

Druze who defy the stereotype

Druze make up 1.7% of the Israeli population, and 80% of Druze men are career military men who continue working outside the home for most of the week, returning only on the weekend. Some 87% of the community do their compulsory military service in the IDF. And those who don't serve in the army are more likely to do national service.

Today there are also Druze women who choose to do national service in their villages. Once married, most Druze women stay at home; those who work do so mostly as teachers. But there are many in the community who today are breaking the stereotypes and making an impact on Israeli society in different fields.

The activist

Nadia Hamdan, 60, has been the head of Na'amat, the Histadrut women's organization, in central Galilee since 1994. Almost unheard of, she married at the age of 40 a man 15 years her junior. They have two children, aged 18 and 14. Her daughter wants to be a singer.

Hamdan is outspoken and has no qualms about discussing the disparity between the life of Jews in Israel and the lives of Druze and other minorities, including what she says is the governmental attempt to divide and separate Druze from their Arab identity as well as from their lands.

All around her village of Yanuh, there are Jewish villages which can expand and build and improve, she said. But if the Yanuh municipality wants to do the same, it must wait 10 years to receive permission.

"I feel choked all the time," she said. There is a lack of housing and jobs for the younger generation, she said, while there are greater attempts to "Judaize" the Galilee.

She lives in Kfar Havradim with her family, because she was unable to build on most of a plot of land she owns in Yanuh, which the state has designated for agricultural use only, and is satisfied with her life there, she said, but when she compares life there to life in Yanuh, it hurts.

"I am speaking out of pain," she said. The term "alliance" is only a vague word if one partner apparently steals from the other, she said.

Still, if given the choice whether to live in an Arab country or in Israel, she would unequivocally choose Israel, she said.

"I don't call myself 'Palestinian,' I don't have that identity. I just want to live like everyone else," she said. "I want my rights, whether I serve in the army or not. Every day there are new laws infringing on human rights. It is something people do not want to see or hear, but it is what

you see all around. Only a stupid person does not see that.

"Israel is my home, my land, and I can't move from here. I didn't come from anywhere else. I am not an immigrant who can say I will go home. This is my home," she said.

"Life in Israel is a good life, though the security situation here is so-so. It is better than living in an Arab country like Lebanon, Syria or Saudi Arabia. God did not mean Arabs to rule over other Arabs; they are dictatorships and always at war."

The scientist

Prof. Fuad Fares, 63, from Hurfeish and today a professor at the department of human biology at the University of Haifa, is the founder and scientific director of PROLOR Biotech, a clinical stage biopharmaceutical company.

He was among five students from his middle school class of 28 students who passed a standardized test that determined which students from his village would continue on to the regional high school in Tarshiha.

Much has changed since then. "It was very difficult. There were a few classrooms, they were old classrooms and we didn't have any heating or cooling. The situation today is much better," he said.

He graduated with a complete matriculation exam and was regarded in the village as a success story. His father, a career army man, and his mother, a housewife, encouraged their six children to continue and excel in their studies.

"My father told us that he was waiting for the day he could sit down at home and look at all of our diplomas on the wall," said Fares. His sister became the first Druze woman to enroll in the Technion in the early 1980s, and three of his brothers went into education, with one of them becoming principal of a school. A fourth brother is an accountant with the local council.

When he was starting his career a little over 30 years ago, there were two Druze professors. Today, there are six, and three doctoral senior lecturers. While still minuscule, the increase is significant, said Fares.

Though Fares did not serve in the army, all his brothers and high-school classmates did. He was one of two students in his high-school class who continued with their studies in university. After receiving his BA at the Hebrew University, he went on to do a three-year postdoc, accompanied by his wife and two children, in St. Louis, where he studied genetic engineering.

There he developed a patent to produce a protein used in IVF fertility treatments. He sold the rights to Merck, one of the



ARTIST FATMA
Shanan's works often feature oriental carpets. (Fatma: Nir Aviel; Painting: Avi Amsalim)

work near their homes, and it is hard to find land to build a home on."

Interestingly, he said, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics 64% of Druze women receive academic degrees.

All four of his children are now pursuing advanced degrees, with his oldest completing a doctorate at the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology doing cancer research at Rambam Medical Center, another is in medical school, and a daughter is completing her MA in public health at the University of Haifa. His youngest son, the black sheep of the family, is studying business administration.

Fares noted that, still, his family is the exception rather than the rule, and less than 0.4% of Druze go to doctoral studies, and only 1.1% complete a master's degree, he said. One barrier is the distance of the universities from Druze villages, he said. Though he lives in Haifa with his family and maintains a home in Hurfeish, traditionally Druze tend to stay close to their home villages.

He is trying now, together with a friend, to set up a scientific research center for the Druze sector, and is hopeful that creation last year of the Azrieli Faculty of Medicine of Bar-Ilan University in Safed will make it easier for Druze students to study medicine and continue with scientific research.

The artist

Fatma Shanan, 32, knew from a very young age that she wanted to be an artist, and went from her childhood drawings in her home village of Julis to win the Tel Aviv Museum of Art's 2016 Haim Shiff Prize for Figurative-Realist Art and the Culture and Sport Ministry's 2017 Young Artist Award.

While still in middle school and with her parents' support, she sought out the tutoring of Shaharban Amer, a woman a generation older than her from her village, who had studied art but went into teaching rather than continue with a career as an artist. In 2010 Shanan received her bachelor of education degree from the Art Institute of Oramim Academic College, and in 2011 studied privately with artist Eilat Shamir.

Her works feature oriental carpets as a prominent part of the composition, representing tradition while presented in different contexts. The rugs, which took on an almost mythical quality in her childhood, and

which she uses to define more fluid gender, national and ethnic identities, are depicted in fields, on roofs, olive groves and on roads.

Her own internal personal struggle has been to create a larger space for herself as an individual within a society which emphasizes the collective, she said. She has found that space in her art.

"When you create, you are making a bigger space, your possibilities are bigger," she said. "You create a difference between your physical space and your mental space. What speaks out in my art is how, in my life and in my art, I try to open up my own personal space - create some personal area for me, Fatma." Indeed, she is trying to find her own space within her society, she said, not leave her society.

"I don't fit totally inside the circle of my society, but I don't go outside of that circle," she said. "But I try to create something which is very much my own. It's something I have been searching for since I was a teenager. In a sense it is similar to how we Druze try to live within Israel. I feel quite like a hybrid."

Still, sometimes there are prices to pay, taking such an unconventional path within Druze society, such as being a woman artist, and she has paid those prices, she said. For the most part, however, she said, there has been a greater acceptance of her choices.

"It is still rare, but I knew that when I chose to do it," she said. "You live with uncertainty. There is no normal process in being an artist. There is no start and end."

She has lived and worked in Tel Aviv, and now she is making Julis, where she has a studio, her home base again for the time being. Her work has been shown in solo and group shows both in Israel and abroad, and she has received numerous grants, awards, and residencies, including the 2017-2018 Pelech Fund Residency in California. For the past four months she participated in a residency in New York, and she will have an upcoming solo show at the Andrea Meislin Gallery on Madison Avenue in New York City.

Having had the opportunity to work outside of Israel has shown her that her work connects with people outside of the Druze and Israeli societies, she said.

"It is something very global," she said. "I see that what I am doing is wider, it does not belong to just one place."



largest pharmaceutical companies in the world. Fares then founded his own start-up, which develops other patented therapeutic proteins, including a growth hormone protein to help in treatment of adults and children with growth hormone deficiency. The protein is now in phase three of clinical trials for adults. In 2013 PROLOR signed a definitive merger agreement with OPOKO Health.

Unfortunately, Fares said, for many young Druze getting out of the army it is still difficult to contemplate continuing with their studies, as they marry earlier than their Jewish counterparts and are expected to build a house and support their household. Many still opt for a military career, which provides them with a stable salary.

Nevertheless, one notable change in the society, he said, is that couples are marrying at an older age, with men marrying at an average of 27, and women at 22.

"Before, they were getting married much younger at 20, 21 years old, and it was hard to continue in academia without the support from their families," said Fares. "Today I see more parents are prepared to help their sons after the army. They see more the importance of academic studies."

But for the majority it is hard for most to go back to study, once they are released from the army.

"They marry early, sometimes even when they are in the army," said Fares. "Still, there are some, few in numbers, who choose to continue to higher education. That is better than when I was young. Today there is a change. There is a high school in our village, and everybody who finished middle school goes on to high school."

However, even today, for many of the released Druze soldiers who have come to feel part of Israeli society, it is a shock when they return to live in their villages and see the discrepancy between where they live and Jewish towns, he said.

"They see they are not 100% integrated into Israeli society," he said. "There is a problem of available jobs for the soldiers and [for] women, who should