

Relief & Social Services

Women's Programme

Mission of the Programme

To promote the advancement of Palestine refugee women as equal partners in the development process, by strengthening their role and active participation in the advancement of their families and the community.

Profile

The Women's Programme not only provides Palestine refugee women with unique and socially acceptable venues for socializing and participating in cultural and recreational activities, the Programme also offers a wide range of integrated services to enhance the knowledge and capabilities of women, such as skills training, advice and education. These services are delivered by a network of 65 community based Women's Programme Centres (WPCs) located across UNRWA's five fields of operation. The WPCs play a pivotal role in strengthening the economic status and social development of refugee women by helping them to become more self reliant. Girls, housewives, unemployed women, potential entrepreneurs, illiterate women, students (boys and girls) and children all participate in the Programme, and the steady rise of participants at WPCs over the years testifies to their success and the role they play in empowering community members.

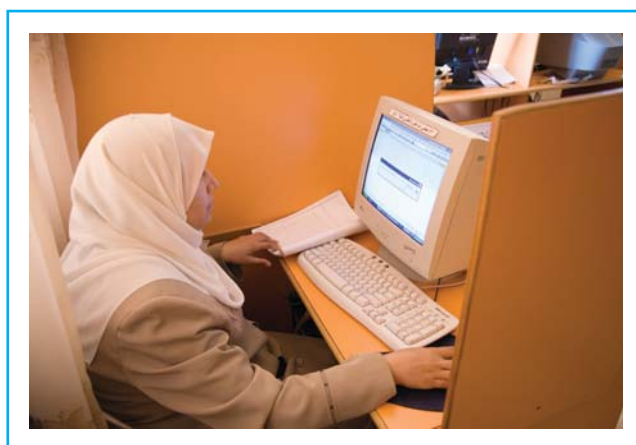
The Women's Programme, through the capacity building of its staff and community volunteers, is implementing the following strategies to help empower women and reduce social, economic and legal gender imbalances in order to eliminate discrimination against women:

- Economic self-reliance to encourage refugee women to enhance their economic status and strengthen their self-confidence by acquiring marketable skills to increase their access to employment and income generation;

- Participation in decision making and leadership to enhance women's role within the family and community by building their capacity and encouraging their involvement in managing Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and activities; and
- Promoting human rights to increase refugee women's knowledge of their human and civil rights and to help them address social and legal concerns in a more effective manner. Activities include: awareness raising sessions on early marriage, domestic violence and human rights; advocacy campaigns; and the provision of legal services free-of-charge.

History

In 1953 UNRWA set up 22 sewing centres to provide women with traditional skills training in sewing, knitting and the famous traditional Palestinian embroidery. In the late 1980s, sewing centres and women's activity centres were converted into multi-purpose Women's Programme Centres to serve as focal points in the refugee camps for UNRWA's work



Palestine refugee women have access to computer labs provided by the Community Based Organizations, (Photo courtesy of Ugo Panella, 2008).

with women. In the 1990s, the role of the Relief and Social Services (RSS) Programme evolved into that of a 'facilitator' vis-à-vis that of service provider where refugee women were encouraged to become more involved in the identification of their socio-economic priorities and organizing activities in the community accordingly. As a result, the role of RSS staff increasingly became directed towards encouraging the organization of local committees and building the WPCs' institutional and financial capacities.

Achievements

The Women's Programme has successfully overcome numerous obstacles to achieve its goals. Some of the most recent achievements of the Programme are:

- Providing skills training services to more than 9,619 women in 2008 in areas such as computer literacy, hairdressing, sewing, traditional Palestine handicrafts and embroidery;



The Women's Programme Centre in Nahr El-Bared, Lebanon plays an important role serving the community following the destruction of the camp in 2007, (Photo courtesy of Rana Zawawi, 2008).

- Establishing 28 nurseries and 46 kindergartens for 7,608 children of working mothers to enable them to work or attend the WPC activities (the fees paid by the parents cover the running costs of these services and help fund the WPC administration);
- Setting up free Legal Advice Bureaus in WPCs in Jordan that have provided support to over 1,608 women in need of assistance, especially in relation to family violence, discrimination and violation of law provisions and human rights. Legal Advice Bureaus in Jordan were designated as safe spaces by the Jordanian legal system and thus serve as a place where caregivers in custody battles can visit with their children;
- Replicating the success of the Legal Advice Bureaus in Jordan in other fields. This has led to two Legal Advice Bureaus recently being inaugurated at Yarmouk and Dera'a Women's Programme Centres in Syria, and legal services being introduced in almost all the WPCs in Gaza and the West Bank;
- Establishing income generating projects to help women generate revenue from small enterprises and to also serve as an example to the community that women can run economically viable businesses;
- Providing informal education and literacy classes for refugee women to assist them entering the formal education system;
- Providing physical fitness activities, including aerobics and stretch classes, along with lectures to encourage women to adopt a healthier life style;
- Strengthening WPCs' networking with local, national and international organizations, relevant UN agencies and government institutions addressing women's issues and concerns; and

- Providing counseling and psychological support services for women suffering from trauma and other psychological stress from the prolonged conflict in Gaza and the West Bank.

Recent Initiatives

Informal education

The Women's Programme Centres provide informal education, tutoring and literacy classes for refugee women to enable them to continue their formal education. In the West Bank, WPCs in Askar, Aroub, and Balata Camps have introduced new informal education services for women who have not completed their high school formal education or *Tawjihi*. As a result 90 women received their high school diplomas in 2008.

Internet cafes

The Women's Programme increases women's access to information technology through the internet cafes which have been set up in Baqa'a, Madaba and Irbid WPCs in Jordan. Internet cafes help to increase the number of refugee women with internet skills and to provide them with regular access to computer facilities. These cafes are now full of women, young and old, using the computers to communicate with family and friends, conduct internet searches, research ideas or download information.

Governance and empowerment of Palestine refugee women in Lebanon

The Women's Programme in Lebanon secured funds from the British Embassy for a women's empowerment and governance project. One of the major activities of the project is to create incubator centres in two camps as a strategy for fighting unemployment.

These incubators will provide graduates from WPCs (and other NGOs in the camps) with the opportunity to practice their newly acquired skills in preparation for transition into the workforce. The incubators include a hair salon, sewing units and computer and mobile phone repair and maintenance units. To date, 279 trainees have enrolled in the incubators of which 117 have secured jobs.



Skills training courses offered at Women's Programme Centres can lead to formal or self-employment which can improve the economic status of women, (2008).

From Poverty to WPC Volunteer: Amal Hassan Abu Hattab

Everywhere she goes people are heartened by the smile on Amal Hassan Abu Hattab's face. She is a divorced mother of 18 year-old Ismail and used to be living on the poverty line with her only financial support coming from UNRWA. Her former husband does not pay any child support towards his son's upbringing.

Despite this, Amal turned her life around with some cash assistance from UNRWA. With this money she bought a sewing machine and learned how to sew from which she eventually received a regular income. Since her divorce, Amal has lived at her parents' house, and with the money she earned from sewing she saved enough to add another room to the family home for her and her son.

Eventually Amal began teaching other women how to sew, and as a result, she is now a volunteer at the Baqa'a Women's Programme Centre in Jordan, where she herself first learned how to sew.



Amal gives back to the community by training women to sew after she received skills training from a Women's Programme Centre, (2009).

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