



# Challenging stereotypes:

## Female trailblazers in


# PALESTINE

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Funded by  
the European Union





Produced by COSPE, 2021

COSPE is an Italian NGO established in 1983, and operating in 26 countries. COSPE has been working in Palestine since 1995, mainly collaborating with youth and women's organizations.

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In partnership with the Democracy and Workers' Rights Center in Palestine (DWRC), the Palestinian Working Women Society for Development (PWWSD), EducAid NGO.

In the framework of the project "Gender Equality in the Economic Sphere: Our Right, Our Priority". The project is supported by the European Union, and aims at enhancing Palestinian CSOs engagement and contribution to advance gender equality in Palestine, in particular the economic rights of women and women with disabilities.

## Challenging stereotypes: Female trailblazers in Palestine

“My father used to support me and my children financially until he passed away. When I obtained my inheritance, I built a house and bought myself a car.”

**Naela Ali Faheem Abu Jiba** is a 40-years-old woman from the Gaza Strip and she works as a taxi driver. *“One day I was in a beauty salon and I heard one of the customers arguing with her husband on the phone about her need for a car. On that occasion, I came up with the idea of setting up a transportation service for women”*.

As the transportation sector in the occupied Palestinian territory, and especially in the Gaza Strip, is male-dominated, Naela’s idea to invest money in a car and become a driver was revolutionary. Her business delivers a fast and efficient transportation service to Palestinian women, increasing their freedom to move autonomously as they feel safer and more comfortable to move around with a woman.

In a patriarchal society that limits women’s freedom of movement, such a service decreases women’s dependence on their husbands, fathers or brothers and relieves them from the social pressure and prejudice attached to a woman hopping on a taxi driven by a man.

Naela is a trailblazer, and she is not the only one. Rimah Jihad Atallah Al-Behissi, a 20-year-old from Deir Al-Balah, in the Gaza Strip, works as a solar energy technician, while Babel Ahmed Qdeih is an expert in mobile phone technology.

These women have pursued careers in male-dominated sectors and in non-traditional professions, overcoming major obstacles that Palestinian women face when trying to access the job market.

Not only they succeeded to work and create their own source of income in a labor market



Naela Ali Faheem Abu Jiba , Taxi driver

where women participation is still very low and the gender employment gap is regrettably wide, but also they dared to challenge stereotypes and discriminatory gender norms that have so far confined Palestinian women to a few sectors, in particular the care sectors: education, health, social care and domestic work.

## Palestinian women’s access to employment: a snapshot

The Palestinian economy is a captive economy, as it is completely subservient to that of Israel, the State that has been illegally occupying Palestine since 1967. The profound impact of decades of settler colonialism, military occupation and blockade in the case of the Gaza Strip on the economic situation has been further aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic, and women are paying the highest price. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), in 2020 only

1- Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021. The Situation of the Palestinian Women on the Eve of the International Women’s Day, 08/03/2021. Available at [http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/portals/\\_pcbs/PressRelease/Press\\_En\\_7-3-2021-WD-en.pdf](http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/portals/_pcbs/PressRelease/Press_En_7-3-2021-WD-en.pdf)

16% of all working-age women in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (oPt) participated in the labor force, compared to 65% of men.

This percentage drops to 2% when it comes to women with disabilities while 23% of men with disabilities participate in the labor force. These data show how low women's participation to the labor force is, as well as the wide gap between men and women, which partly displays the starkly different level of access to employment opportunities based on gender. Moreover, the unemployment rate stands at 40% for women and spikes to 69% when considering young female graduates<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, when looking at data on unemployment rates by years of schooling, the more educated women rank the higher the unemployment rate; for the last quarter of 2020, PCBS reported the unemployment rate at 5.6% for women with 1-6 years of schooling, and at 42.1% for women with 13+ years of schooling<sup>2</sup>. In other words, a University degree does not increase the likelihood of getting a job and this is further confirmed by the fact that although 61% of students enrolled in higher education institutions are women<sup>3</sup>, females' unemployment rate is much higher than men's one. More women than men suffer from long-term unemployment, as 59.5% of unemployed women spend more than 12 months looking for a job, compared to 33% of unemployed men<sup>4</sup>.

*The main obstacles I faced were the lack of available resources and difficulties in obtaining practical training, as I am a girl and all the specialists in this field are young men.*

## Limited Opportunities: Major obstacles to women's access to employment

The statistics highlight that Palestinian women and men do not enjoy the same employment opportunities. Widespread and deep-seated gender-based discrimination significantly hinders women's full enjoyment of the right to work, in breach of international standards and, in particular, of Article 11 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The obstacles that severely limit or outright impede Palestinian women's access to the job market, especially in non-traditional and male-dominated sectors, are many and various.

### At household level

The patriarchal features of the Palestinian society and the relevant stereotypes and gender norms critically limit women's access to employment, as well as opportunities for their advancement. First, women are expected to be responsible for domestic work: what is known as the "care burden" falls primarily and almost entirely on their shoulders. In Palestine, "the ratio of women's to men's time spent on unpaid care work reaches [...] 7:1"<sup>5</sup>. Babel Ahmed Qdeih recently opened her own shop, where she provides women in Gaza with phone programming and maintenance services. *"I am trying to conciliate my work and family duties"*, she admits. In the oPt, 80% of men and 60% of women believe that *"women's most important role is within the household"*, while 75% of men and 51% of women assert that for women it is more important to get married than to have a career<sup>6</sup>. These attitudes affect women's aspirations, define their priorities and

2- Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021. Labour Force Survey (October – December 2020) Round (Q4/2020). Available at [http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/portals/\\_pcbs/PressRelease/Press\\_En\\_15-2-2021-LF-en.pdf](http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/portals/_pcbs/PressRelease/Press_En_15-2-2021-LF-en.pdf)

3- The Situation of the Palestinian Women on the Eve of the International Women's Day.

4- Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021. Palestinian Labour Force Survey: Annual Report: 2020 (table 63).

5- UN Women and ERF, 2020. Policy Brief No. 4. The Care Economy in Palestine: towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work.

6- UN Women & Promundo, 2017. Understanding Masculinities: International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) – Middle East and North Africa, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, and Palestine. Available at <https://promundoglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/IMAGES-MENA-Multi-Country-Report-EN-16May2017-web.pdf>



result in, among other things, 94.8% of women being primarily responsible for unpaid care and domestic work, compared to 42.5% of men<sup>7</sup>. In the Gaza Strip, unemployed women spend on average 12 hours a day on unpaid care and domestic work<sup>8</sup>, making particularly hard for them to be able to work outside the home.

Gender stereotypes further limit women's access to employment as husbands are generally considered as the main decision-makers within the household and as the protectors of their wives' safety from the actual or perceived risk of harassment outside the house. The implications are twofold. On the one hand, many Palestinian women cannot independently decide if they can leave the house and, therefore, only 1 in 10 reports having the sole decision-making authority over whether she can work or get a job outside the home<sup>9</sup>. The fact that women are expected not to be out in the evening or to work with men additionally narrows their possibility to access the job market. On the other hand, as men administer family assets, women may not have access or control to resources that could be essential, especially if they want to become entrepreneurs or set up their own businesses. Women exposed to gender-based violence (GBV) are a particularly vulnerable category, as the segregation and isolation they are subjected to further restrict their freedom of movement and limit their access to necessary resources, significantly reducing their access to employment opportunities and the chance to acquire the economic independence that would help them to break the cycle of violence.

### At community level

Gender norms also take the form of social pressure that communities and families exert on those women that decide to invest in and pursue careers especially in non-traditional sectors. As Naela, the taxi driver from Gaza, explains, "The



Rimah, mobile phone technician

main obstacles that I faced came mainly from my family and society; my family wanted me to leave my job because they did not want our family name linked to me working as a taxi driver". Rimah, who is currently working as a solar energy technician with the Renewable Power Company in the Gaza Strip, fears that, in the future, her extended family will pressure her to leave the profession "due to customs, social norms, and widespread criticism from the community."

### At State level

At the macro level, the Israeli military occupation significantly reduces women's opportunity to participate in the job market. First, especially in the West Bank, going out of the house entails a high risk of being exposed to abuse, harassment and violence from both Israeli occupation forces, as well as from settlers. This strengthens discriminatory gender norms, as the possibility that women are subjected to the

7- OCHA/CARE, 2020. Rapid gender analysis to inform the 2021 humanitarian programme cycle in the occupied Palestinian territory. Available at <https://www.un.org/unispa/document/rapid-gender-analysis-to-inform-the-2021-humanitarian-programme-cycle-in-the-opt-ocha-care/>

8- Oxfam, 2019. Rapid Care Analysis: A contextualized tool for the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Available at <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/rapid-care-analysis-a-contextualized-tool-for-the-occupied-palestinian-territory-620911/>

9- Understanding Masculinities.

Israeli occupation-related violence becomes an additional deterrent to leave the home to go to work. Beside restrictions on mobility, the widespread illegal practice of Palestinian homes demolitions by the occupying power entails additional care burdens for women, as they have to take care of their children without shelter. Moreover, families usually move to the house of the husband's relatives, which implies that women are less likely to be free to decide for their own lives and more likely to be subjected to various forms of GBV<sup>10</sup>. The Israeli occupation further limits women's access to employment, as it has a huge impact on access to resources and development opportunities at large. As the military occupation, settler colonialism and the blockade in the Gaza Strip damage an increasingly deteriorating economy, job opportunities drastically and progressively shrink and, for all the reasons mentioned above, women are the first to be cut out. Palestinian laws and policies also heavily reflect these gender norms, power relations, and social expectations. Despite the numerous commitments in national strategies to foster women's integration in the labour market and economy, and to address gender gaps, labor legislation and policies are still gender-blind and do not address the systematic discrimination that Palestinian women experience when trying to access the job market. Likewise, Palestinian bank and lending institutions, which are crucial for women who want to become entrepreneurs and develop their own businesses, do not always take into account women's specific necessities and constraints when they request loans, like their limited ownership and control over money and family assets.

***I have come to love my work, and dream of continuing to work in this field, despite being exposed to criticism in my community***



Amal , carpenter

The limited access to resources that results from societal norms and discriminatory laws is further perpetuated by a gender-blind credit system, which is even more defective for women in remote areas<sup>11</sup>. "The difficult economic conditions prevented me from opening my own business at the beginning. The main obstacles I faced were the lack of available resources and difficulties in obtaining practical training, as I am a girl and all the specialists in this field are young men", Babel states.

### **Women with disabilities**

Women with disabilities (WwD) represent the most excluded category. They struggle to have access to employment, education and resources, as they have to be dependent on relatives or friends for care and support. A woman with disabilities faces multiple obstacles before and during the employment. She has to deal with inaccessible jobs advertisements, lack of appropriate transportation, different and unfair terms of references and, often, with the inaccessibility of workplaces. In addition, once

10- WCLAC, 2021. Compounded threats. How covid-19, occupation and patriarchy have impacted Palestinian women in 2020. Available at <http://www.wclac.org/files/library/21/03/m8bwzl5xfxczrnc15ygkyi.pdf>

11- PWWSD, 2020. A Research Study on the Impact of the Israeli Military Occupation on the Access of Rural Women to their Economic Rights.



and if she gets the job, there is the risk that the employer will require her to perform tasks that are not conform to her qualifications. National and international laws on rights of women and Persons with Disabilities should protect their employment inclusion, but often these laws are neither implemented nor monitored.

In addition to the prejudice, physical and institutional barriers linked to their disability, WwD are also highly exposed to GBV, which adds another layer of discrimination that further increases their vulnerability and decreases their opportunities to engage in a profession of their choice. Indeed, a 2019 study reveals that there is a much higher incidence of GBV among Palestinian WwD compared to women without disabilities<sup>12</sup>, and that an increasing proportion of women and girls with disabilities in the Palestinian territories has experienced various forms of psychological, social, physical and sexual violence.

### The Impact of Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought a general deterioration of the economic situation and a general loss of jobs and economic opportunities. At the same time, the public health crisis and the measures that have been adopted to reduce the spread of the virus have further reinforced pre-existing patriarchal structures. Beside the reduced mobility, the lockdowns and the closure of educational institutions have increased the care burden and household tasks that fell solely on women's shoulders. In a survey conducted by AWRAD, 68% of female respondents noted a significant increase in household duties during the pandemic<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, the loss of family income disproportionately affected women (76% female, 66% male), who have additionally faced an unprecedentedly high incidence of GBV. These dynamics, besides having a huge toll on women's psychological and physical wellbeing, further reduced employment opportunities available to women and their possibility to join the labor force.

## Female trailblazers in Palestine

In such a context, any woman that succeeds in accessing the job market and in a non-traditional and male-dominated sector is, indeed, revolutionary. Female trailblazers have not only managed to overcome the multiple layers of discrimination, but they have also had the courage to take the lenses of social expectations off, recognize their passions and aspirations and pursue them with perseverance and determination. Each day, they face criticism and pressure, especially from their community, and yet they decide to continue and challenge deep-seated prejudice through their professions.

As Naela, the taxi driver, puts it, *"My job is not shameful, even if it is unconventional and unfamiliar to society. It would be wrong not to continue. I must face difficulties and assume responsibility in order to pursue economic and moral empowerment"*.

On a similar note, Rimah, the mobile phone technician, proudly states, *"I have come to love my work, and dream of continuing to work in this field, despite being exposed to criticism in my community, from my relatives and from people around me. Through my job, I was able to create a source of income for myself and gained self-confidence. I also sensed that I gained people's respect and appreciation. I made them respect me and adopt a positive opinion of women in general"*.

Amal Shahda Ahmed Abeed is a carpenter from Nuseirat refugee camp, in the Gaza Strip. After 9 years of traineeship in the field of carpentry, she was selected for a project by the Small Enterprise Center Association and won a grant, through which she was able to open her own shop. *"It was a wonderful idea for me and a new challenge, as I am a woman and I live in a refugee camp. Although society, customs and traditions reject this idea, I was determined to start my own business"*. Her work had a positive impact on her home and her life.

12- UNFPA and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark: Women and girls with disabilities: Needs of survivors of gender-based violence and services offered to them, March 2019. URL: [https://palestine.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Women%20and%20Girls%20with%20Disabilities\\_0.PDF](https://palestine.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Women%20and%20Girls%20with%20Disabilities_0.PDF).

13- AWRAD, 2020. Coping with COVID-19 Pandemic: Impacts and Coping Strategies among Palestinians. Available at <http://www.awrad.org/en/article/10707/Coping-with-COVID-19-Pandemic-Impacts-and-Coping-Strategies-among-Palestinians>

She asserts, *"Had I not worked, the situation would have been very difficult, especially because no one is supporting me financially, and my sick daughter needs monthly treatments estimated at 150 shekels approximately. My work gave me strength and confidence in myself, and introduced me to people and society"*.

Women with disabilities working in non-traditional sectors face additional layers of discrimination and stigma; hence, their choice to keep working and advancing in these professions becomes a courageous daily struggle for their rights and dignity. The story of Karima, a 30-year-old mobile communication technician from Yatta, is one among many others.

**I** work for a mobile communications company. I love working and I never take days off. Since I started, I have gotten many job offers. People appreciate my work very much and they always ask for me. For me, disability is not a disability; it is an energy that can lead you on the path to success.<sup>14</sup>

It is worth mentioning that, in some instances, supportive parents have truly made a difference as they backed their daughters in pursuing their ambitions. Their support has helped them to stand up to the many criticisms and challenges coming from the society more at large. As Babel said, *"My father encouraged me to do this work. He stood by my side and provided me with his full support to continue my work in doing maintenance of women's phones. I initially worked at home, and used some modest maintenance tools and devices, such as my personal computer, maintenance programs, hotspots, and the examination tool that my father provided for me"*. Similarly, Rimah expressed her appreciation and recognition to her mother who encouraged her to complete the specialization in solar energy when she was thinking of giving up. She eventually graduated with distinction.

No matter how high the obstacles, their unconventional professions have represented the

keys to their economic and personal empowerment. By pursuing the career they chose for themselves, they gained self-confidence and control over their own lives, built their own financial independence, scored respect and got new contacts with others.

## New Spaces, New Opportunities, New Perspectives for Palestinian Women and Girls

Female trailblazers and the non-traditional professions they keep pursuing are extremely significant not only for themselves and their own existence but also for Palestinian women and girls more at large. The most immediate and tangible effect is that, in some cases, they give women access to new services that, due to discriminatory social norms, were previously exclusively managed by men and thus de-facto inaccessible to women. Their independence and autonomy make space for other women's independence and autonomy.

Babel has specialized in repairing women's phones *"in order to preserve women's privacy and their secrets, so that they feel more reassured that their phones and their contents are [kept private], in case they require maintenance. My services were welcomed by a great number of girls"*.

Similarly, Naela's work as a driver made movement easier for women and "contributed to releasing them from feeling uncomfortable, especially for their transportation during the night time". Likewise, Rimah sets up and repairs electrical installations in female-headed households. Their examples prove the deep trust and connection that runs through and binds Palestinian women together, in a spirit of sisterhood and reciprocity. These women picture the future of their professions and businesses side by side with other women. *"I seek to develop and expand my business, provide all maintenance equipment, expand the place, and train girls at my shop"*, explains Babel, the mobile phone technician. Naela noticed some reluctance from other women, probably due to pressure from

<sup>14</sup> -EducAid, 2016. I am a woman. No more, no less. Available at <https://www.educaid.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/I-AM-A-WOMAN.pdf>





Karima, mobile communication technician

the families, yet she is still determined to involve more women and to open a taxi office. Rimah is thinking about involving other women, not only in her job, but also for ***“advocating together to change customs and traditions, and challenge the negative perception of working women in society”***. ***“The nature of my work has encouraged women and girls to educate themselves, work, and undertake studies in fields that are rare, difficult and unconventional”***, Rimah asserts. Although concrete and urgent measures are necessary to eliminate gender-based discrimination currently hindering Palestinian women’s full enjoyment of their right to work, Amal, Babel, Karima, Rimah and Naela’s stories, as well as the stories of many other Palestinian female trailblazers, are extremely significant as they open up new perspectives and give Palestinian women and girls the possibility to imagine themselves and their futures differently. By hearing the story of a successful female solar energy technician, like Rimah, girls think that a future in this unconventional field is possible for them, too. Dreams and aspirations change and widen and the self-fulfilling prophecy of women responsible for unpaid care work or employed in

“traditional” sectors can eventually be broken.

As 75% of men and 51% of women in Palestine believe that for women it is more important to get married than to have a career<sup>15</sup>, presenting the stories of female trailblazers is necessary and urgent. Only then can girls imagine themselves doing what these women do.

## Developing Story

The latest escalation of violence in the oPt and, in particular, the heavy bombardments the Israeli Armed Forces conducted on Gaza in May 2021 have significantly exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in the Strip. The airstrikes killed 256 Palestinians, including 66 children and 40 women, injured more than 2,000 and provoked irreparable damages to civilian infrastructure, which displaced thousands of people, decreased access to clean water and essential health services, and worsened the already chronic electricity deficit<sup>16</sup>. Ahead of a process of reconstruction that will take years, the life of two million people has been severely disrupted. Amal, Babel, Naela and Rimah are among the two million; their present is grim and their future is even more uncertain than before. Among other things, their professional growth has been abruptly interrupted and they risk losing their jobs, which, as explained above, represent their major source of income and much more than that, for them, their families, and the Palestinian women as a whole.

Ever since the beginning of the 11-day flare-up, Rimah, Babel, Amal and Naela have stopped working. Rimah, the solar energy technician, has not been able to work and does not know when and if she will be able to resume her job. Her employer is struggling to pay wages; moreover, the company has suffered major damages and equipment has been stolen from the storage unit during the attacks on Gaza. Rimah has thought about using her professional skills to work autonomously, yet she has neither the necessary equipment nor the means to purchase it.

Likewise, Babel, the mobile phone maintenance

<sup>15</sup>- Understanding Masculinities.

<sup>16</sup> - UN OCHA, 2021. Situation Report No. 2 : 28 May – 3 June 2021.

Available at <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/response-escalation-opt-situation-report-no-2-28-may-3-june-2021>

technician from Khan Younis, was not able to work during the heavy airstrikes. She could not reach her workplace, located in the border area in Abassan, and she is currently unable to resume her work because, as the border crossings remain closed except for basic commodities, she does not have the spare parts needed to repair mobile phones.

For the same reasons, Amal, the carpenter, does not have the material she needs; in addition to that, there is no demand for her products as people's priorities have drastically changed.

Naela, the taxi driver, could not work during the attacks as the main roads were directly targeted by Israeli airstrikes. Today, she is trying to resume her work but she is continuously struggling with flat tires due to the stones, shrapnel and broken glasses lying on the ground.



Babel, expert in mobile phone technology

## What is the way forward?

- Professional orientation and counseling for girls and female students, as well as outreach to parents and communities about women's career choices, need to be strengthened.

- Self-employed women and women entrepreneurs should have increased access to financing and technical guidance to develop their projects, taking into account their disparities in access to resources and the context in which they open their businesses. They should receive more support in shouldering the risks of operating a business, and provision of grants should be privileged over loans for more vulnerable women in view of their economic and social status.

- Collective income-generating projects and work among women, through cooperatives and associations should be encouraged and supported.

- The reform of the TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) system should be pursued, particularly in the Gaza Strip, where only men can study certain professional specializations, while others are only open to women; furthermore, girls and young women should be provided with incentives to choose a vocational education.

- The role of employment offices / One Stop Shops should be developed in order to enable women to gain or regain employment, and/or reevaluate and develop their professional skills and formulate career projects.

- Awareness-raising programs among communities on the right to work as a fundamental right for women and the value of women's work should be intensified, also addressing harmful societal norms that undermine women's agency and economic empowerment.

- Patterns of discrimination in access to employment should be monitored, and policy responses to end them should be developed.

- Affirmative action projects and programs for women, including women with disabilities, should be multiplied.

- Clear gender and disability disaggregated targets for policy instruments and programs for employment should be indicated.

- The Labor Law reform process should be sped-up, ensuring that amendments to the Labor Law from a gender equality perspective are adopted.





*This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of COSPE and DWRC and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.*



Funded by the  
European Union