
The Atkin Paper Series

Women in Palestinian Refugee Camps: Case Studies from Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine

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To be a refugee is hard, but to be a woman and a refugee is the hardest of all

The aim of this paper is to take the reader on a journey into the lived experiences of Palestinian refugee women, in several stages. First, I offer an introduction to the historical roots and struggles of Palestinian refugee women. This is followed by case studies drawn from my field research in refugee camps in Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan. The third part of the paper includes recommendations for improving the participation of refugee women in the social and political arenas of these refugee camps. Three main questions have driven the research for this paper: What is the role of women in the refugee camps? What changes have occurred in their lifestyles as refugees? What do these women think and do in pursuit of the principle of the right of return?

Introduction

The Palestinian refugee issue was created in 1947 as a result of the Palestinian Nakba. Around 711,000 Palestinians were forced to flee their homelands because their villages were destroyed. It has been a long and eventful ride for them up until the present day, despite all the attempts to resolve this intractable issue.

Several United Nations Resolutions have addressed the Palestinian refugee issue over the years. The first was Resolution 194 (Right of Return), adopted on 11 December 1948, near the end of the 1948 Arab–Israeli War. The resolution defined the principles for reaching a final settlement between Israel and the Arabs, which included the return of the Palestinian refugees to their homes. It called for the establishment of a UN Conciliation Commission to facilitate peace between Israel and the Arab states. It stated that ‘the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those who chose not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible’. Another resolution, UN General Assembly Resolution 3236, was passed on 22 November 1974; it declared the right of return for the Palestinian refugees to be an ‘inalienable right’. Yet since then, the Palestinian refugees have had to live in the hope that one day they will be able to return to their homeland, their villages, their lands and their dignity.

I will present myself as an example of a Palestinian refugee woman from Dhiesheh refugee camp, Bethlehem, Occupied Palestine. I have lived in a conflict zone, where I have seen much of the suffering of the Palestinians. I grew up in a family and an environment where women are very strong and join the men in their struggles. I grew up in a culture where women organised initiatives so that when their husbands were attacked and arrested by Israeli soldiers, they were able to live, work and raise their children, and continue the Palestinian struggle. From what I have seen first-hand, women coped with leaving their villages better than the men. My grandfather, for example, refused – with dignity – to be called a refugee and refused to give in to the fact that his home was taken, but my grandmother travelled miles to bring water or food to the house, and adjusted to her new environment. My grandparents had eleven children, and my grandmother decided to be strong and move on for them, so that they could eat and go to school. This was passed on to my mother, who was very active in the political arena. She would arrange meetings for all the women in the camp to start small businesses (such as sewing and teaching) as well as demonstrations to help end the Israeli occupation. Teachers and students were all on the same page: the struggle was their only way. They wanted their identity back, and they wanted to live like normal human beings.

As a third-generation refugee, my situation is a little different. The aim of regaining my lost identity has not changed, but the way of the struggle has. My grandmother wanted to feed her children and build a house; my mother had the house, but the economic situation was very hard, and the concept of the Intifada was the focal point for the rebuilding of Palestine. For me, the economic situation is not as bad: I have a house, I travel and learn in other countries. I carry the Palestinian issue on my shoulders and I talk about conflict resolution. I am the new image of a refugee: not poor, not a prisoner. I am the refugee who is educated, and strong.

This does not mean that I am better off – there are different areas of hardship. I don't have the same rights that they did; I don't have the same freedom that they did. My mother, and to some extent my grandmother, played a major part in the struggle: they were first in the field and the first to create initiatives. Now, women in Palestine are less and less involved. I remember my grandmother telling me: 'Manar, don't let the Palestinian story die because of men leading from the front and women being in the back. This is not us and this is not the strong Palestinian woman'. I carry my grandmother's words with me here.

The focus of this research is the experiences of Palestinian refugee women in Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine. According to Kuloglu's book on *Violence Against Women in Conflict Zones*, statistics show that 80 per cent of the victims of the Palestinian conflict are women and children. The conflict and its aftermath affect women in different ways, and they stay with women all their lives, as a stamp on their body or soul. In fact, throughout Palestine's history, women have suffered the most, as daughters, wives, sisters and mothers.

The Journey Through the Camps: Lebanon

The roles played by women in the three refugee camps that I visited in Lebanon (Shatila, Al-Rashidiya and Ein El Hilwa) are similar in many ways. However, the second and third generations of refugees are in many ways different, and thus the role of women has changed throughout the years.

Women were major participants in the historical events that occurred in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. They fought the sieges that were imposed on them by various parties in Lebanon and by Israel. Here I will focus on the events in which women played a great role, and on the siege of today.

Women as armed resistance

The first camp I visited was Shatila Refugee Camp, in the south of Beirut. According to UNRWA, the population has risen to 22,000 people, living in a one kilometre squared. The small, narrow streets in the camp, its lack of infrastructure and the open electricity wires show the limits of poverty from which this camp suffers. After a tour, I visited the women's centre, where I met six women between the ages of forty-five and sixty-five.

Palestinian refugee women in Lebanon played a great part in the armed resistance against attacks from Lebanese parties, such as Amal, and from Israel. All the Palestinian factions – the PLO and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) – trained people how to defend themselves: how to use guns, bombs and knives. The younger generation of women at that time, in the 1980s, were the ones who were most enthusiastic about the training because they wanted a country, a homeland. The humiliation that they had endured as refugees in Lebanon made them this way, as well as their ruined homes in Palestine, the attacks on their families, and not being able to see their families because of the Israeli occupation. The women would leave to go to the mountains and train with the men; the training was very difficult: 'My commander shot me for real while we were training, so I could know the real thing of how to be a good fighter'. They used to crawl on the ground, and jump above rocks. Some of the women wanted to sacrifice their lives for their country's freedom, and wanted to be suicide bombers in Israel.

One of the heroes of that time that the younger generation looked up to was a woman called Dalal Elmughrabi. She was a Palestinian militant who was a member of Fatah and participated in the 1978 attack on Israel which resulted in the killing of 38 Israelis. She was killed in the course of an operation. 'To be called Dalal means to be a hero. We all wanted to be Dalal, we all wanted to have revenge and to have our land back, and end our suffering by returning back to our identity, our country,

to Palestine'. This is a quote from Kifah, one of the women who decided to be like Dalal. This is her story, which she shared with me.

When she was fifteen years old, she wanted to go and see Palestine, so she wrote a letter to her parents. She told them that she wanted to die in Palestine. She went with two men to the border (Israeli/Palestinian-Lebanese) dressed as a suicide bomber. Since she was born she had seen blood; she was stateless, with no homeland. The women's union helped her to know her way and to help in the struggle, but then she thought to herself: why are we living? Are we living to die? Her two brothers had already been killed. So she decided that she didn't want to die in Lebanon; she felt that as she was already dying, she would rather die in Palestine. No one wanted her to go, but she wanted to go and die there. Her dream was that her body would be in Palestine. She left school every day to go and train, and even faked her school grades for her parents so she could train in secret. She left to carry out the attack, with two men who were her friends. When they reached the border, the Israeli soldiers saw and attacked them, so they ran away and hid in the house of a Lebanese family. The family told the Israeli soldiers where they were, so the soldiers came and threw grenades at them. The men ran away, and she was left inside alone and the Israeli soldiers arrested her.

After listening to what Kifah had to say, I realised that a woman's role lay not just in her actions: it was in her soul, her body and her emotions. Kifah went back home after being in prison for seven years, and she is a hero for the Palestinians. She wanted to give her soul away for freedom and to tell the world that Palestinians still exist and still resist.

Women as prisoners

It was not only men who were attacked, arrested and detained in Israeli and Lebanese prisons. Women were also arrested, attacked, tortured and interrogated because of actions that were considered to be crimes, such as: demonstrating, providing food for fighters, fighting, helping the injured, sending letters and handing out flyers against the Israeli occupation and against some of the Lebanese parties.

On my second day, I visited the Al-Rashidiya Refugee Camp in the south of Lebanon. The leader of the women's union there said that around 50 per cent of the prisoners at that time were women. 'The women suffered in prison more than men, it was much harder'. Some of the women showed me the scars that they still have.

In the eyes of some of the political parties in Lebanon, Syria and Israel, women were not less of a danger than men. In Lebanese prisons, their biological nature facilitated maltreatment. Women are biologically different than men – not weaker, but different. This was used in many ways as a tool of torture in prison. For example, women were tortured the most (sometimes only) during their monthly cycle, with their arms tied behind their back and sitting on uncomfortable chairs for hours and sometimes days. The prisons did not provide the women with needed materials, and they were forced to cut up blankets. Many of the women I interviewed talked about this because it made them hate the fact that they were women, hate their bodies

and their souls. I would like to mention here that the prison guards included women, who would have been familiar with such needs.

Rape was also a tool of humiliation in prison. A woman who wished to remain anonymous shared a little of her misery: 'I was in prison for ten years, and then I left with a child in my womb, the child of the enemy'. She forced herself to remember what she had been trying to forget for years. With tears and pain she apologised and left the room, with no further explanation except that she had had a miscarriage.

During the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in 1982, the Ein El Hilwa Camp was completely destroyed. Ain al-Hilweh is the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon with over 70,000 Palestinian refugees and their descendants, in a very small area around one kilometre squared. All the men were imprisoned and the women had no choice but to rebuild the camp, otherwise they would have had nowhere to live. UNRWA told them that they would provide them with tents instead of rebuilding the houses, but the women refused this. At that moment, the camps were besieged by tanks, so the women divided themselves into groups: a group to distract and fight the Israelis, and another group to bring gas and burn the tents. After this incident, the tent plan was cancelled by UNRWA, while the determined women rebuilt their houses.

I was lucky to meet the women who decided to rebuild the camp. This is a very famous story among Palestinians, and represents an example of what has been told through the years about the role of Palestinian women in refugee camps. The women I met criticised the new projects implemented by the women's centre which are funded, for example, by the EU and the Japanese government, despite the fact that they focus on empowering women. Om Mohammed said: 'we don't have this problem. We, as the older generation, have our strength and we are powerful. They just want the younger generation to think that they need to be empowered and make them forget the real problems and issues'.

Walking in the alleys of Ein El Hilwa, I saw the history of the camp before my eyes, and I saw how the women I was walking with were well respected, the heroes of the camp. Even the name Ein El Hilwa means, in Arabic, 'the eye of the beauty'. The camp was named 'the women's kingdom' after what they have done and what they are still doing.

Women and nonviolent resistance

Some of the women created different ways to resist. For example, the women I interviewed in Ein El Hilwa, who rebuilt their camp, were idols of the non-violence movement. In other camps, such as Shatila and Al-Rashidiya, the women had divided themselves into different groups. One group made food, even when they had nothing to cook and they were forced to eat cat meat. Some of the women would go and bring water and risk getting shot or killed on the way. Another group would help the injured and bury the dead. The women were the main factor in surviving many disasters, such as the Israeli invasion, the Sabra and Shatila massacres, the war of the camps, the Lebanese civil war, and simply being refugees.

During the 'war of the camps' (a sub conflict in the years of the Lebanese civil war that happened between 1984–1988, when the Palestinian refugee camps were besieged by the Shi'ite Amal militia) the main activity for women was demonstrating. It was illegal to demonstrate in the streets so most of the time men avoided doing so. Women, on the other hand, would go and demonstrate, risking their lives – even if they were pregnant. They made newspaper headlines almost every day. They demonstrated against the siege, and against the Israeli occupation of Palestine and Lebanon. One of the women I met, Om Mohammed Al'afehi, was outside Shatila Camp and could not go inside because of the siege. She decided to demonstrate in the streets on a Friday. She went to the mosque and said that she wanted to preach to the people that day. She told them: 'Allah doesn't need your prayers today, Allah wants you to act. Come with me to break the siege, come with me to help our brothers and sisters'.¹ On that day, thousands of people demonstrated at Shatila Camp and broke the siege. This was one of the main actions that later brought the siege to an end.

Another tool that the women used was tunnelling, using only their hands as a tool. Especially at Shatila Camp, they used the tunnels as shelters in case of shooting, bombing or air strikes. They were also used them to bring in what they needed from outside the besieged camp, such as water and food.

All these tools were used as methods of nonviolent resistance and as a way of surviving. However, every day for them was a struggle. They were all targets, and it was their identity that was the biggest target of all.

'Whoever did not die then, is sick now'

In my interviews in the three refugee camps, many women from the older generation would talk about their health. Some of them wished that they had died when they were much younger. According to the interviews, more than 70 per cent of the women who fought and lived at that time are now sick with serious diseases. The bombs that were dropped on the camps are still affecting the lives and health of the refugees. Recently, a mother lost her child while playing in the streets, due to an unexploded bomb.

All the women I interviewed were sick. Some had damaged lungs from being in the tunnels; their bones and their hands were also ruined. Some have cancer or heart issues. The way their faces look even when they are laughing is sad, and tired. I went to visit some of the women in Al-Rashidiya Camp who could not move because of a sickness in their muscles. They are all depressed. Their role has demanded so much from their health. Some of the women died in the sieges, massacres and war; the women who are alive live in pain every day. Some of them pass it on to their children.

There are no single Palestinian woman: all are married to Alkadya (the Palestinian cause)

These women all had dreams of having a house and children, with a husband that they love. For many of these women the typical 'Prince Charming' figure of

their time was a hero, a Palestinian with olive skin who fights for the dignity and the freedom of his people.

The women mentioned many love stories that were created in prison, or under the gloom of shootings or starvation. They also explained that the men's idea of a perfect woman was one who walks beside him and fights for the freedom of her people, and who is also a good cook.

Yesterday and today

Many elements differentiate the older generation of women from the younger ones. They live in very different times. In my visit to the three camps in Lebanon, I met also with the younger generation in order to hear about the roles that they play. I noticed that they are all very active in NGOs that concentrate on empowering women: for example, focusing on violence against women, embroidery, small businesses and loan projects. They also have projects for their children, such as libraries, kindergartens and schools.

The new generation have their own concerns and hopes. They introduce themselves as Palestinians and dream of going back to Palestine. However, they have a lot of other issues besides the right of return: violence against women, which is increasing; and women's rights, which were clear and respected among the older generation, but which now the new generation of women must work to achieve.

I met one woman who is nineteen years old. She is the star of a documentary about women's rights called Ahlam ('dreams'). When she was engaged, her fiancé forced her to leave school. She left school and then her fiancé left her. She says that he destroyed her life. The new generation of women know less about Palestine and the right of return, as they focus so much on these new issues. In their projects, the women's centres work to keep this alive, which they do in most cases; however, there are new and broader things that the new generation worries about which takes up most of their time and energy.

From what I have seen, the younger generations are the coordinators of the NGOs. Their main worry is to get married and have a husband even if they do not go to school. Poverty at their parents' house makes them want to leave so they can be less of a burden. Most of them end up divorced, which is a new phenomenon among the younger generation. The number of divorces in the camps is increasing, perhaps higher than 60 per cent.

The new generation is trying to redefine the terms to fit with their lives, with their new style of living. They are trying to find a way back to their identity but also to live prosperously. In Ein El Hilwa Camp, there are three types of refugees: from 1948, from 1967, and those without any papers. The women suffer from this the most because under Lebanese law, if she is a 1967 refugee her children will not be registered and so will not have any governmental papers. Above all, no-one is allowed to buy anything outside the camp, especially not a house, land or farm. They are not allowed to work in more than seventy types of jobs, including professional, administrative and mercantile. There is no future for them or their children. Therefore,

1 Interview with Om Mohammed Al'afehi

the new generation is now thinking of how to leave. The women here are always meeting and thinking of how to marry a foreigner to have a better future for their children, and also to have the chance to visit Palestine. Things are changing, and in many ways are getting worse.

Wafa says 'I'm different than my grandmother and mother. I care about fashion and makeup, I care about looking pretty and I care about being active and learning and educating myself. I don't know if another attack will happen in the camp. I'm sure I will fight and I'm sure I will be able to try and protect as many people in the camp as possible, but I won't know that until I'm in the situation'.

As we can see in this research, the mentality of the women has shifted from participating in the struggle to thinking of a 'normal' life, looking for a better future. This does not mean that the refugee issue will be forgotten, as the new generation argue. The new lifestyle comes about with the idea that they 'want a way out of all this, they want to live'.

My trip to the refugee camps in Lebanon revealed the different roles of women, influenced by the circumstances in which they lived and are still living. Despite the differences, the roles of the women remain the most effective in times of war and peace.

The Journey Through the Camps: Jordan

The Palestinian refugees in the camps in Jordan have a mixed identity. They know that they are Palestinians at heart, but they act like Jordanian citizens, are very loyal to King Abdullah and to the country, and if they have a Jordanian National Number they have the same rights as Jordanians. This is the case with the two camps that I visited: Bak'a and Gaza (Jarash).

The Bak'a Camp was created in 1968. It lies 20 kilometres north of Amman, and is home to around 100,000 Palestinians, who are registered with the United Nations. Before the Syrian refugee crisis led to the creation of the Zaatar Camp, it was the largest refugee camp in Jordan. On my visit to Bak'a, I met with the male camp manager. He offered to take me to meet the women at the women's centre in Bak'a. My first interview was with a director of the projects in the centre.

The women I interviewed in the centre introduced themselves as Jordanians from Bak'a Camp. They were conservative in answering my questions. The women repeatedly told me how much they loved Jordan, and the King. They explained the role of the Kingdom in making their lives possible.

The women in Bak'a Camp focus on their daily lives. The new generation is very different from the older one. The centre educates women with skills that they can use to earn money, if they are allowed by their husbands and families to work, such as how to make scarves, hummos, pickles, and cooking. They also have a hair salon where they teach the women how to style brides.

All the women I interviewed talked about their love for Palestine but did not want to talk about the history. They wanted to talk about their daily life, not the past or the future. They are scared to lose what they have, as being Jordanian citizens they have many rights. They just live their days and protect their children. If they are allowed to work by their husbands they are delighted, if not they do not fight it.

Jarash Camp (or as it is nicknamed "Gaza" as most of its residents were from Gaza) was different. The women there had a voice and spoke with honesty about how the Jordanian government treats them as second-class citizens because they do not have a Jordanian National Number. The camp is home to about 24,000 Palestinian refugees who left the Gaza Strip in 1968. Most of the families living there were also displaced in 1948, meaning that they have lost their homes twice. The majority live on less than \$2 a day; about a quarter live on less than \$1 a day. The people in this camp are not allowed to work and they have no rights in Jordan. I met with five women here.

In this camp the women are the main providers. They work in the women's centre in the small UNRWA office and earn very little money, because they cannot have large projects or a stable salary. The women in this camp have no right to work

or even to continue their education in Jordanian universities, like the men do. Some of them decided to go into the private-sector factories to work, including Israeli factories in Jordan. They do not care that they work for Israelis and that the goods they produce are exclusively for Israel.

They want to live and these are the only places where they are allowed to work. They are equal in terms of rights, and salaries. 'It is the only place where we can have a good income and not be humiliated', Nuha told me.²

Most of the women say that they want to go back to Palestine even if they are humiliated there. They do not want to stay stateless. 'The men do nothing here, they are like stones, they either talk too much politics, or want to have too many children. At the end it is the women who will raise those children and feed them and have the responsibility of finding a future for them'.³

2 Interview with Nuha

3 Interview with

The Journey Through the Camps: Palestine

The journey in the refugee camps in Palestine is very similar to the ones in Lebanon in terms of the role of women in the past and present; however, I will touch on the period of the second Intifada and the role of the younger generation at that time.

Dhiesesh is located south of Bethlehem city in the West Bank and it has more than 13,000 people living in less than half a kilo meter squared.

This camp is known to be one of the strongest and most vital among the camps in the south of the West Bank.

Women have played and still play a great role in the life of Dhiesesh. A few years ago I interviewed a woman that had been in prison for seven years. During the second Intifada, when she was a teenager and she had lost many members of her family, she had agreed to go to one of the Israeli cities and blow herself up as well as killing as many Israelis as she could. On the day that the explosion was due to take place, she strapped her detonated explosives belt to her body and a car took her to the city so she could carry out this attack. However, she decided to go back. She told me that "when I saw an Israeli child with his mother, I forgot that they were the enemy and all what I wanted to do was go home." She went home that night shaking and shivering, very scared. The same night the Israeli soldiers came and arrested her. Now she has three children and is teaching them about peace more than anything else. Even after what she faced from the Israeli army in prison and from what she witnessed before prison she told me that "a mother should teach peace and dignity to her children, so they can build what is left to be built from Palestine."⁴

Such suicide bombings, or Martyr operations to the Palestinians, increased greatly during the second Intifada. Ayat AL-Akhras a sixteen year old teenager was the only woman from Dhiesesh Camp who in 2002 who actually went and exploded herself. Normally, and especially during the Intifada, a person who commits such an action is labelled a hero; However when she did this, some of the women, and the men, from the camp criticised the operation not because another Israeli teenager was killed but because she is a woman and her body should not be seen. Her body has been with Israel since 2002 and just last year in 2013 they gave her body to her family to bury it. Therefore, the idea of struggle for women is limited to some tools, but not all the tools like men are able to utilise. This attitude does not come from a caring aspect towards women; it is more from the conservative mentality of the idea of woman and their bodies.

4 Interview with ???

This is just one story out of all the stories from the second Intifada, which was a very fragile political time. Some other stories include the story of a mother who lost all her children, whom were shot and or imprisoned. However, if we want to look at success stories and the positive side of the women's role in the camp one must mention the Ibdaa Cultural Centre. The Centre has a dancing group for children and youth that has males and females, as well as many other projects that can feed their minds with knowledge. One project is the women's committee which meets regularly to create activities for women, mothers and their children. These are things such as workshops, forums on topics like health and human rights. The women also take part in skill training classes for different languages and literacy. The centre has also started a fitness training programme for women as well. One of the most important projects is the embroidery cooperation project which provides income for over fifty women from disadvantaged families in the camp. They have also organised trips abroad so that they can attend women's conferences. They have also supported women in their education by raising funds for scholarships inside Palestinian universities, as well as scholarships to study abroad.

The question of whether women are more violent than men has been given some attention and there are different researches that answer this question: however, the women in the camps through different ways have showed their aptitude and preference for non-violent resistance. The struggle of the Palestinian people is mostly through non-violent means. The women in the camps are the greatest example of this for several reasons:

- Embroidery: this project is very well known in the camps such as Ibdaa Embroidery project where women protect the existence of their culture as well as provide an income for their family.
- Women Centres: the women centres in the refugee camps are a focal point of the existence of the women's traditional role. Such centres have different projects that focus mostly on women and children, such as nurseries, kindergartens, libraries, summer and winter camps, discussion groups, trips for the women and children. This empowers the women – as shown by what the women's centre in Ein El-hilwa refugee camp is doing.
- Women scholarships for education and small businesses: Such as the Development for Improvement of Livelihood for Palestinian Refugees projects where women create businesses in their homes, such as making and selling perfumes, food etc. The women who participate in these projects usually say that their husbands do not really support them, but that their children do. One of the most effective projects for Palestinian women, and refugees in general, is Ashoka (<https://www.ashoka.org/fellow/fida-abu-turky>).

- Not only business scholarships, but also the academic scholarships affect the future of women refugees. Some of the refugee women have become film directors and made documentary movies about the lives of people in refugee camps and Palestine in general. Such as a programme called Shofat – this is a TV show that is directed by a woman from Dhiesheh Camp. This show addresses the problems and the issues within Palestinian society. There are women who have had the chance to go and study abroad and came back to Palestine to teach in the camps, and to assist the children with any learning disabilities as volunteers.
- Women peace building projects have been are the most effective projects. For example there are organizations such as the Center of Democracy and Community Building that deals with this issue where they bring Israeli and Palestinian women to discuss the issue of moving forward and find ways to resolve the conflict.
- There are more than a thousand successful stories of the resistance of the Palestinian refugee women, and Palestinian women in general, that helped lives move forward and made pain easier to handle. They raise hope inside a community that is under occupation and under one of the strongest militarys of the world, the Israeli military.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From my visit to the different refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan, and being a refugee myself from Dhiesheh Camp, I noticed differences between the refugees themselves, but my main focus was on the women's roles in these refugee camps. They are different, but somehow all of them agree on one point: that the role of women is getting weaker due to a change of culture, oppression on the part of families and other women, and even by women to their female counterparts, which is most common nowadays. For example, in the elections of one of the Dhiesheh NGOs, it was difficult to find a woman willing to nominate herself to be elected into the administrative board. The women I interviewed mostly agreed that their role was bigger in the past and that women were allowed to practice their rights and freedom.

Furthermore, does equality mean to be equal to men? Women also have their own way. However, some women who are leaders act like a man, dress like a man, talk like a man and even cut their hair short. Are men the women's role model in the camps now?

Based on my research, I would present the following recommendations:

1. Change educational material that hurts the image of women

In the Palestinian educational system, women are poorly represented. From the first grade, students are taught sentences such as 'Mama is cooking, Dad is reading' or 'Salma is cleaning, Mohammed is playing'. The system teaches to students who will become women and men in the society and what their set roles will be. I believe that this has to change and the idea of a woman who cooks and cleans should be equal to the idea of a man who cooks and cleans. Equality should be taught in schools from day one. This is how we start creating a new society that could build a stronger generation of women.

One step that could be taken is to have stories for children about women who have left an impact on their countries and the world in general. These stories can show women as heroes and the children will be influenced by them in a way that they are influenced by the Cinderella story. Projects and funding should be available to support this idea and put it in place in the Palestinian educational system.

2. Raise the political participation of women

As the research has shown, women in the refugee camps have great capabilities. They have always been the ones that try to find a solution so their families can have a future. I believe that women should be involved in decision-making in the camps, as was the case in the 1980s and early 1990s. They should be allowed to run for and be elected to office. The women who have rebuilt camps from scratch, who have led demonstrations and fought in the field, are examples of the great participation and

contributions of women. They should have much bigger roles. Yet women's political participation in the refugee camps is less than 20 per cent in 2014, compared to much higher percentages years ago.

Women used to run for office in the different Palestinian factions (the PLO, PFLP and Hamas). They also used to lead demonstrations and political meetings. Unfortunately, women now are hardly seen on the political street. The political arena has a great gender gap due to the absence of women. It is also less welcoming for a woman to be in a leadership position. 'Sit down, Hind' is a new phrase, originally said by a Jordanian MP to the female Jordanian MP Hind Fayeze when she was expressing her opinion. This phrase has been used repeatedly to every woman who wants to express her political views in the refugee camps, mostly in a sarcastic way. If a woman expresses that she wants to be the manager of a camp she is will also be met with sarcasm from her society..

This is a serious issue that puts half of the society, women, in a deactivated mode, even if they try. One great example of this is that Khawla Al'zraq, a refugee woman from A'ida Camp in the West Bank, is the leader of the women's union. However, most people acknowledge her nowadays by her husband's position (he is Minister for the Palestinian prisoners).

Providing women with the training and skills required for promoting women's increased visibility, participation and influence in politics is very much needed.

One other point that we should look at is the failure in the peace talks between the Arabs and Israelis, I believe that one of the reasons for this is that there are very few women whom participate in such activities on both sides. We could name one or two from the Palestinian and Israeli sides, such as Hanan Ashrawi and Tzipi Livni, but they are not enough and to an extent they have not been able to do much in the peace process. Women could bring to the table a much deeper solution for peace talks.

Women should not be limited to few positions in politics; they should be trained and supported to run for the highest positions such as to be the President of the country.

3. Focus on the real issues

The NGOs in the refugee camps have so far brought fixed projects to be implemented, in order to develop women's ideas and skills, and the women have had to fit into these projects. However, as this research shows, the women already have their own experiences, skills and knowledge, which should be invested back into the camps.

I recommend focusing on the critical issues according to the women's own suggestions, which are mainly to do with human rights, and in particular forcing the international community to give them their human rights. Men are becoming increasingly violent towards women for many reasons, and one of the reasons is that the West has promulgated the idea that women should ask for their rights, which has made some of the men think that women do not have rights. For example, the

women are mostly led by men in these NGOs, and the advisor or consultant is a man; it is very rare to see a woman in the highest ranks. Therefore, focusing on the real issues of women and their potential roles is what the NGOs need to be training the women for, without any fixed conditions.

An example that could be given on the fixed projects is USAID, the USAID funds don't want to deal with any woman who has a brother or a husband who is a martyr – there are many other conditions – but how can this project be helpful to women as it is often these women who are most in need and they cannot participate. Also some of the projects do not want the women to talk about things like politics while their lives are all surrounded by politics.

I believe that personal initiatives in the camps should come back, and the women should start making initiatives without depending on the funds of a particular organisation as they mostly have preconditions.

4. Deal with facts, not idealism

The woman is the teacher and god of the family; she is the one who has the most influence on her children, especially in the refugee camps. I believe that it is from her that things can start moving forward. The women here know that their children need a better future. Therefore, to move forward and live does not mean that your issue has died. The women should teach their children that if they live, Palestine will live. The idea of a hero should be changed through them; they should help make the hero an educated person, a doctor, an engineer, a writer, and much more that could develop society.

Palestinian mothers have been accused of sending their sons to die and be a hero, to kill many Israelis and be a martyr. I argue that the meaning of 'hero' is very much different than what they are accused of. No mother wishes death upon her child, so indeed the issue is much deeper.

Therefore, in educating a mother, you educate a society.

5. Women should stop oppressing other women

From what I have noticed in my research, the new generation of women are very much oppressing other women. They use the most offensive words to describe other woman. This issue should be resolved by putting these energies to work in building teams of trust and cooperation. Also, the older generation of women do not support the new generation: they criticise them, but do not teach them. The same with the new generation: they criticise them, but do not learn from them. In addition, women vote for a man even if there is a qualified woman for the position.

6. Refugee women meeting Israeli women

My last recommendation involves the concept of the 'other'. There are meetings with women on both sides in Palestine; however, there is no meeting of women from Lebanese refugee camps and Jordanian refugee camps with Israeli women. I think this could bring new prospects for the peace industry. It might take years, but as history has shown, women have something in common and they are leaders by

default. If they cannot meet in Jordan or Lebanon, they can travel abroad and meet in order to talk, share and move forward.

An example would be bridging the gap between the two opposing sides by addressing the common concern of women's involvement in politics and peace negotiations, and identifying the factors influencing the halts in peace talks to date and finding alternative solutions.

About ICSR

ICSR is a unique partnership of King's College London, Georgetown University, the University of Pennsylvania, the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya (Israel), and the Regional Centre for Conflict Prevention Amman (Jordan). Its aim is to counter the growth of radicalisation and political violence by bringing together knowledge and leadership. For more information, see [**www.icsr.info**](http://www.icsr.info)

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