# STUDENTS-MOTHERS' CONCEPTION ON COMBINING HIGHER EDUCATION AND MOTHERHOOD - A COMPARATIVE INTERCULTURAL OUTLOOK

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**Abstract**
*Combining higher education and motherhood is a complicated and challenging task. Within patriarchal societies this challenge turns to be acute. Women living in such societies are deprived from the right of family planning. Motherhood is experienced as a feminine lot women have to comply with. Moreover, it constitutes a guarantee to moving out to the public sphere. This study focuses on the conception of combining higher education and motherhood as it emanated from the experience of religious Jewish students-mothers and Bedouin students-mothers. It probes also the cultural -related similarities and divergences. It transpires that students-mothers from both cultures exert great efforts in their way out of the private sphere and consider higher- education as the ultimate pathway to self-actualization over motherhood. Though the Jewish religious students-mothers are much more influenced by the non-religious society similarities are discerned in the experience of the two groups.*

**Key words:** *higher education, motherhood, intercultural societies, self-actualisation, patriarchal societies*

## INTRODUCTION

The mommy trap deployed by women for centuries and voiced by feminists is still looming large over post-modern women's life projects, often hindering women's self- actualization .

Nowadays, higher education constitutes the *sine qua non* of personal and social success. As a result, higher education plays an important role in every post- modern society. In Israel, higher education is experienced as the ultimate aspiration one should have, a natural strategy in people's life planning. When it comes to religious Jewish women and Bedouin women higher education matters become a complicated act. Cultural and religious contexts turn to be for these women an additional trap to overcome.

The complexity of these two societies brought us to probe the way religious Jewish students-mothers and Bedouin students-mothers perceive the combination of higher education and motherhood. Knowing and understanding cultural and personal difficulties in regard to combining higher education and motherhood will assist us in structuring new feminine educational models, namely teacher training programs, that will enable a simultaneous actualization of motherhood and acquiring higher education without paying a high feminine price.

### *Israel social structure*

The Israeli society is composed of diverse cultures. The majority of the population in Israel is Jewish and constitutes 80% and about 20% Arabs. The Jewish population is divided into sectors: religious and non-religious. The Arab population is mainly divided into Christians, Muslims, Druze and Bedouins. The Jewish society and part of the Arab society are influenced by the European culture. In addition, changes occur and affect all the domains including higher education. Compared to the Arab society, the Bedouin society is the most traditional society in terms of customs and the role and woman status (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

### *Women's self-actualization in the Bedouin society*

Since the establishment of the state of Israel, the number of girls enrolled in the Arab education system has been rising steadily. In the late decade Arab women enrolled for studies in higher education (Abu-Saad, 1995; Pessate-Schubert, 2003, Alyan, Zidan & Toren, 2007). The majority of Bedouin women who choose to pursue their studies opt for Teacher Colleges. By large they all plan to join the educa-

tion system of their region. Teaching is regarded as an opportunity and an impetus for individual and social change (Pasta-Schubert, 2005). Though they expect and yearn for change, their main concern is Bedouin society -related individual change and less change for themselves. Though Bedouin women are well aware of their power and strength, the traditional codes and norms rule their behavior in the public sphere (Gilad, 2007). They find it hard to cope with this dissonance. On the one hand, they constitute a source of proud, appraisal and respect for themselves as well as for their families. On the other hand, they can live as educated women only within the confines of the tribal culture. They have to cope with the gap between the education and the Bedouin culture along with frustration and conformist conduct while keeping up the Bedouin tradition and obeying to the Bedouin society codes (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2008).

Bedouin students- mothers still live in a dissonance between the obedience to the tradition and their full authentic self- actualization. The dissonance increases when they are required to decision making, especially when alternatives are opposite or contradict their faith. In such cases, the tradition and the family take precedence, their selfhood is pushed aside.

***Motherhood and self-actualization in the Jewish religious society***

The Jewish religious woman is defined a priori as a mother. She is born a mother. All her life is channeled and designed to actualize this specific mission. Consequently, her conception is designated and based on this definition. The Jewish religious woman is deprived of the opportunity to cast aside the heavy weight of the responsibility for the continuity of the Jewish people.

The conception she is raised upon defines motherhood as an ontological and existen-tial (religious) essence. As such it refutes *a priori* family planning as a feminine strategy and defines motherhood as self- actualization. Maslow (Maslow 1964) regards self-actualization as the realization of any potential, including motherhood. Winds of feminism continue to blow within the religious sector, too, and cause architectonic motions in the religious woman's self- definition of her self- actualization. The religious feminism imported from America in the 1960s by Jewish emigres, probed and redefined the status of the woman in Judaism in general as well as her traditional roles (Plaskow, 1998, Christ $ Plaskow, 1999, Adler, 1998, Sheleg, 2000, Rotling- Reiner, 2006). It questioned and undermined the orthodox rabbinical authority (Ross, 2004, Goldstein, 2008). The Jewish religious woman's existential definition that confines her to the maternal has cracked: it broadens and focuses on what a person is capable of doing (Rogers, 1980), and includes the two components of the feminine self: the maternal self and the ontological self. Her self- esteem is redefined, too: it derives from her motivation and satisfaction from personal achievements and not from a given role in society (Nozick, 1989) .

Thus, a dialectics between immobility and change has been set off. This dialectics has completely widened the extent of self- actualization and has broken Jewish religious women's self- actualization boundaries. Breaking conventions and shattering boundaries were a feminist religious act (Heshel, 1998, Grossman, 2005). The unique feminist religious discourse in which combining studies and motherhood is inscribed constitutes a hybrid amalgam of an accentuated individualism and the commitment to the Jewish family.

***Motherhood and feminism***

Motherhood is a feminine condition that implies a feminine sacrifice. Being a mother has for centuries undermined the feminine being. The self- sacrifice, the mother is entailed to, is a conventional morality (Gilligan, 1982, Crittenden, 2002)

Contrary to Stern's premises (Stern, 1998) regarding the motherhood constellation, maternity provokes a crisis in the existence of every woman. It requires a destructuring of the pre-existing balances and the elaboration of a different readaptation (Vegetti -Fenzi, 1996). The physical and psychic weight of responsibility on the mother is the heaviest of social burdens. (Rich, 1979) Consequently, mixed feelings reside within the motherhood experience, leading to a life of frustration .No wonder, love and anger toward the children can exist concurrently (Rich, 1979, Almond, 2011).

Since Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) and Friedan's waking up call (1963) women have strived for self-actualization within the confines of motherhood. By trying to run other life projects along with motherhood and redefine a self that doesn't reject its self.

Still, motherhood has been looming large over the self, resulting in a deplorable model: maternal over –achievement. Trapped in motherhood women experience a regressive super- selfless mothering (Warner, 2005). Though doing good to themselves, mothers are still feeling bad: they feel guilt, anxiety, stress and exhaustion (Warner, 2005, O'Reilly, 2007). The problem that has no name (Friedan, 1963) turned to be "the mess" (Warner, 2005), or Susan Maushard's "mask of motherhood", women disguise the chaos and complexity of their lived experience (O'Reilly, 2007). Women came to acknowledge motherhood life's limitations and cut back on their ambitions accordingly .

However, women have claimed for a maternal autonomy. Shields (2002) designed a roadmap for sharing parenting to avoid the mommy trap. Empowered mothering constructs have been offered to and applied by women ranging from looking to friends, and family, to assist with childcare, as well as paid assistance to raising children with an involved community of co-mothers (O'Reilly, 2007).

A more radical approach was set by feminist mothering theory that seeks to transform and abolish both the patriarchal role of motherhood and that of childbearing and redefine motherhood (O'Reilly, 2004, 2007, 2010.)

**Research question**

What is the conception of students-mothers in regard to the combination of motherhood and higher education from a multicultural aspect?

**Methodology**

This study was conducted in a qualitative-interpretative approach known as case study. Using an interpretative qualitative method also allows theunderstanding, description and interpretation of what is happening in the field, and also includes the latent aspects from the perspective of the participants themselves. One of the most important advantages of this type of research is its ability to provide insights on the effects of the actual situations and contexts in which they occur. The case study is inductive because it displays the data from the situation regardless of the assumptions and hypotheses, and it allows the expression of situations from differentstandpoints (Shkedi, 2005, Shkedi, 2012).

**Research participants**:

The participants included 20 undergraduate Teacher Academic College students who were mothers of at least one child. The students-mothers represent two different cultures: 10 Bedouin students-mothers and 10 Jewish religious students-mothers. The research focuses on students-mothers because it is assumed that they have experienced and are still experiencing the combining of studies and motherhood in their respective colleges and consequently they are able to address and recount the difficulties as well as the combining studies and motherhood related challenges they face on a daily basis. The ages of the participants range from 20-26 as for the ages of their children, they range from 2-13.

**Research tools**

In order to discover the students-mothers conception regarding combining studies and motherhood we used a standardized open -ended interview. The questions of the interview focused on their personal background, the depiction of their experience of combining studies and motherhood, the difficulties and the challenges they coped with as well as the sources of support within and outside the family.

The interviews were done by the researchers. The participants were randomly divided between them. This procedure was applied in order to avoid bias. The interviews took place in Hebrew in their respective colleges. The length of each interview was about60 minutes. Structured and designed for this research the interview was based on the research of Millet (1997).

**Data processing**

The data of the interviews were content- analyzed. The data analysis was done in two levels: normative content- analysis to discern prominent tendencies and qualitative hermeneutic content analysis to disclose essences, conceptions, standpoints and diverse insights. A triangulation of analysis was done by the researchers along with a comparative analysis of the data. Categories were drawn upon an approval of 67 % from the researches. (Shkedi, 2005, 2012).

## FINDINGS

Findings show that despite the differences between the two cultures, similarities arise concerning the conception of combining studies and motherhood amongst the two groups. For all the participants motherhood is conceived as a feminine lot they have to comply with. Nevertheless, they choose higher education as a gateway for self-actualization. Both groups mentioned the conceptual support they got from their families as well as the daily help with child care offered by family members. This assistance is experienced as an indispensable resource for their self- actualization in the public sphere. Still, they all struggle with the multiple requirements they are entitled to in their self-actualization journey. Intensively experiencing the combining of studies and motherhood, they all engage in a process of probing and questioningtheir top priorities. Despite the hardships, they all hold on tight to their dreams and pursue their studies toward self- actualization outside the realms of the private sphere. Higher education constitutes for the participants of the two groups the hallway to equal opportunities for women both in the private sphere and in the public sphere.

### 1. Born to procreate

The conception of motherhood among the Bedouin students-mothers and the Jewish religious students-mothers is inherent to the role of the woman in the society. The majority of the students-mothers strongly believed that women are born to procreate. Though all the students- mothers mentioned the cultural value of children and large families, the Bedouin students- mothers were the only ones to impart a stated preference for male children as a valuable social status determinant.

One Bedouin student- mother recounted: In our society, women are valued by fertility and the number of children. After I got married, it was obvious for everyone that I would get immediately pregnant no matter if I wanted or not. My family and of course my husband expected me to bear a child in the first year of marriage. A woman who gives birth to numerous children is a woman to be praised. To be a mother is the most important thing."

A Jewish religious student- mother related: "When I started here my studies, I wasn't married, but I got married during the first semester, and then I got pregnant. I gave birth in the second year and now I'm pregnant again and will give birth in the fourth year. Well, combining studies and motherhood is not simple, but ... I think the college population, I mean the majority of the girls here are in the same situation as most of them are married, and give birth, sometimes every year. So ... When you see them all In the same situation, it cheers you up and ... there's a common discourse, one understands the other or gives tips to each other, or even helps each other. "

Another Bedouin student-mother said: I got married at a very young age to an older man…I couldn't object or refuse, I told to myself that if I get married and bear children immediately after marriage I'll be able to convince my husband and his parents and mine too, to let me study at the college. I agreed to comply with their demand (to get married with the older man), so they have to consent to my request."

**2. Backing up**

All the participants mentioned the support they get from their families, husbands and friends throughout the academic year. They all stressed the fact that without this support they wouldn't make it and wouldn't handle both all the academic requirements and the household's chores.

A Bedouin student told: "my husband's family helps me a lot. They take the children to the baby clinic, or to the doctor when they are sick, they take them to and from the kindergarten and to school every daywhen I start early, and when I study late".

A Jewish student recounted: "I'm a mother of two, 3 years and eight months, and two years and a half. I got married in the first year of college. After six months I got pregnant, I wasn't sure I would manage with a baby. My mother-in-law told me that she will help me. I told myself that with all the help and her support I'll make it. She told me not to change my plans because she wants us to succeed and develop ourselves. That's how I continued to study".

**3. Around the clock**

The participants' choice and decision to enroll for studies stemmed from intrinsic and extrinsic motives. Without probing in depth the choice motives to pursue studies, it seems that combining studies and motherhood aroused wonderings and posed numerous dilemmas.

A Bedouin student claimed: "I find it very hard to combine studies and motherhood. I thought many times to quit. I get out of home very early in the morning for college and go back home late in the evening. When I'm back home I have to cook, clean the house, get dinner ready, prepare the next day sandwiches for the children, give some attention to my husband and study, you know homework, papers, get ready for tests and the like…I fall asleep while reading some material. I'm exhausted".

A Jewish student said: "I was heartbroken. You know, getting her out (2 week- baby girl) early in the morning. I had guilt feelings. Why am I doing this? I told myself time and again it is on her behalf…to make me a better mother… I told myself every time. I wanted to quit and stay with her".

Another Jewish student told: When I get home, I take care of my babies. I don't touch my books or any college matters. I want to be only with them, to compensate them for the time I'm not with them. Only when they get asleep I start everything, papers, homework. Many times, I am too tired to concentrate… and I find myself with a lot of work not done. I have no time for that. It's very hard to live like that,then day after day you're trying to fill in the gaps.

**4. Between spaces - Looking for a new feminine space**

The majority of the students mentioned that studies constitute for them an enjoyable alternative frame which contributes a lot to their feminine development. It appears that for the Bedouin students, studies are an escape from the intransigent and difficult domestic frame while for the Jewish students studies constitute an escape from a non -satisfactory domestic one.

According to a Bedouin student: "I know that I'm not allowed to tell this aloud, but I enjoy so much coming to the college, meeting Jewish and Arab students, chatting with them, having lunch in the college cafeteria and mainly studying. I feel that I want to escape home but also to come back home".

Another Bedouin student said: "I'm fed up staying home feeding the baby, cleaning, cooking, pleasing my husband, being nice to his parents. Here I feel that I flourish, I study and develop myself and eventually I'll be a teacher. So studies enable me to run away from household chores and children care under the constant supervision of his family. At the college I live in a world where it's enjoyable to live in. though I know that in the end of the day a lot of hard work await for me".

A Jewish student told: "Difficulties aside, and I don't want that to sound harsh, it's just that ... It is also wonderful. This is the most fun to study and come back home to the kids and everything ... I mean it's something I really want. So I consider it important to learn and develop myself. I can sit at home and

do all the washings and the rest. But I won't feel any satisfaction or self-fulfillment because I know I have more than that and I love to study.

## 5. Towards feminine self-actualization

In the Bedouin culture concepts like self-actualization, empowerment and work outside the home for women are relatively new concepts which penetrate and are implemented gradually. However, the family and the Bedouin society realize that education is the key to success in life and good integration in society and the economy. This quiet revolution occurs and generates changes in the status of women in general and of educated women in particular. In the Jewish religious society these concepts are not strange or new since this society is highly influenced by the Jewish non-religious one. Religious young women want to be like their non-religious counterparts whom they regard as role models. A stay-at-home Jewish religious woman, praised ritually every week on the Shabbat table by the husbands and children as well as the wives, is considered as a feminine failure or at least as a woman who lags behind the post- modern women. Note, dire economic straits, due to marriage at a young age, legitimate and promote the religious Jewish women toward self- actualization.

One of the Bedouin students told: "I've always wanted to learn, to stop being a shepherdess, leaving home to go to college or the university. I consider myself as an educated, working woman and also a mother with children and it should not be in contradiction".

Another Bedouin student said: "My father thinks that boys and girls should get education. He always encouraged us, the girls, to study and work".

A Jewish student recounted: "My husband helps me a lot. I draw a lot of strength from him to continue. He helps me out with the children. He bathes them, feeds them and put them in bed. When I have to study for tests, he is on duty. I do nothing. When they are sick, we share the task, I take a week off from studies and he takes also a week off from work. Thus, I can attend almost all the classes without being too much absent. My mother also helps out".

Another Jewish student told: "My mother-in- law helps me a lot. My husband,too. She lessens half of the burden and the hardship. She is one of the persons that help me overcome all the hardships. She supports me a great deal. When I talk about quitting college, or even when I tell her that I want to reduce the number of courses, she cheers me up and stops me from doing it. She does everything to enable me continue my studies. She cooks the weekend meals, takes care of the children in the afternoons when I'm in the college. She keeps telling me: Sit and study, I'll do everything".

## 6. Winds of change - redesigning a feminine model

Higher education in Bedouin society contributed to the advancement of women, but at the same time it has created a deep gap between the professional life of women in the public and private spheres. Women, who knew how to narrow this gap and to deal correctly with it with the help of the family, constitute a role model for girls and women who are still on the border line of home and what the outside world offers and allows. Among the Jewish religious society, young women aspire for something beyond motherhood and call for self- actualization over motherhood. Since they get married young, usually following a matchmaking where attitudes and future plans are probed carefully and agreed upon by the two sides, husbands know *a priori* their wives' top priorities. Marriage in such cases is a mutual agreement and support for the spouses' life plans. Still, young religious women set new top priorities in their society because religious men are immersed in the Jewish religious law that praises the ideal of the eternal Jewish mother confined in the private sphere.

A Bedouin student told: "In our society the majority of women study to be teachers. Women need to learn and work. They have the skills and the abilities. As teachers we have the capacity and the opportunity to educate for gender equality in schools. Together we'll change our standard in society".

Another Bedouin student said: "It's about time I'll do something with myself. I always took care of others. Now, I want to develop, to be a leader. I am able to bring about change, to influence and to do better to women".

A Jewish student said: "I don't want to think that I wasted my life. I want to do something out of my life. I want to do something that I love. I am raising my daughter now and I want her later to succeed, I want her to do something with herself. My mother struggled hard for us. You say I'll quit, throw all the studies in the trash? I'm doing this for my mother but also for my daughter so she'll have a good mother".

Another Jewish student told: "I study for myself. I study because I want to, because I want to know …and beyond the occupation, I want to study because I want to develop myself.[…] if I'll feel that I'm not actualizing myself, it will have a bad effect on the home, all the frustrations will be taken out….that's what made me stay in the college despite the pressure and constant race."

A Bedouin student said: "I am smarter and stronger than the men in my family and I don't let myself dare, or to stand out or realize what I really want. Now I know that with a little wit and without breaking the social frameworks I can bring about change".

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Students from both sample populations take the combination of higher education and motherhood as a challenging and complicated experience that sets off conflicts and hard feelings between the students themselves and the society they live in. However, Bedouin students-mothers and religious Jewish students-mothers aspire for self-actualization outside the realms of the private sphere. Motherhood constitutes a *feminine condition* they have to comply with, like their mid- 20th century counterparts they try to pave their way out of the private sphere (Friedan, 1963, Gilligan, 1982, Crittenden, 2001). Nevertheless, they set new structures to redefine and reconstruct new frames to better their *feminine condition* (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2008).

For the religious Jewish student-mothers the maternal –self pales and has lost its appeal despite the Jewish theological significance. A certain uneasiness concerning the religious Jewish law *vis-à-vis* motherhood surfaces in the narratives of the Jewish participants and in their current striving for self-actualisation. Motherhood is perceived as a feminine lot that hinders or inhibits self- actualization in the public sphere while studies constitute a stairway to a feminine heaven that appeals to them. Surprisingly, this perception echoes Simone de Beauvoir's radical theory (Beauvoir, 1949). We assume that being surrounded by non- religious young women who plot out their lives independently of the Jewish law regarding family planning or marriage at a young age, accentuates the feminine frustration. Still, caught in the realms of the religious Jewish law they are compelled to combine higher education and motherhood. In this context, self- actualization outside the realms of the private sphere sharpens the significance of studies for the feminine religious Jewish ontological self. Unlike their Jewish religious counterparts, Bedouin students- mothers maintain the Islam religion on the Customs and laws. They don't dare break the patriarchal structure of the Muslim society and obey their husband, father and male siblings. Within this framework of obedience, they try to follow their hearts and abide their inner voice without shattering any frame. Though the price of the feminine ontological self is high, Jewish religious students- mothers do not give up, they exert great efforts sometimes at the cost of living in a very uncomfortable zone, and in a chaotic world or "the mess" (Warner, 2001). Through the experience of combining studies and motherhood, the feminine ontological self asserts itself and demarcates its boundaries. For the Bedouin students-mothers studies are conceived and constitute a *voyage out* though they hardly break and transgress patriarchal laws. They comply with the rules and choices regarding the domains of studies dictated by the patriarchal laws only to temporarily set themselves free outside the realms of the private sphere ruled by their husbands' families. The *voyage out* is a long- coveted *voyage in* the ontological self. Studies not only offer new horizons and open fascinating worlds but they also constitute a transformative key for the public sphere. Studies are meaningful and significant despite the hardships they encounter on a daily basis. Bedouin students-mothers design their own paths within the realms of the confines they live in. Though they are quite aware of the fact

that back home they have to fill all the duties assigned by their role in the Bedouin society, mainly serving their husbands' families as well as taking care of the children and the house. Still, they set new feminine models of self- actualization in the public sphere. Influenced by the encounter with various students from diverse cultures, along with new horizons offered by academic knowledge, the Bedouin students conceive themselves in a different new way that questions their role in the Bedouin society as well as in the family. Note, the Bedouin society is still a conservative one in terms of change and development though winds of change have already blown. Young women cannot overtly defy tradition and rules. They combine studies and motherhood in a way that doesn't raise objections and to the satisfaction of all parties. Given the complexity of the combination of studies and motherhood one should assert that Jewish religious students-mothers and Bedouin students-mothers do not dissolve in the crowd and redesign against all odds a new feminine model in their respective societies.

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