

Achieving Independence

Women Entrepreneurs in Palestine



By Ghada Qaddoumi

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Historically, Palestinian women have been largely responsible for ensuring the domestic well-being of their families. However, imprisonment and exile of husbands and sons has meant that many families and communities suffer from a frequent absence of male wage earners and community leaders. In such circumstances, women have often emerged to take up new roles in communities and central positions in decision-making processes. In Palestine as a whole, few women participate in the official labor market, but many women, especially in rural areas, often work unofficially or their labor is not recognized because it largely takes place in the home and is unpaid. However almost 65 percent of agricultural work is done by women as part of their household duties, and women often carry out a significant amount of unpaid work in rural areas.

MA'AN understands that there are constraints that block women's equal participation in the development process. These obstacles include a lack of social services, lack of training, low self-esteem, lack of technology, and a lack of information, in addition to social and cultural constraints. Women also lack access to adequate assistance, training, and rehabilitation to allow an exit from poverty or to meet the needs of their families. Despite the onset of female participation in social, political, and economic fields, there is a lack of female leaders, policy makers, and decision-makers. They are largely absent from senior positions in key political and economic institutions that shape their access and control over resources. Their marginalization from obtaining real power has further increased as a result of the unstable political situation.

Entrepreneurship of Palestinian women is considered a significant factor in national economic growth. Over the past years, institutes' interest in women entrepreneurship has increased, allowing women to play a crucial role in the economic development process and



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transform themselves from inactive individuals into dynamic role models in society. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, entrepreneurship empowered women to practice innovation in creating new projects that contribute to community development as well as decrease unemployment rates – 47.8 percent for women and 22.5 percent for men in 2017.

Throughout 30 years of rooted experience in the sustainable development of poor and marginalized communities, MA'AN programs have focused on agriculture and food security, community development, capacity building, emergency response, environmental protection, and the development of youth and women. In its commitment to the social and economic empowerment of Palestinian women, MA'AN programs aim to develop women's skills, knowledge, and attitudes, which results in their increased participation in the community as essential partners in national development and prosperity. The goal of MA'AN's Women's Development Program is to empower Palestinian women who live within a context of continual hardship brought about by the Israeli occupation and equip them to succeed in the extraordinary and multiple roles that are often demanded of them. Through this program, which emphasizes equality and a more just society, approximately 180 projects were implemented for women in Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Jordan Valley, and

MA'AN strongly believes that women should play a central leadership role in Palestinian society. It works to empower women as agents of change and to increase their participation as leaders and wage earners at the household, community, and national levels.

the Gaza Strip, guiding them in suitable entrepreneurial projects to generate income, assisting them in improving their livelihood and contributing to the reduction of people living under the poverty line.

The difficult economic and social situation that youth and women experience in Palestine stems from an increase in unemployment among marginalized groups. MA'AN believes in the importance of the role of women in the development of Palestinian society and the contribution of women to the world of entrepreneurship.

Currently, MA'AN Center, in partnership with the Welfare Association and through the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, is implementing a program that focuses on the economic empowerment of youth. It encourages women to start their own income-generating initiatives

MA'AN is committed to supporting the role of women in society through promoting their participation in its development projects.

by developing their entrepreneurial skills, knowledge, and techniques through introducing marketing, project management, and preparation of business plans that would enable them to join the work force.

The program encourages these income-generating projects by providing a \$15,000 grant to establish small, viable, and sustainable businesses that will enhance women's entry into the world of entrepreneurship, create jobs through projects implemented, and allow women to contribute to developing the country's economy. Through these established small businesses, women will be supporting the commercial, educational, recreational, and cultural sectors, which is a priority and an urgent need in order to attain improved economic status, to reduce unemployment rates, and ultimately to strengthen women's status at a national level.

Hala Abu Eid, 28, from Bedo Village, northwest of Jerusalem

Hala, one of the beneficiaries of the program, lives in a conservative environment and has little to no access to work or other means to support herself and her family due to the lack of educational opportunities. Through joining the program, Hala was able to acquire the necessary skills needed to start her own project – a lingerie and cosmetics shop. Hala has been able to establish herself, facing

all the challenges and obstacles, and prove her ability to achieve her goals and ambitions as well as improve the living standards of her family. Hala's business has created job opportunities for other women in her village, allowing her to hire a young woman to work with her on the project.

"Our limited financial capabilities and the need to seek help from others to provide treatment for my son makes me feel weak and embarrassed, but now that I have a project of my own, I am thrilled to be able to support my family. My project has boosted my confidence and enabled me to secure a decent life for my children." Hala Abu Eid

The impact of MA'AN programs is not only limited to the West Bank and Jerusalem but also extends to the Gaza Strip, enabling women's productivity and family support in that region.

Ahlam Arafat, 51, from Rafah, Gaza

As a beneficiary of the Rights and Resilience Project (implemented by MA'AN in Gaza with Action Aid, and funded by DANIDA), Ahlam Arafat has modest experience in the field of sewing. She used to take advantage of the absence of her children during school hours to visit her friends and women's centers to learn sewing skills. She had occasional opportunities to sew school uniforms and sell them at cheap prices so that she could pay off her debts and afford food for her children. Ahlam's children describe her as a patient and persistent mother as she struggles to provide a decent life for them to complete their education. Her eldest daughter, who was divorced at the age of 20, was able to enroll in college and study fashion design to support her mother at work. However, Ahlam and her daughter were unable to find job opportunities or start a small business, resulting in an increase in their stress and frustration.

The project empowered Ahlam to establish a small sewing shop

equipped with all the tools and materials she needed to start her income-generating business. Over a period of three months, Ahlam participated in training/coaching led by qualified consultants on how to start and sustain a small business. Ahlam and her daughter have managed to gain financial stability through sewing, which has improved their living conditions and livelihood.

"This project has given me strength and increased my self-confidence after I had been feeling confused and ashamed about not being able to take care of my children. My hands were shaking in the beginning, but the motivation I received from my coach helped me overcome all these

obstacles. Now I see myself as an active person and capable of running my project and receiving my clients."
Ahlam Arafat

Ghada Qaddoumi, a program manager who works for the economic empowerment of youth in Jerusalem, has over 20 years of extensive experience at MA'AN Development Center in project management, women's programs, capacity-building, and youth projects. She is also a trainer and certified master facilitator in the "Active Citizen" and "Women Participating in Public Life" programs.



Madees Khoury

Madees Khoury is the first female brewer in the Middle East. Holding a BA in business management from Boston and an MBA from Birzeit University, she manages Taybeh Brewing Company, the first micro-brewery in the Middle East. As she deals with the daily challenges that come with doing business in a politically and economically unstable region and in a male-dominated industry and society, her work has taught her the difference between equality and justice, and the merits and downfalls of trying to reconcile the two.

Her perspective to share with other women? Determination is not the only key to success; you also need high hopes that the future cannot and will not remain unchanged.