

This booklet is based on a project which started in early 2015 to mark International Women's Day by paying tribute to Palestinian women, some of whom are UNRWA staff, through documenting their stories, told in their own words.

The stories show fragments of these women's lives, shedding light on their triumphs and at times their losses. The stories shown in the booklet vary in content, but they all tell a similar story of courage, resourcefulness and a will to choose life and hope in the face of adversity.

These stories were collected through video conferences, Skype and phone calls, except for in Jordan, where the interviews took place in person.

The title of each story was derived from conversations with the participants, during which they shared their past, present and their aspirations for the future. Each title focuses on themes that played a central role in the stories. They represent the strength and resilience of these women by highlighting themes that represent, not only the challenges and hardships that they have endured, but also the ways that they have chosen to cope.

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**Sameera Abd Alaal  
Syria**

Sameera works as a school attendant in an UNRWA school in Damascus. Fridays were always special for Sameera (Um Nidal), and her family, but one Friday everything changed when Yarmouk camp was hit by bombings. They escaped becoming part of the wreckage of their home by 10 minutes. Sameera now lives in a room below her office at UNRWA with her sister and her brother's children. Those closest to her remind her to keep smiling.

**Khadija Fares  
Syria**

Khadija is from Jaramana camp in Syria; she has been working with UNRWA for the past 14 years in Jaramana Haifa Kindergarten. She is now working as a kindergarten teacher, specialized in puppet theatre. She was trained on using puppet theatre to raise awareness on issues related to protection and child abuse. Khadija also organizes puppet theatre in several other camps as well as collective shelters.

**Hiyam Ali Awad  
Jordan**

Hiyam takes us back to 1967, the year that Israel occupied the West Bank. She was 5 years old when the soldiers entered Ramallah. Amid the chaos that ensued, her family fled to Amman. Hiyam now works for UNRWA as a Community Development Social Worker in Zarqa camp and is passionate about working with Palestine refugees, who she sees as family. She is a Master Trainer on gender-based violence [GBV] at UNRWA Jordan Field Office and is the Deputy Team Leader of the Zarqa camp GBV Team.

**Manal Abu Saloom**  
**Jordan**

Manal always wished she could be self-employed, despite others telling her that it would be difficult. After befriending a teacher who encouraged her to work, they opened a learning centre together in Marka camp offering remedial classes to students. She recognizes the important role her mother played by raising her and her siblings, being a relentless source of self-confidence, and teaching her right from wrong.

**Wafa' Sarhan**  
**Jordan**

Wafa' is a school counselor at Amman New Camp in Jordan. She started working at UNRWA 14 years ago when she was 23 years old; it was her first official job. She started her Master's degree at the same time she started her work at UNRWA. Then she took a break from studying for 10 years to care for her three daughters. In 2012, Wafa' started her PhD in Psychological and Educational Counselling. After joining the team working on GBV, Wafa' felt a lot of reward seeing how she was making a difference using her specialization on psychosocial counseling to support GBV survivors. Wafa' is a master trainer on GBV at UNRWA Jordan Field Office and is the Team leader of the Amman New Camp GBV Team.

**Sereen Dheeb**  
**Jordan**

In 1983, when Sereen was just 8 years old, she moved with her siblings from Lebanon to Jordan. Sereen takes us back to her childhood days during the civil war in Lebanon and remembers her grandfather who worked with UNRWA and who was the most cherished person in her life. She describes living through the war in Lebanon in the time of Eid and how it took away the joy

of celebrations, meaning that people laughed at you for wearing your new Eid clothes and how even as a small child, you felt ashamed to wear them. Running from one place to another in the camp during the war there was never time to put your shoes on so people would run barefoot, but she and her cousin would take turns wearing a single stolen slipper.

**Khawla Abu Diab**  
**West Bank**

Khawla is a field nursing officer at UNRWA West Bank Field Office. She has worked with UNRWA for the past 26 years. Khawla discovered she has breast cancer in 2010. As a nurse, she knows that cancer does not equal death but is afraid to tell her family and going through chemotherapy proves challenging.

**Laila Shamali**  
**West Bank**

Laila joined UNRWA seven years ago. She works as a doorkeeper in UNRWA Jerusalem Area Office in Ramallah. She has dedicated her life to raising her three daughters. She was working in three places at the same time to cover her children's expenses until she found a job with UNRWA. Laila was very keen on ensuring that her daughters received the best education possible; two of her daughters studied at the Ramallah Women Training Centre and the third one at Birzeit University.

**Suzan al-Dabba**  
**Gaza**

Last summer, in the middle of another conflict in Gaza, the building where Suzan and her family lived was hit. That was the moment when Suzan knew that her family would not return to their home and they were forced to abandon it and flee for their lives. As a deputy school principal for an UNRWA girls' school, she refused to stop working when her family moved to a designated emergency shelter during the conflict and became a deputy shelter manager. Despite facing disapproval from those who thought she should not be working in such a difficult

environment, she worked day and night throughout the war, distributing food to the displaced on the backdrop of the sounds of bombs and ambulances. Later, Suzan became a Collective Centre Manager.

**Amal el-Najar**  
**Gaza**

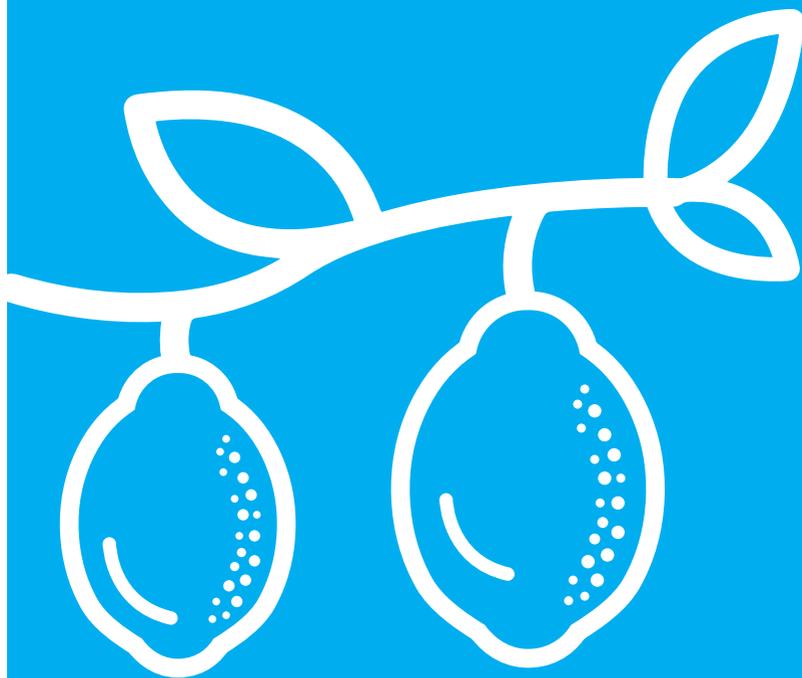
Amal, a mother of eight, dropped out of school to support her family, who were faced with financial hardship after her husband lost his job. She joined her nearest community-based organization where she was able to develop her skills in sewing and stitching, skills that allowed her to provide for her family. Amal has been routinely participating in events related to the gender initiative in Gaza since 2014, something which has increased her self-confidence according to her. She is passionate about writing poetry, which allows her to express herself.

**Ferial Sabri Kiwan**  
**Lebanon**

Ferial applied and got accepted as a Camp Services Officer with UNRWA in Shatila camp in Lebanon. She was the first woman to hold such a position, and despite facing much criticism, she perseveres. With time, she proved herself and gained her colleagues' as well as the community's respect and recognition.

**Samar Ismael al-Shaar**  
**Lebanon**

Samar, who volunteered at the Burj Barajneh Women Program Centre (WPC), was able to benefit from different trainings at the WPC. Samar is now working in the centre as a tutor in literacy classes for women from the community in addition to participating in the Healthy Kitchen project, a healthy meal project in collaboration with the American University of Beirut. Samar says that the WPC helped her to be active in the community and improved her financial situation.



# the lemon tree

Sameera Abd-Alaal (Um Nidal)

Syria

Sameera lives in Damascus. During the interview, which took four hours, she was able to share with us some moments of her story, 'The Lemon Tree'.

The lemon tree is where Sameera, or Um Nidal, sits in the afternoon after she finishes her shift. She enjoys every second while the soft breeze carries with it the fresh lemon scent. The lemon tree protects her from the strong sun of the early winter.

“  
‘Samoura  
I miss you,  
come sit next  
to me.’  
”

As the bell rings, it is time for her to go home and join her family. She reaches Yarmouk camp, walks through its streets and arrives at a building opposite al-Wassim Mosque. She opens the door and a distinct masculine scent surprises her and fills her with joy as she walks in. She follows the scent through the corridor and opens her bedroom door; a dark handsome man with a beautiful shining smile is sitting on the bed.

“‘Samoura,<sup>1</sup> I miss you, come sit next to me,’” her husband, Abu Nidal reaches out his hand to her. Sameera sits next to him. Her phone rings; it is her son Iyad: “‘Mama, my wife Hiba and the children are coming tomorrow for lunch, and Nidal and his family are coming. Tell Yazan to join us too.’”

Fridays are very special for Sameera and her family, a day where all the family gathers around- her sons, their wives, and their children. The kitchen is chaotic, with the children rushing in and their parents running behind them, and Sameera cooking and hugging her grandchildren, all the while holding the ladle in her hand.

The heat coming out of the oven, the smell of the strong spices, the crackling sounds of the plates, cutlery, and pots are filling up the kitchen. After lunch, Sameera and Abu Nidal take their grandchildren to play in the park outside. Lulu, her favourite granddaughter, insists, “Teta, Teta, I want orange juice, take me to get some, take me!” Sameera takes her to the juice shop next door.

Friday gatherings used to take place almost every week, until the siege on Yarmouk camp started in 2012. On one of the evenings, Sameera, Abu Nidal, and Yazan were able to flee downstairs to the neighbours and find shelter until the bombing stopped. Only 10 minutes separated them from death. Their kitchen, bedroom, and half of the house were brutally shattered into irreparable bits and pieces.

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<sup>1</sup>Samoura is a nickname for Sameera.

“  
**‘Abu Nidal  
went out for a  
walk; he was  
bored.’**  
”

The camp came under siege on 26 December 2012. Iyad and Nidal were able to leave Syria as soon as the conflict started. Sameera, Abu Nidal and Yazan were hungry, cold, and penniless for a year under the siege. Sameera was able to leave the camp to bring in food and some money. She could not come back in. She waited by the checkpoint every day throughout the month of Ramadan, amid the heat and hundreds of people trying to get in and out of the camp.

Sameera tried to get Yazan and Abu Nidal out, and every time she called Abu Nidal, he said: “‘Samoura just get Yazan out and don’t worry about me.’” She was finally able to bring Yazan out, with hopes and plans to send him to join his brothers, as Sameera and Abu Nidal had agreed and planned.

Sameera arranged all that was needed for Yazan to leave. Sameera, Yazan and Abu Nidal were in touch every day to check on each other, but five days before Yazan was supposed to leave, Abu Nidal was unreachable. Sameera and Yazan tried to contact him but to no avail. Sameera then called their neighbour, Abu Hasan.

“‘Abu Nidal went to the dentist; his teeth were hurting him yesterday.’”

The next day: “‘Abu Nidal went out for a walk; he was bored.’”

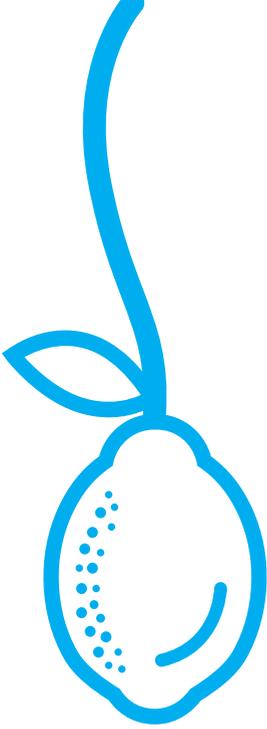
On the third day: “‘Abu Nidal went to get some groceries.’”

On the fourth day: “‘Um Nidal, did Yazan leave? When is he leaving?’”

On the fifth day, before Yazan left, he asked his mother: “‘Mama, where is baba? I am trying to call him, and say goodbye to him, where is he?’”

“Do not worry sweetheart, he is just busy and he misses us. I will tell him to call you before you leave the Syrian border.”

Sameera dropped Yazan off halfway to the border. Her heart was throbbing as she hugged him goodbye and she could barely catch her breath; she could not stop sobbing. She got back to her sister’s house, and still she could not stop crying. Her heart was beating quickly, as if someone was stabbing it with knives. She went about her evening prayers like she did every day.



“  
**‘Smile  
 Samoura, your  
 smile is the  
 most beautiful  
 thing about  
 you.’**  
 ”

She put on her white prayer dress, spread the prayer rug on her sister’s bedroom floor next to the bed. To her left, there was a nightstand with a landline phone on it. She was ending her prayer, and while she was doing her salutes, still sitting on the rug, impulsively she grabbed the phone and dialed Abu Hasan’s home number.

“I beg you Abu Hasan where is Abu Nidal?”

“Has Yazan left already? Where is he?”

Sameera started crying hysterically: “Yes he did. I beg you just tell me where is he?”

“Um Nidal, go on the internet, just go on the internet!”

She started screaming, “What is going on Abu Hasan? TELL ME!”

Abu Hasan took a deep breath and said: “I am sorry Um Nidal, Abu Nidal is dead. May God have mercy on his soul.”

Sameera screamed. Her sister stormed in and grabbed the phone from the floor.

“Abu Nidal died five days ago. They shot him because he smuggled Yazan out of the camp.”

Sameera ended her story with; “God bless his soul, he was kind and tender; he was my life, my everything.”

“After this incident I often called Abu Hasan. He told me that the night before Abu Nidal was kidnapped, he was talking about me as if I was his lover whom he was having a secret affair with.”

Now Sameera sits under the lemon tree in the UNRWA school in Damascus where she works. She sits under the lemon tree during her breaks. The scent of the lemon that the breeze carries keeps her alive. She still cooks every Friday for her colleagues at the school. They are her support system, whenever they see her feeling down, they come to her and tell her: “Smile Samoura, your smile is the most beautiful thing about you.”



# the rabbit doll

Khadija Fares  
Syria

**“Women are the foundation of everything: the family, the society, and everything. The woman’s spleen doesn’t burst as quickly as a man’s. God gave us this gift; we should use it to take care of the people around us and make them feel safe and loved.”**

This is what Khadija told us as soon as she heard we are having this interview to mark International Women’s Day. The first thing she said when she saw the camera via Skype: “Promise me that I will look beautiful and thin, okay?”

Aicha Takhzant, the Women Programme Officer with UNRWA in Syria, came into the room and said: “Do not listen to her, she is one of the most beautiful women I know.” Khadija turned to her and embraced her warmly. “Aicha is motherhood, she is kindness, and my safety. I can be myself around her. She always opens her heart to me. She makes me feel beautiful and strong when she hugs me.”

Aicha started crying, and Khadija followed. Khadija said: “I want to buy her a white jasmine necklace, because the whiteness in her heart is vast and endless.”

Aicha interrupted: “Khadija is a wonderful, great woman. Let her tell you about the way she uses puppet theatre to reduce stress and trauma for children. She protects them from abuse.”

Khadija got excited and spoke up quickly: “I work as a nanny in a kindergarten where I do puppet theatre. One time, I was asked to do puppet theatre for a children’s centre at an UNRWA collective shelter. After the show, the children went to wash their hands and when they returned they asked me to smell their hands. I could feel their

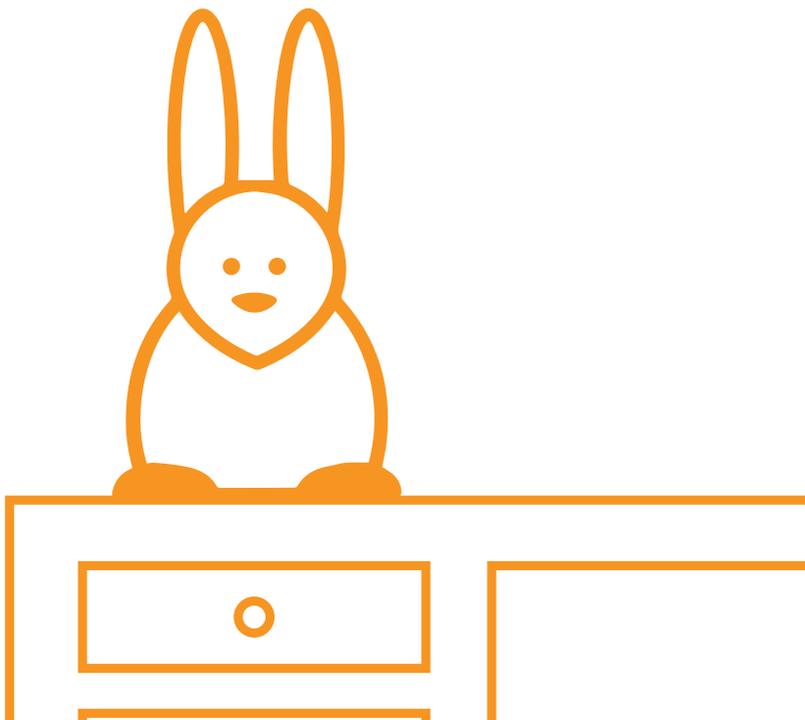
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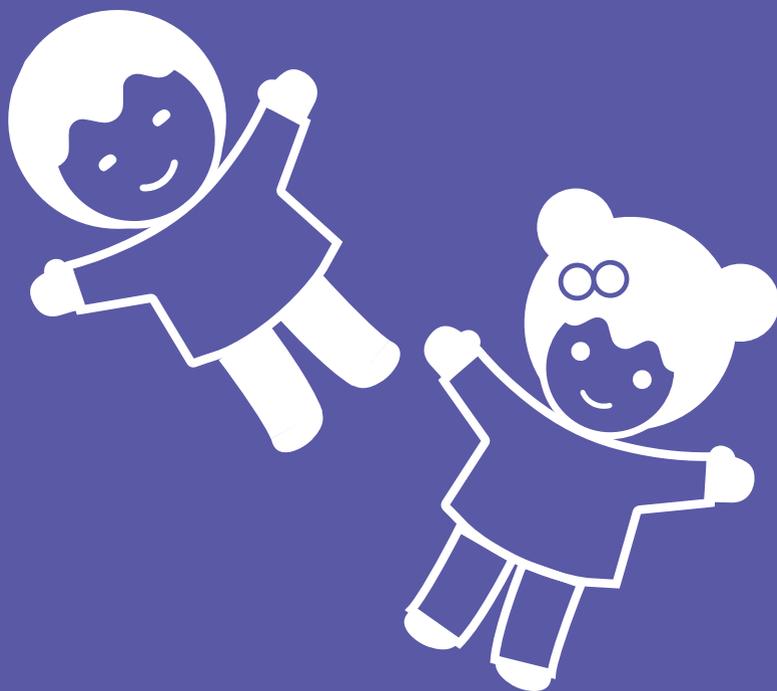
“  
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”

hands were cold. A young girl came and gave me her small toy insisting that I take it. It was a little rabbit doll and it was so dirty. She told me to wash it. I took it and kissed it and it has been in my room ever since.”

She sighed and continued: “When a displaced child gives you their toy, it is as if they are giving you their whole world.”

Khadija wanted to add this before ending our conversation because she had to go to class: “I lost my mother and father and my whole family, and I fully support myself on my own. I am a strong Palestinian woman. I got that from my mother and grandmother. However, I am nothing like these Palestinian women who struggle daily. They are persistent and strong. They are my absolute inspiration.”





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# sami and lubna abd al-aziz

Hiyam Ali Awad  
Jordan

**We were sitting with Hiyam, laughing and drinking coffee. She was wearing a lively colourful scarf. Her eyes were full of life. As soon as we started to set up the camera, she fixed herself up, and we could see the excitement in her body language.**

The first thing she said: "I have always wanted someone to document my story; it is an honour for me that you ladies are interested in my story."

We smiled, and said to her: You seem ready; it looks like we do not need to ask you a question.

Her tears started flowing and her voice trembled: "You took me back to Ramallah; to Sami and Lubna Abd al-Aziz, my babies. You took me back to our garden in the summer of 1967 in Ramallah, when I was a little 5-year-old girl, playing outside with my baby dolls, Sami and Lubna. I was feeding Sami a cheese sandwich, sitting on the green grass in the garden. My family's garden was full of fig trees and blueberry bushes."



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 ”

“All of a sudden I heard the sound of bombing and military planes. My mother grabbed my hand and I dropped Lubna and Sami, leaving Sami’s plastic mouth stuffed with bread and cheese. Then I found myself in a big truck full of other frightened, crying children; the sound of bombing and planes did not stop. After that, I heard my mother’s voice arguing with another woman about sitting in the front seat instead of the woman’s chicken cage. The argument overlapped with the insisting voice of the driver: ‘Get in or I will leave you both here!’ My heart started beating fast and I wanted to vomit.”

“They threw the chicken cage away, and both got in. I felt relieved; my tears and breath calmed down. There was another raid and so we ran out of the bus. We ran towards an eggplant farm to hide in the barbwire fence, waiting for the raid to end. After it ended, we realized that we were starving. We started eating the small sweet eggplants from the field. A big bus arrived, and all of us jumped onto it to go to the next stop.”

“My mother put me on her lap. An older woman, wearing a colourful headscarf, sat two rows behind us. My mother held me tightly to her chest as the bus drove away. Soon after, another raid attacked us, hitting the rear end of the bus. The older woman’s body was split in half and blood was everywhere. I will never forget the smell of blood and flesh in that bus!”

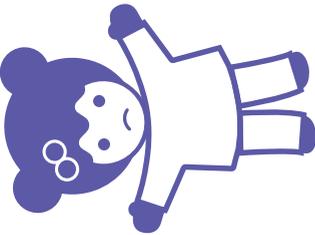
“My mother carried me, and we ran quickly towards the green fields. She covered me with the bushes to try to protect me from the raid. I could only hear the sounds of warplanes and my mother’s faint voice telling me to take the money from the pocket of her Palestinian embroidered dress if anything

happened to her. After an hour we reached my uncle's chicken farm in Karameh. We were very thirsty and could not find water in the farm, but we found a fig tree, and ate from it. I fell asleep, and I do not remember how we reached Jordan."

As she finished, she took a deep breath, started crying and said: "I miss my mother, she is the only one who knows exactly what I went through. She never let go of my hand all throughout this journey." Hiyam lost her mother to a heart attack when she was 13 years old.

"I used to always sleep very close to her. That was the only way I could sleep. After she died, I started to feel cold; I missed warm home-cooked meals." She cried even more and said: "I want to sit with her just one last time, and tell her how much I miss her, and tell her secrets I cannot tell anyone else. I love her, and I miss her every day. I want to put my head on her lap and let her play with my hair until I fall asleep."

After she calmed down and drank some water, she said: "My work with UNRWA has taught me how to work with refugees, with people like myself. Every old man is my father and my uncle. Every woman wearing a Palestinian embroidered dress is my mother. These people are my family, my sisters, my brothers, my Sami and my Lubna, my home."





# freckles

Manal Abu Saloom  
Jordan

**“My mother is a very generous person. She is of medium height, neither tall nor short, and she is very kind to me and to my siblings.” This is what Manal told us as she kneeled down to kiss her mother’s forehead. “Do you see those wonderful freckles?”**

We visited Manal in Marka at the remedial learning centre she has cofounded. She showed us around; all the children were happy and determined while sitting next to their teachers and studying. As we sat down to have coffee, we asked her to tell us the story of the centre. She adjusted her position, took a sip of the coffee.

“I consider myself an ordinary human being. I was unfortunate; I could not get a degree or a certificate, but I was able to create myself on my own. I am an independent woman; I can do things on my own. Through that, I proved to myself and to people that I am a successful, accomplished person.”

“The story started at my children’s kindergarten. A teacher once hit my daughter, so I went to the principal’s office and talked to the teacher. I used a polite and understanding tone. After that, the principal approached me saying that I should be an active woman in the society, and I should get out of the house more often.”

“After some determination and persistence, I was able to open my own centre with the support and trust of those around me. I called it ‘Farah (happiness) Centre’. As you can see it is full of children. My centre is well known in my area. I built a relationship of trust with the people. They send their children based on word of mouth. I have a good reputation. They know that their children will be safe and well taken care of here.”

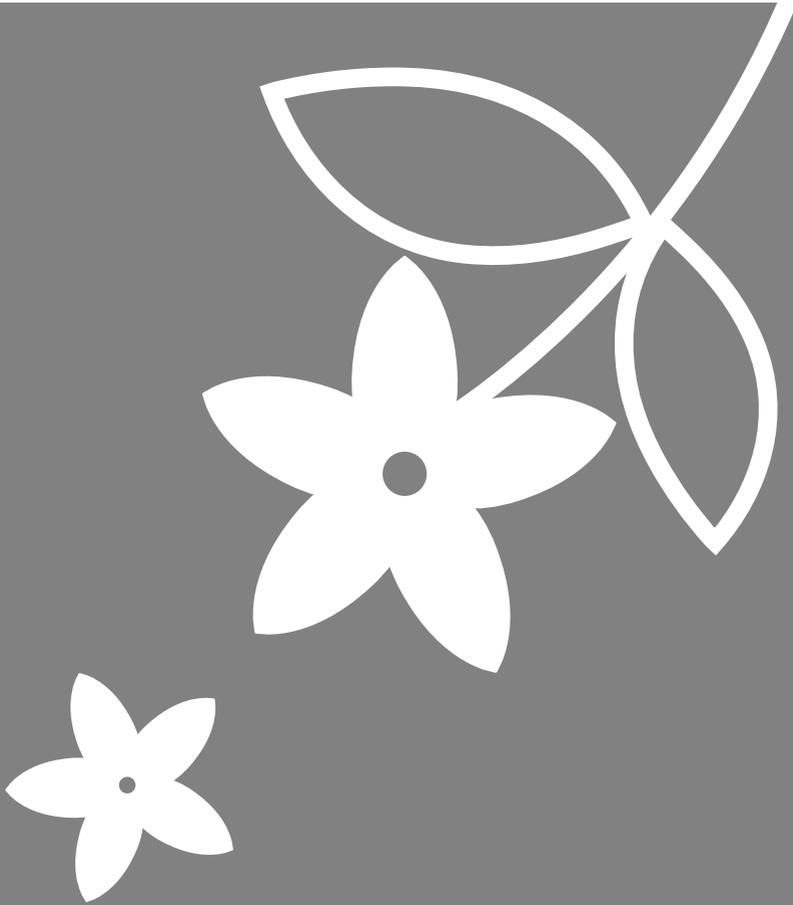
“A long time ago, before I opened the centre, it was a dream. I used to daydream about the space, with its every detail, colour, and sound. I saw myself in a big honorary ceremony

“  
**Do you see  
those wonderful  
freckles?**  
”

with the children and teachers around me and with me on the podium thanking everyone for giving me the honor to be there. I convinced myself that I could make it happen. The next day someone offered to help me with this initiative.”

She sighed and took another sip of her coffee: “Can you see how I got my freckles from my mother?” She smiled. “My mother is my source of education and knowledge. She raised me. She taught me right from wrong, and how to forgive and love without hurting anyone. Every point that breaks a human being and brings them to a better place is not meant to break them; it is to empower them. I was one of those people.” She looked up and said: “You have to know that a woman can be a mother, a wife, a sister, and a daughter. A woman is not half of the society, she is society itself.”





# the jasmine flower

Wafa' Sarhan  
Jordan

**“I am an ordinary woman: a mother, an employee, a daughter, a wife. I play all the roles any woman plays in our society.” This is the first thing Wafa’ told us when we met her on a cold morning in one of the UNRWA clinics in Jordan. Staff greeted her affectionately as she entered the clinic.**

Wafa’ sat on a chair opposite the camera with a soft smile on her face.

We asked her: When was the first time you heard of UNRWA? Her eyes opened up: “I graduated from an UNRWA school, where my father also worked as a teacher. A friend of his, who also worked with UNRWA, told him about a job opening for a counselor. I applied and was called in for an interview. After returning home from the interview, and as I took my shoes off, the phone started to ring. My family was around me and my father was standing next to me as I rushed to answer the phone.”

“Congratulations Ms. Wafa’, you got the job.”

“My heart was racing.”

“You have to follow up with the medical check-ups for the required official papers.”

“The voice kept talking, but I did not hear a thing. I only heard my heart beating, and my arms hugging my sister Huda’s arms. My father looked into my eyes, and put his hand on my shoulder and I will not forget the proud look on his face.”

Wafa’s eyes started watering.

"My father is my rock. He is a pen I carry around in my purse to express my feelings and ideas. Life has become so difficult after his passing."

We asked her: what comes to your mind when we say vulnerability? She exhaled softly and took a sip of coffee letting out a soft smile: "Vulnerability reminds me of strength. Without our weakness we cannot feel our strength. Strength is my motivation. My students give me motivation, especially those of them who kept in touch after graduation. The first time one of my students visited me I was very happy. She used to follow me everywhere when she was still a student. She was like a white rose. I keep going back to the moment when she stood in my office glowing and telling me that she wants to be just like me when she grows up."

“  
**‘Congratulations  
Ms. Wafa’, you got  
the job.’**  
”

"My office is my home, it is full of colour. The sun is always shining in here. My daughter's picture is always in my office."

Wafa' sighed, leaned backwards, and closed her eyes.

"My work is really fulfilling, I really enjoy it. I love it! The impact of my work on those around me pushed me to continue my PhD in psychology and counselling. Every student, every teacher, every mother and every refugee is in need of someone to wipe away her tears and give her support."



**flour**

Sereen Dheeb

Jordan

**“God grants us new phases in our lives. Through these phases we can erase the pain we suffered and draw a new picture of our lives.”**

After having a cup of coffee we asked her: What does UNRWA mean to you?

“I wish my grandfather was still alive now, my late mother’s father. I lost my mother when I was a child. This left a hollow feeling in my life forever. UNRWA never failed to support us, they always reduced our suffering as Palestine refugees. The UNRWA logo reminds me of my grandfather. My grandfather worked with UNRWA distributing flour and food supplies to the people. The smell of flour reminds me of my grandfather’s face. He has a reddish face and rosy cheeks. He was tall and well built.”

“We were first in Ein El-Hilweh camp in Lebanon. After we lost our house because of the bombing, we moved to Saida. The house that we moved to was bigger. I remember there was a big room where all of us gathered. Every morning we heard our grandfather reciting verses from the Quran. We left our rooms to the sound of his voice. We sat on his lap and waited for breakfast. He used to feed me bread dipped with molasses and tahini when I was on his lap, telling me: ‘Jiddo, this is your blood and bones, you have to eat it!’”

As she reminisced, her laughter was calm. She started to tell us about her childhood and the hollow feeling she still feels sometimes.

“One of the most difficult moments of my childhood was waking up in the middle of the night and crying. My siblings and I used to sleep in the same room. I cried in the middle of the night because I was scared at night-scared of the darkness. I used to ask my older sister: ‘Why didn’t you wake me and hug me when I was crying?’”

She laughed again: “I remember that during the Eid holidays our grandparents used to buy us new clothes, and we would walk around the camp in our colourful clothes. There was destruction all around us, so the other children used to make fun of us and point at us saying: ‘Shame on them, they are wearing Eid clothes,

“  
**After having a cup of coffee we asked her: What does UNRWA mean to you?**  
”

“  
**I am an optimistic person. We have the ability to adapt to everything. Love what you get, so you can get what you love.**  
”

tsk, tsk, tsk.”

“It is every child’s right to celebrate Eid. I remember my Eid outfit. It was a light pink dress with a pink bow tie on the back. I loved it! Every Eid holiday is important to me. I make sure my house is super neat and clean. The house is full of Eid sweets and desserts. The aroma of Arabic coffee fills the air. This is proof that the Palestinian people will never stop living!”

“In the camps during the war, we used to move barefoot from one shelter to another when we were children. One time while walking, we found the left pair of a slipper by the mosque. My cousin and I shared this slipper when we moved around.”

She chuckled and put her head in her hands. We shared her chuckle and then asked her: How are you able to look back on these moments with laughter?

“I am an optimistic person. We have the ability to adapt to everything. Love what you get, so you can get what you love.” She sighed: “Whoever said you cannot give of what you lost was wrong. I lost a lot, but I will always be able to give. I will always smell the flour, the truth and the kindness.”



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# the red rose

Khawla Abu Diab  
West Bank

**The video chat opened up, and we saw a humble, petite woman with short reddish brown hair sitting in her office. She greeted us with openness and warmth. This woman is Khawla, and this is her story of 'The Red Rose'.**

Khawla was at the beauty parlour. The hairdresser was putting her chair up and looking at her through the mirror opposite them: "Do not worry Khawla, it will grow back again. Let us have a new look with shorter hair now." The hairdresser put her hand on Khawla's shoulder and said: "You will always be beautiful."

Khawla cut her hair right before going to Beirut for a course, on 3 March 2012. At first, she was reluctant to go. However, Dr. Umayyeh Khammash, the Chief of Health Programme in the West Bank, and his deputy, Dr. Mohammad Al-Khalili and her other colleagues insisted: "We are not going without you, nothing is wrong with you now, and if anything happens, we will be there with you."

The first time her hair fell off, she found some on her pillow, then on the towel after she took a shower, then on the coat after she took it off in the office. Khawla lost all her hair when she was in Beirut.

On a sunny day in November 2010, Khawla was sitting on the balcony of her house in Jerusalem. She was chopping fasoulia (green beans), preparing lunch for her husband Nabil and their daughter Lina. There was a constant pain in her left arm for a couple of days and was throbbing strongly now. She put the knife down, felt up her hand, arm and armpit, and on the side of her left breast she felt a stiff 2 cm lump. She took a breath and thought about how she will tell Nabil and her children. The word cancer is perceived as a death sentence.

“  
‘God is with the  
patient ones,  
God is with the  
patient ones.’  
”



Khawla used to be a nurse for a long time and she knows that this is not the end; she knows what procedures she can consider.

Khawla underwent surgery in November 2010 and all the cancer was removed. Nevertheless, after running some tests, they found out that they were invasive cells; they can multiply rapidly and aggressively. For this to be treated, she needed sixteen chemotherapy sessions. The chemo encounters were the most difficult part for her and her family. It took them a long time to accept this reality and challenge. Especially her eldest son Amjad, who lives in the United States, and her other son Faris. During the first chemotherapy session,

Amjad stayed up all night, and he was constantly on the phone with Nabil, checking on his mother, and Faris would say to him: "Stop crying, your mom will get better."

Halfway through the chemotherapy, by mistake, the hospital gave her three dosages instead of one. The heavy pain following this was non-stop agony for four days straight. Khawla was restless, exhausted, and sleepless. Her daughter Lina was always covering her, embracing her and reading the Quran for her to calm her down.

"It was horrible, atrocious pain. It was hell indeed."

On the afternoon of the fourth day of this agony, Nabil came home, placed his soft big hand on Khawla's knee and with his extraordinary smile he looked into her eyes: "How are you now my love, better?" Khawla took a breath, closed her eyes, and said: "All this awful pain in my legs and knees that had been burdening me for four days faded away quickly. It was some kind of connection; it was like a miracle."

She went to sleep after this. Her body was shivering and trembling; her breathlessness and tears were unstoppable. Suddenly, she smells her mother's and father's morning coffee from her childhood. She is now in Silwan, Jerusalem; it is six in the morning. Her mother is in her Palestinian dress. She smells her mother's sweet smell of musk and amber. It is the smell of simplicity, purity, innocence, and safety. She hears her father's calming strong but soft voice singing in her ears: "God is with the patient ones, God is with the patient ones." Her breath and tears slowed down, and her pain became more bearable.

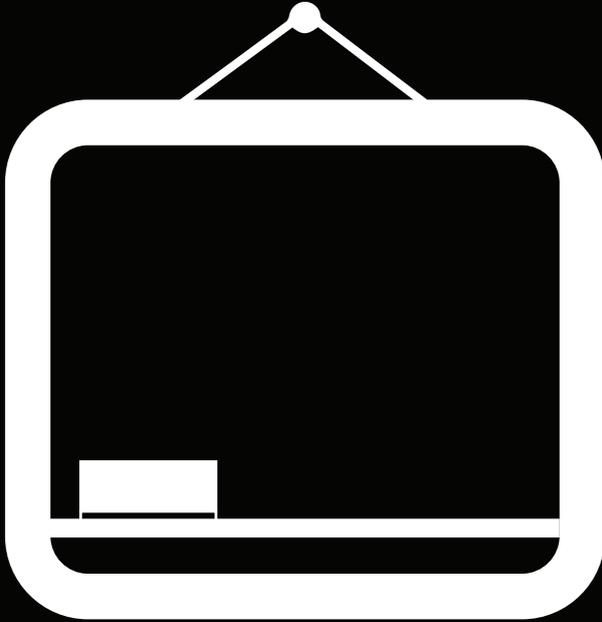
“  
**The most  
 important thing  
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 herself.**  
 ”



Khawla now wakes up every morning, cancer free, prepares the morning coffee with Nabil, opens the balcony door, and waters her red roses. She arrives at her office in the morning and greets her friends and colleagues, including Dr. Umaiyeah.

She wrote a letter of appreciation to her family and colleagues expressing her gratitude for the unconditional support she had received from them: "With God's blessing and support from family and colleagues, it was easier. From my experience I learned that moral support, self-confidence, and a positive outlook on life are the strongest factors in recovery; needless to say, they are recovery itself."

Khawla then looked at us through the camera and said: "The most important thing for an Arab woman is to be herself. She has to be constructive. Not to allow destructive and negative surroundings to feed on her. She has to be defiant and persistent, to support her positive thoughts and convictions."



# **my teacher, ms. laila**

Laila Shamali  
West Bank

**We did not have the chance to talk to Laila over Skype and see her face. Yet we managed to call her on her mobile phone and speak to her for half an hour.**

We asked her: Where do you find strength?

She sighed and said: "I remember my teacher in primary school. Her name was Laila like mine, and we use to call her Ms. Laila. She was such an intimidating woman! All the girls in the school used to be afraid of her. She used to scold us if we did not finish our homework or did not pay enough attention in class. We loved and respected her. If she was standing right in front of me now, I would run to hug her and tell her: 'I miss you, I want to go back to primary school and learn more from you.'"

"She always inspired the girls she taught to be someone influential in the future. Ever since I had my daughters, I always wanted them to be proactive women in the society. I thank Ms. Laila for the dream I carried with me since they were born and for the determination to accomplish it. I was able to educate all of my daughters on my own, and they are strong successful women now. My daughters are my backbone, they are my life, and they are like a breath of fresh air!"

"Raghda is my dove; she has a BA in English literature and is getting ready to finish her MA in Birzeit University. Rawan is my angel; she studied Photography. Lara the youngest is my lioness; she studied Cosmetology."

She continued: "Twelve years ago, my husband got really sick, and he passed away. I did not refuse to accept this reality. I took on ad hoc jobs to be able to support my daughters to pursue their studies. In 2006, I applied to a post in UNRWA and got it. UNRWA is my second home now. They always support me unconditionally, in particular Mr. Mohammad Yacoub, the Deputy Chief Area Officer. He treats us with equity and equality. He reminds us that we are his colleagues and family, and that his door is always open to us. Every day as I wake up, I thank God for this blessing, I feel safe and secure when I go to work."

“

**I remember my  
teacher in primary  
school. Her name  
was Laila like mine,  
and we used to call  
her Ms. Laila.**

”



# colouring pencils

Suzan al-Dabba  
Gaza

**Suzan's mobile phone did not stop ringing for the first 15 minutes of the interview. Every time it rang she would apologize: "I am sorry, but people are setting appointments with me from school."**

She turned off her phone. Suzan is a very busy woman, yet very present. She told her story with enthusiasm. The moment when the glass was breaking over their heads, the moment when the stones were falling on them, and the moment when the water started flowing from the water tanks, was the moment when they knew they will never come back home again, and it was that moment that they left their house and never looked back. Her husband was holding her hand, her daughter holding her other hand, and her other two children were running before them.

"Like when you give drops of water to a dying bird, with a 10 per cent chance of living. It felt like a slice of Judgement Day; it was an unbearable feeling."

Suzan has a university degree and has been working with UNRWA for the past 15 years. In the summer of 2014, she defied her family when she left her home in Zaytouna neighbourhood and dedicated all of her time to work at Al-Daraj Shelter.

Her family discouraged her from working at the shelter. "Why are you doing this? We are decent people, all of them working there are men, and you are the only woman!" Suzan raised her voice: "You know what my reply was?" She put her hand up and pointed at the camera and proudly said: "This is out of the question, I have to work and serve these people, and I have a huge energy that needs to be diverted towards a positive direction." Her parents did not call her for a week after this.

**“  
You are not  
only displaced;  
something else  
is wrong with  
you.  
”**

“  
**‘Suzan, you  
are a mountain  
wherever you  
go. You turn  
destruction  
into paradise.’**  
”

During the conflict in Gaza in 2014, Suzan and her family stayed in the shelter from 13 June till 26 August. She worked within the shelter on providing services and assistance to displaced persons at the backdrop of the sounds of bombings, ambulances and sirens. That particular shelter housed almost 7,000 persons.

One time, as Suzan finished her check-ups at 10 in the evening, she sat down and started to unwrap her cheese sandwich to eat, when she looked up to see a man in his forties, very thin, pale, exhausted, and lost.

“Come closer sir, what is wrong?” He looked at her with desperation and said: “I am displaced from my home with my children.”



"You are not only displaced; something else is wrong with you." Suzan gave him her chair and a few dates she had; she felt that he was ill. Suzan and her family gave their beds to him and his four children, while they slept on chairs all night.

He is a cancer patient, undergoing chemotherapy. "I will tell you one thing about him. You know when you give a kindergarten child a case of coloured pencils and then he colours on a blank paper, then he rubs all the colours with his palm, you see a dark grey colour? This is how he was exactly!"

Suzan told us how her reputation was spreading around Gaza, among people, television and radio. They talked about the powerful and effective actions she has taken during and after the conflict.

Her family proudly says to her: "'Suzan, you are a mountain wherever you go. You turn destruction into paradise.'"

After the conflict, Suzan worked as a shelter manager and was nominated for an award in Geneva. Her goal was to offer the best humanitarian services to displaced people, by connecting and cooperating with everyone, especially women and children. She also worked on women's empowerment by training women in the centre on various crafts to help them earn a basic income, such as embroidery, cooking and wool-making. Suzan also established a children's kindergarten, which opens daily from 8 a.m. till 12 p.m. creating a safe space for them. Suzan cooperated with other colleagues at UNRWA and other specialized institutions to provide medical equipment and free wheelchairs for people with disabilities.





# coffee, extra sweet

Amal Najjar  
Gaza

**“I drink my coffee extra sweet every morning. I have had my dose of bitterness; I do not want any more bitterness.” Amal replies to every question with a poem she wrote. We asked her: How are you?**

*I married him with my mind  
But I have no control over my heart  
As for the word 'love'  
My heart never felt it  
And my tongue never uttered it.*

“This is how my life started. I was married by force. It was an open wound. I pressed it with all the power left in me to overcome this wound and walk strong and tall.”

We talked to Amal through Skype. She took a deep breath and looked into the camera.

*I walked the world until I was parched  
I couldn't tell friend from foe  
The path of the salt sea is easier than the road I am taking now.*

She sighed and leaned backwards: “Despite everything, I was able to persist and challenge everyone and everything standing in my way. I was determined to build my house. Even if it took my life, I would do it.” She smiled: “Sorrow is never forgotten. We have forgetfulness, but we do not really forget. We ignore. It will never be erased from our memory. This will never stop me from living and embracing my husband and sons. It will never deprive me from enjoying every moment of my accomplishments. I enjoy every moment when I share my poetry with others. I enjoy having breakfast with my sons. I enjoy my coffee with extra sugar.”

Amal, or Um Ahmad, took part in activities aimed at the empowerment of women including knitting, handicrafts, psychological support, and teaching literacy.

“  
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morning.**  
”

Before she had to leave she delivered this message to us:  
“My goal is to see all women challenging their hardships with  
patience, wisdom and deliberation, to create things out of  
nothing. They have to stop waiting for things to come to them.  
Make the impossible possible. Work is honorable.”

*Our life is not a red carpet  
Decorated with roses, pearls and corals  
Out of every story and tale  
We come forth with  
Determination, strength, and faith.*





# high heels

Ferial Sabri Kiwan  
Lebanon

**Ferial is a Camp Services Officer in Shatila camp in Beirut. She was highly criticized at the beginning. People used to ask her: “Why did you put yourself in such a position and take on a job you cannot do? It is clearly a man’s job!”**

Ferial had applied to that job while she was pregnant. During the fourth month of her pregnancy, Ferial was called for a test, and upon passing it, she was called for an interview; she was in the last two weeks of her pregnancy then. She described the situation, laughing all the while: “Five months before the interview, right after taking the test, I prepared an outfit just for the interview in case I passed the test. I was among the five called in for an interview. Then the night before the interview, I tried my outfit on.”

She giggled: “I was too pregnant for the dress! So I prepared a new outfit. I woke up the next morning, put it on, and kept the high heels in my purse. I left my house wearing my flip-flops. Right before I was called in, I changed from the slippers into the high heels.”



Ferial got the position and her husband supported her despite a lot of discouragement from the community around them.

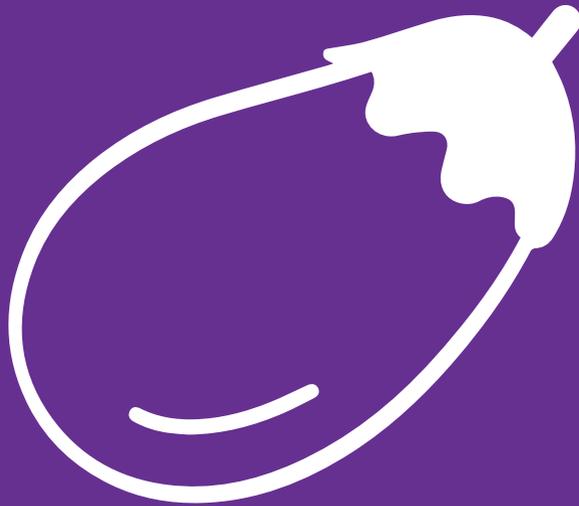
Ferial has five children now. While we were talking on Skype, her teething son Luqman was crying, but she remained focused nonetheless while trying to soothe her baby.

Following the brief interview with Ferial, she got in touch with us through text message: "I remember the defining moment that made me a stronger woman. I used to get distinguished grades when I was a teenager. A year before graduating from high school, a very supportive teacher visited my father to convince him to allow me to pursue a university degree. Back then my father was against the idea of girls obtaining university degrees and working."

She sent another long text: "Last week, a delegate was visiting Shatila camp and we were doing a briefing about UNRWA operations at the Ramallah School Library. During the meeting, the Chief Area Officer looked at me and said: 'This is the first time in the history of UNRWA and Lebanon that we have a female Camp Services Officer.' They all looked at me, nodded, and smiled. I am very happy for the gratitude and recognition that I received."

She sent one final text message: "There was this one time, not long after I had been hired for this position with UNRWA, that a woman asked me: 'Why do you want to work in the difficult conditions in Shatila camp?' I told her that my job in Shatila gives me more pride than any other office job I ever had in my life."

“  
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 was called in, I  
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 heels.**  
 ”



# maqloubeh with eggplant

Samar Ismael al-Shaar  
Lebanon

**“Boil the chicken until it is half-cooked and then fry the eggplant and the chopped onions. In the bottom of the pot, place the boiled chicken then, above that, the eggplant, and on top of that the fried onion, and finally on top pour the rice and spices (black pepper, cinnamon, turmeric).**

Maqloubeh is made up of four layers: the chicken, the eggplant, the onion, and the spiced rice. Then cover with water and place the pot on the stove for approximately an hour. Then turn it upside down onto a big tray- delicious!” This is the recipe that Samar shared with us, describing it with joy in her voice.

Samar volunteers at the Burj Barajneh camp at the Women's Programme Centre (WPC). She also participated and was trained, along with other women, through the 'Healthy Kitchen, Healthy Children' Project, in collaboration with the American University of Beirut (AUB), which operates Sufra Kitchen, a local community kitchen.

Even though the conversation lasted for less than an hour due to poor internet connection, Samar was able to share with us her relationship with and love for cooking. “Food brings people together and makes them happy. The children at school are happy when it is *maqloubeh* day, they jump around and call me Miss (teacher), and no one has ever called me that before! I feel happy too.”

“Once, my family and I were at my mother's house for lunch. We were sitting around the table and eating together. I made a big tray of maqloubeh with eggplant. Everyone in the family clapped when I turned it over. The house was full of smells and scents of delightful spices and onion. My mother looked at me with a big smile, 'Samar, bravo! That is really delicious. You are a talented cook, keep it up.' My mother is my life!” “I also volunteer with UNRWA to teach literacy. One of my

“  
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”

students there, Um Lutfi, has had a great influence on me. She is inspirational because of her determination and pursuit of learning. She reminds me of that student who comes on the first day of school and is very enthusiastic, with hair parted and combed to the side and shirt tucked into his trousers.”

Right before we ended the conversation with her, she insisted to deliver a message to Arab women: “I advise every woman to get out of the house and participate in activities and courses the centres provide to us. If a woman works and can manage between her work and house, she will feel accomplished, independent, and productive. This is very important for a woman’s morale.”

