

Women's Empowerment in Palestine: A Process in Progress

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For many generations, Palestinian women have been fighting against the extremely difficult conditions of daily life in their country, marked by war and Israeli restrictions. This has often prevented their inclusion in the labour market, although the ratio of female university graduates amply exceeds that of male graduates. In this context, it should be noted that, in recent years, initiatives and programmes have emerged aimed at enabling women's access to work, the business field and the creation of employment. The Business Women Forum (BWF) works in this line to provide women entrepreneurs with tools when founding and managing micro, small and medium enterprises to revitalise the Palestinian economy while offering work to other women. However, to ensure the success and continuity of these initiatives, it is necessary to strengthen sectoral cooperation and best practices in the local, regional and business arena, which will certainly be determined by the evolution of the conflict in this part of the world.

Palestinian women have been leading many struggles over the past four generations to acquire their social, economic and political rights in a context of dehumanising protracted occupation and recurrent aggressions, internal polarised political authorities, gender discrimination, adverse social norms and pervasive patriarchal culture, ironically perpetuated in every arena not only by men but also by many women. Despite these profound internal and external challenges, inclusion of women in the labour market and enabling them to contribute to the Palestinian economy has been a standing development agenda item in the public, private and civil society sectors.

The prime external impediment to economic advancement that faces men and women

alike, though disproportionately, is lack of control over land and resources, beside a long list of Israeli restrictions that have been smothering the Palestinian economy and prohibiting its recovery or development, hence augmenting its inability to detach from the Israeli economy. This intricate context has contributed to accelerated deterioration of the Palestinian economy, increased rates of unemployment for women (43% in 2021, compared to 41% in 2019)¹ and impoverishment of families and vulnerable groups, including households headed by women and youths. Although this situation has a universal impact on livelihoods and businesses in Palestine, it has an exponential adverse effect on the employment gap between women and men, which is vast in the

1. See www.pcbs.gov.ps

first place (43% of women are unemployed vs. 21% of men).

The adverse social norms in society assign a higher value and priority to men over women; hence gender discrimination against women is evident in numerous spheres of life, including education, health, personal status issues, employment and engagement in the labour market. For instance, although the rate of female university graduates is notably higher than for males, their engagement in the labour market is much lower due to unequal opportunities, education incompatibility with market demand and, in many instances, women holding back due to limited decision-making power and low self-worth. Evidently, only three out of five working women are skilled, which indicates a fading link between education and employment outcomes and may discourage further investment in human capital.² Furthermore, not many women are supported to explore education and work in fields that are seen socially as exclusive types for men; and the financial independence of women continues to be an issue. Available data demonstrates a clear decrease in the rate of women and youth enrolment in the labour force and a tendency to work in the informal sector characterised by lack of legal protection, low wages and unacceptable working conditions.

From over twenty-five years of working closely with thousands of women, well-educated and/or vulnerable marginalised Palestinian women, small and medium enterprises, women entrepreneurs, fresh graduates and young girls, it has been evident that women are capable of breaking barriers impeding their development, emancipation and leadership of a successful career, running a business of their own, innovating and influencing the economy.

However, it is only possible when women trust themselves, get the knowledge and skills required, and have the courage to meet the challenge to step into the business world and labour market, predominantly run by men, and ensure their financial independence. Undoubtedly, reinforcing women's and youths' resilience under occupation, creating a support system that empowers them and engages family male members, and an enabling environment at society and sectoral level are essential.

The past few years have witnessed notable efforts for enhancing engagement of women in the labour market and entrepreneurial work

Despite the profound challenges mentioned earlier, the past few years have witnessed notable efforts for enhancing engagement of women in the labour market and entrepreneurial work, predominantly led by relevant NGOs, community-based organisations and women's forums, particularly the Business Women Forum-Palestine. The latter, for instance, has been creating a support system for emerging business women and entrepreneurs to enhance their knowledge, skills, attitudes, competencies and power to make informed and strategic decisions not only in their businesses but also in their lives. The support system has interlinked components of intensive mentorship and capacity-building, access to information and awareness raising, providing linkages with new networks and interactive platforms, investment promotion, memberships in local committees and entities, and providing them with a solid voice in development or reform of national policies that affect their lives. Being the key

2. S. A. Hillis., J. J. S. Alaref and W. M. Takkenberg, "Enhancing job opportunities for skilled women in the Palestinian territories", The World Bank, no. 129981, 2018, pp. 1-84.

decision-makers in women's families, male engagement is central in this system through awareness raising and advocacy with men and boys in the family promoting positive messages about women's economic role and gender equality, supporting women to have a greater role in the family and the community. Um Ahmad, a role model from the Northern Valley in Jericho said: "Even my kids look at me differently after I started selling my products and went for a trade mission to Bologna, they never believed that I can be more than a mom."

In addition, the Business Women Forum promotes the success of vulnerable women and celebrates evolving businesses regardless of their size or budget by creating role models and champions who share their experiences and successes at local, national and international level. In fact, a few champions became new coaches and are currently training young businesses, inspiring other women to walk in their footsteps.

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Supporting women small-scale food producers in marginalised and vulnerable communities in the West Bank, particularly Area C, and Gaza not only improved the livelihoods of their families but also transformed disadvantaged communities.

Most importantly, women who succeed in growing their businesses also employ other women, creating jobs for the young and opening job opportunities for family members. K. Sulaiman – an entrepreneur seven years ago from Beta-Nablus and a new coach and trainer in soap making – currently owns and runs a shop in Ramallah City with a well-known "Biladi" soap brand where she promotes herself

as LUSH Palestine. She employs more than twelve staff members and some of her family. She became a role model in this industry.

Many economic empowerment programmes were implemented in Palestine to enable women to have equitable access and control over information, resources and opportunities that increase their employability or to start their own businesses as entrepreneurs. Some of these efforts have encompassed practices that proved to be successful not only in alleviating the impact of challenges that women face in the labour market but also increased their opportunities in employment and entrepreneurial work. For instance, the Business Women Forum designed tailored programmes to address the gap between the education and employment outcomes, labour market demands and emerging needs of the private sector, particularly after the outbreak of Covid-19. One of the programmes is "WASSALNY, Women as Catalysts of Change", which in Arabic means "take me to the right destination", provides capacity-building, skills development, one-on-one coaching and on-the-job training for fresh young women graduates, which proved to be a transformative experience for most of them if not all. Marketing services are costly in the Palestinian market and relevant specialists are scarce, so micro, small and medium enterprises and fresh female graduates continuously seek Business Women Forum assistance to market their products. The situation has provided an opportunity for the Business Women Forum to create additional jobs for young women and enhance business opportunities for micro, small and medium enterprises through WASSALNY. It identifies young women talented in marketing and enhances their capacity to become marketing and sales specialists with greater employability skills, and then connects them with job opportunities provided by leading women in micro, small and medium enterprises and the private sector. The programme

is designed in an innovative way to link fresh graduates with these women to build a long-term mutually reinforcing business relationship, where they work together to grow and expand and improve their living conditions. WASSALNY also provides a solution for private companies that look for skilled fresh graduates. Notably, more than 70% of young women who participated in the programme (640) were employed. In addition, many of them were given the opportunity for advanced training and became certified trainers.

In addition, the Business Women Forum created a Business Development Center to become the innovative business model and new “Innovative Women’s Economic and Entrepreneurial Empowerment Hub”, which uses a holistic business development approach that has been part of the structure of the Business Women Forum. This approach focuses on capacity-building, one-to-one coaching, on-the-job training, mentoring, developing competitive products and creative designs, providing seed funding and investment promotion, role modelling, advocating women’s issues, access to knowledge, finance and marketing, creating platforms, and networks at the local and regional levels and enhancing access to export

chains. This holistic approach helped enhance the sustainability of businesses and access to economic opportunities through job creation and income generation, and thus promoted women as potential leaders and agents of change.

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Although many of these practices proved partially or fully effective and served their purposes for the time being, they are not sustainable in the long run. However, to ensure their continuity and progress it is critical to reinforce cross-sectoral cooperation and integration of programmes working on women’s economic empowerment and financial inclusion. Furthermore, it is highly important to capitalise on successful experiences and share best practices among stakeholders locally, regionally and internationally. Undoubtedly, resolution of the conflict in this part of the world will have a significant impact on economic prosperity, which will increase employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for women and youths.