



*Dr. Sarah Abu-Kaf*

# PIONEERING THE UNIVERSITY PATH FOR BEDOUIN WOMEN

**DR. SARAH ABU-KAF**, who holds a B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. degree from BGU, is the first Bedouin Arab in the Negev to become a clinical psychologist. She is also a BGU faculty member of cross-cultural psychology in the Conflict Management and Resolution Program. She leads University initiatives to counter dropout among Arab and Bedouin students. And, she is accomplishing significant research on a subject close to her heart: how to help minority students from communities like her own navigate college life successfully and cope with the stress of being “the other.”

Dr. Abu-Kaf lived these challenges firsthand. She came to the University in 1995 from her Bedouin village, near Beer-Sheva. Family resources were scarce but education was priority number one, she says. “My parents pushed us. They saw education as giving my brother, sister and me a safe future financially—a way to survive and live respectably. My mom helped us in classes until the material began to be difficult. And if we had homework

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**Today, approximately 1,200 Arab students study at BGU. About 450 of them are Bedouin and 70 percent of the Bedouin are women.**

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we were told, ‘Don’t do anything else—go study!’”

She married directly after graduating from high school. Her husband, Jazi, who is himself a BGU alumnus, further encouraged her. “I worried that I wouldn’t be good enough. I didn’t have a clue about what to study. He pointed out that I have strong recall and that I’d always liked helping people.

“We also considered that our society needed psychologists because our living conditions are so stressful and there’s

so much change in our lives. So we decided it would be smart for me to study psychology.”

The idea that Bedouin students could need psychological support met reality once Abu-Kaf engaged with the college environment. “Coming to the university so young was difficult. The Jewish students were all older with such different life experience. The gaps between the groups became obvious to me.” Firsthand experience sparked motivation: Bedouins—especially the women—were dropping out at a high rate. She wanted to help them adapt to university and succeed.

When it came time to develop her doctoral dissertation, “Personality Vulnerabilities to Depression and Somatization Among Bedouin Arab

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*Dr. Sarah Abu-Kaf, above, in 2014, was named to the Women in Science Hall of Fame by the U.S. Department of State as one of a group of 11 women from the Middle East and North Africa. In 2016, she she won the Israeli Council for Higher Education Award in the young researcher category.*

and Jewish Students,” she discovered that the relevant knowledge base was surprisingly limited. “The little research that had been done on the differences between the populations was written by people outside, who saw things in black and white. It was difficult for them to adapt their thinking. I felt I had to examine different aspects of students’ mental health and the clinical aspects from the perspective of my community.”

In interviewing female Bedouin students for this project, she learned that without enough money to spend time in the cafeteria between classes, they had to sit outside on the grass, sometimes all day, until the bus arrived to take them home. “Many also said that they needed somewhere to go for help. And I saw that they didn’t know each other because they were in different departments.” The University personnel were sympathetic but the students didn’t come forward, so typically their situation wasn’t understood until it was too late.

“I began to think about creating a common space, a physical place to meet, get to know each other and find resources,” Abu-Kaf says. A way to make this happen materialized when she met Robert Arnow and his wife,

Joan (of blessed memory), during a campus visit. Arnow was already a long-term BGU benefactor and AABGU leader. Touched by Sarah’s personal struggles to stay in school, the Arnows helped her find the resources to accept a postdoctoral opportunity as a Fulbright scholar at Harvard.

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To help more Bedouin female students, they created a scholarship program and a meeting place that evolved into the Robert H. Arnow Center for Bedouin female students. In this comfortable place they can spend their free time socializing, studying, and making use of a mothering center, social worker and computers. Seminars that include workshops in Hebrew are offered.

Language proficiency is a primary need, Abu-Kaf knows. “If they manage Hebrew, students will succeed. When they have difficulties with the language, social as well as academic problems follow.”

### MAJORITY-MINORITY ISSUES

Dr. Abu-Kaf’s research focuses on how people are affected by moving from one culture to another, and the coping mechanisms that help minority groups adapt to the majority culture. To investigate how Jewish and Bedouin students can interact better, she recently led a major project financially supported by Sohn Howard from the Fohs Foundation.

Her team was looking for commonalities—but results were not as expected. “It was amazing—we found that each group’s barriers are so different that just managing the data and explaining the results seemed impossible.”

She found that the differences derive more from minority versus majority status than from cultural differences. “The Bedouins want to form social relationships and they try, but their culture shock and language problems leave them little time. The Jewish students are not similarly motivated. They want to have friends and succeed,



but building multi-ethnic relationships is not a high priority for them.” Since students in both groups experience stress and depression, although for different reasons, both need support.

Female Bedouin students are especially at risk because they find it difficult to ask for help. Many retreat into a state that psychologists call “avoidance”: unwillingness to face their problems. “They try to cope but it costs them too much. They become very self-critical and this makes them passive and, in many cases, severely depressed.” The need for emotional support is acute, Abu-Kaf believes.

“I try to encourage people to think about differences without being judgmental. If you want to help, you must understand other people’s motivations—why they take care of their mother a certain way; why they have many children; why the father takes direction of his children’s lives.” Collectivist societies, which value interdependence, produce very different perspectives



from Western-style individualistic cultures, which value independence.

Stereotypes interfere with understanding, Abu-Kaf notes. She found, for example, that University administrators tended to interpret a student’s failure to ask for help as a sign that she is not serious and respectful of the educational opportunity.

Despite all the challenges, “I’m a very optimistic person!” Abu-Kaf says. “I see hope in the numbers. I see hope because today we are in so many different professions—medicine, high-tech,



Top and Below: Joshua Arnow, son of Robert Arnow, meets with students at the Robert H. Arnow Bedouin Center and views the resources available for their use.

psychology.” She estimates that five years ago, five percent of young Bedouins were interested in a college education. Today it’s almost 10 percent, but economic stresses force many to the job market rather than education.

### A PROMISING FUTURE

“The tremendous hope is women,” Abu-Kaf says. “Twenty years ago more boys got a higher education, but today the trend is the opposite. Perceptions have changed radically. Women see education as an avenue to be financially independent and enjoy modern life. Even those

who don’t pursue education work actively to improve their financial status.”

Her research suggests that women in general adapt more easily to living in and with other cultures. Young men, more apt to feel their social status is being threatened, are currently experiencing a higher dropout rate. “Now, to keep men in the system, we have to support them, or the whole society will suffer with the imbalance.”

Dr. Abu-Kaf brings her knowledge home. Among her six children, two daughters are currently enrolled at

BGU and have come to appreciate the supportive services available to them, in large part due to their mother’s advocacy over time. But she encourages her son to first work in the Jewish community for a few years and learn to speak Hebrew as well as possible.

She knows that her work has implications far beyond BGU. “This isn’t a unique situation. It’s relevant to other minorities in Israel and many other countries. The need is huge for ethnic and cultural knowledge so services can be more effective.” Her publications are widely read. She speaks often to audiences in the wider Beer-Sheva community. And she presents internationally—all toward giving young people and those who support them better tools.

“A society needs to see the different colors it contains,” Abu-Kaf believes. “To have more knowledge, more interaction, more tools to work with—that will bring us to a more positive and plentiful present and future.” ■

The Arnow family is generously matching donations made to Bedouin scholarships. Go to [www.aabgu.org/donate-bedouin](http://www.aabgu.org/donate-bedouin)