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## Investing in Women, Strengthening Communities

“**N**o society can be just, and no human or economic development even-spread and sustainable if women, who represent half of the population, are left behind, if their needs and aspirations are not addressed.”

This statement, which first appeared in the fall 1996 issue of ANERA News, comes from Dr. Lamis Abu-Nahleh, a founder of the Bir Zeit University women's studies program. Nearly 20 years later, its message remains as relevant as ever.

Women are a powerful force in the communities ANERA serves. They are mothers and caretakers. They are breadwinners and providers. They are advocates for positive change. They are leaders in their fields and role models for young people. We know this to be true based on over 45 years of experience of working with strong and inspiring women who have been at the heart of many of our program successes.

ANERA's upcoming Annual Dinner celebrates women and is raising funds to support projects in Palestinian and Lebanese communities that open doors



# ANERA NEWS

The ANERA newsletter is published quarterly by American Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA), a non-profit agency established in 1968 and dedicated to providing development, health, education and employment programs to Palestinian communities and impoverished families throughout the Middle East.

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Editor: Liz Demarest

Contributing Writers:  
Rami Azzam, Bill Corcoran,  
Liz Demarest, Laurie Kassman,  
Ilham Nasser, Nancy Nye,  
Muna Shami

Contributing Photographers:  
David Colman and Rania Elhilou

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ANERA  
1111 14<sup>th</sup> Street NW, #400  
Washington, DC 20005  
Tel: 202-266-9700  
anera@anera.org • www.anera.org

**COVER PHOTO:** Om Ahmad Ebeed is a mother in Khan Younis, Gaza, who participated in ANERA's parasite prevention program.  
Rania Elhilou, photographer

## Investing in Women, Strengthening Communities

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for them through education, health and development programs. When women have access to educational and economic opportunities, they invest in their communities and improve the lives of everyone around them. Support from ANERA's community of donors helps them achieve that goal.

### Good community health begins at home...

Women are the primary health caregivers for the family. This is particularly true in areas where doctors are not readily available or affordable. The more that women understand their own health needs, the better equipped they are to take care of their husbands, sons and daughters. Through learning actionable practices, women are able to take control and prevent common problems like lice, scabies, parasites and nutrition deficiencies.

### Education opens opportunities...

Increasingly, women are in the majority when it comes to seeking higher education; however, they often don't share the same advantages as their male colleagues. Vocational training programs offer them marketable skills that give them a competitive edge. ANERA is especially concerned with providing teachers the knowledge and skills they need to bring out the best from their students (see page 6).

### Investment transforms lives...

More women are major breadwinners, whether they are newly arrived refugees in Lebanon or heads of impoverished families in Gaza where men cannot find jobs. Through economic development programs, like loans and support for women's cooperative enterprises, women are empowered and the economic benefits of their endeavors naturally follow for everyone around them.

### Partnerships make it all possible...

ANERA partners with women who are leaders in their communities. They haven't walked away. They are there every day investing their time, energy, creativity, their hearts and sometimes even their own limited resources. They set the example and improve the well-being of their expanded family – the men, women and children who benefit from their generosity.

## Advocate for Women

Ellen Siegel, long-time ANERA supporter and health committee member, returns to Beirut every year to remember the victims of the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre. As a nurse, she volunteered during the 1982 invasion of Lebanon to treat wounded Palestinian and Lebanese in Sabra camp.

Besides promoting ANERA's medical relief projects, Ellen is a strong advocate for the empowerment of women through embroidery programs and educational outreach.

Ellen Siegel received the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee 2014 Rachel Corrie Award in honor of her commitment to Palestinian human rights.





**702,000**

Number of women & girls who now have access to clean bathrooms, potable water or upgraded medical and education facilities in Palestine.

2008-2013 | ANERA's Emergency Water & Sanitation project



**77 teachers** trained in teaching methods that encourage active learning from Gaza & West Bank preschools



female-headed refugee families from Syria received in-kind relief kits in Lebanon

There are no school health programs in Gaza for children between 3 and 6.

Last year, ANERA narrowed this gap by holding health education sessions for **5,109 mothers.**



**98%**  
Gaza Women's Loan Fund  
repayment  
rate

CHILDREN UNDER 3

CHILDREN 6 & UP

For those who need proof that women are a sound investment, ANERA can proudly present the Gaza Women's Loan Fund (GWLF). Now in its 20<sup>th</sup> year, the GWLF has offered small affordable loans – totalling more than \$7 million – to nearly 6,000 women who have used the start-up funds to establish businesses in food preparation, cosmetology, small animal husbandry, and so much more. The extraordinary repayment of loans has ensured the initial investment of capital is recycled again and again.

Hope Cobb, who chaired the GWLF committee in the late 1990s, said, “The ingenuity shown by these women and their families is truly amazing. They accomplish so much with so very little.” And committee member Mona Aboelnaga added, “By supporting a woman entrepreneur, you educate her children, provide momentum for women’s rights and strengthen a community and its civil society.”

At the October Annual Dinner, ANERA will honor Hope Cobb on behalf of all the donors who made the Gaza Women’s Loan Fund a reality, and celebrate the contributions Gaza’s women have made to their communities.




*“I sent two kids to university and I fed my family.” Fathia Abu Amer says she would not have been able to build up her dress-making business without the several loans she had received from the Gaza Women’s Loan Fund. “I have no words to describe how fortunate I was when I learned about the loans 20 years ago.”*





# Rahaf's Story: A Dream on Hold





I come from Baba Amr, in the city of Homs. Baba Amr is the neighborhood where everything started in Syria. Homs was under siege for over a year, so we were not able to leave. It was very difficult there: there was no food, no water, no medicine. My father disappeared during the war. We don't know where he is and we don't even know whether he is alive.

Right after the siege was over, in February 2014, we escaped to Lebanon, my mother, my three sisters and me. Psychologically we were just so tired!

I'm 18. I'm the oldest. We're all girls, and you know what? This is actually better, because when there are boys in the family, they tend to make decisions for everyone. While me, I am a free spirit!

Soon after we arrived in Shatila camp, I started to volunteer at the Najdeh Association [ANERA's partner]. I cannot spend all day doing nothing. At least there I feel that I am helping some people. I teach young children who don't have access to school and I help pupils with their homework. Education is very important. It is the most important thing to build a future.

In Syria, I was in 10th grade. I was about to get my degree. But then the war started. In Lebanon, the curriculum is different. It's all in English. It's too difficult for me because I've always studied in Arabic. But I had very good grades, so I'm not giving up. I will pursue my studies when all this is over.

Syria is the most beautiful country. They say that our house has been destroyed but I am not sure. We came from Syria with just with a few suitcases full of clothes, and that's all we have left.

Life is tough in Shatila. Electricity cuts off all the time. The water is salty - we can't drink it. We have no fridge.

My dearest dream is to go back back home and get my degree so I can become a pharmacist.



# Taking Pride in Preschool Education

by Dr. Ilham Nasser and Dr. Muna Shami, members of the ANERA Education Committee

As individuals who evaluate schools on a regular basis in the US and other countries, we were so pleased to visit ANERA's early childhood development (ECD) projects in Palestine in May. We saw first-hand the inspiring work that ANERA has spearheaded in a sector that has historically been underfunded and marginalized. Palestinian children, just like any other children, deserve a solid educational foundation. And ANERA is striving to provide it.

As a female-dominated profession in Palestine, it is fair to say ECD doesn't get the same level of respect as other fields. ANERA is invested in empowering women and elevating their skill level and professionalism in the eyes of the practitioners themselves and in the community as a whole. The messages instilled are: it's a real profession...it's valuable...preschool teachers are an integral part of the education community, not babysitters.

We saw ANERA's education program specialists Sulieman Mleahat and Sulaima Abu El Haj embodying those messages. Sulieman does a great job of supervising and managing the program. Sulaima is directly involved, on a regular and ongoing basis, with mentoring, guiding, and supporting the teachers and directors of preschools.

We visited a dozen preschools and when Sulaima walks into a room, teachers and children rush to greet her and hug her. She is part of the community. You feel her relationship with the school is ongoing and very much nuts and bolts. She models the behavior that she wants the teachers to adopt, getting down on the floor at eye-level with children. She is uncompromising with the teachers about the important role they play. She tells them, "You develop children for life!"

It was clear to us that the women who direct and teach at the preschools we visited are taking great pride in the importance of what they are doing. Their classrooms are interactive and fun and they are actively using the teaching techniques they learned in ANERA's training and mentoring sessions. It is also evident that parents are getting more involved with their children's preschool experience. For example, while we were there, Sulaima conducted a session to teach parents how to make toys. All of the participants were mothers and they engaged in the activities with enthusiasm. They were able to see the immediate benefit of the training, when their children took the toys and played with them right away.



In a region where the majority of preschool-aged children have no access to schools at all, the progress we witnessed is critical. ANERA's work with teachers and parents, coupled with extensive school renovations and reading initiatives, have led to substantive, real changes that are being played out at preschools across the West Bank and Gaza. We have a long way to go, but there is no doubt that the ECD sector is being revolutionized and taking a proud place in many Palestinian communities.

*[from left to right] Muna Shami, Sulaima Abu El Haj and Ilham Nasser with three students at the Azariyeh Preschool in the West Bank.*





# Annual Dinner

Friday, October 17, 2014

**Omni Shoreham Hotel**  
2500 Calvert St NW  
Washington, DC 20008

**Make a reservation.**  
Visit [www.anera.org/dinner](http://www.anera.org/dinner)

**Questions?**  
[dinner@anera.org](mailto:dinner@anera.org)  
(202) 266-9729

## Investing in Women Strengthening Communities

When women have access to educational and economic opportunities, they invest in their families and communities.

Funds from the 2014 Annual Dinner will open doors for women through education, health and development programs in the West Bank, Gaza and Lebanon.



# ANERA

Improving Lives in the Middle East

Since 1968

American Near East Refugee Aid  
1111 14<sup>th</sup> Street NW, #400  
Washington, DC 20005

## Investing in Women, Strengthening Communities

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Dear Friend of ANERA:

The majority of ANERA programs directly impact women and indeed are made possible because of their active involvement.

When we are building infrastructure, women are engaged in the design and implementation stages. When we reach out to communities about adopting healthy practices in families, it's the mothers who come and then actively pass on what they learn. When we train preschool teachers in active learning techniques, women are the participants. When our projects create jobs, women are often employed as engineers, supervisors and specialists at ANERA and elsewhere. There are countless examples like these.

I hope this issue of the newsletter, with its focus on women, will buoy your spirits. As we all watch the news and follow the troubling developments in Palestine, let's take heart in the resilience and creativity of the people ANERA serves.

  
ANERA President

