

## THE WOMEN OF PALESTINE

The key I had for the apartment in Bethany, outside Jerusalem, didn't work. Hot and exhausted after hours in buses and waiting in lines to come through customs from Jordan, I desperately tried all the doors. An older woman, hunched over, making slow, thick steps across the front courtyard, greeted me with a glance and soft "Marhaba". I hurried over and asked in jumbled Arabic if she knew the landlord of the apartment. She nodded, and beckoned me to follow.

This was the beginning of a quiet friendship with the mother of the landlord, who lived in the ground floor apartment of the house. Their living arrangement is a typical one. An extended family of parents, children and grandparents living together, the father earning a living working in a government office, the women maintaining a lush, half-acre garden, preparing food and cleaning. Throughout my ten days in that apartment, the wife and grandmother were steadily working outdoors. I was awakened early in the morning by the sound of their chatting as they cleaned and prepared vegetables and fruits for canning, and shelled nuts. In the late afternoon when I returned home, they were always in the garden, watering, weeding, pruning and picking fruits.

I made the trip to Jerusalem because I wanted to understand more about ANERA's projects in the Occupied Territories. It was not my first trip to the Middle East, and I didn't expect to be surprised-- but I was. I was unprepared for the diversity and complexity of the roles Palestinian women play in their society--from the hardworking housewife in the apartment below to the YWCA director about to leave for Copenhagen to attend the International Women's Conference, and all the variations in between.

On my first day, I visited Elizabeth Nasir at the Rawdat El Zuhur school in East Jerusalem. As we sat talking about the school's history, which is also to talk about Elizabeth Nasir's history, one of the women who works at the school came in to show us a new dress she had just finished embroidering. The bodice of the heavy brown cotton dress was covered with the elaborate, colorful cross-stitching typical of Palestine. Miss Nasir reminisced about her girlhood in Palestine, when everyone wanted to wear Western clothes. Now she wishes she were accustomed to wearing the traditional dresses because they are beautiful, practical, and truly Palestinian.

I had assumed that detailed embroidery survived primarily as a tourist item. But as we drove north from Jerusalem to Ramallah that day, two out of three village women over the age of thirty were wearing extravagantly embroidered dresses. They wear them as everyday working clothes--sometimes hitched-up around their waists, sleeves rolled; sometimes loose and flowing, and most often with other clothes underneath.

The style of the embroidery varies from village to village, and everywhere I went--Ramallah, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Gaza--women would boast of the detail and perfection of their local designs. Embroidery lives on today largely because of the work and will of Palestinian women who organized into Arab Women's Unions, cooperative societies, and charitable organizations. Through the cooperatives and unions, Palestinian housewives acquire material and thread to embroider pillowcases, tablecloths, dresses and decorative pieces which are then marketed by the unions. In this way, these organizations are helping to sustain a cultural tradition while providing an outside source of income for women who might not be able to earn money otherwise.



Mennonite Central Committee photo

Often in the countryside I saw women working in the fields; but rarely in the city did I see them behind shop counters. The only women in business for themselves, excluding the Arab Women's Union shops, are those who, poorer than my landlord's wife, are selling the fruits and vegetables they can spare from their own gardens. These women, sitting cross-legged on a blanket spread on the sidewalk, sell a handful of apples or bunches of mint out of the aprons across their laps.

Beyond the traditional female role as teacher, charitable worker, or housewife, is the more startling role of the Palestinian woman as organization head and manager. Of the 15 institutions I visited in a week, at least half were directed by women. Probably the oldest are the Arab Women's Unions, some of which date back to the 1920s, and which today are among the few consistent, surviving and effective Palestinian institutions in the Occupied Territories. The Unions can claim credit for providing crucial services--health care, food and job training--throughout the West Bank and Gaza when few other organizations could function.

There are the women like Elizabeth Nasir at Rawdat El Zuhur and Hind Husseini at Dar El Tifl who built schools and orphanages after the war and partition of Palestine in 1948. There are the women who direct large international affiliates, like the YWCA, which operates as a school, cultural center and hotel. And there are the women in the camps working collectively to provide health care, schooling, athletic and cultural activities through UNWRA or through the Association for the Development of Camps.

All three of the Palestinian universities opened in the 1970s are fully coeducational. Birzeit University was quiet and unhurried the day I visited because I arrived in between academic terms. The women on campus, coming from all levels of Palestinian society--from the children of doctors to those of homeless refugees--look Western and cosmopolitan. There are no embroidered dresses here, except on special occasions. The women in the universities of the West Bank may share the benefits of education with men, but they also suffer the drawbacks. Jobs for educated Palestinians are hard to find in the Occupied Territories, which is one reason that women now go into teaching or nursing. One woman engineer I met was working as a secretary because of the dearth of engineering jobs.

— Lucy Brown

This issue of the ANERA Newsletter is an impressionistic portrayal of the women of Palestine, rather than a statistical analysis. All of the articles were written by American women describing their personal experiences with Palestinian women. In the quotes at the center of these pages, Palestinian women speak for themselves about their lives and their society.

## UM AHMED

I grew up in Kansas City, and after completing college in North Carolina I married a fellow student, a Palestinian now working on his Ph.D. His mother, Um Ahmed, came to the U.S. for the first time last summer, and stayed with us for three months. She and I shared many household chores, and in so doing we both had some enlightening experiences.

In our initial venture outside the home without my husband, we went to the grocery store. As we set off, she in her embroidered Palestinian dress and I in my blue jeans, my mother-in-law looked a bit skeptical as I placed myself behind the wheel of the car. When I started the motor, she said a short prayer. At the Safeway, she was amazed at the size of the store, but unimpressed by the vegetables and fruit which she felt had been picked too early. In addition, she was a little unhappy with the size of the zucchini and remarked: "Why do you let the zucchini grow so large?"

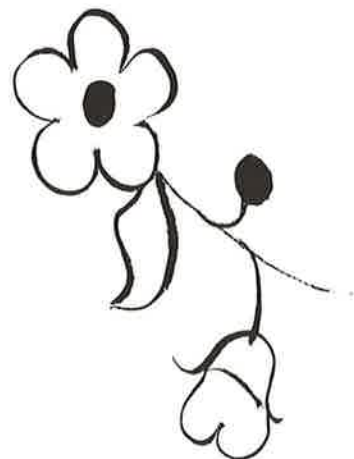
Upon our return home, Um Ahmed intoned an additional prayer thanking God for our safe return. We quickly unpacked our provisions and started to fix one of my husband's favorite dishes, stuffed zucchini and grape leaves--my mother-in-law had managed to sneak the grape leaves past U.S. customs, but had been caught with the little zucchini. When the preparations for the stuffing were done, we placed newspapers on the floor and arranged ourselves comfortably there to start stuffing, all the while conversing with each other on topics ranging from the squirrels in our backyard to raising children.

I noticed that my mother-in-law never threw away bread--not even the crumbs--because she viewed bread as God's blessing. Whenever a piece of bread accidentally fell on the floor, she would pick it up, kiss it and put it away. When threading a needle, she always went to the window to see by the natural light. I would have turned on a lamp instead.

After I started back to work during the second month of her stay with us, she became lonely and bored alone in the house. To help occupy her time, my husband and I bought her a coloring pad and magic markers. Her feeling of pride and accomplishment was so deep-felt that she eagerly began her days by drawing, sometimes even forgetting to eat her breakfast.

Her pictures stood on our mantel until she left; she took her creations with her. This was the first time she had ever had the opportunity to draw.

— Ann Barhoum



## PALESTINIAN WOMEN SPEAK:

**"How can I say I want to be equal to a Palestinian man when Palestinian men don't enjoy equality with other men?"** — Christian Science Monitor, Sept. 5, 1975

**"Because of the years of occupation, we have had to take care of problems that normally are the responsibility of governments."** — Time magazine, April, 1980

**If Palestinian women can work now, this is because of the exile and changing social attitudes. But although our women had to go to work after 1948, and the man often left his family in order to work abroad, so that the children saw their mother as breadwinner and head of the house, still it takes more than one generation to change centuries of social attitudes."** — Journal of Palestine Studies, Spring, 1979

**"Before 1948, Palestinian rural women enjoyed the relative freedom of a mountainous country; the necessity of sharing in the work of the fields freed them from the veil and allowed them to visit towns to sell agricultural produce. But after the exile two opposing trends appeared. One, based on the belief that their own ignorance had contributed to the disaster, was a determination to acquire as much information as possible. The other was a nostalgic longing to preserve the old society's structures and habits, which led to the metaphysical resurrection of the destroyed villages and urban neighborhoods within the chaos of the refugee camps and to a strict enforcement of the old mores."** — Journal of Palestine Studies, Spring, 1979

**"All of us women are brought up in a certain way and this affects every one of us. I have progressive ideas but I can't implement them fully because of my upbringing. I feel that an Arab woman has to marry if she wants to live in society."** — Journal of Palestine Studies, Spring, 1979

**"The women in the camp lead an isolated and sheltered life. They have very little contact beyond the boundary of the camp. Day to day life is difficult and the problems are many and varied."** — YWCA Report to ANERA, 1978

**"In Palestinian literature the mother has always been the symbol, and played the role, of the land: strong, protective. The son leaves and returns, she is there, the recurring protection. And it is a fact that the Palestinian woman dies very young. This is simply because the women are worn out, overworked and exhausted physically and emotionally."** — Journal of Palestine Studies, Spring, 1979

**"Women's liberation is a luxury here."** — Los Angeles Times, May 9, 1976

**"If women had run for office, they would have been elected (in the 1976 elections). The national blocs were eager to have women. In the next elections, women will definitely run for office and probably be elected."** — Los Angeles Times, May 9, 1976

**"In my poems I try to emphasize that I am a woman, although I don't feel a second class citizen at all. I feel the Palestine cause is mine and the work is mine."** — Journal of Palestine Studies, Spring, 1979

## CONVERSATIONS AT THE YWCA

After having worked at ANERA for a year and having learned first-hand of the difficulties of life for Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, I decided to visit Jerusalem and the West Bank and Gaza in March, 1980. My two-week visit left me with vivid impressions of the sorrows, hard work and courage of the Palestinians I met there. The following two incidents especially touched me:

After taking us to visit two refugee camps, Doris Salah, Director of the East Jerusalem YWCA, told us that she had sponsored some meetings at the Y for young mothers from the camps to give them a chance to keep in touch with the world outside the camps, and to get expert advice from doctors, nutritionists and others. I asked her what questions these young mothers asked most frequently. She said that they had expressed a lot of concern about the future of their children now in kindergarten. One mother said that she wished her son would stay in kindergarten all his life so that he would never

have to face the hardships of camp life. Another mother felt the opposite. She said she wished her son were already grown up so that he could join the struggle for freedom. I realized with a shock that these women were just my age, had grown up in the camps themselves, and that the prospects of a normal, happy childhood for their young sons and daughters were not bright.

One of the most poignant moments of our visit occurred just as we were leaving. We had spent a good deal of our two weeks in Jerusalem with Doris. She had shown us several projects, both in the city and in refugee camps, and had invited us to a fundraising dinner with home-cooked food, folk dancing and a dance band. Early in the morning as we were reluctantly getting ready to leave for the trip home, she came rushing to our hotel. "I just wanted to say goodbye once more," she said, "you don't know how much it means to see people from outside who care. It makes our loneliness easier to bear."

— Dagny Svlen

## KAREEMI, A PALESTINIAN

Kareemi has none of the sophistication one might expect in the United States from so attractive a young woman. She has dark, shoulder-length hair, a ready smile that moves into dimples, and long, slender legs that fit her jeans the way most women wish theirs would. Kareemi is nineteen, and coming to know her I see her personality constantly change from guileless and shy to confident and assured. This changing of roles gives her a vulnerability, an ambivalence that in the days before women's liberation we called charm and femininity.

I know her in two worlds: in her West Bank home, where her Arab roots go tenfold deeper than my Western-world roots, and where she moves barefoot like her mother in a traditional family lifestyle; and I know her in university surroundings....

Once, to visit her small village of Deir Debwan, I accompany Kareemi on an Arab bus out of Ramallah. We travel for about twenty-five minutes through dry, rocky farmlands with olive groves. The bus stops in the small central square of Kareemi's village....

We walk a short distance up a hill to a hand-chipped, white stone home built by her father, who is one of sixteen hundred Palestinians deported from his homeland by the Israeli occupying forces. I see three women in long, traditional Palestinian dresses sitting cross-legged on a concrete porch in the sun, chatting and sewing. One of them, Kareemi's mother, rises, and, standing tall and wide of girth, warmly embraces Kareemi and me...

Kareemi's mother moves automatically into her kitchen to prepare food and drink...As her mother works, Kareemi places a slender arm around her mother's ample waist. I note the contrast between the two women: one young, outwardly modern, who goes to college and speaks four languages, and the other with only three years of formal education, who looks old because she dresses in what we in the West have come to call the old style. She does not rouge her lips or cheeks, she ties her long hair in a bun, and even on a warm day she is outfitted in layers of heavy fabric that cover all but her face, hands, and feet. The two women express a natural, spontaneous warmth for each other. "She is not only my mother," Kareemi says, "she is my best friend."

...we talk late into the night about our lives as women, and how we are alike and how we are different...As to the future, Kareemi sighs. "We Palestinians do not know our future. We have no freedom."

— Grace Halsell

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# ANERA'S WORK WITH WOMEN

The women of Palestine are both victims and heroines, beneficiaries of charity and donors of charity, traditional housewives and modern political leaders. Many of their efforts--orphanages, schools, handicraft centers--may seem like conventional "women's work" to Americans. And yet, their existence as organizations run by and for women, and their contributions toward maintaining the fiber of a culture and society through times when all else seemed lost, place them in a category beyond our usual conception of charitable works.

ANERA's projects can be divided into two kinds as they relate to women: those which support women's organizations, and those which support predominantly men's organizations whose impact reaches both men and women.

Among the women's organizations are schools and orphanages, most of which were founded by individual women to care for children who were orphaned or impoverished by war and military occupation. Some of these are Rawdat El Zuhur and Dar El Tifl in East Jerusalem, founded by Elizabeth Nasir and Hind Hussein, respectively; and Jeel el Amal in Bethany, founded by Alice Sahhar.

The Arab Women's Unions of the Occupied Territories are among the oldest continuous Palestinian institutions, dating back to the creation of the first Palestine Arab Women's Union at a 1929 Women's conference in Jerusalem. Unions and Arab Women's Charitable societies in Nablus, Hebron, Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Gaza run hospitals and clinics, teach vocational training courses in traditional crafts, and offer literacy classes for women. The Unions serve their communities also as cultural centers, displaying art work and producing theatrical performances. In Bethlehem, they even boast a sleek modern swimming pool.

The creation of three West Bank universities, Birzeit, Bethlehem and Al Najah, and the Arab College of Nursing outside Ramallah, may have a greater impact on the lives of Palestinian women than they will on men. Before these institutions developed in the 1970's, Palestinians had to leave home to attend universities in Israel or abroad. Because Palestinian women were less inclined to do this than men, fewer received college degrees. Today, women are rapidly catching-up with men in filling college classrooms.

The Arab College of Nursing and the nursing program at Bethlehem are able to provide nursing training to women whose families might have objected to this profession in the past. Nursing has been a predominantly male occupation in the West Bank and Gaza because of the strong Arab feelings about protecting female modesty. With two quality programs close to home, one of which, the Arab College of Nursing, is exclusively for women, Palestinian



Dagny Svien

women are increasingly attracted to acquiring much-needed nursing skills.

The Municipality of Hebron constructed a new library building to replace the cramped library quarters within the municipal building itself. The spacious and well-lit building, including a private reading room for women, is able to attract many women who were uneasy about entering the old facilities in the municipal building.

When olives are in season, women throughout the countryside hurry to the orchards to pluck the ripe fruit from the trees. Then they haul the olives off to the presses and camp in line for days waiting their turn to press the olives for oil. With new presses purchased by the Tarqumiya cooperative and others, the long wait is shortened.

Electrification projects in the Hebron and Nablus districts will bring day-time power to areas that until now have enjoyed electricity only at night or not at all. For women, this opens the possibilities of refrigeration and electric sewing machines, among other things. In Gaza, a municipal project to extend sewer pipe through poor neighborhoods clears the air and the streets, making life cleaner and healthier for women and children at home all day.

Palestinian women have advanced in many ways, but the reasons for their progress will not be found in "women's liberation". They advanced because they had no choice. Separated from husbands and fathers by war and military occupation, the women of Palestine are forced to shoulder much of the responsibility for maintaining basic institutions and services, as well as carrying on their traditional tasks of farming and caring for families.

Enclosed is a special gift for women's projects in the Occupied Territories.

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*This issue of the ANERA Newsletter was edited by Lucy Brown, ANERA's Executive Assistant.*

# ANERA

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