A Palestine refugee woman looks out over the camp
Baq’a camp, Jordan - 1973
(c) Odd Uhrbom/UNRWA Archives
On the occasion of International Women’s Day 2014, and during the International Year of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, it is my pleasure to present this album, ‘The Long Journey of Palestine Refugee Women.’ Candidly portraying the lives and experiences of Palestine refugee women, this collection is a testament not only to their own strength and dignity, but also to the richness and resilience of their community.

Facing displacement, violence, poverty and a denial of basic rights since they were forced to leave their homes in 1948, women have been important guardians of the Palestinian collective memory and communal identity. I have always been amazed by the strength and the spirit of Palestine refugee women. Teachers, doctors, engineers, daughters, sisters, wives and mothers have - through their songs, stories, traditions, skills, talents and sheer force of will - kept alive the collective memory of their refugee communities. Across generations, UNRWA has proudly stood by them, lending support through education and training, healthcare, community development and microfinance.

As we celebrate the contribution of Palestinian women, we must also reflect on the work which remains to be done. Events in the region have shown that Palestine refugees, in particular women and girls, remain uniquely vulnerable. We must strive to support the specific needs of each refugee woman, ensuring her access to services and encouraging her pursuit of new and greater opportunities. Without equality for and empowerment of women, there is progress for no one.

This volume – the UNRWA contribution to the memory and narrative of the Palestine refugees – is a celebration of their contributions to a vibrant and rich culture that has flourished despite enormous obstacles encountered on the long journey of the Palestinian refugees. The photographs you see come from another guardian of the narrative of Palestine refugees: the UNRWA archives. In each photograph, you will see a woman who symbolizes the experience of all Palestinian women and girls. Through the challenges of the past 65 years, their eyes have retained the same pain, but they also continue to reflect the same shared knowledge that determination and steadfastness are essential to building a sound and productive future for the people.
الصعوبات الاجتماعية

HARDSHIP
The Palestine refugee community has been marked from the beginning of their journey by incredible vulnerability. They are asked to not just address their own challenges, but also to weather storms throughout the region. Palestine refugee women – who are threatened by violence, including sexual and domestic violence, or who are left to raise their children alone when husbands or breadwinners are lost – have had to call upon vast reserves of strength and determination.

The conflict that began in Syria in 2011 and has devastated not just that country but also Lebanon and Jordan is only the latest, most terrifying reminder of their vulnerability. It is particularly heart-rending for the Palestine refugees as, in Syria, they had enjoyed a relatively comfortable and safe exile. Challenges remained, but they benefited from many of the rights of Syrian citizens, and were able to go to school, raise their families and find fulfilling employment. After three years of this ‘new nakba’, the community has been devastated, with almost all of the Palestine refugees in Syria in desperate need of assistance.

UNRWA hardship assistance programmes, both emergency and constant, have consistently sought to support women in their efforts to protect themselves and their families. In 2012, for example, over 23,000 of the nearly 300,000 Palestine refugees receiving assistance from the UNRWA social safety net were widows. This priority extends also to places for women in emergency work and training programmes, and efforts to combat domestic or gender-based violence. The Agency has committed to prioritizing and mainstreaming gender and gender issues both in its programmes for refugees and in its offices.
Palestine refugee women farmers
Biddu, West Bank – 2012
© Alaa Ghosheh/UNRWA Archives
A Palestine refugee woman in front of her shelter
Ein El Hilweh camp, Lebanon – 1950s
© UNRWA Archives

Amani Mahmoud, 20, fled her home in Yarmouk with her family
Al-Rameh collective shelter, Jaramana camp, Damascus, Syria – 2013
© Carole Alfarah/UNRWA Archives
Palestine refugee working as a TV broadcaster
Syria – 1975
© Fayez Audeh/UNRWA Archives
Displaced by conflict, a Palestine refugee woman and her five children sought shelter in an UNRWA school
Ein El Hilweh camp, Lebanon – 1982
© George Nehmeh/UNRWA Archives
اختفى زوج حليمة جودة أثناء حرب 1967، فبقت بمفردها لتربي ابنيها، وأحدهما مصاب بالشلل وهو في التاسعة من عمره.

Halimeh Judeh’s husband disappeared during the 1967 hostilities, leaving her to raise two sons, one paralysed at age 9.

Beach camp, Gaza - 1979

(c) George Nehmeh/UNRWA Archives
Palestine refugee women gather for a distribution of rations
Beach Camp, Gaza - 1989
[Caption: M. Nasr/UNRWA Archives]
Palestine refugee couple celebrate the arrival of a new baby.

Baqa’a camp, Jordan – 1973

© George Nehmeh/UNRWA Archives
Especially in the early years, raising healthy children was an incredibly difficult task for Palestine refugee mothers. They faced not only the usual challenges of parenthood, but also the added crises of displacement - including overcrowding, lack of hygiene and insufficient food – and, at times, environments marked by conflict and violence.

UNRWA has sought to help these women as they raise their children. One innovation, in 1957, was the development of Najjar salts, a special oral formula to treat dehydrated diarrhoeic infants. This treatment was later adopted and used extensively by UNICEF.

The situation today has improved in many ways. UNRWA health services provide Palestine refugee women with pre-conception care, as well as attention before, during and after pregnancy and birth. By 2010, 70 per cent of women received antenatal care, and nearly 100 per cent of births were attended by skilled health staff. As these women raise their children, UNRWA doctors and nurses are there to provide monitoring, checkups, vaccinations and attention, and to support the strength and determination of Palestine refugee mothers.

Nurses, in particular, have played a dual role in the history of the community. For thousands of women over the past 60 years, nursing has been a fulfilling and rewarding career, but nurses also form the backbone of the UNRWA health system. They provide attention and care to Palestine refugees - young and old, men and women - in the face of the challenges of everyday life as well as the extraordinary struggles of the Palestine refugee experience.
Young mother taking a dehydrated child to UNRWA clinic
Karameh emergency camp, Jordan – 1971
© George Nehmeh/UNRWA Archives
Mothers with children
UNRWA Rehydration and Nutrition Centre, Khan Younis camp, Gaza
(c) UNRWA Archives
Nurses care for a young child at an UNRWA health centre
Alliance, Damascus, Syria – 2013
© Carole Alfarah/UNRWA Archives
Mothers with babies receiving health care
Jordan - 1967
© UNRWA Archives
Graduating class of UNRWA nurses
Gaza – 1982
[c] Emile Andria/UNRWA Archives
التعليم

EDUCATION
In addition to displacement, instability, conflict and poverty, Palestine refugee women have faced struggles within the community itself. Despite all the challenges, however, they have made great strides over the decades, both for themselves and for the community at large. One of the most fundamental tools in their arsenal has been education.

A high-quality education, beginning in primary school, opens the door to greater self-determination and responsibility. With scholarships, academically gifted young women in difficult socioeconomic circumstances can pursue higher education in fields ranging from accounting to medicine, English to economics and physics to sociology. Each young woman who does so puts herself in a powerful position to give back.

The UNRWA system – with over 700 schools, one of the largest in the Middle East – was the first in the region to achieve gender parity, in 1962, after girls represented only 26 per cent of students in the 1950s. Palestine refugee girls have made up half the population of UNRWA schools ever since. They have excelled in subjects ranging from Arabic and English to mathematics and human rights. Since 1955, academically gifted Palestine refugees have been able to receive UNRWA university scholarships; in 2014, nearly three quarters of scholarship recipients are young women.

Palestine refugee women have made innumerable sacrifices over the decades, both as a group and individually: Mothers have gone hungry so their children might eat, and women have left school to help support their families. It has been part of the Agency’s goal to ensure that whenever they have the chance, women can access the opportunities and possibilities they may have had to give up earlier. Schools and activity centres – and, today, Women’s Programme Centres – give women a safe place to gather and learn skills like literacy or embroidery.

In the 1960s, for example, many women worked at nine UNRWA arts and crafts centres in Gaza, where the sales of their embroidery both remunerated the women and paid the rent and expenses of the establishment. The women used traditional skills for modern purposes, developing themselves and their community while supporting themselves.
Young woman learning embroidery
UNRWA arts and crafts centre, Gaza – 1960
© Myrtle Winter Chaumeny/UNRWA Archives
Ina’am Hadad (r) used an UNRWA scholarship to study medicine at Jordan University Hospital. She received a position there upon graduating from Jordan University Hospital, Amman, Jordan – 1982. 

Ina’am Hadad (r) استفادت من منحة دراسية من الأونروا لدراسة الطب في مستشفى الجامعة الأردنية. وحصلت على عمل هناك بعد التخرج.

Photo: © Sh. Hasan/UNRWA Archives
Women in an adult literacy class in an UNRWA community centre
Khan Dunoun camp, Syria – 1991
© George Nehmeh/UNRWA Archives
Palestine refugee girls in school
UNRWA girls school, Zarqa, Jordan – 2014
© Alaa Ghosheh/UNRWA Archives
Many Palestine refugee women, like Ina'am Abu Hajjar, 18, brought their children with them to learning activities. UNRWA Women’s Activities Centre, Jabalia camp, Gaza. © UNRWA Archives
لاجئة مسنّة في صف لمحو الأمية
مركز الأنشطة التابع للأونروا، مخيم قلنديا، الضفة الغربية – 1978

An elderly refugee in a literacy class
UNRWA activities centre, Kalandia camp, West Bank – 1978

© Munir Nasr/UNRWA Archives
Girls write their names in clay
UNRWA girls’ school, Sbeineh camp, Syria – 1970
© Myrtle Winter Chaumeny/UNWA Archives
التدريب والمهارات

TRAINING AND SKILLS
Over the past six decades, Palestine refugee women have preserved many of the traditional skills and crafts – in embroidery or soap-making or culinary activities – that represent a vital and frequently tangible piece of the collective memory of the community. A cross-stitch pattern typical of a particular village, a special soap learned from one's grandmother or a unique recipe – while small, these skills represent threads to the past that are vital for a community in such challenging circumstances.

As times change and generations come and go, Palestine refugee women have not, however, remained bound only to the traditions of the past. They have actively sought training and skills in new fields. They have explored new opportunities and developed skills and abilities in areas ranging from hairdressing to accounting to engineering and architecture. As they protect the past, they look towards the future.

UNRWA has recognized the changing needs of regional labour markets and the vital role women can play in filling those needs. Since 1962, when the Ramallah Women’s Training Centre was established – the first of its kind in the region – nearly 83,000 people have graduated from UNRWA training centres. By 2010, over 40 per cent of the students in UNRWA centres were women; in that year alone, 6,300 women graduated from UNRWA courses in fields ranging from pharmacy to computer skills. Like others before them, they went on to find or create jobs, becoming able to support themselves and give back to their community.
كانت إنعام مدبوع من أوائل خريجات دورة تصفيف الشعر في مركز رام الله للتدريب النسوي، وقد فتحت صالونها الخاص في الخليل، الضفة الغربية - 1969

In'am Madbouh, an early graduate from the hairdressing course at RWTC, opened her own salon in Hebron

Hebron, West Bank - 1969
(c) Munir Nasr/UNRWA Archives
A young woman studies hairdressing at an UNRWA VTC
Amman, Jordan - 2013
(c) Alaa Ghosheh/UNRWA Archives
Nahmeh Abu Amer taught science at the Salfit Secondary government school in her native Nablus after graduating from RWTC
Nablus, West Bank – 1974
[c] George Nehmeh/UNRWA Archives
Hediyeh Jayoussi and three of her classmates graduated from the secretarial course at RWTC and were hired at the Kuwait Oil Company, where they prepared punch cards for the company's data-processing machines and computers.
Sports formed an integral part of the training programme for young women at RWTC
Ramallah Women’s Training Centre, Ramallah, West Bank – 1971
© Kay Brennan/UNRWA Archives
التمويل الصغير
MICROFINANCE
Palestine refugee women have never been willing to wait patiently for opportunities to come to them. In the face of displacement, poverty and other challenges, they have always been ready to find their own opportunities, to explore creative ways around the obstacles and limitations of daily life in pursuit of a better future.

Over the past 20 years, thousands of courageous and entrepreneurial women have used UNRWA microfinance loans to create new opportunities. Among marginalized and disadvantaged people like Palestine refugees, and particularly women, access to financial services is limited. Its impact can therefore be transformative, both for the individual woman and for the community that sees women strong, empowered and succeeding.

The UNRWA microfinance programme, established in 1991, has included a specific focus on women since 1994, when it began offering small loans to groups of women entrepreneurs in Gaza. By 1995, women made up over 80 per cent of UNRWA microfinance customers in Gaza. In other areas, where it is more common for women to work individually within their homes, UNRWA developed a new loan product appropriate for their needs. In 2011, women made up over one third of our microfinance customers, and had received US$ 11 million in loans.

Each woman and each idea are unique, with their own needs and potential. UNRWA seeks to provide each woman with the support she requires for her idea and creativity to flourish, benefiting the woman herself, her home, her family and her community.
Pioneering microfinance clients
Beach camp, Gaza Strip - 1995
(c) M. Nasr/UNRWA Archives
Microfinance client doing embroidery
Aleppo, Syria – 2012
© Carole Alfarah/UNRWA Archives
إحدى المستفيدات من برنامج التمويل الصغير تصنع الحفاضات
بيت لحم، الضفة الغربية – 2012

Microfinance client making diapers
Bethlehem, West Bank – 2012
© Nabil Darwish/UNRWA Archives
The European Union has played an important role in empowering Palestine refugee women through supporting UNRWA human development programmes.