

# Passion and Hope Palestinian Women Entrepreneurs



By Anu Virtanen

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In 2004, entrepreneurship and start-up support programs in Palestine began by targeting the students at universities, particularly those in the IT sector. The first programs focused on promoting the idea of entrepreneurship and encouraging Palestinians to take this path. IT centers of excellence began to incubate start-ups through provision of space and guidance.

Later on, while the start-up ecosystem developed, the incubators started to provide the entire cycle of incubation, including systematic advisory services and coaching, as well as business advice. Moreover, the business incubators began to be more open and encouraging to other business sectors outside the arena of IT. This probably plays a role in the decisions of many women to translate their ideas into businesses and join the incubators.

Albeit men are still way more likely than women to become entrepreneurs, the number of female entrepreneurs is growing, particularly in Palestine. According to a World Bank study<sup>1</sup> published last year, 23 percent of start-ups in Gaza and the West Bank have female founders, while in similar ecosystems the numbers are lower – in Beirut, for instance, 19 percent of the start-up entrepreneurs are women and in Dar es Salaam, 15 percent.<sup>2</sup> Let's ask Palestinian women why they chose the path of starting their own business.

## Laughter yoga ambassador runs growing business without stress

While working for several years in the field of women's empowerment in the MENA region, Palestinian Dr. Manal Dandis from Hebron heard countless stories of women who were under stress. The working environment slowly began to have a negative effect on Dr. Dandis as well. She recalls how she found laughter yoga: "I was searching online for a method to reduce stress, and laughter yoga attracted my attention. I read about the benefits: the yoga breathing sequence combined with laughter brings oxygen to one's body and releases stress. According to the studies, fake laughter provides the same

physiological and psychological benefits as spontaneous laughter. I started to practice it and felt the benefits immediately." When Dr. Dandis wanted to share her experience with others suffering from stress, she found out that there were no laughter yoga teachers in Palestine. So she decided to become one herself and packed her luggage in order to travel to India to study with Dr. Madan Kataria, the originator of the concept.

Dr. Dandis is now a certified laughter-yoga teacher and the official laughter-yoga ambassador to the Middle East. She gives classes in gyms, sport clubs, study centers, chambers of commerce, and children's centers. While targeting mainly the most vulnerable people, such as disabled children and families living in poverty, she also teaches in work teams and school classes. She has so much work that she is able to employ yoga teachers and grow her business. For this she is receiving support from the EU funded Business Start-up Incubator Support (BSIS) project, implemented by Enabel (the Belgian development agency) at the Business Incubator Unit of the Palestine Polytechnic University in Hebron.

Dr. Dandis' business idea follows the mission of the laughter-yoga concept: health, happiness, and world peace. She believes in these values, and she is convinced that given the great market potential, her business will continue to grow. "I have already overcome many obstacles. By showing the scientific research that has been carried out on laughter yoga, I have convinced people that it is neither a religious nor a political endeavor. It is a method to release stress, and this is what we need. My dream is that all Palestinians would practice laughter yoga," she concludes while laughing.

## A passion for fashion resulted in a career change

Fashion designer Manar El-Banna presents sketches and photos of dresses that are ready for purchase in her showroom in Gaza City. It's difficult to believe that she only started her career as a fashion designer about five years ago. "I studied architecture, which obviously requires some similar skills, but fashion was only a hobby for me before. I

Laughter Yoga ambassador  
Dr. Dandis is spreading happiness  
with her smile and business.



***“I receive professional support on how to teach laughter yoga from my mentor, Dr. Kataria, and the BSIS program facilitates the technical aspects of the management of my business. Moreover, I enjoy the positive energy around me in the office where I meet other start-up entrepreneurs, create new ideas, and seek for synergies.”***

Dr. Manal Dandis

sewed baby clothes for 12 years until I started to think that it could be my main job,” she reveals.

El-Banna changed her career and followed her passion by establishing Mix Fashion in 2013. Since then, she and her growing number of staff members have been designing and sewing multi-usage dresses, some of which are made from recycled

El-Banna presents her sketches in her showroom in Gaza City.



materials. Due to the restrictions imposed on imported goods, textiles are costly in Gaza. Therefore, many women prefer to own multi-usage clothes or recycle their old clothes.

“I started with abayas and continued making wedding dresses and other costumes with the idea that the customer could wear the same attire on several occasions. Regardless of the purpose, all my clothes are tailor-made,” the designer explains. While pleasing customers is an obvious goal of every business owner, under the difficult situation that Gaza is facing, the social impact of entrepreneurship is equally important for El-Banna. Her business contributes to improving the lives of several Gazan families since Mixed Fashion employs five full-time employees along with several part-time workers. Employing women requires taking cultural aspects in to consideration. She explains: “Some of my part-time employees work from home, which allows these women to continue to take care of their families while they earn some extra income at the same time.”



El-Banna and one of her five employees.

El-Banna’s passion and vision led her to choose a career in fashion design, but in order to make her business successful she needed professional business advice. “The biggest advantage of joining the Business and Tech Incubator at the Islamic University of Gaza is that it enabled me to move from my old office to the showroom here in the center of Gaza City. The seed fund I received made this possible,” notes El-Banna.

The designer says that they call the BSIS program *bassees*, which means “hope” in Arabic. “Hope is what the project and entrepreneurship have given me,” El-Banna concludes.

### **Satisfaction through entrepreneurship**

Jerusalemite Suzan Ghosheh Shurafa has done something unusual with her life. She used to hold a good position in an international organization, but she felt that her creativity and energy were restricted. She explains the reasons behind her decision: “As a psychotherapist, I needed to be in the field, not in the office waiting for a fund or a new project. I was sitting in meetings, writing papers, and doing deskwork while I saw that there was a lot of work to do in the field.”

Ghosheh Shurafa opened up to her friend Asmahan Alayan who is an experienced businesswoman who was dealing with start-ups. Encouraged by these discussions, Ghosheh Shurafa became convinced

that she should start a business on her own. She partnered with Suad Mitwalli whom she met in a psychodrama high-diploma course. Previously both of them had completed a BA in psychology from Birzeit University. In addition, Mitwalli holds a diploma in Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy. These two women, who have a lot of experience in counseling and trauma therapy,



Ghosheh Shurafa chose to follow her dream and became an entrepreneur.

especially with women, decided to establish Nisma Al-Quds, which means “fresh air Jerusalem.”

“We started to use nature as a therapeutic technique by organizing walks and talks in nature and

***“My own business is my dream come true! I don’t want to sit at home; I want to do something I love.”***

Suzan Ghosheh Shurafa



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breathing activities for women in the villages, and raising awareness about mental health. We have traditionally labeled mental health as a concern only for those persons who have been marginalized because of their psychopathology. I have a passion to change this,” Ghosheh Shurafa states.

She emphasizes that mental health issues do not occur only in the refugee camps or within other vulnerable groups but also among women who work and live regular lives in the cities. Since Nisma Al-Quds joined the Jerusalem business incubator, partnering with Palestine Education

for Employment and operating on the premises of Al-Quds University, they started to strengthen their marketing and awareness-raising activities. In addition to traditional psychotherapy, they continue to introduce new therapy methods, such as group therapy and psychodrama.

Ghosheh Shurafa elaborates on the satisfaction that she finds in her work: “Last year we started the first group sessions on a voluntary basis since we wanted to make the sessions accessible to the women participants who couldn’t afford the typical fees. It was a success! Most of the participants changed their lifestyle

somehow and were satisfied with the results. That’s the best reward; it’s not only about money.” Ghosheh Shurafa admits that being an entrepreneur is not easy, but she doesn’t regret her decision to leave her safe, well-paid office job as she now feels more empowered and satisfied with herself.

Anu Virtanen is a Finnish communications consultant who works for several EU entities globally, including the EU-funded Business Start-up Incubators Support

(BSIS) program, which supports entrepreneurs in Palestine through partnering with business incubators located in East Jerusalem, Ramallah, Hebron, Bethlehem, and Gaza. The program encourages entrepreneurs to change their ideas into businesses and, consequently, contributes to private-sector development and the improvement of lives in Palestine. The program is implemented by Enabel (the Belgian development agency).

<sup>i</sup> Press Release, “New World Bank Report Highlights What It Takes to Build a Robust Palestinian Start-up Ecosystem,” The World Bank, July 2018, available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/07/11/new-world-bank-report-highlights-what-it-takes-to-build-a-robust-palestinian-startup-ecosystem>.

<sup>ii</sup> Tech Startup Ecosystem in West Bank and Gaza, Findings and Recommendations, The World Bank, 2018, available at <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/715581526049753145/pdf/126144-replacement-WBG-ecosystem-mapping-digital.pdf>.



## Rita Asfour and Ronza Asfour

Rita Asfour and Ronza Asfour are two young female entrepreneurs who co-founded Fitafe’, the first restaurant in Palestine that specializes in healthy fast food.

With backgrounds in business administration and French translation and literature, their age, gender, politics, and finances all posed challenges, but their passion and hard work have helped Rita and Ronza to reach their goals. They have changed the daily habits of many by offering high-quality, well-balanced meals and making focused health-awareness services easily accessible. Their business has grown dramatically, and they are now managing a team of ten people. Their aim is to travel with their vision and to expand their scope of expertise to reach larger national and international communities.

Their advice to young entrepreneurs? You will be successful if you convert your passion into hard work. Persist! No matter which challenges you find. The challenges of today will become merely tiny, innocuous bumps along the way.

Women Speak



## Amal Masri

Amal Daraghmeah Masri is the editor in chief and CEO of Middle East Business News and Magazine and the CEO of Ougarit Group. She holds an honorary doctorate from GODSU University, Florida, USA. Decorated by the French Republic as chevalier de l'ordre national du Mérite and having won first prize as Best Woman Entrepreneur in MENA, she is listed as One of Ten Global Women Entrepreneurs and Leaders and will be named among 100 Inspirational Women by the Dr. Pauline Lang Foundation.

Her secret for success?

"It's challenging enough to be a human being in the twenty-first century, but even more so when you are a woman. This factor is multiplied if you live in the Middle East, in an occupied country, where realities such as equality, justice, and equal opportunities are said to exist, as long as you are a man!

One way to succeed in such an unusual environment is to remain alert to the possibilities that can occur at any time and be willing to act upon them. Set an achievable goal for yourself, a goal that fits you, and not just an image you've seen in the media that prescribes how women should look, act, or be.

As a woman you should be free to be what you want to be. Women are strong enough to hold down a job, care for children, and run a household without complaint. We just get on with it. But if you don't want this stereotype, don't be that person. If following your chosen career and building a business is what lights that flame within, follow your dreams and make it happen. If you want to fly, sprout those proverbial wings and learn to do it!

Create your own terminology, your own words; believe in it, live it, do it.

Make your cause everybody's cause. Create a dream that everybody will want to be part of. Always remember that for you as a woman, success is like a journey in a boat that will require harmony and balance to steer its path. You can row that boat alone, or you can row with a partner or two, making sure that you work as a team, respect one another, and share the same dreams, ethics, and aspirations. Never take others for granted or treat people poorly. It only reflects badly on you as a person.

Above all else, always give, as giving is the secret of success. Try to enjoy the happy times. As poet Omar Khayyam said, "Be happy for this moment. This moment is your life."



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