

**Voice of Women**  
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**Statistics: Investing in youth to safeguard Palestine's future**

Sanaa Assi

Palestinian society is young. Half of the population is less than fifteen years old, according to estimates from 2003, and 33% of are between the ages of 10 and 24 years old. In light of these numbers, it is essential to focus our strategy on the future development of Palestine. Youth in Palestine are faced with daunting challenges, including being a prime target of the Israeli occupation army for killing, arrest and detention. However, there are other problems that face our youth, as indicated by the following figures:

1. 25% of male youth and 2% of female youth are regular smokers
2. Approximately 12% of male and female youth have been victims of physical violence
3. 20% of males and 17% of females have left school

A study has shown that school dropout among males is due to a weak education system, while early marriage is the main factor among females.

It is essential that we adopt educational, social and health policies that meet the needs of young people. The skills of our youth can be harnessed and developed by involving them in the drafting of laws and policies. Our laws must guarantee the rights of our youth, empowering them to play roles and utilize their skills in all spheres of life. As we execute our organizational plans and objectives, such as working to reduce the incidence of early marriage, we must focus our efforts on this important segment of our society: our youth.

**Jennifer De Piaz: American human rights volunteer in Palestine**

Tahsin Yaqin

What would motivate a young American woman to leave the security and stability of her home in New York and come to Palestine, where her life could be put in jeopardy?

Jennifer has spent the past seven months in Ramallah. During this period, she says she has become better able to understand the lives of Palestinians under occupation. I met Jennifer at the Palestinian Bureau of National Planning for Children. She seemed to be concentrating deeply on her work. We began talking about her experience here in Palestine. She believes that her role is to take back the true narrative of the Palestinian people to her community in the USA so that they can have an accurate picture of the reality on the ground here. She hopes to make an impact on public opinion there. Jennifer is well aware that Palestinians distinguish between American citizens and the US government, as evidenced by the Palestinian hospitality offered to American visitors. She says she has enjoyed living with Palestinians and hopes the situation will improve, although “nobody knows what might happen next,” she says.

The 29-year-old American activist has been interested in human rights for a long time. Her parents worry about their daughter staying in Ramallah, especially during the Israeli invasions. She expresses her shock at what Palestinians have to endure due to the Israeli occupation, and says she cannot understand how the same people who suffered oppression are now oppressing another people. Jennifer has experienced many aspects of the suffering lived by Palestinians, including siege and curfews. She describes some of the most difficult experiences she lived through, including witnessing home demolitions, and says she thinks that having been physically present on the ground here will make the story she will tell back home more powerful, because it will come from her own experience. She is hopeful that this will contribute towards influencing US public opinion in favor of Palestinians and of justice. Jennifer also compared the fear experienced by Palestinians with the fear experienced by her own people on 9/11.

### **A new concept: Committees for secure motherhood**

Ahmad Salim

The Secure Motherhood program is a project of the Primary Health Care Department of the Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS). The project, funded by the French Red Cross, was launched in 2001 in four PRCS primary health care centers: Silwad, Kafkha, Tarqoumia and Qabatia.

Jamila Sheikh is a member of the Beddou Committee. Talking about the achievements of this project, Jamila emphasizes the increased awareness of health issues among women and families. “I have personally learnt a lot through my relationship with this committee. I have given lectures and awareness sessions to

mothers and students on various subjects, such as marriage, pregnancy and drug addiction -- because the Palestinian woman is not given the opportunity to get educated, and is therefore marginalized within her own society,” she says.

At first, the timeline of the project was 9 months, with the objective of developing health awareness for Palestinian women, families and society at large. Jamila says that at the high school where she works, there are 20 cases of early marriage. Some of the married and pregnant women pursue their studies; three have divorced within two months after their weddings. “In our society, women are oppressed and freedom of choice is prohibited in every aspect of life. This has engendered many negative attitudes concerning the health and psychological trauma of women,” Jamila says. Continuing psychological care and awareness campaigns are important in decreasing such problems.

Samer Maghari, Program Coordinator of Woman and Infant Health Care at PRCS primary health care, talks about the development of the Secure Motherhood program. First, a health team composed of a doctor, a nurse and a social worker, went through a training process. Then this team selected female volunteers with special qualifications in their respective areas. These selected women then made visits and gave lectures in clubs, schools and neighborhoods for three months. Lectures and training courses revolved around project concepts, action plans and communication skills.

The project has been so successful that it will be extended for another two years, reaching twelve new areas.

### **Women in Palestinian media**

Attaf Youssef & Amal Jom'a

The participation of women in the Palestinian media, whether as decision makers or as speakers on issues related to women, is still very weak compared to the presence of men. In fact, women issues are still not dealt with in depth in the Palestinian media. *Voice of Women* interviewed some journalists to discuss the low profile of women in our local media outlets. Nadia Awad, program manager for the local TV channel, Watan, thinks that the absence of female figures in our media is a reflection of our patriarchal system which neglects women's rights in all aspects of life. Jibril Haja, editor of *Bayader*, a magazine issued by Birzeit University's Development Studies Center, describes *Bayader* as an important document focusing on social issues without distinction between male and female. “Human development can never be achieved if half of the society is denied its rights,” Jibril says. The media experts we met all agree on one point: a male dominated media is ultimately the result of a male dominated society.

## **Yusra Barbari: a lifetime of activism**

Fayez Abu Oun, Gaza

Eighty-one-year-old Yusra Barbari is president of the Palestinian Women's Union in Gaza.

Yusra began her activism as a child: at the age of five she collected money for the people affected by the Al Aqsa events during the British Mandate period. She used to attend demonstrations in protest of the British occupation of Palestine. "I was among the people who welcomed the refugees who were displaced and forced to leave their cities in historic Palestine and find refuge in Gaza," she says. In 1949, she obtained her BA in Literature from Cairo University in Egypt. Her MA thesis focused on the struggle of the Palestinian people. She has mastered Arabic, English and French and has also studied Latin, Hebrew and German. She worked as a teacher and then became headmistress of Zahraa High School in Gaza.

During WWII, Yusra was a member of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Executive Secretary at the Palestine Red Crescent Society in Gaza, before the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 1967. In addition to the various political roles and positions she has occupied, she has been active in cultural ceremonies, holding positions such as political advisor of the Palestinian sports team to Jordan, Egypt, Sweden and China.

Yusra's main aim has been to mobilize women within Palestinian communities to participate in various social, economic and political processes which contribute to their development. For many years, she has been politically active, supporting Palestinian women at the forefront of the liberation struggle in all its aspects and historical stages, on both nationalistic and social levels.

Because of her active participation in the advancement of the Palestinian national cause, Israeli occupation authorities imposed travel restrictions on her for more than 7 years. Yusra believes that efforts must be coordinated in order to produce a national unified strategy for Palestinian women based on women's' priorities. She adds that the development of women's political, economic, social and legal status cannot be isolated from the general political situation of the Palestinian people who are still under occupation and are struggling for independence and sovereignty over their land.

"If I had to live in such a situation -- and I say this knowing the situation well -- I would think of becoming like them." This statement by the spokesperson of the British Liberal Democratic Opposition Party has caused intense reactions leading to her dismissal from her position.

Jennie Tong, who belongs to the third opposition party, confirmed that she would have reacted as the Palestinians have if she were a Palestinian, because the circumstances imposed by the Israeli occupation are unbearable.

The British media has reported the many condemnations made against Tong after her statement, which led the leader of her party, Charles Kennedy, dismissing her from her position as spokesperson of the party on children's issues. She had stated that desperation leads to a mental state in which individuals may decide to commit suicide. Tong was severely criticized by the spokesperson of the international affairs of the Conservative Party, Michael Ankrum, who said that her statements will cause pain to the people who lost their relatives in suicide attacks.