This interview series highlighting the experiences, challenges and successes of the UNRWA female workforce continues with the latest edition featuring Haifa Alwhaidi, the Area Relief and Social Services Officer for the South Amman area. Haifa pursued a degree in sociology at Al-Karak University and simultaneously received a diploma in the Arabic language at Amman College University. She began her career at UNRWA in 2008 after having amassed a broad range of compelling experience.

Please describe your past occupation(s) and years of experience.
Initially I began teaching for a period of three years before pursuing a degree in sociology. I then encountered challenges finding a job. Eventually I became a secretary before becoming involved with and working at a hostel for female students for a total of nine years. This preceded the start of my career at UNRWA approximately a decade ago. My decision to pursue a career at the Agency was twofold: I love working with refugees (I myself am a Palestine refugee), and UNRWA is an impressive, reputable organization. I am very grateful for my family’s unwavering support and encouragement.

Why, in your opinion, is it important to have more women in senior positions?
In light of a diverse range of social obligations, women encounter a number of challenges in their daily lives; for example, balancing work, home and familial responsibilities. A woman holding a senior position encapsulates the essence of ‘super-woman’: she ably prevails over a unique set of circumstances.

What are the main challenges of being in a leadership position, particularly for women?
One challenge emanates from our own local communities: There exists a percentage of community members - family, friends and colleagues alike - who do not accept women in leadership positions or posts with a substantial amount of responsibility. As a leader, there is an impetus to lead and inspire others, including those unwilling to accept such a profoundly important role for women. Jordan, however, is better than other geographical contexts. In addition, UNRWA confronts this major challenge as it does not discriminate between men and women and is a massive proponent of gender equality.

What advice would you give to women trying to establish their career?
The obstacles and challenges that women encounter are many. Put these hurdles behind you - keep fighting, keep thinking and be strong. My message to the Palestine refugee community is have a foot in this life! Show the world who you are. Do not depend on anyone but yourself. I wish all women will have the opportunity to improve their lives and take whatever accomplishments they achieve and use them to earn the respect they deserve.
UNRWA is a United Nations agency established by the General Assembly in 1949 and mandated to provide assistance and protection to some 5 million registered Palestine refugees. Its mission is to help Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank and the Gaza Strip achieve their full human development potential, pending a just and lasting solution to their plight. UNRWA services encompass education, health care, relief and social services, camp infrastructure and improvement, protection and microfinance.

For more information, please contact t.abunafiseh@unrwa.org