did not need to rely on the SHOWED method. They were highly enthusiastic about describing their photos and narrating their stories without any prompting. We began the session randomly with one participant, then took turns to ensure each woman had space to speak.

To avoid influencing the content, the facilitator refrained from commenting and focused solely on facilitating the process. After each participant finished sharing, the others were invited to respond

or comment on the story. These interactions were recorded (with everyone's consent) and later used by participants to reflect on how the six women agreed on certain issues, were moved by others, or expressed anger in response to some topics. This collective engagement helped surface issues that may be shared among other Bedouin women as well.

Although the SHOWED prompts were not used directly, the facilitator still organized the stories on the board, placing them under the six previously identified themes.

The women had taken the photos themselves and recorded their accompanying narratives in their notebooks. Some stories were deeply emotional and personal. Many of the themes and stories overlapped, which will be further explored in the following sections. Despite their differences, the women found strong resonance in each other's experiences. They unanimously expressed concerns about stereotypes and false narratives, a shared fear of losing old traditions, and the pressure they felt from some of those same traditions.

5. Qualitative Findings – Storytelling

5.1. Data

This section presents all the photographs and accompanying narratives in a table. The facilitator supported participants in categorizing their stories under one of six proposed themes, drawn from the intersectionality framework: identity and intersectionality; tradition and modernity; community and family; gender roles and expectations; education and empowerment; and hopes and dreams. These classifications were developed collaboratively with the co-researchers. It is important to note that each story often intersects with multiple themes - precisely why intersectionality was chosen as a guiding framework. There is no single or definitive way to interpret a narrative. The six themes served as organizational tools to help participants sort their narratives, but they are not exhaustive or limiting.

Rather, their main function was to support the lead researcher in analyzing the data and later synthesizing the findings into key themes and takeaways in the conclusion. In the photovoice methodology, analysis represents a blend of the co-researchers' narratives and the lead researcher's reflections. It is a collaborative effort aimed at identifying core themes and uncovering deeper understandings of Lebanese Bedouin women's identities.

Enas Abu Eid

Enas is a Lebanese Bedouin woman who completed her schooling and now works at a nearby shop. She captured striking images that reflect the richness of traditional Bedouin life. Enas aspires to preserve the oral histories of the older generations.

Note: All photographs below were taken and are owned by Enas Abu Eid.

Community and family



I am a Lebanese Bedouin girl. I was studying in a school and faced difficulties with classmates from civil society. I used to speak their dialect even though I hated speaking it, but they considered speaking in the Bedouin dialect something strange. When I spoke in my dialect, they would mock me, consider me from the “Nawar,” and diminish my worth among civil society. I was saddened by this treatment and resorted to urbanism in order to become like them. After time passed and I matured, I came to understand the meaning of Bedouin culture, its beauty, customs, and traditions. I now speak it in front of all communities and I am happy - it is my mother tongue and I will not give it up.



I am a 20-year-old Lebanese Bedouin girl. A young man from outside our clan loved me. He told me so, and I agreed and asked him to inform my family. He did, but my father refused because he is an outsider, and they consider me not yet of the age for marriage and responsibility. I felt sad because I loved him and I wanted this to happen, but I couldn't change it and didn't have the courage to confront my father or discuss the matter with him, so I decided to remain silent and accept my fate. We come from a society that refuses to give a girl to outsiders - whether they are Bedouins from another tribe or from urban society. They have a law of “tjyīr,” meaning that her cousin or relatives have more right to her than a stranger. These beliefs upset me and somewhat restrict a girl's freedom to choose her life partner. But most of them, including me, abide by my father's decisions and consider what the family says to be in my best interest, and respecting them is important and necessary in our time.

Tradition and modernity - hopes and dreams



I am a Lebanese Bedouin woman and I am proud of this identity. I love my country, Lebanon, and I love its beautiful customs and traditions that represent Bedouin life. What bothers me is the new generation's loss of Bedouin customs and traditions such as clothing, culture, and the authentic Bedouin dialect due to the presence of technology and fashion.

I dream, as a Bedouin woman, and I wish for the return of the old way of life, the old food, clothing, and the customs and traditions our ancestors tell us about. Because with time, these customs will be forgotten with the presence of technology and fashion - and our ancestors die and these customs die with them. I wish for an end to conflicts between Bedouin families, such as revenge. In Bedouin families, they take revenge even after hundreds of years. Some of them forgive, and others take their revenge. I don't like enmity - I like forgiveness.

Tradition and modernity



Our customs and traditions - we Bedouins - since the old days, they used to embroider the cloaks by hand, and they used to churn milk in the shakwa (which no longer exists). They ate clarified butter (samn sāgh) and made shamandūr from the milk gum. Hospitality was with bitter coffee. They would move from one area to another, and at weddings, they wore cloaks ('abā'), headbands ('aṣaba), long shirts (qallābiyya), and 'iqāl. Weddings used to last seven days (my grandmother told me hers lasted six), and the bride would be paraded on the hawdaj.

In our generation, many customs have changed. Customs, weddings, and food have evolved. Many Bedouins have forgotten the old Bedouin customs and traditions because they turned to urban society and followed modernization. In my opinion, I don't like that these details are being forgotten because they were very beautiful - they came naturally, and people were different. Many things have changed, and life has changed and no longer resembles the past - there's no longer blessing in time. In the past, they had a lot of sheep and would slaughter them, and it didn't occur to them that they were spending or anything like that. A wedding would last fifteen days or seven days and it wasn't a problem. But now, the wedding lasts two days at most, and the groom starts to feel like his budget has broken. So, many things have changed - even the clothing used to be very beautiful.

As for today - say I go to visit my sister - if I wore the old clothes, people around me would talk and ask what I was wearing, and I would feel like something is wrong, even though I am Bedouin. For example, we now wear those clothes only at weddings and on special occasions. So today, why would I wear them?

There are elderly people who still wear them and have no problem with it.

Gender roles and expectations



I see that the Bedouin woman puts in double the effort - both for her children and her husband. She works hard to secure a promising future for her family and to ease the burden on her husband. In our neighborhood, there's a determined woman who works at a nearby vegetable shop to provide for her children's needs, their education, and to cover the cost of medicine for her sick husband, who is unable to work. She works day and night, and when she finishes, she returns home to complete her household duties - happily, without complaint or resentment.

Gender roles and expectations 	The Bedouin woman eats from the sweat of her brow - she and her husband do not resort to disgraceful work. But the Bedouin woman struggles for the sake of her family and to please her husband. The Bedouin woman preserves her customs, her respect, her chivalry, and her pride. Some Lebanese civilians consider Bedouins to be “from the Nawar,” and this is what breaks the feelings of the authentic Bedouin woman - they do not know the authenticity of the Bedouins.
Tradition and modernity 	My mother doesn't wear the 'asabeh (headband). She wears the abaya when she goes out. I asked her why she doesn't wear the headband anymore, and she said, “I don't have the patience for it anymore.” But I would like her to keep wearing it. She says she can't tolerate it anymore - maybe because she works a lot, the headband doesn't stay on well, and that's why she stays home.

Shaima Abu Eid

Shaima is a Lebanese Bedouin woman working toward her dream of becoming an architect. After searching, she was accepted into the Lebanese University, Faculty of Fine Arts, majoring in Architecture. I organized a small fundraiser to help cover her tuition fees and rent a room for her in the city. She is a proud Bedouin woman who previously contributed to another project led by the American University of Beirut and the British Council to safeguard Bedouin heritage in Lebanon.

Note: All photos below were taken by and belong to Shaima Abu Eid.

Tradition and modernity



My grandmother always talks to me about her pride in her Bedouin identity, and that her generation preserved old customs and traditions as much as possible, such as cooking, clothing, and facial tattoos. To this day, she still wears the Bedouin dress, headband, and veil. Even though this draws everyone's attention to her, she tells me that when she is in public places, everyone looks at her - some with disdain, some with surprise, and some with admiration.

Identity and intersectionality; community and family



The Bedouin identity sometimes harms those who carry it. I am a Bedouin girl integrated into urban communities. I carry out daily activities and have friends, but I hide from them the fact that I am originally Bedouin. This is because of their negative perception of this community - they fear it and consider it inferior. It is a community they do not know and do not want to get to know, because of the accumulation of bad beliefs passed down through generations. They are ignorant of who the Bedouins really are, and they avoid getting close, insisting on their view.

We, as a rising generation, avoid explaining or getting into discussions - to avoid tension or disagreements, or to avoid seeing disgust in their eyes. I don't say I'm Bedouin in front of my friends, and others don't tell the van driver that their destination is Housh al-Arab, and others don't speak our dialect in public.

This was during childhood. Now, after maturing and becoming aware of our culture and its depth, I no longer mind saying that I'm Bedouin and that I belong to this tribe. I've become fully convinced that in order for others to accept us, we have to accept

ourselves first, understand the good sides of this culture, and work on improving the bad sides - so it can become better over time. It is an identity that should be cherished, its beauty introduced to others, and its authentic customs and traditions preserved. There is no future without a past for a person to hold onto and be proud of.

Identity and intersectionality



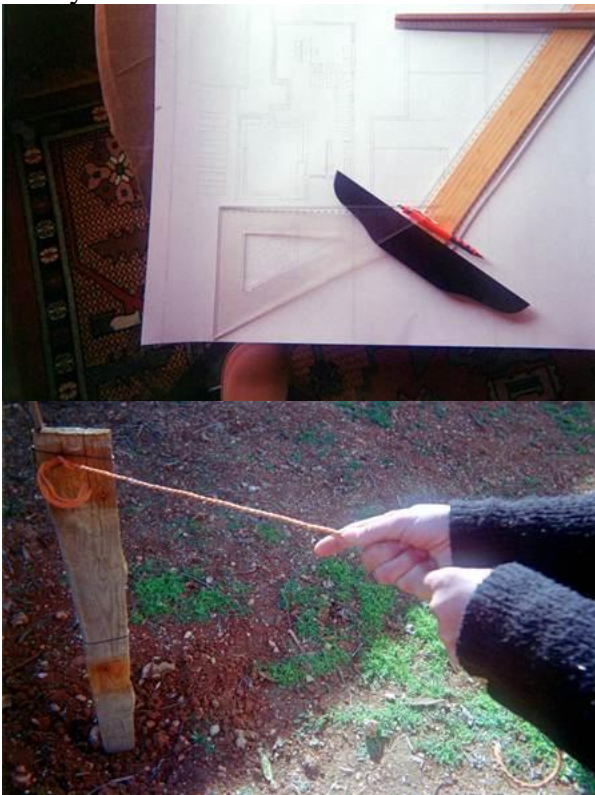
A photo showing the entrance to a hospital. This is what the Lebanese identity has given us - it allowed us to enjoy the rights of any Lebanese citizen, regardless of whether we are Bedouin or urban. It made us belong to a country where we must abide by its laws and systems, carry out our duties, and benefit from all the social services it provides, such as social security, education, healthcare... It gave us a symbolic value that affirms our existence, made us equal with other communities, and granted us the right to travel, move around, vote to make our voice heard, and work in government institutions.

Community and family



Many times, the family is the reason behind an individual's brokenness and weakness. In our culture, there are essential and important things that must be followed. Most Bedouin girls suffer from a lack of confidence, and that is mainly because of the parents. When both parents give their children confidence, no one can interfere in their affairs or question their actions. Parents are the source of an individual's strength and the starting point of their behavior. When they are too strict, the children hide their mistakes out of fear of their reaction - and things might get worse. And the opposite is also true.

Identity and intersectionality; community and family



In the picture, I am a Lebanese girl of Bedouin origin. I was able to succeed and excel in my studies and prove myself to my community and to civil society, which believes that Bedouins are not good for anything or capable of achieving - that they are from "the old days" and that their thinking is limited, their lives are simple, and their dreams capped. This is how I see their ideas and how they view us.

My identity will not affect my future or my dreams, and it is not an obstacle to my achievements or to giving, as some people think - including some from the Bedouin community itself. Most of them believe that a girl's future is marriage and taking care of the home - so what is the point of education and work? And even if someone fails, that has nothing to do with being Bedouin. I wore the Bedouin dress at my graduation ceremony and I will keep wearing it on every occasion. This identity always accompanies me - to show everyone who sees me that I am Bedouin and proud of it, that I was able to achieve, and to reflect their image of us back to them - to show that Bedouin youth can

	learn, work, succeed, keep up with development, and be part of society.
Hopes and dreams 	Hope: The sun is the source of hope. When it appears, we feel hopeful for a new day that carries a lot of hope. I dream of awareness campaigns that help unite communities, where humanity is the starting point and priority in how people are treated - regardless of their identity, gender, sect, color, clothing, or dialect.

Community and family



I remember when I was young, in school, they used to distribute family registry extracts for certain procedures. I felt ashamed and afraid that my friends would see I was Sunni, as they assumed I belonged to the same sect. This was because of the discrimination and hatred ingrained since childhood between sects. So I added a stroke over the dot and turned the "ya'" into an "ayn," so the word would read "Shi'a" instead of "Sunni," so they wouldn't know my reality, distance themselves from me, or hate me for being from another sect. This might be due to general sectarian extremism in our country, Lebanon. I was young and unaware - all I wanted was not to be without friends. But I spent my school years without friends and didn't get along much with my classmates.

Judging people based on things they can't change or didn't choose is wrong and a kind of injustice with a negative impact. We are not the ones who choose who we belong to, who we are, or which religion or sect we follow - and we are not necessarily defined by the religion, sect, identity, or lineage we come from.

Tradition and modernity



I would like to introduce civil society to the beauty of Bedouin life, the beauty of the spirit of Bedouins, the value of their customs and traditions, the uniqueness of their dialect and clothing, the smell of their food mixed with generosity, hospitality, and kindness, and the sound of the jurn grinding coffee, as if it were saying to you: "A hundred welcomes, you've lit up your home and your people." Their eagerness for one another in joys and sorrows is as if they are one household - if your neighbor is well, you are well.

Tradition and modernity



I would like to introduce Bedouin generations themselves to their identity, to how deep-rooted and beautiful it is - so that they are not influenced by how other societies view them, and so that they do not follow in my footsteps of hiding it, being ashamed of it, and treating it as a source of fear. Based on my experience, this is something difficult and causes a person to live with overthinking and limitation. It affects our personality and becomes a burden on those who carry it without sufficient knowledge of it or the ability to show it and take pride in it. People's opinions of them should not be a priority.

What I have reached in terms of awareness and conviction - I believe all youth my age have reached as well, and the younger ones will reach after going through experiences, challenges, and growing awareness. That's why I expect a bright future for them. This generation now coexists with the pressures of other societies. They know who they are. I am studying engineering, and others are in nursing, education, and commerce. They have founded their own institutions, joined the army, and taken public jobs. This proves our ability to integrate into two different civilizations, to succeed, and to take what's best from both.

This gives us extra strength, increasing drive, and the ability to confront and influence others - not the other way around. Bedouins are distinguished by authenticity, intelligence, resilience, curiosity, and the desire to develop. Changing the inferior view of our identity, and how we are treated as if we are from another planet - people who are nothing like them - depends on understanding our customs and traditions, and changing the idea that they are backward or complicated. They actually establish order

	and foundations that protect society from corruption and deviation. Our customs and traditions impose modesty, avoiding suspicion, respect for others, and rules for how to interact - which differ from one family to another.
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Gender roles and expectations



My mother: Her life is an expressive story that teaches and offers lessons. She was young, living in a Bedouin community that depended on a traditional way of life. Everyone worked to secure their daily sustenance - the father, the mother, and the children - some working with livestock, others trading milk or farming. My grandfather was one of the first people to work at the American University. He would see students and professors, and that became a motivation for him to educate his children, at a time when children were usually raised to help their parents in their work. He enrolled his children in school and instilled in them the importance of education.

My mother used to excel above all her classmates. The teachers and principals were amazed by her and her performance. Even her village was amazed by Hamra's success - that she was a Bedouin girl who was studying and outperforming the other students. My grandfather encouraged her even more to persevere, and he was proud of her and her advancement. She reached the university level, and everyone looked at her with admiration and amazement - as someone who had changed all the existing perceptions and standards. Bedouins and non-Bedouins alike, young and old, loved and respected her and praised her achievements.

To this day, I still hear compliments when people find out I am her daughter. She entered university at a time when even urban communities barely had access to higher education. Only a small minority reached that level, while many Bedouins didn't even know how to write their names or read. She formed strong friendships with people from urban communities and had no issue with being Bedouin - she was proud of it and

expressed that pride openly. She had a strong personality and unwavering confidence in herself and her success. Her parents supported her and were proud of their daughter's achievements. She was cherished, and everything about her was unique - her clothing, for example, followed a "civilian" style at a time when Bedouins considered that shameful or unacceptable.

She got married and continued her education at the Lebanese University. She took on the responsibility of a husband, household duties, studies, and social life. She succeeded in being a mother, teacher, wife, student, and Bedouin woman. She worked on many projects with professors from the American University, discussing all things related to Bedouins. She wrote the book Suwalif al-Badiya, and she visited London and Jordan. I hope she spreads her message around the world. She was hosted on multiple television programs, where she spoke about herself and her identity - these were some of the most successful episodes. She partnered with UNICEF for literacy programs to help elderly people in her community who could not read or write. She studied nursing and now provides healthcare services thanks to the knowledge and experience she gained from those courses. She worked in trade and now works in agriculture. She remains, in the eyes of everyone - and in my eyes - the kind of woman who will not be repeated.

My mother's choice of life path changed the course of my own life. She is aware, educated, and deeply concerned with me being better than her - that my paths and decisions are right, regardless of whether society accepts them. What matters to her is that I be a good, educated, and distinguished young woman. She is my role model and means a lot to many Bedouin girls who

	dream of learning and reaching a place in society. My mother's story sums up the Bedouin woman: educated, successful in her work, capable of balancing between two identities, bearing responsibility for her family and its needs, embracing change over time, keeping up with what's new, able to change how society sees the Bedouin identity and to present it in various ways. She is a bridge between communities, well-suited to build a modern family with deeply rooted Bedouin traditions. This contributes to raising a conscious generation and encouraging children to pursue education and reach the highest levels of learning. She is a woman of accomplishments, and her family, children, community - and even other communities - are proud of her. Admiration fills people's eyes and shifts many beliefs, thoughts, and perspectives. In doing so, she proved to the Bedouin community that urban life is not something bad, and to the urban community that Bedouin identity is not something shameful. In our story, there are details only a Bedouin woman can understand through her journey and experiences. No one else can understand what it feels like to be seen as a Bedouin Lebanese woman, or the challenges and situations she faces - whether from within her community or from others. The feeling of being successful and effective at home, in society, and in work - of balancing between two different identities - and the satisfaction of achieving, being admired, proving oneself in a male-dominated society that opposes women simply for being women, let alone Bedouin. To be what she wants to be, to dream of the future, to work toward her goals, and to prove to everyone that she is capable and that she will bring about change.
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Maryam Hamad Abu Eid

Maryam is the youngest woman who participated in this project. She does not like school and wants to be a mother and a housewife. During the research, the participants encouraged her to complete at least her secondary education, and she re-enrolled in school in the year following the study.

Note: All photos below were taken and are owned by Maryam Abu Eid.

Community and family



I love being with my friends in this community, but I cannot, because they make fun of my Bedouin dialect. I wish I could speak like them, but I have a weak personality, and I wish I could fight this thing inside me. My Bedouin friends do not have this fear that I have. They speak like the Hadar, but I cannot speak like them.

Tradition and modernity



The way I think and my taste is that I adore everything related to my old customs more than to modern things. For example, there are many kinds of ovens, but for me, as a Bedouin girl, I love the bread that we make in our own Bedouin way, where the fire hits the saj until it makes the most delicious loaf of golden bread - golden like the sun.

Gender roles and expectations



The Bedouin woman is a mother, a wife, and a woman of her clan. She has her status - she is the one who helps and carries out the work of the home, her children, and the members of the clan. Her opinion is the secondary one: any man gives his opinion first, and then the woman.

Her role in judging horse riding, managing the household, and organizing tent setups and childcare has value, but there is a weakness in how women's rights are not recognized, in the lack of justice and values, and in the lack of full participation in society - even though she plays a fundamental role in it.



I had stopped going to school because I didn't like it before. But my family kept encouraging me to continue my education, telling me I should study and get a job. I kept refusing - I didn't want to study and just wanted to stay at home. I went back, but then stopped again because there were too many lessons that had piled up while I was away, and I couldn't focus on what was being taught in school. Next year, I will go back, because now I want to learn, study, and eventually work and get a job.

Israa Al-Nazzal Abu Eid

Israa is a makeup artist. She loves makeup and works as a freelancer. She dreams of owning her own salon. She offered to do makeup for all the participants and the lead researcher free of charge whenever they have an event.

Note: All photos below are taken by and owned by Israa Abu Eid.

Gender roles and expectations



When we mention the words “Bedouin woman,” we sense the scent of the old, beautiful, and simple days. The Bedouin woman - there is nothing more beautiful said in this world - is strong and patient in enduring life’s hardships. These words bring to mind my grandmother, who endured a harsh Bedouin life. She is known as a “female with masculine muscles,” able to carry out all tasks under the weight of a harsh climate.

The life of the Bedouin woman was difficult. My grandmother worked tirelessly, without boredom, fatigue, or complaint. But anyone reflecting on that image might notice that her hands bear the marks of deep psychological suffering. The lines in her face carry all the pain and sorrows that the tongue cannot speak. Her life was limited. She divided her days between housework, raising livestock, caring for the children, and working the farmland - planting and harvesting livelihood to support her husband, building her own strength to carry the household on her shoulders and help him without adding to his burden. She gathered livelihood from sheep and poultry and worked in traditional crafts. She baked bread on the saj or in the clay oven. These were customs and traditions passed down from the fathers and grandfathers.

Gender roles and expectations



I believe that God created the Bedouin woman as someone who can endure so much. Fate decreed that her husband would become ill and unable to work after once working at the American University of Beirut and providing for all their needs. My uncle's wife - the woman we're talking about - accepted God's will and decided to work and support her husband without complaint. She didn't compare herself to other women who live stable, comfortable lives free of hardship.

I always pray that God grants her patience and strength to keep supporting her children and her husband. I am proud of her, and I thank God that my uncle does not need help from anyone, and that his wife is able to provide for him and their children. They are not beggars. They don't need assistance from others. They are self-sufficient.

Tradition and modernity



These traditions had shackled my grandmother's dreams. She was bound by those customs that stood in the way of realizing her small and simple dream - learning to read and write. Despite these challenges, my grandmother used to do the hard labor that was considered the work of men.

My grandmother is the candle that lights my heart and fills the house with brightness. She is the one who gathers the family under her warm wing with tenderness and love. She is the foundation of the family, the solid pillar the children turn to when facing problems. She is the jewel that shines. If my grandmother were to be absent one day, the family would lose its sense of safety and affection.

	Facial tattoos were drawn on their faces in the past, and this was considered adornment and makeup at the time.
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Zahraa Abu Eid

Zahraa is a woman with extensive life experience. She gave advice about marriage and partnership to all the participants and to the researcher as well, telling them not to rush into marriage and to choose someone they love. She also encouraged them to continue their education so that they can face life on their own in case of divorce. Zahraa is currently continuing her studies in nursing. I personally learned a lot from Zahraa.

Note: All photos below were taken and are owned by Zahraa Abu Eid.

Gender roles and expectations



I used to love education very much because I aspired to a bright tomorrow. I loved education so I could grow and succeed in my daily life. But this dream quickly faded because of life's difficulties. We lived a simple and modest life, praise be to God. My father worked from morning until evening to provide for the family's needs. When he came home tired, I would say to myself, "Maybe, Father, I can carry some of the burdens and expenses so I can see you at ease." So I decided to leave school because of financial hardship - my father could no longer afford the school fees, and I had to stop studying. I started working and relying on myself to earn money and help my father, then complete my education.

I faced many difficulties along the way. Praise be to God, I became responsible for myself in my life. I worked and put in effort and returned to school. I paid for everything I needed and relied on myself. I was studying and working so I wouldn't give up on my dream because of the hard circumstances. Praise be to God, He granted me success - I worked and completed my studies and didn't need anyone. This was very important in my life and taught me many lessons about being responsible for yourself so you don't lose your dream. Life is hard - if you're not strong, you will fail and achieve nothing but failure.

Identity and intersectionality



I am Bedouin, generation after generation. I was born with this instinct and lived with it in my humble village, in an environment that resembles me. In my childhood, I was the happiest person. Then I reached adolescence, and that was the real catastrophe. I entered a new life, with new people. I used to get close to them and speak to them with all kindness, and they looked at me with inferiority, as if I were different from them, as if I were from one planet and they from another - even though I am human like them. But their response to me was: *You are not fit to be our friend because we are from the high and elite class, and we belong to the generation of civilization and progress. You have no place with us. Your place is in the popular villages. We do not want to talk to you.*

Community and family



I wished I were in a dream and could wake up from it because of how harsh her words were to me. But I broke the barrier of fear and surrender, and I stood in front of her with full confidence and said: I am a simple Bedouin girl, and this is my identity. I cannot hide it or change it. I, madam, do not know the art of pretending. If you accept me as I am, then welcome to my life - and if you do not, that's your business. I am here to achieve my dreams, to make my father proud with my success, and to do everything useful for my village. She responded with mockery: *You won't be able to succeed. This is a well-known school with a high level, and only outstanding students enter it. I have a private tutor who helps me with my homework so I can succeed. But you - no one is helping you.* I looked at her and said: *I don't need anyone to help me. I will study and reach the highest ranks, and you will see that.*

Tradition and modernity



Marriage is 'half of faith' as they say. Marriage is a binding and interconnected relationship between a young man and a girl, but this marriage differs from one village to another or from one clan to another. Some people cling to their backward customs, such as the girl being reserved for her cousin - he is more entitled to her than a stranger, whether she accepts him or not. Her opinion is not taken into account because the guardians are the ones who make this decision on behalf of the girl. I am one of those girls who fell into these fake customs.

Tradition and modernity



My cousin proposed to me, and even though he had been married before me and had children, there was a dispute between them, and she left the house, so he decided to marry again - and I was the lucky one he proposed to. My father spoke to me and said: "Your cousin is better than a stranger. No matter what happens to you in this world, he won't abandon you, because you are his cousin, from his own flesh and blood, and he will be your support." This was also my family's opinion. I agreed to the marriage for the sake of family ties and for the two families to remain united, since I only had one uncle. I accepted him out of conviction and because my family wanted him, even though I didn't know him well - only formally, as they say. There was nothing between us except greetings. The engagement happened and we were married within a week. I became a mother, a wife, and a worker all at once. I carried a responsibility bigger than my age. I became the mother of two children, a wife, a field laborer, and a homemaker.

Gender roles and expectations



I faced many difficulties in my life. At the time when I was supposed to wear a graduation gown, I wore a wedding dress. At the time when I was supposed to carry a pen and a notebook, I carried a pickaxe and a shovel to work in the plain. At the time when I was supposed to be sitting at a desk and a study chair, I was sitting to raise two children. This was my life in short. I used to work with him in the plain all day, and I never heard the phrase, "God give you strength." He treated me poorly. I was like a slave under her master. I endured it only because I wanted peace and didn't want problems between the two families. Every day, the disputes between us grew. He started talking to his old wife and decided to bring her back home even though he had said he didn't want her. I had accepted him from the beginning; he promised me one thing and did something else. He told me he wouldn't bring her (the first wife) back, but he broke his promise and did. So I decided to separate from him because I wasn't happy with him. I used to act happy in front of my family and my uncle's household so I wouldn't burden them with my worries. I went through many hardships with him and never spoke to anyone about what was going on between us. I asked for a divorce and decided to separate from him because of how badly he treated me. We divorced, praise be to God, and I came out of his prison into my complete freedom. I went out to live life again, to achieve everything I had dreamed of, and to get everything I was deprived of with him.

Community and family



I faced some difficulties in my life because of how the world views a divorced woman. But this didn't restrict me or imprison me - rather, I became stronger, faced the world, and continued my educational path. My family played an important role in my life - a positive one. They told me: life doesn't stop here, you're still young. On the other hand, how society looked at me: "You're divorced, your place is at home. You should stay there. You can't go out. You can't continue your education because you're divorced." I heard such phrases many times, but I didn't care about them. Because whoever lives listening to people's words dies from worry. I learned from my story to rely on myself. I became responsible, strong, and brave. I don't give up, and I don't let failure defeat me. From my marriage experience, I learned many lessons that strengthened me. Truly, every girl should think carefully before making her choice - marriage is not just a white dress you wear, or a fancy car you ride in, or booking the most luxurious hall. Marriage is a responsibility that shouldn't be taken lightly.



Bedouin women

Fatima Abu Eid

Fatima is a strong woman. She has suffered from thalassemia since childhood. She accepted her condition and is studying nursing to help others who have the same illness. She is very brave and proud.

Note: All photos below were taken and are owned by Fatima Abu Eid.

Identity and intersectionality



The term “Bedouins” refers to the inhabitants of the desert who live a nomadic life and depend for their livelihood on raising livestock. Wherever there is water, there are Bedouins. As for the urbanites (Lebanese), this term is used for the countryside, villages, and cities, and they rely on their land for livelihood.

For me, as a Lebanese Bedouin girl, I see no difference between us. We have the same characteristics: kindness, perceptiveness, courage, and many good traits. But there are some urbanites who look down on the Bedouins and boast about their origins, their wealth, and their children from the beginning of their lives. But boasting about one’s origin at the expense of others is considered racism.

Tradition and modernity



The Bedouin is characterized by customs and traditions that urbanites cannot understand or engage with - such as dialect, clothing, food, and many other things. There are beliefs and ideas that are completely different from those of urban communities. Among the Arabs, there are many proverbs and riddles that are difficult for the urbanites to understand, like the customs of drinking coffee, wearing the shemagh, and many others.

Over time and with the development of science and life, the Bedouins began to educate themselves. This is not a denial of their origin, but rather a reduction of as many negatives as possible and an expansion of the circle of positives. With time, the Bedouins settled in villages, and some settled in cities for several reasons, including political ones, such as the enforcement of borders, which made the idea of constant travel very difficult.

One of the key references among Bedouins is that they choose a man with noble qualities - generosity, courage, and a big heart - so that he can serve all members of his tribe and have the capacity to solve many of the problems that arise and be a fair judge.

Identity and intersectionality



I am a Lebanese Bedouin girl in my twenties. Since I opened my eyes to this world, the image of blood-filled wires has followed me. I have always been admitted to the hospital for blood transfusions.

Someone once mocked me for my illness and called me "disabled." It was like a bullet that shattered my ribs - a bolt of lightning that destroyed my life. It made me surrender and feel that I had no place in life. It was a difficult period I cannot forget. I hated myself, my life, and everyone around me. I became someone entirely different. After some time and with the

	support of family and friends, I resumed my life's path and professional journey. I always ranked at the top in success.
Identity and intersectionality 	Today, I am at the end of my educational journey, with only a little left before I graduate. I hold my head high - and my father's too - and I am proud of my illness, because it made me a driven, loving girl who is at peace with herself. I say to those who throw words like poison: be gentle. There are patients who cannot bear it, and your words could be the reason they are killed psychologically and morally. As for me, I forgive - so I wonder, is there anyone else like me!?
Community and family 	Despite the development, there are still people who cannot accept the idea of urbanization, and they consider it a denial of their origin. I have a friend who always complains to me that she suffers because of her family's customs and traditions. She is not allowed to leave the house alone and must continue pleasing her father and brother until she gets married. They don't accept the idea of loving someone outside the family, and she is forced to marry someone from her relatives. If a suitor comes from outside the family, her father consults the relatives before even asking her, and he obligates her to accept - even if she doesn't want to and insists on remaining single. I'm talking about someone I know. For

	example, when I go to visit her, they allow me to visit and allow her to come to my place, but nothing beyond that is permitted. I'm against this behavior. Bedouin customs don't say this is acceptable. Bedouin traditions are beautiful and give women freedom.
Community and family 	If from the start you're doubting her, then what confidence are you leaving her with? That could create a negative reaction - she may act in the wrong way as a result, and that becomes a reflection of the lack of trust. On the contrary, if you give her full trust and freedom, she will protect herself and live up to that trust. Let's say she did make some mistakes - then understanding and dialogue might solve it. But the real problem is how we deal with mistakes. Even the parents can't understand, and instead of helping, they expose the issue or make it worse - and they don't help in finding a solution.

5.2. Verification and evaluation session

The final step in the Photovoice approach is not simply wrapping up the project with participation certificates, a group photo, and a lunch - it is, more importantly, what is known as the 'member check'. This session is an essential part of the methodology, designed to review the research with community members or project participants.

In this step, the principal researcher checks whether participants are satisfied with the analysis conducted and whether they wish to add, modify, or remove anything. During the session, I shared

the research findings, thematic analysis, my notes, and other relevant materials. I also invited their feedback on the overall project - particularly regarding the methodology.

To minimize bias, I specifically encouraged them to share both the positive and negative aspects, so they wouldn't feel pressured to speak only favorably about the experience.

Notes on the photovoice methodology:

The facilitator asked participants about their experience with the camera and whether it helped them in the storytelling process. Overall, all participants agreed that the camera facilitated narration, especially since storytelling can be complex and they often do not know where to begin. However, they criticized the use of analog (disposable) cameras, noting that this format may limit the process. Several participants expressed that using digital cameras would have added value, as it would allow them to gain photography skills they could apply beyond the project.

One participant noted: "Sometimes narrating is difficult, but when I film something from my daily life, it becomes easier."

Another participant added:

"It would have been better to shoot with modern cameras, along with photography training courses. That way, we could acquire better skills. Modern photos are of higher quality, and when displayed in an exhibition, the quality wouldn't be questioned. The goal is to learn the scientific principles behind the work, not just rely on spontaneity [...] Pictures can express more than what we say. An image can be a principle or a starting point. It helps link ideas together. [...] For the exhibition, pictures inspire people and make them want to read. Images make things easier - writing is more difficult."

As for their overall feedback on the project, it was overwhelmingly positive. Participants felt the project gave them a meaningful opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions. They appreciated having a space where their voices could be heard. However, some expressed concern that their voices might go unheard in the end, or that all their work might be in vain if the project does not lead to further action.

One participant said: "The project is beautiful because it reflects our life as an idea. [...] This project shouldn't end here. There should be ongoing projects. We could explore other topics - for example, documenting the dialect. It would also be interesting to work with a more diverse sample. Mixing the sample could be educational - seeing how young people think, comparing ideas, and then bridging the gaps."

When asked about the adopted framework and methodology - regardless of the photography element - participants described the project as highly flexible. They felt there was no specific goal they were expected to achieve, and instead experienced the project as an open space to express whatever they wanted, whether positive or negative. Many said they felt like active contributors in shaping the project itself, and emphasized that nothing was imposed on them. Rather, the facilitator's cooperative and flexible approach enabled their full participation.

As one participant explained:

“Comprehensive topics, not one specific topic. The project didn’t impose anything. If someone came and imposed something, I’d have felt anxious. But the topic was open. We talked about what we wanted, about everything we liked, what we wanted. The whole process was easygoing and free. Whether someone was educated or not, had information or not - she could still present a story. In other projects, they’d say, ‘You can talk about your mother, for example,’ and want something specific. But in this one, we talked about whatever we wanted. There were themes, but they didn’t limit us. You could talk about what you wanted.”

When asked about the adopted framework and the methodology - aside from the photography component - participants described the project as highly flexible. They said they did not feel pressure to reach a specific outcome, nor were they steered toward certain answers. Instead, they described the process as a free and open space in which they could express whatever they wanted, both positive and negative. Several noted that they felt involved in shaping the project itself, rather than having something imposed on them. They credited this to the facilitator’s flexible and collaborative approach.

As one participant put it:

“Comprehensive topics, not a specific topic. The project didn’t impose anything. If someone had come and imposed something, I would’ve felt anxious. But the topic was free. We talked about what we wanted - about everything we liked, what we wanted. It was easygoing and free. Whether educated or uneducated, with information or not, anyone could present a story. Other projects might say, ‘Talk about your mother,’ or some specific thing. But here, we talked about what we wanted. There were topics, yes, but they never limited us. You could talk about whatever you wanted.”

Participants also described discovering hidden strengths and interests. Fatima said:

“I didn’t know I’d love writing until I tried it. I told my teacher about the project and she advised me to keep writing. We discovered hidden talents - like Enas, who didn’t expect she could write all this.”

Alongside these skills, many participants said they gained something deeper: courage, empathy, and mutual understanding. They felt more confident expressing their Bedouin identity.

Israa said:

“The participant who shared how she used to be afraid to tell the bus driver where she was from - for the first time she said it without shame: ‘I’m going to Hosh al-Arab.’ The project gave us more courage.”
“There are girls who don’t like to say they’re Bedouin. I felt that we had things in common. We each took problems and advice from each other. We talk to our friends, we show our talents, and we like talking about the project.”

“There are things we learned from each other’s experiences. I met girls I used to see differently, and the distance between us became smaller.”
“I became bold. I wasn’t thinking like this before. I decided to say all this. Now I’ve opened my mind to something different.”
“For the first time, I say I want to go to the Arab lands.”

Shaima added:

“We talk about the problems we are experiencing, we learn from each other, and we contribute to change. It’s not just talk - we talk and strive for change.”

Maryam said:

“I have an ID card from Hawsh al-Rafiq, but today I say proudly that I’m from Hawsh al-Arab.”
“I’ve overcome the fear of others. I’m happy with the positive outlook too.”
“We can’t deny that there are people who really would like to learn about this culture.”
“The most important thing is the exhibition. Without an exhibition, maybe my voice wouldn’t reach anyone. I want to become known. Even if I write something important, I want to talk about it in the end.”
“It has become part of your CV.”
“You’re afraid the goal won’t be achieved. Maybe we’ll get tired and no one will care. Then we’ll go back to continuing our lives.”

This session was also recorded for later reference, with the full consent of all participants. At the end of the meeting, the facilitator distributed certificates of participation and scheduled a follow-up session to plan for the exhibition. The facilitator is also currently developing a new initiative focused on documenting Bedouin oral history through the perspectives of the younger generation, and participant contributions will naturally be included in this future project. In parallel, a group of supporters has expressed interest in funding the participants’ university education as a way to encourage them to pursue higher education.

Picture (9) of participants with certificates of participation in the research

6. Conclusion: Learning and Growing Through Stories

Analyzing identity through the lens of intersectionality requires close attention to how different social categories - such as class, gender, sect, nationality, legal status, and others - overlap and interact to shape people’s lived experiences. This approach moves beyond viewing identity through a single axis, instead acknowledging that individuals experience forms of marginalization and privilege in complex, interwoven ways. Identities are not fixed; they shift over time, responding to both personal and societal change. Therefore, a researcher’s understanding of intersectionality must also remain dynamic and responsive. In this project, the intersectionality

framework allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how Bedouin women experience their identities - as women, as Lebanese citizens or non-citizens, as members of a historically marginalized community, and as individuals negotiating tradition and modernity.

Rather than seeking to categorize each testimony under a single identity marker, the analysis sought out points of overlap - how social, cultural, political, and familial forces combine to create specific pressures or possibilities in women's lives. To structure the analysis, the themes were grouped into two main intersections. The first explores how identity and intersectionality manifest between tradition and modernity. The second focuses on gender roles as they intersect with community, family, education, and empowerment. Hopes and dreams - emerged consistently and is woven throughout both sections, as it intersects with nearly all aspects of the women's experiences.

Interestingly, a third theme has emerged during the thematic analysis sessions. We called it "The Struggle between Public and Private Spheres." We had not anticipated it before during the preparation sessions. And this is something unique about photovoice. As the lead researcher works collectively with the co-researchers, new things might emerge. Their photos and captions shed light on this struggle and we talked about it in detail, please see below for more info.

Theme 1: Identity and Intersectionality Between Tradition and Modernity

Girls in the study consistently described facing a sense of inferiority from non-Bedouin society, often referred to as "urban" or "civil" society. This dynamic was apparent even in early conversations before the formal research began. Zahraa, for instance, recalled her experience in school: "I entered a new life, with new people. I used to get close to them and talk to them with all love, and they looked at me with an inferiority, as if I were different from them, as if I were from one planet and they were from another... You are not fit to be our friend... your place is in the folk villages." These exclusionary views left lasting impacts, but through the sessions, it became clear that they were not the only source of pressure. The girls also spoke of criticism from within the Bedouin community itself - especially from older generations - who accused them of abandoning tradition by changing their clothes, their dialect, and their values. Rather than a wholesale rejection of customs, many young women are carefully choosing what to preserve and what to leave behind. As Enas put it: "I dream of being a Bedouin woman, and I hope that the old life... the old dress, the old customs and traditions will return. But I hope that the problems between Bedouin families, such as taking revenge, will disappear. I do not like hostilities; I love tolerance."

Several girls described changing their dialect to avoid mockery and better engage with civil society. This pressure - external and internal - compels them to negotiate a hybrid identity. Shaima described this as a balance: "My mother used to adopt the 'civilian style' when the Bedouins thought this was shameful and undesirable." Her mother's story, Shaima said, "sums up the Bedouin woman. She is educated and successful, and able to achieve a balance between her two identities." Fatima also observed: "Despite development, there are some who cannot accept the idea of urbanization and consider this a denial of their origin."

Many participants expressed anxiety about the loss of cultural traditions - especially weddings, clothing, and dialects. Enas worried that the Bedouin identity could fade as new generations lose touch with foundational customs: "The new generation, which lacks Bedouin customs and traditions such as dress, culture, and the authentic dialect, bothers me." Maryam spoke about her attachment to traditional bread-making. Enas again shared how upset she felt when her mother stopped wearing the headband that had once been part of her daily attire. For these young women, cultural practices remain central to their identity - even when they are no longer practiced. They do not define themselves solely by tradition, but they also refuse to let go of it entirely.

There was discussion around how traditions can also be commodified, as is the case in Jordan where Bedouin heritage is used in tourism. Tourists are offered the "Bedouin experience" of drinking coffee in a tent, watching traditional dress performances, or riding camels. Some girls reflected that Lebanese Bedouins are often invisible to the public. Others stressed that their identity should not be reduced to a performance for outsiders but should be respected and understood on their own terms. They emphasized that elements like Bedouin coffee are more than symbolic - coffee, they explained, is a ritual of conflict resolution. If a family accepts coffee from the family of someone who has killed their son, it is considered a declaration of forgiveness. In resisting some customs while embracing others, the girls are actively reshaping what it means to be Bedouin. For instance, Enas rejected the custom of "tajyeer" (prioritizing a male cousin in marriage) and described it as a harmful practice that limits women's autonomy: "These beliefs bother me and restrict a girl's freedom to choose her life partner." Zahraa also shared her experience being married off to her cousin without consultation, calling the custom "false." She said: "Some cling to backward customs, such as reserving a girl for a cousin, whether she accepts or not."

Negotiating identity is not limited to reconciling the past with the present, but extends to navigating how others perceive them - both inside and outside the Bedouin community. Shaima described how her grandmother was viewed with surprise and sometimes disdain for wearing traditional dress in public. This shows that despite generational change, the stigma persists, though now girls also face pressure from their own community to conform to more modern lifestyles. Some testimonies also included language that distinguished Bedouins from other marginalized groups. For instance, Enas recounted being mocked at school: "They would mock me and consider me to be from the 'Nawar' and reduce my value." She added: "I was saddened by this treatment and resorted to civilization in order to become like them." The rejection of the "Nawar" label reveals another layer of social hierarchy, with Bedouins themselves distancing from groups viewed as lower status. This reflects a broader dynamic in Lebanese society, where rural populations are often marginalized by urban elites, and in turn may reproduce the same patterns of exclusion. Shaima also shared her experience navigating religious sectarianism, recalling how she altered official documents to conceal that she was Sunni out of fear of rejection: "I added a mark to the point and changed the ya' into an 'ain' so that the word would become Shiite... I didn't want them to hate me." Meanwhile, Fatima spoke about the discrimination she faced due to her illness and being labeled as "disabled." These examples show how Bedouin girls are impacted not only by tribal traditions but also by broader Lebanese and regional issues - sectarianism, ableism, and class-based exclusion.

Most of the girls - except Maryam - say they have now reached a place of acceptance and no longer feel shame about their Bedouin identity. Some of them are now able to publicly identify themselves

as Bedouins without fear. Israa even said: "For the first time, I say I want to go to the Arab lands." Maryam, however, still feels unable to speak in her Bedouin dialect among her peers. She explained: "My personality is weak and I wish I could struggle with this thing that exists within me... I will not be able to speak like them." The Lebanese identity they inherited was seen positively by some participants, as it offered them access to civil rights - voting, education, healthcare - even if unevenly. Shaima remarked: "This is what the Lebanese identity gave us. It made us enjoy rights like any Lebanese citizen, regardless of whether we were Bedouin or urban." Still, participants also recognized that they were not fully accepted into Lebanese society. Due to long-standing discrimination and the legal limbo many Bedouins face, some women said they feel they have limited space to criticize the state or demand more rights. Their citizenship is still experienced as conditional.

Theme 2: Gender Identity Between Education, Empowerment, and Orientalism

This theme draws on narratives that surfaced across multiple topics - particularly gender roles and expectations, education and empowerment, and hopes and dreams. Together, these threads reveal how Bedouin women construct and negotiate their gender identity in relation to their families, their communities, and wider society. The pressures they face are not only from men or patriarchal structures, but also from other women - often mothers and other female relatives. What emerges is not a strictly gendered struggle but a communal one, reinforced by both men and women within the Bedouin community.

One of the clearest expressions of this dynamic relates to marriage customs - especially the practice of "jeer" (the expectation that a girl is reserved for her cousin) or restrictions against marrying outside the clan. Participants described these traditions as deeply limiting. Enas, for instance, shared that she fell in love with a young man from another clan who later proposed, but both of her parents refused. No one in her family supported the match.

Zahraa reflected on how these constraints had shaped her own experience:

"Marriage is the completion of half of the religion. Marriage is a connected and cohesive relationship between a young man and a girl, but this marriage differs from one estate to another or one clan to another. Some of them cling to their backward customs, such as a girl who is reserved for a cousin. He is more deserving of her than a stranger, whether she accepts him or not. Her opinion is not taken into consideration because there are guardians who take this decision on behalf of the girl. I am one of those girls who fell into these false customs."

Despite recognizing these restrictions, none of the participants blamed their families. Enas explained that although she felt these customs limited her freedom, she still trusted her father's judgment:

"He was a Bedouin from another clan or urban area and they had a law (for renting) a girl, meaning that her cousin or relatives had more right to her than a stranger. These

beliefs bother me and somewhat restrict a girl's freedom to choose her life partner, but most of them, including me, adhere to my father's decisions and I consider what the family says to be in my interest, and respecting them is something important and necessary in our time."

Zahraa similarly appreciated the support her father offered when she later asked for a divorce and wanted to resume her education. In their reflections, the participants did not frame their parents as enforcers of these traditions; instead, they located the problem within the customs themselves. They rejected the idea that their families had failed them.

This refusal to frame the issue in terms of individual blame is crucial. Drawing on Leila Abu-Lughod's *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, this analysis aligns with a critical stance toward narratives that simplify or exoticize women's lives. Abu-Lughod warns against framing Muslim women as a singular, oppressed group requiring external salvation. Likewise, this project resists reducing Bedouin women's experiences to a monolith or interpreting their stories through a rescue framework.

Rather than presenting Bedouin women as victims of tradition, the participants themselves described a complex negotiation with their cultural context. They acknowledged the limitations, criticized certain customs, and at times resisted them - but they also spoke with care and nuance about why these customs exist and how they relate to a broader sense of belonging. Zahraa, for instance, explained why she initially accepted to marry her cousin:

"I agreed to him for the sake of family ties and for these two families to remain cohesive and together, because I only had one uncle, and I accepted him out of conviction and my family's desire for him, even though I did not know him closely except officially, as they say, there was nothing between us except greetings."

In this sense, their narratives complicate binary readings of agency and oppression. They reflect the specificity of gender identity within the Bedouin community - one that is shaped not only by patriarchal structures but also by tradition, family loyalty, and deeply embedded notions of duty and respect. These women are not passive recipients of culture, nor are they simply resisting it. Rather, they are actively interpreting, negotiating, and reshaping it - on their own terms.

During the sessions, discussion was had between the girls about the freedom of Bedouin women. Maryam says:

"Despite development, there are some who cannot accept the idea of civilization and consider this a denial of their origin. I also have a friend I know who complains to me that she suffers from her family's customs and traditions, that she cannot leave the house alone and must please the father and brother until her marriage. They do not accept the idea of love from a stranger and that it is forced by someone from her relatives. If a groom comes from outside the family before consulting the girl, the father consults his relatives if there is a young man who proposes to her and obliges her to accept her, even if she does not want it. She insists on remaining single. For example, I go to visit her and she is allowed to come to me only. Otherwise, she is not allowed to do that. I am

against this behavior. Bedouin customs do not say that this behavior is acceptable. Bedouin customs are beautiful and give freedom to women.”

Shaima intervened and expressed her opinion and then shared her story:

“Bedouin customs are new and do not take away women’s freedom, but some take these customs towards backwardness and reactionaryism, and there are some stories that happen to some girls. Here, parents feel fearful and anxious about their daughters and are trying to protect them. Yes, we appreciate this fear, but the girl says herself that if he had some confidence in me, but because of the lack of confidence, the girl begins to doubt herself. If you fear for her, you do not have the right to put her in a shell, because in this way you make her have a weak personality,” she said, speaking to the negative role customs and traditions can play when misapplied.

This discussion revealed a key tension: the contrast between the celebrated idea of Bedouin customs as protective and empowering for women, and actual practices that can limit personal freedom and autonomy. The contradiction was demonstrated clearly in these narratives, suggesting that traditional rules are at times misused as tools of control rather than honored as cultural heritage. As Shaima put it, “this approach makes them weak.”

All participants spoke about Bedouin women and their role. They consistently described Bedouin women as physically and psychologically strong. Although I observed that much of this strength is built on unpaid and invisible labor - raising children, maintaining households, and contributing economically - participants themselves proudly emphasized this resilience. Still, some pointed out the toll it takes. The image of the Bedouin woman as strong is a source of pride but also reflects a heavy burden.

Enas says:

“The Bedouin woman eats with the sweat of her brow and her husband, and they do not resort to bad deeds. But the Bedouin woman strives for the sake of her family and to please her husband.”

Although her mother had to leave school early despite being an excellent student, Shaima says:

“(My mother) got married and completed her education at the Lebanese University. She took on the responsibility of a husband, housework, study, and society, and succeeded in being a mother, educator, wife, student, and Bedouin woman.”

Maryam describes the Bedouin woman as:

“She is a mother, a wife, and a clan owner. She has her position. She is the one who helps and carries out the tasks of the house, her children, and the clan’s children. Her opinion is the secondary opinion. Any man says his opinion first, and then the woman. Empowering her to evaluate horseback riding and household activity, and stopping the lowering of tents and arrangements for the children.”

Then Maryam adds:

“There is weakness in the lack of recognition of women’s rights and the failure to eliminate rights and values, the participation of society as a whole, and the basic role in society.”

As for Israa, she used the phrase “hard work that was considered the specialty of men” to describe her grandmother’s labor. She was proud of her grandmother, whom she described as a “female with masculine muscles” who endured a harsh Bedouin life and performed roles typically reserved for men. Despite their interest in documenting women’s stories, the young women often maintained traditional gender ideals. Fatima, for example, says:

“One of the most important references of the Bedouins is that they choose a man with good qualities, which are generosity, courage, and the owner of a big heart so that he can serve all the people of his tribe and he has a great ability to solve many of the problems that occur and to be a just ruler.”

This demonstrates how traditional gender hierarchies continue to shape expectations - both of women and of leadership - within the community. These ideals are not necessarily challenged, even by women advocating for greater freedom.

The dual image of the Bedouin woman - both strong and subordinated - captures the internal conflict young women are negotiating today. On the one hand, they admire and draw strength from their heritage; on the other, they are influenced by new ideas about autonomy, education, and equality. These contradictions do not lead to the abandonment of tradition, but to its renegotiation.

The generational shift is not a rejection of heritage but a renegotiation of it. They live in a world shaped by “modernity” and exposure to different social models, yet they remain rooted in and nourished by their cultural legacy. This dynamic is further complicated by the contrast between past and present. Participants noted that the pressures they face today - from both inside and outside the community - are different from those of their grandmothers. In earlier times, the Bedouin lifestyle itself offered a kind of internal coherence. Now, these women must constantly reconcile tradition with rapidly changing social norms, both locally and globally. This has created greater pressures on young Bedouin women - pressures that did not exist during earlier eras of Bedouin life (see literature review).

The Bedouin, Arab, and global contexts intersect in the everyday challenges facing women, reflecting shared struggles between Bedouin girls, Arab women, and women more broadly. Family expectations and cultural obligations often emerge as significant obstacles to self-realization. As Shaima puts it:

“The family is often the cause of the individual’s brokenness and weakness. In our civilization, there are basic and important matters that must be adhered to.”

Her words illustrate how cultural and social restrictions can undermine a woman’s ability to define her own path. She emphasized the difficulty of “proving herself in a patriarchal society that opposes women because they are female, even more so if they are Bedouins,” expressing a belief that Bedouin women face layered struggles - gendered, cultural, and societal.

Zahraa offers a different but equally powerful perspective. Reflecting on her life after divorce, she states:

“I faced some difficulties in my life because of the world’s view of my being a divorced woman, but this thing did not restrict me or captivate me. Rather, I grew stronger and faced the world and continued my educational path.”

Her experience of resistance and resilience resonates far beyond the Bedouin community. It reflects a broader reality shared by many women who confront social stigma and choose to reclaim their agency.

Meanwhile, the testimonies of Shaima and Maryam expose a subtle but pervasive dynamic: the tension between empowerment as defined by the women themselves, and empowerment as imagined by others - particularly within civil society or through Orientalist lenses. These narratives challenge assumptions that education and employment are the only valid markers of success.

Shaima says:

“I am a Lebanese girl of Bedouin origins. I was able to succeed and excel in my studies and prove myself to my community and civil society, which consider that Bedouins are not fit for anything or able to achieve.”

Then adds:

“(My mother) dreams of me being a good, educated and distinguished girl. She is my role model and means to many Bedouin girls who dream of learning and reaching a position in society.”

These quotes expose the depth of prejudice within Lebanese society while simultaneously asserting the transformative potential of education - not as a Western-imposed ideal, but as a means of community-driven empowerment and pride.

In contrast, Maryam shares a more ambivalent view:

“I had stopped studying because I did not like it before, but my family was encouraging me to continue my education and that I should study and get a job, but I refused and did not want to study and that I wanted to stay at home.”

Her statement challenges the rigid link between empowerment and academic or professional advancement. It opens space for a broader understanding of fulfillment, one that does not center solely on formal education or public success. Maryam’s voice invites a necessary rethinking of what it means to be empowered - and who gets to decide.

Shaima, for her part, supported Maryam’s decision to return to school, saying:

“I told her that she has reached the secondary stage, meaning she is finishing this stage, and this is a good step.”

Her encouragement reflects a nuanced understanding of empowerment as a process. Education is framed as a useful tool, not a universal mandate - an opportunity, not an obligation. This mutual respect for personal autonomy and communal support is essential to how these young women understand and negotiate their gender identities.

Together, these stories dismantle Orientalist frameworks - particularly the idea that strong, liberated women are those who seek higher education and salaried work. Instead, the narratives propose an alternative lens, grounded in cultural nuance, lived experience, and self-defined strength.

This generational shift - one shaped by civil society's pressures, economic precarity, and cultural change - has prompted young women to articulate more inclusive and grounded definitions of success. They are creating space for empowerment that does not exclude tradition, and for progress that does not erase personal or communal values.

7. Concluding Remarks: The Struggle Between Public and Private Space

Bedouin girls navigate hierarchical assumptions - such as modernity versus traditionalism, women versus men, secularism versus religion, and particularism versus universalism - in complex and uneven ways. The Photovoice project revealed how participants articulate their lived experiences through a framework that blends pride in tradition with a desire to embrace values like independence, education, and gender equality. They are not simply resisting change or clinging to heritage, but rather negotiating a dynamic balance between inherited identity and contemporary pressures shaped by globalization and modernization.

Photography served as a powerful medium for expressing experiences that are often difficult to articulate in words. The images the participants selected challenged stereotypes that portray Bedouin women as passive bearers of cultural legacy. Instead, these young women appear as active agents shaping their own narratives - stories marked by resilience, pride, and subtle forms of resistance. Many photos captured moments of strength and dignity, disrupting reductive interpretations of both their gender and communal identities.

These acts of representation - both visual and narrative - unpacked the multi-layered strategies these young women use to engage with the structures that shape their lives. Whether negotiating societal expectations, confronting familial roles, or resisting broader social marginalization, the participants expressed an acute awareness of the power structures they operate within, and the limitations and opportunities those structures entail. In this way, Photovoice enabled the participants not only to document their realities but to actively intervene in broader debates around gender, identity, and belonging - within their communities, within academic frameworks, and within public discourse.

The tension between public and private space was especially visible in their testimonies. On the one hand, the private domain - marked by family expectations and communal norms - demands

loyalty to customs, social roles, and inherited gender expectations. On the other, the public realm - whether civil society, universities, or workplaces - imposes its own criteria for legitimacy, success, and acceptance. Young Bedouin women live between these two spaces, constantly negotiating how to present themselves, how to protect their values, and how to assert their rights.

This constant negotiation is not merely a burden - it is also a form of agency. Within this struggle, many girls have developed a flexible identity that accommodates tradition while selectively adapting to new contexts. They are not simply rejecting or accepting inherited roles; they are reshaping them. Some elements are embraced, others redefined, and some consciously left behind. This process reflects not only resilience but also a high degree of self-awareness and strategic independence.

Importantly, these negotiations are often not linear or resolvable. The contradictions embedded in the public-private divide may persist across a lifetime. As such, flexibility becomes a survival tool. Rather than striving for total coherence or resolving every tension, participants described focusing on what can be managed, altered, or resisted. One might choose to prioritize education over marriage, or reclaim pride in heritage without reproducing all its norms. This capacity to set priorities, accept partial victories, and live with ambiguity is essential to sustaining a sense of agency over their lives and well-being.

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