Palestine Refugees Today

No. 129

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Palestine refugee women: Resilient and resourceful

The theme of this year's International Women's Day, observed every year on 8 March, was "Refugee Women". To mark the occasion, this issue of Palestine Refugees Today looks at the lives of Palestine refugee women.

SINCE the Palestinians first became refugees in 1948, Palestinian women have seen their families go through many upheavals - from temporary displacement to civil war to full-scale war.

Families have had to pack up and flee several times, leaving their homes and belongings behind them. As Palestinian men have lost their land and their jobs, it is the women who have been called upon to keep the families together. The families, in turn, have ensured that their mothers and grandmothers are not abandoned in their old age.

In many Palestine refugee families, grown children and grandchildren live where their grandparents have lived since the original Palestinian displacement in 1948, and very often it is a widowed grandmother who is at the centre of this family circle.

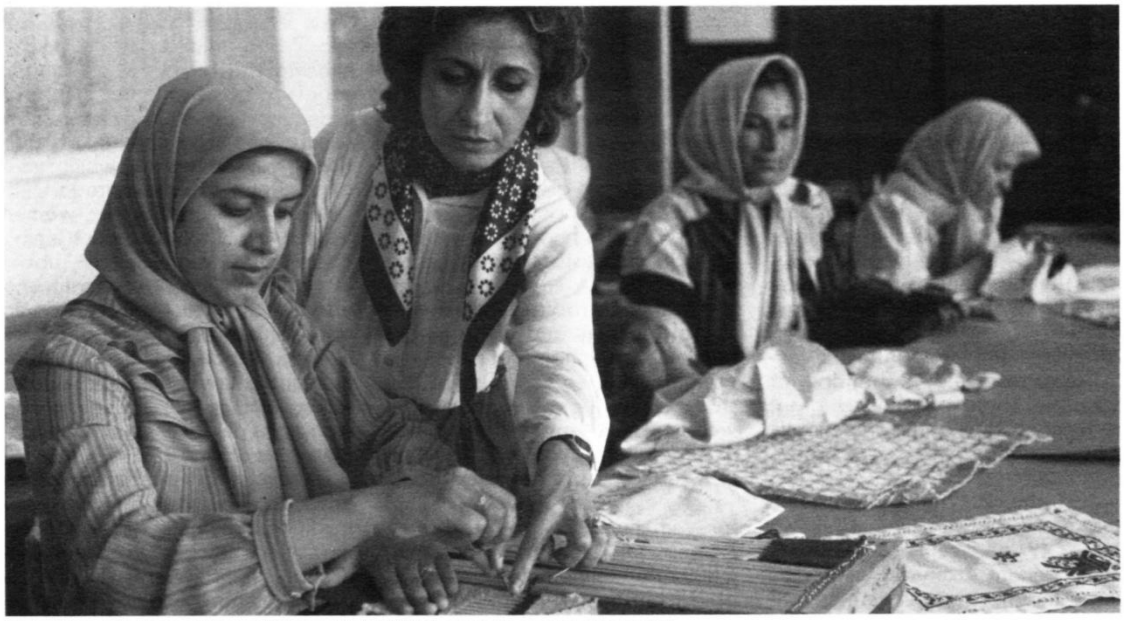
At the same time, as the menfolk are caught up in the repeated rounds of turmoil in the Middle East - when husbands and fathers have been wounded, killed or thrown out of work - it is the women who have had to keep hope alive.

Hardship has not stopped Palestinian women from moving with the times. Almost all the younger women have received an education and many have gone on to earn a living in a whole range of professions from teaching to computer programming. Some have been able to pursue studies or careers in non-traditional subjects such as engineering. Others have faced the same dilemma which many women face and have had to hold back their careers in order to help their families.

"Resilient and resourceful" are the words UNRWA's Director of Relief and Social Services, Mrs. Angela Williams uses to describe Palestinian women. As head of the department which embraces UNRWA's women's programmes and as deputy director of UNRWA field operations in Gaza from 1985-88, Mrs. Williams has had close contact with Palestinian women and their needs and aspirations.

"I think for people who have not met Palestinian women before one of the most immediate impressions is how well-educated they are, how resourceful, how articulate and how very highly motivated," she said in an interview marking this year's International Women's Day. "I think it perhaps comes as a surprise to some people to find how much more freedom of movement the Palestinian woman has within her community than some of her neighbouring Arab women," Mrs. Williams said.

"One of the remarkable things about the Palestinians - and I would say especially about the women - is their resilience, their determined hold on their aspirations. The women, of course, do share above all the aspirations of the Palestini-



Embroidery is just one of many skills taught at UNRWA women's programme centres

ans for a state of their own and they are very much leaders within the family in keeping alive the determination to see the struggle through."

It is too early to say what effect the intifada which has been going on in the West Bank and Gaza Strip since December 1987 will have on the role of Palestinian women there. Women have been taking an active part in the uprising-particularly by establishing and running neighbourhood committees, cooperatives and other ventures designed to increase their communities' self-sufficiency.

Mrs. Williams said many women now needed to supplement their families' incomes because their husbands had been imprisoned, wounded or killed in the intifada, had lost their jobs in Israel or had been unable to attend their jobs regularly because of curfews and other restrictions on the movement of working-age Palestinian males imposed by the Israeli authorities.

"The jobs done by most of these working women are not always glamorous," Mrs. Williams said. "They are employed in textile factories or in animal husbandry, for example. These jobs, however, are at least as important to economic survival and growth as are professional careers."

Of the 2.4 million Palestine refugees registered with UNRWA some 49 per cent are women. They benefit from the Agency's three main programmes - education, health and relief and social services - as well as from special projects established specifically to aid women.

Education: When UNRWA started its education programme back in 1950, only about a third of the Palestine refugee children of school age received an education and most of those who did turn up for school were boys (74 per cent of UNRWA's pupils in 1951).

Over the years, the proportion of refugee children attending school rose dramatically and the number of girls attending also rose. The male/female ratio (51 : 49) is about equal and corresponds to the ratio in the population.

Today UNRWA spends half its total budget on education and Palestine refugee women play an important part in the programme. Just under half of the Agency's 10,000 teachers are women and in the 1988-89 school year, 286 of UNRWA's 608 head teachers and 36 of the 62 assistant head teachers were women.

UNRWA produces all its own school teachers and the Agency's teacher training courses are popular with women. Out of 860 students, 500 - or 60 per cent - are women. The Agency prides itself on its Ramallah Women's Training Centre (RWTC) in the West Bank, which was the first college of its kind for women in the Arab world when it opened in 1962. Since that time, 6,800 refugee women have graduated from the teacher and vocational training courses at the centre.

RWTC was closed by the Israeli authorities, together with other institutions of higher learning in the occupied territory, for two years during the intifada. During that time, many of the students, as is normal for 20-22-year-old Palestinian women, got married and had children.

When the centre reopened last year, they were accepted back, and many of the married students, including those with infant children, are carrying on with courses despite opposition from some of their families who would have preferred for them to keep to their traditional roles as wives and mothers. Many have gained their families' - and their husbands' - encouragement to complete their educations. This is cited as one of the changes in traditional ways of thinking which have been wrought by the intifada.

The proportion of women trainees at UNRWA's other training centres is still relatively low - about 20 per cent. UNRWA is continuing efforts to attract more women applicants by offering courses more likely to attract women, such as business and office practice, computer science and courses training young women as dental assistants, physiotherapists and nurses.

A number of Palestinian women have chosen to study such non-traditional subjects as engineering, electronics or architectural draughtsmanship at UNRWA's training centres and have gone on to find jobs in those areas. About a

Computer course at an UNRWA training centre

third of the 453 university scholarships awarded in 1988-89 to Palestinian students were awarded to women.

Palestinian women - and men - who complete their studies still have to struggle to find work because of the economic problems of the Middle East. Says Angela Williams: "For those who have been able to find work, very many do succeed in being accepted in the profession for which they have been trained. There is today a problem because of the economic recession throughout the area and a backlash - particularly among certain conservative groups in the area - against women working. But on the whole the Palestinian community has been very encouraging of women's education and their employment afterwards."

Health: UNRWA's health programme is directed largely at women and children, as a visitor to any of the Agency's 104 clinics can see (and hear!). Pregnant refugee women register at the nearest UNRWA clinic and are closely monitored through pregnancy. UNRWA midwives often deliver the newborns. Over the first five years of the babies' lives, mothers bring them to the clinics to be weighed, immunized and checked at regular intervals. The Agency also provides school health services, family life education and health education classes for mothers.

Relief and Social Services: Since 1989, UNRWA's Relief and Social Services programme has given a stronger emphasis to refugee women as a group requiring special attention. Women's Programme Centres offer women and girls a meeting place and an opportunity to take part in activities including dress-making and industrial sewing, traditional embroidery and health education. Courses have also been organised in such income-generating skills as typing, flower-making, machine-knitting and hairdressing as well as in the teaching of functional literacy and numeracy courses which are greatly in demand among older women who were not able to complete their schooling.

These multi-functional Women's Programme Centres have over the past two years been evolving from the sewing centres and "women's activities centres" once found in many Palestine refugee camps as one of UNRWA's social services. Ms. Najwa Kefaya, UNRWA's Amman-based Women's Programme Specialist is the person directly in charge of UNRWA's women's programmes.

UNRWA health programmes cater to women

In collaboration with a professor from Jordan University, Ms. Kefaya prepared 1,500 questionnaires which were sent out to Palestinian women in the West Bank, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, asking them what they wanted the centres to provide. Many women replied that they needed somewhere to leave their children. On the strength of this, a creche was included in the design for the new purpose-built women's centres.

Ms. Kefaya, who recently completed a Master of Arts degree in Women and Development in the Netherlands, has also been looking at ways of improving the marketing of items produced by women at the UNRWA centres, including samples of traditional Palestinian embroidery.

"When I was in Holland," she says, "I graduated in a Palestinian dress. It was fully embroidered and people were astonished. People who didn't know me were coming to ask me about my dress. They were really impressed and they wanted to buy something like it." Such dresses are produced by women at the UNRWA centres and sold at outlets such as the UNRWA Embroidery Shop in Gaza or the Women's Cooperative in Kalandia camp, West Bank.

UNRWA also tries to help women by giving extra aid to 151,000 especially needy refugee families-half of which are headed by women. Special hardship assistance includes food, clothing, blankets, small cash grants, shelter repair, preferential access to UNRWA vocational and teacher training centres and grants for small income-generating projects.

These projects are part of UNRWA's efforts to help refugees to become self-sufficient. Grants are given to families or groups of refugees to establish workshops or small businesses with start-up capital and initial support from a social worker trained in income-generation. In Gaza more than a quarter of those employed in such projects are women. In the West Bank the figure is as high as 44 per cent.

The Agency, in coordination with a British non-governmental organization, also provides loans averaging $10,000, repayable at low interest rates over three years for income-generation projects. Women are among the beneficiaries of this programme - either receiving the loans or working in the projects once they are established.

The Relief and Social Services programme has adopted a three-pronged objective for those activities which particularly address the needs and aspirations of Palestine refugee women: to enable more disadvantaged women, especially from the Special Hardship Case families, to acquire the skills and secure opportunities with which to earn a living; to enable them to cope effectively with family and social problems, and to facilitate their role in the development of their community.

Living under curfew: How one family coped

During the recent Gulf war, a day-and-night curfew was clamped on the West Bank and Gaza for more than 40 days and nights, confining virtually the entire population to their homes. UNRWA relief workers circulated among the camps and villages to see how families were faring, as the Agency embarked on a plan to distribute donated foodstuffs to all families. Here is the story of one family they encountered in Fawwar camp, in the remote far south of the West Bank.

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1. This family is registered as a special hardship case with UNRWA. The father suffers from chronic back trouble which prevents him from doing more than occasional work as a labourer. The 31-year-old mother has nine children, of whom the eldest is 15. The husband's mother also lives with the family, in two rooms with a separate kitchen.

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2. The house is built of stone and mud with a corrugated "asbestos" roof, and is situated on a narrow hillside terrace which is flooded when it rains. There is no bathroom, only an outdoor water tank. The shelter is in poor condition, and relief workers rate it a priority candidate for UNRWA's shelter rehabilitation programme.

3. At the time of the visit, it had been only five days since the family had received a food parcel under UNRWA's emergency food distribution programme. Still, the total amount of food remaining consisted of a day's supply of flour, a handful of sugar, half a tub of cooking fat and a jar of coagulated olive oil, some tea and a few pickles.

4. The refrigerator was almost empty, save for a piece of bread, some left-over bean pulses and the medication the mother had collected from the UNRWA health centre in the camp that morning during a break in the curfew. To the side, there was a little salt and some spices. There was no fresh food in the house.

5. Such food as there was could be cooked only over a gas-fired bunsen burner. During the curfews, it became difficult to replenish gas supplies. Apart from the rations from UNRWA, this family had to depend on charity which their neighbours could no longer afford to give. A water bill for the entire year 1990 had arrived with a final warning that the family's water supply would be cut off if it were not paid by mid-January: only the curfew imposed at that time had prevented the warning from being implemented. The family said they had no money to pay the bill or any part of it. The immediate problem for this family, and many others like it in the occupied territory, was survival.

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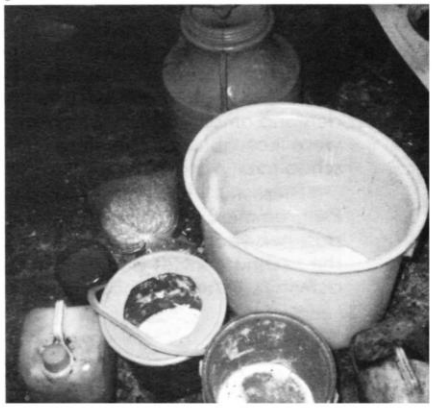


Life under curfew: Fear, hunger and loss

For six weeks at the beginning of this year, during the war in the Gulf, the entire population of the Israeli-occupied territory—1.7 million Palestinians—were placed under a sweeping day-and-night curfew. People were forbidden to leave their homes, except during brief breaks in the curfew. For one Palestine refugee family and their neighbours in a camp in the West Bank, this experience had a profound effect on their lives.

FOR the last four out of her nine years, Samah Ramahi has suffered from kidney failure. Her illness requires her to go to an Israeli hospital in Jerusalem for dialysis treatment at least once a month. For Samah, the curfew imposed on the entire West Bank and Gaza Strip during the Gulf war was not just an inconvenience but a threat to her very life.

Samah Ramahi is a Palestine refugee living in Jalazone camp, West Bank, about 20 kilometres north of Jerusalem. The first signs of her illness developed in late 1986, when large numbers of soldiers converged on her family's shelter in Jalazone to arrest her father, Mahmoud Ramahi, a journalist with an east Jerusalem newspaper.

Four months later, in March 1987, an even larger number of soldiers came to the Ramahi house to seal it, after an Israeli military court sentenced Samah's father to five years in prison. Samah fainted as soldiers forced the family of seven and their furniture out into the street and started sealing the rooms of their shelter. She was taken to hospital, where her condition deteriorated and she developed kidney failure. None of her family have had kidney problems in the past and family members believe that her illness was caused by shock.

Samah is on a special diet based on food commodities obtained outside Jalazone, a small camp of some 6,000 people nestling in a valley just west of the Jerusalem-Nablus road. Every day, Samah's mother cooks two meals-one for the family and one for Samah. During the curfews, when Palestinians were banned from moving about outside their homes, the family could not get the special food Samah needs. Even during breaks in the curfew for a few hours once or twice a week, they were still not allowed to leave the camp to buy food for Samah. The curfew also delayed planned tests on Samah's sister to see if their blood types were compatible; it had been hoped that the sister would be able to donate a kidney to Samah. The tests, scheduled at Hadassah hospital in Jerusalem at the end of January 1991, have been postponed indefinitely.

Israeli army watchtowers overlook Jalazone camp

The curfew on Jalazone, first imposed on 15 January 1991-the expiry date of the United Nations deadline for the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait-was first lifted for two hours on 22 January and again on 29 January, when UNRWA distributed 25 kilograms of flour to each of the 1,200 families in the camp as part of an emergency food distribution aimed at alleviating some of the hardship caused by the curfews.

As the war in the Gulf continued, curfews on the occupied territories carried on into the second week of February, when the Israeli authorities started easing them in some areas of the West Bank, although not in refugee camps, where they remained strictly enforced. Camp residents tell bitterly of watching from the tiny windows of their shelters as UNRWA trucks loaded with flour and rice went into and out of the camp twice, on 20 and 21 February, without distributing anything because the Israeli authorities refused to lift the curfew to allow camp residents to receive UNRWA's food assistance. This was in violation of a prior agreement between the Agency and the Israeli authorities under which UNRWA would be permitted to distribute foodstuffs donated in response to a worldwide appeal for assistance for the Palestinians.

For the first eight months after the two main rooms in their house were sealed, the Ramahi family lived on a 3x4-square-metre glassed-in balcony, the only part of the house left unsealed. By Novem-

ber 1988, Samah's oldest brother, Ayman, and their two other brothers had just about finished building a number of rooms on top of the sealed shelter when the army arrested them and ordered a halt to the construction. As winter set in, the family moved to a nearby house provided by concerned neighbours.

By this time, Ayman had been released from prison and had got married, so that his family could remain on UNRWA's relief rolls as a special hardship case. Although the family's main breadwinner, Ayman's father, was in prison, UNRWA regulations for assisting families without incomes excluded those with an unmarried male son 18 or older who was not enrolled in higher education. Ayman, who was already 18 when his father was arrested, had planned to go abroad to study journalism, but those plans had been postponed.

Ayman was able to get a job at UNRWA's feeding centre in the camp. But just as his family was settling into its new house, they were visited once again by a force of Israeli soldiers. The soldiers said that this house, too, would have to be demolished, as a further punishment for the imprisonment of the father of the household. They were given an hour to remove all their possessions. Having lost two houses in the camp, and the possibility of building a third makeshift shelter on top of the sealed house, the Ramahis decided to try their luck outside the camp and rented a house in the nearby town of Ramallah. Finally, about a year ago, they managed to find another house in Jalazone, on the other side of the camp from where their two previous shelters had been.

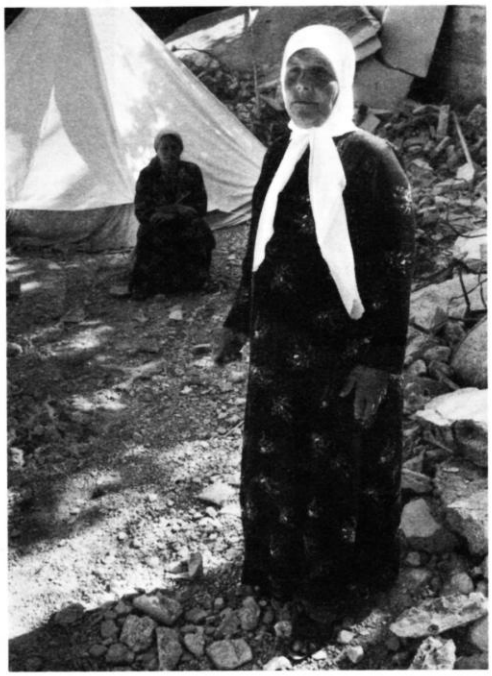
However, says Ayman Ramahi, "My family will not really feel secure, even under the roof of their new house, as long as the West Bank remains under occupation." He says they live in constant fear of a new demolition or sealing order. Samah still has nightmares of soldiers breaking into the house and throwing her and her family out into the street. Indeed, three times during the long Gulf war curfews, soldiers did break in, leaving behind not only frightened children but also a trail of damaged property.

During the curfews, Ayman Ramahi continued to receive his salary as an UNRWA employee. However, hundreds of wage-earners in Jalazone normally depend on daily-paid employment either in Israel or in the Ramallah area. As no-one was allowed to move about during the curfews, these workers were not able to go to their jobs. So even when the curfews were lifted for a few hours to allow families to shop, their families had little money to spend as their income had dried up and whatever savings they may have had were exhausted.

These families survived the curfews because of the close-knit nature of Palestinian society and thanks to UNRWA's emergency food assistance. When the daytime curfew was finally lifted on 1 March, only 12 out of the nearly 350 workers from Jalazone who used to work in Israel were given the new passes now required for Palestinians to go to work inside the "Green Line". Many of those who had worked in the Ramallah area also found themselves out of a job: the businesses they had worked for had closed up shop because of the curfews.

A visitor to the Ramahi family in late February would have noted a one-square-metre hole in the ceiling of the living room, from which the plaster had disappeared, exposing the concrete roof. The plaster had fallen onto a sideboard, breaking most of the glasses and dishes in it. Ayman said that soldiers had jumped onto the house from the roof of a neighbouring shelter and had started breaking the solar panels of the water-heating system, like those found on the roof of every house in the West Bank. The damage to the neighbours' house was even greater, he said, and dozens of families in the camp had reported similar stories from the same incident.

But this latest chapter in the Palestinian experience under occupation has not just engendered property damage, economic loss and psychological trauma. It has changed people's attitudes as well. One day during the curfews, an UNRWA Refugee Affairs Officer, whose job it is to circulate among the camps and other areas checking on the continuity of UNRWA's work and on the general well-being of the population, came across a group of young refugees playing football in an open space in Jalazone camp. The UNRWA man said to the youths: "You know you could be arrested for breaking the curfew for being outside your houses ..." To this, the youths replied, almost in unison: "*Ma'alesh* (never mind). At least in prison we'll get regular meals and cigarettes."



Refugee women outside a demolished shelter, Jalazone camp

Coping under curfew: Very special hardship

During the long Gulf war curfews in Gaza and the West Bank, Palestinians were not allowed out of their houses. The confinement imposed physical discomfort and psychological strain on refugee families, especially those living in the crowded refugee camps of Gaza. No-one felt the strain more than refugee women, who had to look after fractious children at home, shop for food with limited funds as supplies dwindled and even attend mother-and-child clinics during breaks in the curfew. Here are the stories of some of these women in Gaza.

SU'AD Zaqout leaves her home in Nuseirat camp, Gaza, early in the morning to take two of her younger children to the nearby UNRWA clinic for a measles injection. A measles epidemic in nearby areas of southern Israel has prompted UNRWA to start an emergency vaccination campaign for some 50,000 children in the occupied Gaza Strip.

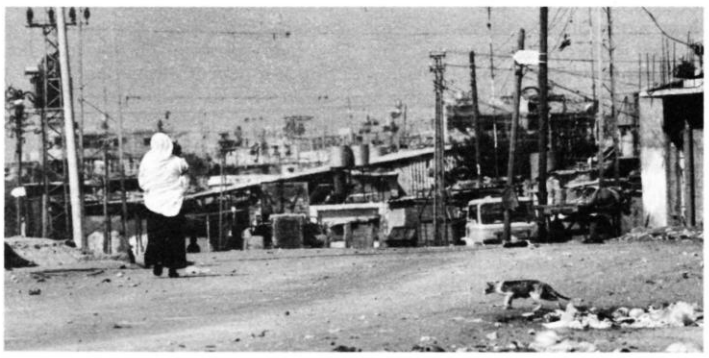
On this outing, Su'ad is accompanied by a few other women and their children. They feel safer walking to the clinic in a group. On this 30th day of the curfew in Nuseirat and elsewhere in Gaza the women don't want to face any problems with the army.

Looking after the Zaqout family's seven other children at home is the eldest child, 17-year-old Mervat. With a maturity belying her age, she has a calm and serious demeanour and almost a noble bearing.

Mervat has just finished her *tawjihi* school leaving exams and her greatest wish now is to be able to enrol at UNRWA's Women's Training Centre at Ramallah in the West Bank.

During these endless curfew days Mervat regularly reads for a few hours from schoolbooks on the English language and on philosophy. Her main task these days, however, is to support her mother as best she can. She helps her with household chores and looks after her brothers and sisters, the youngest of whom is only three years old.

The children are bored and impatient after a month of being under virtual "house arrest", together with all the other 700,000 Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip. Six-year-old Khaled caused excitement the other day by drinking some kerosene in the hope of making himself sick so he could at least get out of the house by having to be taken to the clinic.



Going to clinic in Jabalia under curfew

The girls of the family giggle in embarrassment when asked about their ways of passing the time. Mervat explains that they play hide-and-seek, and doctor-and-patient. The boys sometimes play football or other games in the small yard in the middle of the house, which makes this home more spacious than the usual standard-size refugee shelters in which perhaps half of Gaza's population lives.

Frequently, showing the strains imposed by the circumstances, the children quarrel. Ten people live in this house, with little room to move. The two small bedrooms each sleep five persons.

Mervat and her mother spend a lot of time trying to explain to the children why they cannot demand food too frequently and why the rations are smaller than usual. Compared to many other households in the area, the food situation in this house is not very critical. But there is certainly not a great variety of foodstuffs on hand in this house. The refrigerator is full of plates of cooked rice, vegetables and some soup; there is even some chicken in the freezer–but it looks a bit "off" and not as if it would feed 10 people satisfactorily.

The family, being one of some 47,000 in the Gaza Strip which are registered with UNRWA as "special hardship cases", received a few food parcels before the general curfew was imposed. Mervat's father was one of five people shot dead in a confrontation with soldiers in Gaza in May 1989. The shop formerly run by the father had to be closed, as there is no other male in the family old enough to take it over. Lacking a male breadwinner, the family qualifies for special hardship assistance, including food rations, from UNRWA.

Shortly after the curfew was clamped on the entire Gaza Strip, Mervat's family received a 50-kilogram bag of flour and three kilos of skim milk when UNRWA began an emergency distribution to needy families. The flour goes for baking bread. The oven in the kitchen is not working because there is no bottled gas available during the curfew. So a *tabboun*, a small oven using an open fire, has been installed in the tiny yard outside for baking bread the traditional Arab way.

When the curfew is lifted for a

few hours a couple of times a week, Mervat and her mother go to the market to purchase some vegetables with the little money the family has left. If time allows, they make quick visits to neighbours to see how they are getting on and if they need any help.

Mervat and her family are coping well under these circumstances. However, food stocks are running out and soon they will have to rely on more rations being distributed by UNRWA. The Agency has gone to the world community to raise funds specially for these distributions, since UNRWA's own regular budget is always overstretched just keeping the Agency's normal education and health and social programmes going for Palestine refugees here in the occupied territories as well as in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

The hardships of living in a refugee camp under occupation - and under frequent and now unprecedentedly lengthy curfews - have certainly influenced Mervat's thoughts and feelings. "I don't have any idea what the future might bring," she says in explaining her reluctance to articulate her hopes and dreams. "Life will go on," she says with a sight that belies her awareness that for this attractive 17-year-old girl, there will be few pleasures to alleviate the suffering - at least for the foreseeable future.

SAFFIYEH Abdul-Fattah Hamdan's family in Nuseirat lives under far worse conditions. She, her husband and their seven children live crowded into two rooms no bigger than four or five square metres each. One room provides sleeping space. It is windowless and damp. Some foam mattresses are piled onto the only piece of furniture, a shabby wardrobe.

The other room serves as a kitchen, although it only vaguely resembles a place where food is prepared. There is no refrigerator and such food as there is - some beans and lentils, sugar and some flour - is stored away in plastic boxes. The only light entering the room comes in through the open door. On the floor of the room is a mattress: someone sleeps here at night.

The family was considered a special hardship case by UNRWA for five years, until 1988. Saffiyeh's husband used to work as an orange picker until 10 years ago when he had to quit because he suffered from severe migraine. When the eldest son reached working age two years ago, the family lost its special hardship case status under UNRWA's criteria. The son, now 20, is the breadwinner now, bringing home some 20 shekels a day (about US $ 10) for picking oranges for eight hours. But when there are curfews, there is no work; Palestinians are not allowed to go to their jobs or anywhere else. And that means there is no income for the family.

Every morning, Saffiyeh makes breakfast for the family at around 6 a.m. Bread and tea with some sugar are all they eat - and there is nothing much more substantial to be expected for the rest of the day. Saffiyeh reckons that they eat about 25 loaves a day of Arabic *khubz*.

In a Gaza camp

The rest of the day she spends cleaning the shelter, washing and mending clothes. The children entertain themselves with games. But they quarrel and fight a great deal and this makes Saffiyeh's husband nervous and he sometimes reprimands the children sharply. These long curfews are clearly taking their emotional, as well as economic, toll on Palestine refugee families in the camps of Gaza.

The only distraction for Saffiyeh's family these days is television - a battered old set is parked in the crowded "kitchen", running on electricity "borrowed" from a neighbour. During the curfew, no-one in the family dares to leave the house, out of fear of confronting army patrols and being charged with a heavy fine - or worse! In the hours when the curfew is lifted, the family goes out in pursuit of something to eat - almost as if these people have been reduced to foraging for food. Saffiyeh hopes for an early end to the curfews - above all so her son can go back to work and her young children back to school.

SALMAN, age 10, blushes, bowing his head and smiling, and hides behind his sister. Their mother, Su'ad Mohammad Tilbani, has just been saying that Salman is the best pupil in his class at the UNRWA school in Maghazi camp. But Salman and his three school-age brothers and sisters have not been to school for six weeks - ever since the curfew was imposed on Maghazi and the entire Gaza Strip.

Su'ad has six children. At 37, she is pregnant again. Her husband suffers from weak vision and stomach problems. He worked as a cleaner for the Municipality until 1981. When he could no longer work, the family became recognized by UNRWA as a special hardship case.

UNRWA built a shelter of two rooms for the family, and these were later extended by the father. Still, the rooms are only between five and six square metres in area. One serves as a bedroom for Su'ad and five of the children. The other is not so much a room as a shed. The father and son sleep here among the cooking utensils and other household equipment. A tin of flour is also kept here. There is a third room near the entrance to the shelter in the small courtyard. This is the domain of the husband's mother - an old woman with tattoos on her face and dressed in the traditional Palestinian costume, bedecked with beautiful bedouin jewellery.

Su'ad and her family got their flour and skim milk rations from UNRWA a few weeks ago. Three months ago they received some rice, oil and sugar. They have a small amount of butter oil which is used for cooking. For breakfast, they eat bread (baked in the small oven in the yard) and olives and drink sweet tea. For more than a month, they have not been able to get meat and now, with the curfew preventing farmers from going to their fields and merchants from marketing their produce, there are no vegetables available. As it is, the family's meagre reserves of money are drying up and they are having to be very frugal.

Su'ad spends most of her time baking bread, cleaning the house and washing, knitting and mending clothes. Her main concern is finding enough for them to eat. She hopes the children can go back to school soon, and that they will have a better life than this in the future.

As a woman, as a refugee and as a disabled person, Maisa Lutfi al-Daqqa might be considered by many to be triply disadvantaged. However, her story shines as an example of what disabled people can do with determination. As the Decade for the Disabled launched by the United Nations in 1982 nears its completion, Palestine Refugees Today looks at one of the success stories of that decade.

"I DON'T feel that my disability hinders either my active role in society or my continuation of my higher education," says 22-year-old Maisa Lutfi al-Daqqa, a second-year history student at Damascus University in the Syrian Arab Republic.

Maisa is a Palestine refugee whose family lives in the unofficial camp of Al-Aydeen ("The Returnees") in the Barzeh quarter of Damascus. Maisa has been blind since the age of 11. Two other members of her family – she is the eldest of eight brothers and sisters – are also blind. Their disability is believed to be congenital: their mother and father are close relatives.

Maisa received her elementary, preparatory and secondary education at the Kufr Souseh School for the Rehabilitation of the Blind. There she learned to read Braille. However, when she joined the university in 1987, the Braille system was not available, and she has relied on her sense of hearing to get on with her studies.

UNRWA gave her a grant of 5,600 Syrian pounds (about US $ 500) with which she bought cassettes to record her lessons and lectures. This makes it easier for her to continue her curriculum. "It is thanks to UNRWA that I have been able to resume my education," she says. At examination time, she dictates her answers to a teacher specially assigned to her.

Maisa lives in a university dormitory during the semesters and the rest of the year with her family. At the university she gets around on her own. Her hobbies are music, listening to television dramas and reading books in Braille.

After getting her B.A. degree, Maisa hopes to become a teacher of the blind. She also hopes one day to get married. "I'll make sure it's to someone from well outside my family," she says cheerfully. Maisa's self-confidence and optimism only add to her beauty, and she smiles readily while appealing "to the whole world" to treat disabled people as productive members of society and to treat them on an equal footing with everyone else.

Palestine Refugees Today

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