

POVERTY IN THE LIFE STORIES OF PALESTINIAN WOMEN IN LEBANON



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The following are excerpts from life stories that were told to me between 1990 and 1992 by 18 women from the Shateela Camp, a camp for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. These women were between 90 and 26 years old, and they varied with respect to marital status, educational level, origin, socio-economic level, and employment history.*

When I reread these, I am surprised by the relatively small part played in them by direct descriptions of poverty. Even these whose homes outside the camp had been destroyed during the battles of 1985-88, and who had no guarantee of being rehoused, did not say much about their difficult situation. Perhaps they took it for granted that I knew all about it; perhaps the cultural factor, namely that it is shameful to speak about one's poverty, is a better explanation. And for Palestinians loss of country is always the primordial issue from which all other evils spring.

It is interesting how poverty, when it does appear in the life stories, is generalized rather than personalized, and described in an allusive, almost poetic, style rather than in concrete detail. For example, Umm Sobhi (born in 1941) uses the metaphor of nomadism to describe Palestinian uprootedness and frames her own losses in those of the collectivity:

"Our life isn't a life. There's no one to knock on the door and ask where are you from? Even if we are starving, no one comes and says, 'Take this loaf of bread.' What is our destiny? I had a house in the camp, with three floors. The house went [in 1982]. We built it again. It went again [in the 'Battles of the Camps'], my children passed away, three of my sons, and two of my daughters, husbands. Death is better than living like this. I ask God to change the situation in Lebanon and to let all migrants return to their countries and families. Because if we die here, we find no one to bury us ... There's a saying 'Those who spend their summer in the *Ghor* [deep valley] don't enjoy

their summer
and they don't
get land.'
We Palestinians are like that ..."

"... When I married I bought a house and stayed there. Bit by bit, everybody built. Instead of tents, there was tin. Then they made stone walls and roofs of zinco ... Whenever anyone earned an ursh he built with it. For example, I built three floors, and God knows how I built them. We cut down on expenses, we worked, we did everything possible to add another stone. And when we had achieved this, we found ourselves on the ground again."

Umm Nayef was another speaker of the 'Generation of Palestine.' She was born in 1912 and described the difficult conditions of early exile:

"I worked and Abu Nayef worked to provide for the children. I worked in *haleeshah* [weeding], and I worked in *qasara* [stone quarrying] and I worked in sorting oranges. Abu Nayef worked as a laborer. We worked so as to feed them and put them through school. (Did you have more work than Abu Nayef?) Yes, because he was a lot older than I. We both worked. We were a large family, four sons, four daughters, with us it made ten. In those days there weren't washing machines. There weren't stoves. We cooked on primuses. I went to work in the fields in the day and returned at night to wash, make dough - we baked bread on a *forniyeh* [oven] - and cook. We slept a little and then went back to work. We brought them up with hard labor and fatigue. Not like today."

One of the few speakers who described refugee poverty in concrete detail was Umm Ghassan (born in 1930):

"We came to Lebanon. We came to UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency), who gave us tents. We lived in the tents, it rained, and when Winter came snow covered the tents. My two small children were jumping from the cold. We had



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nothing [*i.e.* , no covers or winter clothes]. I had two paper bags, one had rice, the other had sugar. I poured all that onto plates and lit the bags so that the children could get warm ...”

“.. We were living in the *Hursh* [pine forest] in a tin hut. When it rained we wondered where to sit because so much rain got in. And the children were all small. Thirteen children! Of course he [her husband] was the only one working. And what sort of work! What could he bring, what could he give? LL3! LL2! [almost \$1] What he earned today, we spent today. It was barely enough to buy milk for the children ... We needed milk. I breastfed the children and gave them cow’s milk, but twice I gave birth to twins. They [UNRWA] gave a little sugar but what good was that! The twins died. If you’ve got children you have to nourish them, you need vegetables, you need meat - there wasn’t any! As for school - their father had a problem, he quarreled with someone and was imprisoned. I took them [the older ones] out of school, and I said, ‘*Yallah!* You have to bring money to feed these little ones.’ And I made dough, and baked, and cooked, and sold. He stayed in prison three years ...”

The story of one of the speakers from the ‘Generation of the Disaster,’ Umm Marwan, born in 1938, shows how destitution in the early refugee period affected adolescent girls:

“I was ten years old when the war began ... we left Palestine for

Lebanon and we grew up in camps and dispersion. When someone leaves his country, his house, his place, his existence, he is between ‘sky and emptiness’ [*i.e.* destitute]. Our mother and father worked to raise us but their life was very difficult ... Some people could educate their children, some couldn’t. I got married at the age of 17. When a girl marries, her husband takes responsibility for her and lightens the burden on her parents. They married me to my cousin. She [her mother] wanted that. I wanted someone else.”

“At the beginning of life - a young man and a young woman - love, life, fun - I didn’t experience these things. They didn’t leave us a childhood. War! Our life was difficult, bitter.”

As a group, the women of the ‘Generation of the Disaster’ expressed the suffering of refugee life in Lebanon most strongly. Almost as a collective identity, they summed it up as “All our life is tragedy.” Nozira (born in 1948), typifies this generation. In a “*temoignage*” that tells mainly of oppression, struggle, and battles, the only description of poverty comes at the end, but it is the bleakest of any:

“Our whole story is this: our *dar* [house, family] had eight men and now it has none. My brothers’ widows are each in a different place, all in occupied buildings. They each get a pension of LL20,000 [\$13] a month, not enough for bread.

They also get rations, and with God's help they manage. I am alone. If I stop working no one will offer me a bite of food. I have no brother, no father, no mother, nobody. I have only God. This is what we got from the 'Revolution' ... Our house has ended as if closed with wax."

It was Dalal the youngest of the speakers, born in 1965, member of the 'Generation of the Revolution,' educated up to university level, and ex-Resistance officer, who gave the most detailed and 'inward' description of poverty and its effects on her. Her home just outside the camp had been looted during the 'Battles of the Camps.' She began:

"I lived a not very happy childhood. My father ... was a hired laborer paid by the day. He'd work for one day but if one day he didn't work there was no money. We had no relatives, no paternal uncles. My father was old, he used to get sick a lot and his blood pressure would go down. There were times when they had to carry him home from work."

"We were deprived - no toys, no clothes. I used to feel the difference between me and my friends ... My mother favored the boys. She loved us [the girls] but she gave the boys better food and clothing. What I liked best was to get sick so as to feel loved."

"My father was very strict with us. Everything was forbidden - dancing, singing, visiting friends. We were very isolated. When I started working part-time, at age 13, the thing I most wanted to buy was a transistor - all my friends had cassettes - but my father didn't allow me. Not even a small radio. He said, No, of course. This is still stamped on my memory."

"My friends wore beautiful clothes, they listened to music and talked about the latest hits. I couldn't join in their conversation. Sometimes I pretended I'd heard these songs when in fact I hadn't ... I feel that there's deprivation and inferiority [inside of me], that I'm different from others ..."

"... I was forbidden to visit friends, to come and go. There was nothing but school. And even at school I felt that I lacked many things. It became part of my personality that something in me was missing. I tried to escape it by achieving - I liked having responsibility, I liked to 'give' so as to 'show,' so as to fill the gap. I grabbed the responsibility [of being an officer] with passion. But of course this was at the expense of something else."

Excerpt from Umm Walid (recorded May/June 1997):

"In 1957 the sewing workshop opened. There were 35 girls, and a seamstress came from Jisr al-Basha who trained the girls. Every six months they started a course. After the second course they started giving a salary to the girls. If she cut with electric scissors they gave her LL 50 [\$16] per month, if she cut with

ordinary scissors she got LL35 [\$10]. I stayed a long time, three years. I'd leave, I'd return..."

"Our neighbor used to embroider on the machine. I would watch her. I'd come home from school or the workshop, I'd stand in front of her. I'd say 'Allah khaleek, let me watch you a little.' The other girls paid to learn but I learnt hayk (*i.e.*, by watching). Before I knew it, I was embroidering. I used to bring work and do it, we made accounts. She had two machines. She said, "Work as much as you can..."

"Later I taught girls machine embroidery at home. They'd come for an hour, at any time that suited them, whenever they were free, in the afternoon, at night. All this work was before I married. [What did you do with the money you earned, Umm Walid?] I used to buy gold. So that when the bridegroom comes he sees the gold is there. My father died when we left Palestine. When we saved something from the expenses of the house, I and my mother, we used to buy rings and bracelets... [Where is your gold, Umm Walid?] It's all gone. When my husband got sick, he needed operations. This wasn't covered by UNRWA. I don't even have a ring left."

Endnote:

* *This study, which formed part of a doctoral dissertation at the Sociology and Social Anthropology Department at The University of Hull (UK), is now in process of being extended to other parts of the Palestinian diaspora. All names used here are fictitious*