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Gaza

Palestinian women continue the struggle against hunger and homelessness in spite of the challenges and obstacles they face daily, especially since thousands of Palestinians have lost their jobs inside the Green Line due to the continuing siege and closures imposed by Israel. This article includes a number of stories about Palestinian women playing unique roles to help their families.

Domestic Garden

Zefaf Al Akhras, Um Eyad, supports a family of ten children in Beit Lahia village. Um Eyad is a Palestinian farmer who has managed to protect her family from homelessness and meet the family's needs by developing a domestic garden. "I have managed to send all my children to school; in fact, some of them are even studying abroad," she says.

Um Eyad acknowledges the major role that the Union of Agricultural Work Committees has played in supporting her and providing the necessary aid for her to succeed in her endeavor. The Union's aid has included the provision of plants, seedlings, different kinds of trees, and a solar dehydrator that can dry several kinds of agricultural products, flowers and seeds.

Um Eyad's garden includes a variety of fruits and vegetables. There is a small greenhouse in the garden for growing some varieties of vegetables year round. Um Eyad sells most of her agricultural products, particularly the herbs that are used for medication.

At the moment, Um Eyad is preparing some seeds for planting. She is also experimenting with them to find out which produce the best results.

Vision for the future

The mother of seven children, Suhaila El Dalool, 37, lives in El Zeitoun neighborhood in Gaza. She is one of the female beneficiaries who took advantage of the investment projects that were sponsored by the Australian government through the World Vision Institute and The Union of Agricultural Work Committees. Suhaila used the funds to buy four male and female rabbits, a cage and fodder.

Suhaila says that the project started three years ago when she attended a workshop on how to raise rabbits. During the workshop she was offered some rabbits. She raised the rabbits and this turned out to be the first step towards a bigger project. She managed to sell several dozen rabbits over the next three years. This enabled her to provide for most of her children's needs.

Suhaila's family has put their hope in this project. They have increased the number of rabbits and now they are planning to establish a farm in which all the members of the family will work, since her husband has lost his job inside the Green Line.

Suhaila adds that she has done her best to transfer the knowledge she gained from the workshop to her family members. She pointed out the instructions on the birth of rabbits that are posted on the wall. She says that the project has also played a significant role in bringing the family closer together. The children, she says, cooperate with their father on feeding and raising the rabbits. Instead of roaming around in the streets with nothing to do, they like to be at home and do their homework beside to the rabbits. Their performance at school has even improved.

Suhaila says she plans to continue to dedicate herself to this project in order to keep supporting her family, with the hope that one day one of her children will become an agricultural engineer and help other poor families to start their own agricultural projects.

Bees provide a way forward

Hanan Rajab is another exceptional woman with a fascinating story. Hanan is 38 years old and the mother of eight children. She has also made use of the investment projects. She was provided with two apiaries and equipment. She says that even though she was almost killed after being stung by a swarm of bees, this did not stop her from persevering with her work and it has provided her family with an adequate income.

She started with two apiaries and now has sixteen and she hopes to expand her business further. Last year's production exceeded forty kilograms, this in turn has improved the family's economic status. Hanan states that her husband helps her feed the bees and protect them from the hornets. "I have worked on transferring the knowledge I gained from the workshop to all the members of the family. This in turn has contributed a lot to the success of the project especially since I have ambitions to expand my project into a bigger farm," she says. Hanan also indicates that her success in this project has motivated her to continue her academic studies in the field of social work.

Finally, Hanan expressed her gratitude to the union, especially to the unit for women's issues, which has played a big role in upgrading the standard of living of many families.

Palestinian women's participation in vocational training

Palestinian women are getting more involved in vocational training through courses in schools and centers all over Palestine. The courses include specializations such as computer hardware maintenance and communication sets.

To learn more about the issue, *Voice of Women* met with Randa Nassar, an electronic engineer who has worked in several centers for vocational training in Palestine such as YMCA-Jericho, the International Lutheran Union in Beit Hanina and several centers belonging to the Ministry of Education.

Nassar states that the International Lutheran Union started its mission in 1948, right after the catastrophe, to provide relief to those who lost their land and property. Two workshops were offered; one on smithery and the other on carpentry, on the Mount of Olives. The center was then relocated to Beit Hanina where new areas were opened, including central heating, sewage auxiliaries, aluminum, car mechanics, turnery and soldering. Work in Beit Hanina continued from 1962 until today and 51 classes have graduated so far.

In November 2000, the center took a big step by opening its doors for Palestinian females to learn about the maintenance of computer hardware and other electronic devices. Nassar indicates that since the opening of the center coincided with the eruption of the Intifada it has faced many challenges. Students of both sexes became victims of the closure and siege imposed on Palestinian towns and villages. This pushed the administration of the center to consider establishing residences for female students since there were already residences for males. This included employing a supervisor which in turn became an additional expense for the center.

Nassar states that the center has also faced challenges on the social level. It has taken considerable effort to convince families of the importance of vocational training for females. Families have traditionally preferred academic education over vocational training for their daughters, thinking that only those with low academic averages should consider vocational training. This perception of vocational training needs to be rectified, says Nassar. The director of the vocational training department in the Ministry of Education, Mr. Mohammad Eshtayeh, indicated that vocational training is considered a main pillar of developed societies. He also added that vocational training in Palestine had been marginalized by the occupation for more than three decades. In spite of such difficulties the ministry continues to expand the program: physics, English and mathematics have been added.

We met with one of the center's graduates who has succeeded in opening a shop for mobile phone maintenance. Ahlam Ibrahim Abu Nijim says that she graduated from the Lutheran Union in 2003 after she earned a diploma in communications and electronics maintenance. She also mentioned that before she graduated from the union she was trained in a shop and after that she decided to start her own business. She managed to get a loan and then opened her own shop. Ahlam encourages other women to become involved in this field as it is interesting and in demand in the Palestinian markets. Ahlam also says that her dreams do not stop at this achievement as she will continue her studies in this field at university. She says that she received support and encouragement from her family, and her sister and some of her cousins eventually enrolled in vocational training themselves.

