

## TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING RISK AND PROTECTION PERSPECTIVES OF YOUNG BEDOUIN CHILDREN

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### Abstract

The study is based on a participatory, context-informed study that examined the perception of ‘risk’ and ‘protection’ among 30 Bedouin children aged four to five. It was conducted in the Bedouin unrecognized Villages of the Naqab — Southern Israel and utilized photography, drawings, and verbal explanations. The analysis yielded seven themes representing children’s perceptions of risk and protection. It indicated that children facing extreme adversity were aware of numerous risk conditions, including a lack of infrastructure and the fear of losing their homes, thus adversely affecting their well-being. Children’s insights, and suggested modes of protection, as the study findings reveal, are crucial for promoting children’s welfare.

**Keywords:** *Bedouin children in Israel, context-informed perspective, protection, risk, visual methods.*

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, sociologists of childhood and the U. N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) have focused their attention on including children in academic, practical, political, and social discourse. This has brought about a change in the way investigators comprehend the world of the child (Marey-Sarwan, 2019). This attitude is fundamentally different from the former approach, which studied children but not based on the children themselves.

### 2. Objectives

This study examines perspectives of ‘risk’ and ‘protection’ among young Bedouin children in the unrecognized villages of the Naqab (the desert area in the southern part of Israel). It set out with the assumption that young children from excluded populations living in the periphery have their own attitudes and opinions regarding what is occurring in their environment and that they have the right and the ability to express them. Hearing their voices and including their point of view in the context of risk and protection on public academic forums is likely to contribute to strengthening their ability to cope and effect change in their society.

### 3. The study context

The Bedouin in the unrecognized villages (UVs) of the Naqab are a native minority population, citizens of Israel. They are described as a traditional, collectivistic, and conservative society with approximately 80 per cent of households living below the poverty line, and a high fertility rate (Abu-Bader & Gottlieb, 2009). Today there are some 35 officially “unrecognized” villages according to the State of Israel, which views these lands as state lands. The government of Israel defines these villages as “illegal”, and refuses to provide them with essential services, such as water, electricity, infrastructure, medical services, education and welfare services, roads and public transportation (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Bedouin children constitute approximately per cent 60 of the Bedouin population in the UVs. Despite extensive need, only one-third of the UVs have pre-schools and schools (Fargeon & Rotem, 2016). These data reflect daily life in the UVs and indicate the multiple risk factors that affect the welfare and security of Bedouin children at a young age such as burns, unsupervised traffic, open sewage pits, toxic gases that children inhale following garbage burning, stray dogs, etc. (Marey-Sarwan & Roer-Strier, 2017).

#### 4. Research design and method

This study is based on a participatory, context-informed study (Marey-Sarwan & Ulitsa), which takes into account the complexity of intertwined contexts: historical, socio-political and ecological conditions, in addition to social customs and cultural values. Active participation research is a strategy that is widely implemented by researchers active among marginalized populations that are at elevated risk in order to allow the voices of participants from excluded peripheral groups to be heard (Harcourt et al., 2011).

Participants were 30 Bedouin children aged four to five. Due to the children's young age and their inability to read or write, the research study combined two visual aids, photography and drawing, the children providing verbal explanations of them (Clark, 2011). **Photovoice** is a qualitative community-based participatory research method, that provides valuable insights into research participants' perceptions and uses photography as a tool to document and reflect reality (Vaccarino-Ruiz et al., 2021). Through the use of a camera, Photovoice enables the voices of people who are usually silenced to be heard, and thus they can share their daily experiences and represent their community. **Drawings** are considered a natural way of expressing emotions and cognition (Huss et al., 2013). The use of drawings in the present study not only served as an artistic tool for expressing the children's views and situation, but also empowered them and allowed their voices to be heard.

#### 5. Data collection

First, I met groups of two or three children, explained the study and instructed them on how to use the digital camera. Secondly, I asked the group to provide me with a tour around their place of residence and asked them to help me understand "what constitutes a risk for children" and "what helps them feel safe" by photographing places, people and situations from daily life that caused them to feel either threatened or protected. Afterwards, the children were asked to select one photograph that best represented protection and one that best represented risk and to discuss them. One week later, each child was asked to draw what caused him/her to feel safe or at risk and was asked to explain their drawing. Finally, the children were asked to suggest means of prevention and coping with the risk factors that emerged from the photos and drawings.

#### 6. Findings

The findings express the thoughts and perceptions of young Bedouin children and enable learning about matters that preoccupy them. The children revealed a wide range of risks that were liable to harm their safety and wellbeing and presented several resilience resources that help them cope with risks and protect themselves. It indicated that children facing extreme adversity were aware of numerous risk conditions, including a lack of infrastructure and the fear of losing their homes, thus adversely affecting their well-being. The findings yielded seven main themes representing the children's perceptions of risks and protection and their ways of coping with the dangers indicated. All factors the children mentioned—vehicles, people, etc.—were likely to constitute causes of risk and means of protection, except for one, demons and monsters, that were considered solely a risk.

#### 7. Discussion and conclusions

The study findings indicate that the children's social-political-cultural contexts closely influence their perceptions of risk and coping. This study clearly shows a need to examine the asymmetries of power as a result of the violent political conflict which is the cause of demolition of children's homes and recurring forced relocation plans, which leave Bedouin children in constant fear and anxiety, facing not only environmental hazards, but also deprivation of their basic rights as children. It was obvious that the children experienced and were aware of the dangers, and far from being protected from them, as might be expected according to the CRC (United Nations, 1989).

The difficult context of a community in constant anxiety with extreme poverty and a lack of necessities might provide an explanation for how the children draw on different resources in the face of risk. These include the family and the home as protective factors, providing them with security. Including young children from peripheral, excluded populations in research and examining their perceptions regarding risk and protection in context constitutes the basis for in-depth future studies and is therefore a significant contribution to the body of research into childhood.

The findings also provide a strong empirical basis to call for action to improve children's welfare. I sincerely hope that listening to children's perspectives on risk and protection will urge policymakers to implement the CRC. Any proposed intervention to protect the children of the UVs that does not include the provision of specific culturally informed solutions might result in the misuse of resources and contribute to the Bedouins' continuing sense of being marginalized and abused.

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