

Special Report by Maha Ayyoub Independent Researcher

In 1994, a round-table discussion was held with leading Palestinian women activists in Lebanon to discuss current pressing development issues confronting the Palestinians in Lebanon, particularly women. Since the beginning of this century, political issues have been at the center of Palestinian communal life. This is especially true now, as the neglect of social, educational, medical and economic services for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon approaches a crisis point. For Palestinian women, this struggle has become increasingly frustrating and exhausting. In order to understand what these women have to cope with, one needs to briefly review the history of their situation.

Before the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the existence of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was a source of economic sustenance and a socio-political reference point for the Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon. Though strangers in a strange land, the Palestinians did not live in a state of constant anxiety and uncertainty, as they do today. After the PLO infrastructure in Lebanon was dismantled in 1982, many Palestinians sank into poverty and despair, a bleak situation which was only exacerbated by the Camp Wars of the mid-1980s. During this dark period, the contributions of Palestinian women to their society became even more important and crucial (1).

The conditions that Palestinian women have faced through all the invasions, deaths, deportations and imprisonments have distinguished her as the main provider of her family. She is not only the refugee, but also the mother, the wife, the daughter, the sister, the bread-winner, the teacher and the fighter. She proved her awareness, ability and willingness to overcome and persevere through grave difficulties. She confidently entered the work-place, shouldering all the burdens facing her and her people in the Lebanese society. When the Palestinian Women's League (PWL) was founded, the Palestinian woman's chief concern was not simply equality with men, but rather, the right to work, to be educated, to be provided with the basic necessities of life — clean water, adequate shelter, food and medical services — for all Palestinian refugees. Palestinian women have fought for their human and national rights first and foremost, and for their rights as women only secondarily. They have expressed their deep concern for their society by initiating educational and vocational training programs, income-generating projects, child-care services, and providing economic and emotional support to widows and orphans of men killed in combat.

The dire problems facing Palestinian women in Lebanon today cannot be considered as separate from the problems facing the Palestinian people as a whole. Also, many of the difficulties

currently confronting Lebanese women are affecting Palestinian women as well. Women of both national groups are deprived of civil and personal rights, because both are subject to the same personal status codes, whether Muslim or Christian.

We must acknowledge that social, economic and political conditions in the post-war period in Lebanon are more complicated and difficult than they were before the war. All social movements, not only the women's movement, are confronting difficulties. The key reason for this is the dire economic situation in present-day Lebanon. Today, Palestinians in Lebanon, women as well as men, are primarily concerned with finding food, shelter, health care and education. Their main worry is the issue of their residency in a country that can barely provide for the basic needs of its own people, let alone a large refugee population.

Among Palestinian women, a group experiencing especially difficult hardships at present is the war widows. A recent study of Palestinian war widows in the Bourj al-Barajneh refugee camp in Beirut sheds light on a much larger picture. Widows in general, and young widows in particular, suffered considerably during the war. They exhibited more severe anxiety symptoms than others, felt sick, tired, and had sleeping problems. The only thing they could do to keep their minds off of their troubles was to work, but work is increasingly difficult to find for any Palestinian in Lebanon, male or female.

Out of 247 widows in Bourj al-Barajneh, 80 percent have had no schooling at all, 9 percent have been to school for up to six years, 9 percent have had more than six years of schooling, and only 2 percent have had more than 10 years of schooling. In other words, 89 percent of the widows surveyed in this one refugee camp are functionally illiterate.

In relation to social problems, a significant number of these widows related that they had difficulties in disciplining young male members of their families. The incidence of psychological problems among young males, primarily resulting from the war as well as a lack of training and opportunities, and a concomitant lack of self-esteem, can complicate and worsen already difficult family relations, thus adding even more stress to the lives of widows who are serving as their communities' primary sources of support, guidance and education. The problems confronting the Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon are indeed immense and grave, and it is the Palestinian woman who is bearing the brunt of these problems. Given the discouraging and uncertain political status of the Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon, women's burdens are likely to increase, rather than decrease, in the coming years.

(1) Rosemary Sayigh (1994). *Too Many Enemies: The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon*. London: Zed Books.