

Arab Women Speak Out: *Profiles of Self-Empowerment*

by

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November 1997

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Suggested Citation:

Jabre, B., Underwood, C., and L. Goodsmith. *Arab Women Speak Out: Profiles of Self-Empowerment*. Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, Center for Communication Programs, Baltimore, Maryland and the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research, Tunis, Tunisia, November 1997.

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This publication was edited, produced, and disseminated by Center Publications: Robert J. Riccio,

Executive Editor; Kristina A. Samson, Editorial Associate; and Heather L. Bowen, Publications Coordinator.

Prepared by the Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs with primary financial support from the United States Agency for International Development under the Population Communication Services Project, DPE 3052-A-00-0014-00, the European Commission, and the Arab Gulf Program for United Nations Development Organizations.



Acknowledgments

Arab Women Speak Out was conceived as a documentary, advocacy, and training project to promote women's empowerment and active participation in social development in the Arab world. It was designed by the Near East Division of the Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs (JHU/CCP), under the leadership of Bushra Jabre, Senior Communication Advisor. The frame of reference for the project was developed by Dr. Carol Underwood, Research and Evaluation Officer.

In 1994, when JHU/CCP began collaborating with the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR) in Tunis, CAWTAR was under the leadership of Nabila Hamza. Fieldwork was completed and this publication carried to realization in ongoing partnership with CAWTAR under its current director, Dr. Naima Ben Aicha, and with the important help of CAWTAR Training Coordinator Dr. Faiza Benhadid.

The Palestine component of the project was carried out in collaboration with Population Initiatives for Peace, Ltd., headed by Hamouda Hanafi and Dr. Catherine Briggs. Field work and development of the profiles presented here was carried out by Irene Lorfing in Lebanon; Najwa Kseifi in Yemen; Latifia Kranfla and Sahar Khalifeh in Palestine; Hanan Sabea, Awatif Yunis and Salwa Ahmed Bakr in Egypt; and Djamila Bennous in Tunisia. Boutheina Cheriet was Research Coordinator for *Arab Women Speak Out* during the formative stages of the project. This publication was prepared and the synthesis chapter written by Dr. Carol Underwood, Lauren Goodsmith, and Bushra Jabre, with contributions by Dr. Faiza Benhadid.

The print profiles were edited in English by Adrienne Kols, who also provided assistance in the development of the synthesis chapter. Elizabeth DuVerlie, Special Assistant to the Director, JHU/CCP, reviewed the drafts of the print profiles; J. Douglas Storey, JHU/CCP Research and Evaluation Officer; Sereen Thaddeus, JHU/CCP Program Officer, Near East Division; and Jestyn Portugill of the Academy for Educational Development reviewed the entire manuscript. Sarah Landon assisted in editing and formatting the manuscript.

Very special thanks go to the women in Tunisia, Lebanon, Egypt, Yemen, and Palestine who shared their experiences so that their peers throughout the region and all who are concerned with social development and women's empowerment could learn from and be enriched by their experiences. Many thanks also go to the nongovernmental organizations and social centers that helped identify the women portrayed in this publication.

The *Arab Women Speak Out* project, including the preparation of this publication, was carried out with support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the European Commission (EC), the Arab Gulf Programme for United Nations Development Organizations (AGFUND), and the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR). The Arabic version of these profiles will be published by CAWTAR.

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Introduction: The *Arab Women Speak Out* Project

Women the world over strive for better lives for their families and for themselves. Many women achieve change despite sociocultural, economic, and political conditions that weigh heavily against them. Women in the Arab world are no exception. Throughout the region, there are countless stories of quiet success, of change achieved gradually through a determination to seek new options, make the most of available resources, and extend the benefits of achievement to others.

Yet, Arab women, whether in the popular media or the academic literature, are often depicted as destitute, powerless, and passively subordinate to men. Such images of disempowerment are inaccurate and self-perpetuating. They do a disservice to those women throughout the region who have made vital contributions to social change and to those who seek examples and encouragement for their own fledgling efforts.

The *Arab Women Speak Out* project features stories of struggle, endurance, and achievement—stories of women who have drawn upon their own inner reserves and other resources to create new opportunities for themselves and for others. The women profiled here have persevered in the face of limited educational and economic opportunities, inadequately met health needs, and minimal decision-making power at home and in the wider society. In many cases these women have devoted themselves to mitigating these obstacles within their own communities. In the process, they have gained experience and self-confidence and, increasingly, respect and recognition for their efforts. These women are unmistakably actors in their own right. They stand as compelling models of real-life achievement for women everywhere.

Background

Arab Women Speak Out was conceived as an innovative documentary, training, and advocacy project designed to promote women's empowerment and active participation in social development throughout the Near East. Developed by the Near East Division of the Johns Hopkins University Center for Communication Programs (JHU/CCP), the various project components were produced in collaboration with the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR) in Tunis and the London-based nongovernmental organization (NGO), Population Initiatives for Peace, Ltd. (PIFP). The project was funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the European Commission (EC), and the Arab Gulf Programme for U.N. Development Organizations (AGFUND).

The project features print and video profiles of women in Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Tunisia, and Yemen who are perceived and respected as innovators within their communities. These women, most of them of modest means, have made significant contributions in the areas of economic and social development, political activism and women's rights, literacy, and family health within their communities. They have been successful despite cultural, political, professional, and personal constraints.

Purpose

The primary purpose of the *Arab Women Speak Out* project is to share these women's experiences and skills with their peers throughout the Arab region, as well as with development workers, health providers, community leaders, policy-makers, donors, and interested others. These women can provide role models of achievement and self-esteem for women in comparable circumstances facing similar obstacles. With this goal in mind, the project's components emphasize the strategies and resources, both internal and external, on which these women have drawn.

A guiding principle of the project was to profile women who could provide realistic role models for other women in the region. Therefore, the women profiled in the *Arab Women Speak Out* project come primarily

from modest backgrounds. Few have had access to higher education. They are women with whom many others can identify—women whose concerns and priorities are broadly shared at the grass roots of their societies and whose strategies for change are compelling and instructive. By struggling within the limits set by economic, social, and cultural conditions, they have contributed to the expansion and redefinition of women’s familial and public roles.

Project Components

Women of modest means and quiet achievement, such as those featured in this project, generally go unrecognized by the media. The central component of *Arab Women Speak Out* is a **series of video profiles** in which these women relate their own experiences and describe how they have achieved personal goals and assumed greater stature in their households and communities. The video profiles also contribute to a broader goal: providing alternative depictions of Arab women that may improve the way women are presented and accepted in society.

The dissemination of more positive and realistic images of women in the mass media, print materials, school curricula, and other channels of information, education, and communication is a vital need in the Near East. These channels are powerful tools of socialization through which gender depictions influence the attitudes, actions, and aspirations of men and women, boys and girls. Depictions of accomplished, capable women offer valuable role models for young women and may encourage new attitudes toward women among boys and men. The project’s video profiles will therefore be made available for airing on national and regional television and for screening at a variety of venues. Also available are a **short informational and advocacy video** describing the *Arab Women Speak Out* project and its goals and a **full-length composite video** that features excerpts from the ten documentary profiles.

The project includes a **training module** to be used as a tool for groups to discuss the key factors that have contributed to the success of the women profiled in the project. The module includes process-oriented learning exercises designed to help women strengthen their self-confidence, develop their negotiating and network-building skills, and identify sources of information and support. It also includes a viewer’s discussion guide to promote the critical review of the way women are depicted in other media.

The **profiles published here** are designed to complement the video profiles and training module by providing additional examples of resourceful and enterprising women in diverse areas of the Arab world. In a series of written profiles, 30 women from the five project countries identify the internal and external resources that have enabled them to carry out their diverse activities. They discuss the material benefits and personal satisfaction they have derived from their achievements. The profiles also highlight issues related to women’s control over these resources and benefits.

The profiles will be of interest to social researchers and others concerned with women’s lives and the issues affecting them in the context of Arab society. But they are chiefly intended as a resource for those working in diverse areas of development who seek to create and support projects that will help to expand the breadth and strength of women’s options and activities. At the same time, they promote an approach to project design that reflects the full range of women’s capabilities and moves beyond fixed patterns of what have traditionally been considered “women’s activities.” These written profiles can be used in conjunction with the video profiles to support advocacy efforts with policy-makers, project planners, and donors by encouraging the

Arab Women Speak Out

design and funding of innovative social development initiatives for and with women.

Project Components

- A series of 10 documentary video profiles
- Short informational and advocacy video describing project goals and components
- Full-length composite video including excerpts from all 10 video profiles
- Training manual to promote women's self-empowerment, incorporating a viewer's guide to spark discussion and promote critical analysis of images of women in the media
- Publication profiling 30 women who have contributed to social change within their communities

The next two chapters discuss the project's frame of reference and the criteria by which the profiles were chosen. The following chapter contains the actual profiles of Arab women presented according to areas of achievement. In many instances, however, these women's involvement and achievements are so diverse as to defy convenient labels. Highlighting one area of endeavor is not meant to obscure the others.

The profiles are followed by a chapter entitled "The Profiles in Context." This chapter offers a perspective on the prevailing sociocultural considerations, reproductive health conditions, and issues relating to women's legal status that influence the lives of the women profiled here and women in the Arab world in general.

Chapter IV, "Analysis of the Profiles," reviews the profiles in three parts. First, it suggests certain personal attributes, shared by the women profiled in this project, that can be associated with the process of individual self-empowerment. Second, the major influencing factors that have changed the lives of the women profiled are identified and discussed with specific examples from the stories. Finally, it examines the respective achievements of the women profiled in reference to their primary areas of endeavor.

The profiles are presented first so that the reader can become acquainted with the individual women and then reflect on the challenges that face them and the choices they have made. Readers less familiar with general trends and conditions in the Arab world may find it useful to review "The Profiles in Context" section before reading the individual narratives.

	Education			Family Dynamics			Income-Generating Activities	Community Activity			
	Madrasa (Qur'anic School)	Primary Education	Secondary Education	Initial Family Opposition	Husband's Subsequent Support	Use of Family Planning		Training in Vocational Skills	Literacy Training	Health Promotion	Social Activism
Egypt											
Atteyat			•		•	•	•		•	•	
Gihan			•+	•							•
Iman			•	•	•	•			•	•	•
Sabah		•			•	•	•			•	•
Samya		•		•	•	•	•				
Soheir			•+		•	•				•	•
Lebanon											
Alia		•			•	•	•			•	
Jacqueline			•	•	•	•	•	•			
Nazha		•			•	•	•				
Mariam		•			•		•				
Rachidé					•	•	•				
Umm Ali		•		•	•	•	•				
Palestine											
Amina			•		•	•	•	•	•		
Fatma			•+		•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Magida		•			•		•	•			•
Maysoon			•+	•	•	•	•		•	•	•
Nadia			•		•	•	•				
Nourhan		•			•	•	•				•
Tunisia											
Fethia		•	•		•		•	•			•
Habiba		•			(D)		•				•
Halima					•	•	•				
Jamila					(U)		•				•
Zohra	•				•	•	•	•			
Yemen											
Hayat			•+	•	•	•	•		•	•	•
Houria				•	•	•				•	
Ibtissam			•+	•	•	•				•	
Karima			•+		•	•	•		•		•
Salma		•	•+	•	•	•					•
Samira			•	•	•	•				•	
Tagia	•			•	•		•				

NOTES: "+" indicates professional training or university education in addition to secondary school
(D) = Divorced
(U) = Unmarried



■ Offer access to new ideas, information, and resources that can help expand their life options, including those affecting their economic, social, legal, and status.
■ Promote diverse economic opportunities that move beyond women's income-generating activities.
■ Facilitate the process of obtaining credit and loans.
■ Foster social support for women's education, personal development, and active participation in public life.
■ Help project compelling, realistic depictions of pro-active women that offer inspiring examples and counter inaccurate stereotypes.
■ Help women better understand their legal rights and how to obtain them.
■ Build on the strengths of social networks to provide outreach and support to women.
■ Help women safeguard their health by becoming informed about their needs and their rights to appropriate and adequate services.
■ Seek women's active participation in decision-making about project design and approach.



Chapter I. Compelling Models of Real-Life Achievement

Role models assist us in the process of formulating our notions of who we are and how we should act. The women profiled here have the potential to stand as powerful role models for millions of women living throughout the Arab world because these stories reflect the concerns, conditions, obstacles, and opportunities facing the average woman. These examples may well inspire the belief that, “If she can do it, so can I!”

Frame of Reference

The *Arab Women Speak Out* project is grounded in two approaches that embrace this understanding of the importance of role models. **Social learning theory**, originally developed by psychologist Albert Bandura in the 1970s and 1980s, proposes that people learn new behaviors and identify their own strengths by seeing those capabilities modeled by others; subsequent positive reinforcement is an important complementary factor. Bandura (1994:67) divides the cognitive process of learning a behavior into four steps:

- **Attention**—taking notice of a behavior being modeled by another person
- **Retention**—remembering the behavior observed
- **Reproduction**—copying the new behavior
- **Reinforcement**—receiving positive results from the new behavior and, after testifying on behalf of the behavior or modeling it, seeing others adopt it

People pay attention to a behavior only if they find it relevant. They adopt it only if they feel there is social support for it and believe they can successfully carry it out. Compelling role models can play a vital part on all three counts. First, they encourage people to consider changing their behavior by prompting such thoughts as “that’s something from which I would benefit.” Second, they help people contemplating a change in behavior feel less alone and less eccentric. And finally, role models help people believe that they, too, are capable of successful action.

While the power of role models is central to social learning theory, the theory also recognizes the importance of the social milieu in which an individual works and lives. If a woman believes that the person she seeks to emulate is similar to herself, she will be more likely to believe that she, too, can achieve a desired goal or action. Several of the women profiled here note that they have become role models within their communities and that they find special gratification in helping other women realize their aspirations.

Empowerment education, the second theoretical approach guiding the *Arab Women Speak Out* project, shares some of the assumptions of social learning theory but extends it to involve local people at a more immediate level. Intellectually indebted to the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, empowerment education contends that knowledge emerges not from experts but instead from group discussion at the grassroots level. Women identify the central issues of their lives in group dialogue and, in so doing, allow other women to consider a wider range of options. Then, based on their new understanding and increased sense of their own capabilities, women take action to address obstacles and maximize opportunities.

The term *empowerment* is often used to indicate individual change in isolation from the larger community. This notion is, perhaps, a natural outgrowth of the predominant paradigm that juxtaposes dependence and independence and gives little consideration to the possibility of *interdependence*. In its broadest definition, however, empowerment “involves people assuming control and mastery over their own lives in the context of

their social and political environment” (Wallerstein, 1992:198).¹ Its aim is to have individuals use their new-found powers *to act with others* to effect change—in other words, to strive for interdependence.²

Thus, empowerment:

- is about acquiring the *power to act*, not about exercising *power over* others,
- is not and cannot be imposed from the outside, and
- must grow out of people’s own understanding of their circumstances, their choices, their opportunities, and the social environment (Rowlands, 1995).

Empowered individuals strive for interdependence, are aware of their collective rights and responsibilities, and become actively involved in the larger community. Karl (1995:14) notes that “empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity-building leading to greater participation, to greater decision-making power and control, and to transformative action.”

Whether at the individual or collective level, empowerment is integral to development, which we define as a process that increases choices, improves access to services and goods, and enhances the capacities of individuals. To paraphrase Pratt and Boyden, development—like empowerment—is not just about *having* more but also about *being* more (quoted in Slim, 1995:145). Development can thus rise to the challenge of satisfying fundamental *human*, not merely *material*, needs and explicitly reject the notion that economic growth should be its sole yardstick (Carmen, 1994). This lesson has already been absorbed by the women profiled here, who repeatedly avow that the true importance of their work lies not in its financial rewards but in the opportunity to raise their children in the best way possible, to help other people, and to grow and develop as individuals.

Individual empowerment is the basis of all types of empowerment, but collectivities, too, can gain empowerment. With respect to the family, empowerment entails “developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of the relationships and decisions made within it” (Rowlands, 1995:103). It also means supporting all abilities, whether nascent or fully developed, within the family, so that the family unit is stable, productive, and responsive to the needs of all its members. Empowerment can strengthen the family and the marital relationship that lies at its heart. Many examples of interdependence at the familial level appear within these stories: mutual respect between husband and wife; joint discussion and decision-making on household matters; and shared responsibility for both earning and spending money.

Efficacy belief, or self-empowerment, will also encourage women to participate more fully in the development process. Rather than waiting for development to come to their communities, empowered individuals will want to help guide that process. Developing self-esteem and self-efficacy is fundamental to the success of empowerment education. “Unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act. Efficacy belief, therefore, is a major basis of action” (Bandura, 1997:2). Research shows that participating in empowerment education gives people a greater sense of self-efficacy as they consciously shift their roles from learners to teachers and, ultimately, to social actors.

¹ Bandura (1997), among others, objects to the use of the term “empowerment” and prefers to use the term “enablement.” We will retain the term “empowerment” here as it is used in the context of empowerment education and, therefore, is a broader and more encompassing concept than empowerment or enablement used in isolation.

² In this paradigm, interdependence is reached through a dialectical process in which dependence is overcome by independence, which in turn is transcended by an interdependence born of strength and vitality. In other words, only independent individuals (or entities) can achieve interdependence.

Although women already function as teachers, passing down important traditions and knowledge to the next generation, they may not recognize the significance of their roles or see them as a path to empowerment. Often women think, “It’s nothing. I do it all the time,” or “It’s just part of being a woman.” Empowerment education helps them recognize their own strengths and skills as well as their contributions to the family’s welfare. Equally important, empowerment education helps women become aware of all the options open to them and their potential consequences, on the assumption that informed and self-confident women can make their own decisions (Mayoux, 1995).

Thus, the *Arab Women Speak Out* project is designed to:

- Stimulate women to discuss and analyze the social, economic, political, and cultural conditions that enhance or diminish their ability to act,
- Expand their awareness of diverse life options,
- Enhance their self-image and self-efficacy,
- Help them recognize and appreciate their own abilities, and
- Motivate them to take action towards change.

Popular participation in social change is just one goal of empowerment education. It also aims to influence and shape policy, because social and economic policies can either inhibit or promote women’s empowerment (Wang and Burris, 1994). For this reason, the materials and findings of this project will be shared with the policy-makers who influence social development and family welfare policies. The information will also be shared with the individuals and organizations who shape project planning, including donor agencies, to encourage them to actively promote and support projects that reflect the diversity of women’s capabilities.

Identifying the Women Profiled

In identifying individual women to be profiled, the project was guided by this frame of reference, and informed by the literature on gender and development. The project relied primarily on the word of mouth to locate individual women. A variety of grassroots organizations—including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), reproductive health centers, and social development agencies—helped to identify women who had expanded their roles beyond the hearth, were admired within their communities, and acted as agents of change.

In each project country six to eight such women were identified through additional criteria assessing the women’s effectiveness as role models. The women identified are predominantly married women of reproductive age who already have children and who come from modest backgrounds. The diverse mix of women was rural as well as urban, community activists as well as entrepreneurs, teachers as well as farmers. The women voluntarily agreed to have their stories published, and also filmed, if their cases were selected for the video profiles. Because husbands and other family members were to be portrayed in the video, their active cooperation was also essential.

These profiles provide important insights into the experiences of village and urban Arab women of modest means. But they cannot be considered technically representative of such women or of Arab women in general. Rather, these profiles illustrate various concerns and conditions that are often widely shared, as well as individual strategies for change. The orientation of this project is not to assess overall levels or degrees of action but to understand current action by locating it temporally and contextually. The profiles provide in-depth information about the experiences of a few individuals, through which the reader can gain a better understanding of the complex processes that lead to empowerment. And although situated within a framework informed by the literature on gender, development, and empowerment, the narratives retain the uniqueness that arises from the telling of very personal stories.

Criteria for Identifying the Women Profiled

Women who . . .

- are engaged in social, economic, or political change

Chapter II. The Profiles

Maysoon (Palestine)



Maysoon, now 30, was born and raised in the farming village where she still lives. The youngest of 11 children, Maysoon lost her mother when she was 9 years old under circumstances that she remembers vividly. A neighbor used “air cups” (a traditional therapeutic technique that involves placing small glasses on the skin and heating them in order to draw blood to the surface) in an attempt to help her mother through the pain of her twelfth pregnancy. That afternoon, her mother was taken to the hospital. She died the next day.

After her mother’s death, Maysoon felt the need for new friends. She found them outside her village, in a nearby refugee camp. These girls, who lived a much less sheltered life than their village counterparts, exerted a strong influence on Maysoon:

The girls there were different from us. Their dreams were different; what they wanted was different. Probably I am strong today because the little girls [in the refugee camp] taught me to be.

Her friendship with the girls from the refugee camp helped shape Maysoon’s resolve to resist the marriage later proposed by her father. When Maysoon was in high school, her father decided to follow tradition and marry her off to one of her cousins. But Maysoon objected:

In the beginning, my father went crazy and tried to convince me [to marry], and he hit me. I insisted that I didn’t want this cousin. When my family persisted, I started thinking that any marriage would do. But my friends kept reminding me that marriage is for life: if you’re not convinced, don’t accept, they said. Then I decided that I didn’t want this man as my husband and that my ambitions lay in continuing my education. It was a giant step forward, and from then on my life started.

Maysoon was determined to continue her education. She went on to university in Nablus—only the third girl from the village ever to do so—despite the villagers’ efforts to persuade her father not to let her go. They told her father that a girl should remain at home and that, besides, she would never be able to use her qualifications. Although she wanted to be a teacher, the training she needed was not available at the time, so she opted for accounting and management. Because of the distance between her village and the city, Maysoon lived in Nablus while she completed her studies. There she was exposed to a completely different, more independent way of life and became involved in student activities and politics. Still, when she received her diploma at the end of two years, she returned to her village.

When Maysoon married, it was to someone of her own choice. Though from her own village, Nafez works as a nurse at a hospital in Nablus. When he publicly kissed her on the cheek on the day of their engagement, the act quite scandalized the entire village (and, to some, appeared to confirm suspicions that Maysoon’s stay in the city must have corrupted her morals). From the start, the relationship between Maysoon and Nafez has

been loving and based on mutual support. They discuss all matters of importance and make decisions on them together. In order to be able to raise their children properly and to ensure that they are healthy and well provided for, the couple decided not to have more than four.

Maysoon appreciates her husband's support. She says, *"Not everyone is as lucky as I am, to have a husband like that. We understand each other in every aspect of life, how our lives should be run, whether we should have kids or not."*

After her marriage, Maysoon began working on issues that would generate positive change in the village. Education was her first priority. She worked on two initiatives: founding a paying nursery for small children and organizing free literacy classes for women. Local people enthusiastically welcomed the nursery, which was the first in the area, but expressed some reservations about the literacy classes. Initially, only older women attended the classes, because the younger women were not permitted to leave their houses. However, when the young mothers realized that mastering reading and writing would allow them to monitor their sons' schoolwork, the demand for literacy classes increased.

Maysoon's concern for children and her commitment to education, not the potential profit, motivated her to open the nursery. The work was difficult at first, as Maysoon reports: *"The nursery was nothing, just walls, not even doors, nothing. During my work here, and from the children's fees, I furnished the place."*

Since then, the nursery has become more than a school. Maysoon's concerns with social causes have transformed it into a village gathering place where people come to discuss and gain information on a variety of issues. Maysoon meets monthly with the mothers' committee to help address concerns regarding their children's well-being. In cases requiring special attention, she meets privately with the parents to prevent embarrassment. Public health issues have consumed much of Maysoon's attention. She had long observed that many diseases spread through the village because parents lacked knowledge of basic health matters and hygienic practices. She began organizing health lectures for mothers, providing informational leaflets about common illnesses, and inviting doctors to examine and treat the children at the nursery on a regular basis. One of her goals is to abolish dangerous traditional practices such as the one that she believes killed her mother.

The nursery's health lectures are open to all women in the village. Generally, the health worker discusses whatever subject most of the women are interested in, taking a cue from current community health concerns. When Maltese fever broke out in the area, for example, Maysoon discovered that it was the traditional way in which villagers made and stored their cheeses that caused the disease. Through the lectures at the nursery, and later through clinics and other schools in the area, she helped launch a campaign that to teach the villagers how the disease is spread and how they could protect their families from it. Other lectures at the nursery have addressed pregnancy, breastfeeding, and family planning.

Maysoon has been involved in many other activities. She has campaigned for safe drinking water, helping to distribute antiseptics to kill the amoebas in the swamp and river water the villagers use, distributing informational leaflets to families through the nursery, and visiting people in their homes to discuss the problem. Maysoon also carries out home visits to encourage women to vaccinate their babies. She seeks to help women solve marital problems by advising them on how to organize their time better and how to gain their husband's support, using herself as an example. Although most of the villagers welcomed Maysoon's visits from the start, some initially refused to let her in their homes. With quiet persistence, she continued to offer her help until it was accepted. Increasingly respected for her diplomatic and understanding manner, Maysoon has succeeded in gaining the confidence of the village women, many of whom now seek her out for advice.

The nursery was also a starting point for Maysoon's involvement in other types of community work with women, especially during the Intifada (the uprising against the Israeli occupation that began in 1987). Maysoon believed the Intifada presented an opportunity for women to become increasingly active and independent and to free themselves from restrictive conservative traditions. To this end, she encouraged village women to help care for the wounded, provide support to prisoners' families, and participate in demonstrations. Taking part in such activities, she felt, would broaden women's awareness and promote a wider acceptance of women as active citizens in the public sphere.

Maysoon has continued her own education by attending training programs in early childhood education, first aid, and counseling children and parents. Her enormous energy and talent have not gone unrecognized outside the village: in 1993–94, she was made responsible for nursery programs and summer camps in other parts of Palestine as well.

Hayat (Yemen)

He [my father] objected in the beginning to my working... but I explained to him how important it was for me to be independent and how working helps human beings grow mentally, economically, and psychologically. He understood what I was saying, but it was unacceptable in the village where we have relatives. I fought with him, and he had to fight with them.

Hayat is 28 years old. The eldest of 11 children, she was born in the Tawila Governorate. The family lived in Hodeidah, where her mother was a housewife and her father the director of radiology in a hospital. When Hayat's father learned that he had contracted a blood disease, he decided to move the family to Sanaa to be closer to his relatives. In Sanaa, her father started a printing business with his brother. Hayat recalls how the move to Sanaa affected her father's behavior and her freedom:

My father was full of contradictions, kind and loving, yet rigid and very traditional. When I was young, he used to take me with him everywhere; we visited all the Arab countries and were received by his relatives who were living abroad. At that time, he was very tolerant, but when we settled in Sanaa near our relatives, he became very strict, especially as we grew older.

Hayat recounts that from an early age she was considered the family troublemaker. Her life has been punctuated by disagreements with her father over education, marriage, and work. After she graduated from primary school with distinction, she wanted to continue her education, but her father would not give his permission. Intent on continuing her studies, Hayat prevailed on her uncle to help persuade her father to change his mind. After a long struggle, and with her uncle's support, her father finally allowed her to go to high school.

When Hayat finished high school, she hoped to enter the university. Her father, however, accepted for her an offer of marriage made by a relative, a young soldier studying at the Military Academy in Moscow. Hayat was not consulted in the matter, and the marriage was quickly carried out.

Following the marriage, Hayat locked her door and did not come out until her father promised that she could get a divorce and continue her education. Her uncle intervened by threatening to adopt her and educate her abroad. Two weeks later Hayat received her divorce and entered the university.

If my father had been born in another country not so tied to traditions and customs, he would have been a perfect father. His strictness was meant only to protect us. In my country, it is shameful for a girl to continue high school. To enter the university is a sin. Thank God, there are some Sheikhs who explain how important it is for true Muslims to educate their daughters. Religiously, my father cannot object to my goals and ambitions.

During this period of new experiences and ideas, Hayat considered taking off her veil. Despite her past challenges to some established traditions, however, she hesitated to do so. She recognizes that because she did not remove her veil during her university years, it would not be easy for her to do so now. In contrast, Hayat's younger sisters made the decision to unveil either during their university days or in their workplaces. After graduating with a degree in social philosophy, Hayat found work with a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that implements literacy programs for girls and women in the most needy areas of Sanaa. She developed a training curriculum that created a wonderful team spirit among her students, using music, dance, and role plays to teach her classes. Hayat advocated education for girls of all races and castes, especially the

black, lower-caste *Akhdam*, whose women work as street cleaners. She often visited the homes of these women to try to convince them of the importance of educating their daughters. Hayat left her job with the NGO to pursue further studies at the university and, when she returned to work, was appointed the assistant director of another local NGO, the Social Organization for Family Development. Now she is the organization's director but still finds time from her administrative duties to conduct literacy classes, arranging her teaching schedule so that it is convenient for married working women to attend as well. She continues to organize women's meetings and pay home visits to promote better health practices and the importance of educating girls.

Hayat herself decided when and whom she would marry. She says of her husband, "*He was a very mature and serious person, kind and loving. My father did not object to his proposal, although it was my choice [to marry him].*" Her husband, who comes from a modest family background and works as an accountant in the public sector, initially objected to Hayat's meeting with men in the course of her work. But over time, in part through discussions about the nature and importance of her work, he became supportive of her goals and even amenable to her participation in conferences abroad that further development of her career. He also recognizes that it is necessary for both of them to work if they wish to improve their standard of living. He recently taught Hayat how to drive, and she now has a driver's license. And although, as Hayat observes, "*Yemeni men in general don't help their wives with the household,*" her husband has learned to take care of himself when she is working or tired from her many activities. "*Now he at least knows how to fix himself something to eat or make tea when I am not around,*" she says.

Hayat and her husband have two sons, three years and six months old, and make decisions on the boys' upbringing jointly. To insure that they can provide a high standard of living for their children, Hayat and her husband intend to use family planning in the future. Of her father, Hayat says, "*He is more peaceful now that I am happily married. I seek his advice whenever I need to, and he is very supportive.*"

Hayat is always interested in expanding her horizons and is now looking into commercial ventures. She has good business sense and once designed clothes that her father and his partner manufactured and sold. Now she intends to get a bank loan and help her husband start a bakery. Through her work and devotion to literacy education and health promotion, she has grown to be a leading figure in her community, earning the trust and respect of her family and neighbors. Women in her community respect her maturity and her commitment. Hayat proudly says, "*Sometimes women ask me, 'If our daughters go to school, will they become like you?'*"

A tteyat (Egypt)

Atteyat is 36 years old and the seventh of 10 children. When she was a child, her entire family lived in a three-room apartment. Though both her parents worked—her father at Al Azhar University and her mother managing a livestock fodder supply store and a clothes ironing shop—there was never enough money to meet all the family's needs. The example provided by her mother's activity both within and outside the home was an important one for Atteyat: *"She managed to pursue the businesses and bring us up at the same time."*

After receiving her diploma, Atteyat found work as a clerk in a government institution. At the age of 21, she married Mahmoud, an assistant engineer whose work depended on large government construction projects. Although Atteyat had learned from her parents that a woman's role was not limited to raising children, her mother-in-law believed differently. Atteyat gave up her job to care for her first-born son.

Other differences between Atteyat's goals and the views of her husband's family made themselves felt. When Atteyat set her sights on moving from the couple's small rented apartment to a larger, more centrally located home, she turned to her own mother. Her mother helped Atteyat and Mahmoud buy a flat, which was then registered in Atteyat's name. This situation dismayed her mother-in-law, who saw such an action as undermining the husband's role as the head of the household. Mahmoud did not share his mother's view and in fact demonstrated ever-growing support for his wife's role as decision-maker.

Determined to have a small family and not to recreate the crowding and deprivation that she remembered from her own childhood, Atteyat contacted a local agency about family planning services. Having chosen to use contraception herself, Atteyat began working informally in the neighborhood, encouraging other women to seek family planning services at the association. As she learned more, she also began discussing hygiene, nutrition, and other health issues with her neighbors. When women were too shy to visit the association by themselves, Atteyat accompanied them. Although she developed a close link with the association, she continued to work on a voluntary, mostly part-time basis.

Because she was interested in expanding her community work, Atteyat became involved in the activities of other organizations. After participating in a series of training sessions, she volunteered in a literacy education program, teaching a group of neighborhood women how to read and write. To encourage the participants, she and the group celebrate each time a member successfully completes the tests of her literacy skills. Atteyat knows that she is accomplishing something important by helping these women create new opportunities for themselves and is especially pleased when they bring newspapers to read in class. To broaden their awareness, she integrates into her literacy classes discussions of such issues as family planning, health education, and the importance of the women's roles as wives and mothers. Atteyat's teaching has provided her with new strengths: the exposure to new people and their concerns and ideas has made her more resilient when she faces problems and more tactful in solving them.

One issue that has required particular sensitivity is female genital mutilation. Neither Atteyat nor her daughter has been excised, but some neighborhood women still adhere to the traditional belief that females must be excised in order to curb their sexual desires. Atteyat had learned about the detrimental health, sexual, and psychological consequences of female genital mutilation from the local family planning agency but was initially hesitant to share the information with others. However, when she was invited to celebrate the excision of a neighborhood girl, Atteyat discussed the practice with the girl's mother. After listening to Atteyat, the woman said that she might not have had her daughter excised if she had known about the harmful effects beforehand. This experience prompted Atteyat to begin discussing the matter with women she knows well. Although the women do not necessarily change their minds about excision, Atteyat continues to believe in the

importance of sharing information on this issue.

Atteyat has also become an entrepreneur. Although her husband was able to provide for all of the family's needs, Atteyat decided (with her husband's agreement) to sell her gold jewelry and buy a car that could be used as a taxi. Soon afterwards, Atteyat's husband left Egypt for a lucrative job in one of the oil-producing countries, and Atteyat was left in charge of the taxi enterprise. She had difficulty dealing with the hired drivers, who could not take a woman seriously and tried to cheat her, either by miscalculating the daily returns or by inflating the cost of repairs. Atteyat eventually took over complete responsibility for all repairs, buying the necessary parts, taking the car to the mechanic, and remaining until the car was running again. When her husband returned after two years, she decided to sell the taxi because the profits no longer covered the costs.

Atteyat's second business venture links her entrepreneurial spirit with her desire to help the community. With the money from the taxi and some personal savings, Atteyat went into the clothing business, buying clothes from retailers and hiring women to resell them in the community. After working from her home for two years, Atteyat saved enough money to rent a space from her mother and open a shop, from which she sells clothes and other items to women in the neighborhood. Most of the transactions are made on credit, because, as Atteyat points out, it is a low-income area and the women do not always have ready cash. Apart from commerce, though, the shop also serves as a place where Atteyat can provide clients with information about family planning services and encourage women to attend literacy classes. During this time, Atteyat began assembling her own literacy groups, drawn from her neighbors and from her customers. She recruits younger girls who missed the chance to go to school or who left school before they learned how to read and write.

Both the shop and the literacy classes have become venues for discussing many issues that concern women but that women are often reluctant to address with strangers or medical professionals. While Atteyat is not a doctor, she can offer women basic health information as well as advice on less sensitive matters such as girls' education. Atteyat is eager to persuade mothers to send their daughters to school or at least to literacy classes.

After practicing family planning for four years after the birth of her son, Atteyat gave birth to a daughter. In Atteyat's view, "*I am satisfied with the two [children], as I'm trying to make up for what I was deprived of, in terms of time, space, and fun.*" Her husband plays an important role in the care and upbringing of the children. In fact, in both familial matters and financial affairs, the relationship between Atteyat and her husband has evolved into one based on mutual respect and shared responsibilities. Mahmoud holds Atteyat's capabilities and acumen in high regard. In a significant sign of the cooperative nature of their marriage, he has given her power of attorney over all his financial assets.

Atteyat and her family are planning to move soon to a new city, but she is determined that this change will not put an end to her role as an educator. She has already begun investigating the opportunities for holding literacy classes in her new community and has found that there is a great demand for such classes, as many of the wives of the industrial workers who live there have never had the chance to attend school. Atteyat plans to begin by holding small classes in her new flat but has been investigating larger spaces in the new buildings that can accommodate larger groups of women. She is already assembling the materials she needs for her classes.

F atima (Palestine)

Fatima was born in a refugee camp to a hard-working family with a dozen children. She lived in a two-room

house with no electricity or water. Her brothers and sisters had to haul water in containers from a nearby spring. In the evenings, they would all do their homework by the light of a kerosene lamp. Fatima's father, a farmer in Israel, was the only wage earner in the family. Her mother, a resourceful woman, tried to keep spending to a minimum: *"She would repair old clothes and sew them again. She would also use the house garden to breed chickens and plant vegetables."*

Despite these hardships at home, Fatima's brothers and sisters were excellent students. Fatima was educated in the camp schools through the secondary level and then entered a college in Jordan. When one of her brothers, living in Saudi Arabia at the time, discovered that she planned to make physical education her course of study, he took the first flight home to stop her from entering a program with so many male students. He compelled her instead to study elementary education, and Fatima has never forgotten his authoritarian attitude.

During her college years, Fatima gained a wider political and social awareness. She found support for her nascent activism from her parents, particularly her mother, who encouraged Fatima to hold on to her beliefs with strength and dignity.

Through one of her friends, Fatima met a young man from Nablus. Over the next two years they grew to know each other well. When he proposed marriage, her parents objected at first because they were afraid that Fatima might leave Nablus. Most of her brothers and sisters had gone abroad after marrying. However, Fatima and her husband made plans to start a business venture right there in the city. Although Fatima's husband had a degree in electrical engineering, he worked as a foreman in Israel. Whenever the borders were closed, he was left without a job. Therefore, they decided to open a billiard parlor. Fatima sold her jewelry to help raise the capital, and they registered the business in both their names. After six months, however, it was burned down by troublemakers, and her husband returned to his previous work. They are determined to reopen the billiard parlor as soon as they have enough money to pay for the repairs.

Fatima now works as the director of a children's library in Nablus. The library was founded to give deprived children the chance to read. Its original mission was simply to lend books and to allow children to read on the premises. During the Intifada, however, children stopped coming in; with the closing of the schools, they became poorly motivated. After discussing the problem with the women's committee, Fatima developed a variety of new programs to attract the children back to the library, to engage them, and to stimulate their minds. She introduced educational games, invited the children to watch and discuss educational films, organized a drawing competition, and asked local theater people to stage plays with educational messages.

With the help of the women's committee, Fatima has launched increasingly elaborate programs for the children. A "health education theater" presents plays that demonstrate proper hygiene and good health habits. Boys and girls participate in a folkloric arts group, learning about their Palestinian heritage and performing *Dabkes* (traditional folk dances) on special occasions, including national celebrations. Computer classes teach students the skills they need for an increasingly technological world. To ensure that the library's programs continue to respond to the needs of the children, Fatima has formed a council for mothers that meets monthly; library staff thus interact with parents on a regular basis.

Fatima and the women's committee also have developed a program to offer psychological guidance to children who suffer from social problems. When Fatima notices a "problem child," she refers the child to the social worker for help. Fatima and the social worker also visit the child's parents at home.

Fatima has used her ingenuity to solve a variety of problems that have arisen in the course of her work with the children. Teenaged boys and girls initially found it difficult to interact, for example, so Fatima had them work together in mixed groups on plays, readings, and other activities to ease the tension. When the library's

programs proved too attractive and children began attending the library instead of doing their homework, Fatima assigned children specific attendance hours and worked with mothers to implement the schedule. When the children became more interested in computer programs than in reading, Fatima offered prizes for the best story reader and cut back computer hours. Fatima also helps children who cannot afford the monthly subscription fees to save the necessary money.

Fatima has a good relationship with her husband and discusses everything with him. For example, they decided jointly not to have more than two children because they felt it was all they could afford. Currently, Fatima uses the IUD.

My husband encourages me to develop my personality through work. That is why he takes care of our children in my absence. He also understands that the nature of my work sometimes requires traveling out of the city. He never criticizes me when I am not there to do the house work; instead he helps me and defends me in front of my mother-in-law, who always points out my negligence.

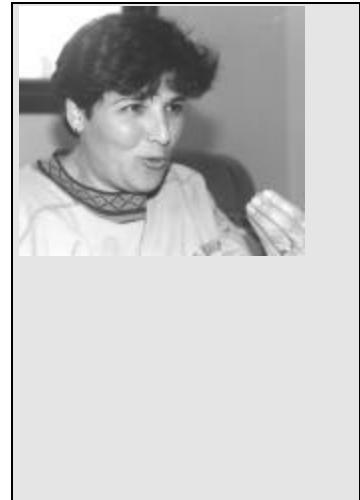
Now 31 years old, Fatima views her work at the children's library with pride. She has transformed it from a simple lending library into a social, educational, and health center for local children and their families. With her husband's encouragement, Fatima now looks after the development of hundreds of local children in addition to caring for her own two children.



The Profiles

Magida (Palestine)

Magida grew up in a suburb of Jerusalem as part of a large, working class family. The middle child of seven siblings, she was allowed to play with the neighbors' children, boys as well as girls, without restriction. Magida believes that this open-minded atmosphere had a permanent impact on her personality and attitudes, making it possible for her to deal with men as equals and to fight for what she wanted. The daily sight of Israeli troops and her mother's grief over the imprisonment of her elder brother also made Magida politically aware. Her brother was imprisoned by the Israelis as a PLO member, and her mother constantly reminded the family that, while they were free, he was in jail. Magida maintains that the relative freedom of her childhood, combined with her family's firm political beliefs, shaped her early adult years: she defied convention to become a political activist.



Magida fell in love with a neighbor's son when she was 17. She was afraid of being confined to a traditional circumscribed role after marriage, so she made him promise not to impose any restrictions on her. They moved to Jordan, married, and joined the Palestinian liberation movement. Magida helped her husband and his comrades plan an armed attack on an Israeli base. When her husband was taken prisoner, Magida was left alone, without friends, and expecting a child in Jordan; her parents did not know where she was. Caught in the middle of the armed conflicts in her homeland, Magida, who was still pregnant, was imprisoned for a year. She gave birth to her first child, a boy, in prison.

I was tortured mentally and physically, including rape threats. But all this made me stronger for I believed that those means were meant for weak souls only.

After she was released from prison, she found that people treated her differently. While they respected her for resisting the occupation, they thought that fighting was a man's job and that imprisonment for a woman necessarily meant rape and loss of honor. Magida tried to convince people that women should have a role in fighting the occupation and that there was no loss of dignity in being imprisoned.

Because Magida believed it important to be self-sufficient and wanted to provide a comfortable life for her baby, she went to work as a secretary in a hospital. Her husband's family, however, tried to prevent her from working; they wanted her to live with them in a more conventional manner. Magida refused:

I couldn't accept to wear the veil and stop wearing my blue jeans. I faced their doubts concerning my leaving the house for long hours. They turned my husband against me by giving him distorted news about me and pushed my father to forbid me from taking part in the political activities that were meant to form the basis for the National Youth.

Magida continued her career and remained politically involved, hosting political meetings with male university students in her home and joining a women's committee that demonstrated in support of prisoners and helped their families. Magida found it possible to defy conservative values and choose her own way, while keeping her self-respect.

Magida wanted to preserve her relationship with her imprisoned husband and hoped that he would understand

her political activities. By the time he was released, however, Magida was back in jail for a second time, during which time her husband divorced her and remarried.

Another chapter in Magida's life opened when she married for a second time. Though hesitant to remarry, she eventually found an understanding man who overcame her reluctance.

All this hardship made me stronger and more determined than ever to prove myself, and I drowned myself with work again in an attempt to change my present and my future. I kept men out of my thoughts and concern although many proposed to me and were ready to raise my child. I refused because I felt that they were only motivated by feelings of chivalry, until I met my [second] husband.... We had several encounters before we decided to get married. I felt that he understood and believed strongly in the social issues that we discussed and that we had similar points of view concerning women and their right to work and to freedom. His mother, though, was against our marriage because I was divorced and he was a bachelor, but he convinced her that being a divorcee doesn't make me less of a human being.

Magida's second marriage is based on interdependence and mutual respect. Her husband admires her strength of character, shares all decision-making with her, and appreciates the income that she brings into the family. Magida has worked with her husband on two projects. Much to the amazement of the neighbors, she helped her husband and the contractor build their house in order to keep costs down. Magida ignored the gossip about her involvement because she felt the house was essential for her children's future. Currently, Magida and her husband share the management of a neighborhood mini-market, which they began together. She works there in the mornings, and her husband takes over in the afternoons when he returns from work.

Magida has rechanneled the energies once devoted to revolutionary activities into a variety of activities promoting women's political involvement and social development. In the afternoons, Magida continues to work for political and social change with the Peace Now organization, which is trying to make co-existence between Palestinians and Israelis possible. Magida also works to help women become educated and independent, and to have a role in the newly created political structure. She works with a committee for Women's Social Work that develops projects for women in villages where women's education, opportunities, and freedom of movement are strictly limited. Through their efforts, the Women's Center has become a place where women can not only take courses in sewing and knitting, but also can meet and talk with other women freely.

Magida, now 35 years old, has been married to her second husband for 10 years and has had three children with him. She does not want any more children. She believes it is critical to use family planning to limit births so that her children can enjoy a comfortable life. Magida is determined to make a better life for her children:

My girls are not going to face the same problems I faced because I'm going to bring them up differently from the way my mother brought me up. My daughters will have more guidance than I got from my mother.

Gihan (Egypt)

Gihan was born in Alexandria, but her mother moved the family of three children back to her home town after Gihan's father died. The move was difficult for Gihan, who was forced to leave behind her friends, her

school, and her home. Even more important, the move magnified the loss of her father, about which Gihan was still confused.

The family moved into the home of Gihan's grandmother (actually, her mother's aunt), a strong figure who headed the household and could not be defied. Gihan's grandmother was authoritative and independent. She had worked as a school principal and delayed marrying until she was 40 years old; only then did it become legally permissible for married women to hold such a position. According to Gihan, the children feared their grandmother more than they loved her. While Gihan's grandmother found life in a small town quite limiting and broke many of the traditions governing women's behavior, she was always the first to impose these same rules on the children, demanding that the girls wear proper clothing, for example, and not stay out late.

Although Gihan viewed her grandmother as a role model, she also defied her grandmother's strict rules. She wanted to become independent and powerful like her grandmother, although she did not become close to her until later in life. Gihan also admired her mother, who worked as a teacher and, in addition to being strong, was warm and giving. As a child, Gihan never understood that the students who came to the house to be tutored were poor children whom her mother had volunteered to help.

Gihan excelled at school but always tried to hide the fact that her grandmother was a principal and her mother a teacher. She desperately wanted to be independent and even completed her application for preparatory school without asking her mother or grandmother for help. An avid reader, Gihan was constantly learning, aided by a relative who was a university professor and sent her new books to read.

At the age of 13, Gihan refused to wear anything but trousers for a year. Two years later, she became friends with a boy at her school who shared her interest in reading, and they spent time together discussing books. On her birthday, the boy gave Gihan a poetry book and kissed her on the forehead. Disturbed by what she perceived to be an irreligious and immoral act, Gihan punished herself by beginning to wear the veil. After wearing the veil for a year, however, she realized that it did not change her feelings or behavior, and that it did not seem to have an effect on the way people looked at her. Gihan took her mother's advice to stop wearing the veil since she did not feel comfortable with it.

In secondary school, Gihan met two girls who were studying agriculture and engineering at the university. They became close friends, reading and discussing books together. After the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, Gihan joined friends at university rallies, even though she was still at secondary school, and attended events sponsored by a newly formed Solidarity Committee for the Lebanese and Palestinians. The three girls began to read about the history, politics, and economics of the Arab world, and Gihan raised these issues with fellow students at her secondary school. Gihan's mother objected to her activism because it reduced the time she spent on her regular studies, but Gihan persisted.

Gihan and her friends expanded their reading to include works on women's position in society and the feminist movement. As their knowledge about these topics increased, they were determined to take action and formed a network called *Bint el-Ard*, meaning "daughter of the land." They argued that women grow out of the land, which knows no distinctions on the basis of nationality or sex; thus they believed that women should be independent and disregard constraints imposed by society on the basis of sex.

Acting on these beliefs, Gihan decided to specialize in geology, traditionally a field dominated by men, when she entered university. There were only 17 women in her class of 120 students, and the men regarded the women who dared to venture into their male domain with curiosity. This atmosphere motivated most of the women to excel in their studies, outstripping the men's academic performance.

In the meantime, Gihan and her friends from *Bint el-Ard* met resistance to their continuing political activities.

Their families thought they were spending too much time away from home, were talking about issues that were none of their concern, were working against tradition, and were ignoring the nation's security situation. Even finding a place to meet was a challenge, since they all lived with their families. Unmarried women were not allowed to live alone. That particular problem was resolved when a fellow student at the university offered them a room at a party's headquarters.

Despite the difficulties, Gihan and her friends persevered. They met weekly to discuss political developments, regional events, and women's issues, and eventually turned for advice to Nawal Sadaawi, a famous but controversial figure who was one of their models for women's liberation and equality. When Nawal agreed to give a talk under their auspices, it attracted an audience of 2,300 people and drew the first outside attention to the *Bint el-Ard*.

After that breakthrough, Gihan and the rest of the group worked hard to broaden the group's base and extend its influence, for example, by hosting seminars and other activities at the university. Their strong ideological and political stands attracted the attention of the establishment, however, and many of their efforts were frustrated by official resistance. Publishing a newsletter on women's issues (including the results of their own research into local conditions) was an early effort, but when they launched a second newsletter for teenagers, four group members were arrested and briefly jailed. Likewise, repeated attempts to formally register the group met rejection from the Registrar of Societies. When the *Bint el-Ard* tried to address uneducated women attending local literacy, knitting, and sewing classes sponsored by the Ministry of Education and Culture, the reception was also hostile. Their efforts to address the women directly, to organize literacy classes, to write a brief letter to the women, and to produce a women's journal were also thwarted.

It was at a workshop organized by the *Bint el-Ard* that Gihan met her husband, who is also a geologist. At the time, he was liberal, open-minded, and supported Gihan's concerns and ambitions. After seeing each other for a year they became engaged, and a year later they married.

When Gihan completed her university degree, she and the other women who trained as geologists found it almost impossible to locate jobs in their field. Gihan was more successful than most, landing a job at a petroleum company based in Cairo. She understood that her work would involve field work in the desert but her boss objected, telling her that the most a woman in his company could aspire to was a position as a clerk. Gihan, thinking that she could prove her credentials over time, accepted these terms. She found herself harassed by her boss; he repeatedly called her into his office, offered her drinks, and discussed her personal life. To her astonishment, Gihan discovered that many other women at the company had suffered similar harassment but were afraid to take action because of the man's powerful position within the company. Gihan, however, made a public scene when her boss's unwanted attentions moved from verbal to physical: she opened the door of the office and screamed loudly, making sure that everyone heard about his behavior. Despite the man's history of sexual harassment, the managing director of the company refused to take action against him, so Gihan resigned.

Gihan remained in Cairo with her husband but left the field of geology. She built on her experience with the *Bint el-Ard* to develop a new identity as a free-lance writer and community activist. She now writes regular columns for two newspapers and also publishes articles in journals with circulation throughout the Arab world. Much of her writing deals with women's issues, such as marital laws or the role of women in elections. Sometimes Gihan discusses her personal experiences, extrapolating from her problems to broader social issues. After she found it impossible to fulfill her responsibilities as a workshop organizer while obeying a curfew set by her husband, for example, she wrote a column about how hard it is for professional women to balance their traditional family roles and the new demands of their work lives. Gihan also works on

women's issues at community associations and nongovernmental organizations. Currently she heads the women's section at the Egyptian Association for Comprehensive Development, where she is designing a project directed to adolescent girls. She participates in conferences and workshops on women's issues and is editing a book concerning the feminist movement in Egypt.

Gihan is eager to teach her daughter how to become strong and independent and to be aware of the constraints society may impose on her. While Gihan strives to strike a balance between her work and her family, she is determined to do so without sacrificing her beliefs and her community involvement.



The Profiles



Ibtissam (Yemen)

There was opposition to my taking off the veil. At first, I wasn't very strong—I couldn't face the objections. I used to give in easily when talking about it. But then I gained the confidence to face others and developed sound arguments from religious and social perspectives. Now I can discuss the veil and be persuasive. I say that people can change and it's not a problem, and others are convinced.

In the course of her 28 years, Ibtissam has traveled a long way: moving from a veiled existence in a conservative village to a job that calls for her to travel and to interact with men as well as women. Each step of the way, she has had to persuade her male relatives to grant her permission to take on responsibilities that are unusual for women in Yemen. Ibtissam's story depicts a careful balance between the demands of family and tradition on one hand, and, on the other, her own desires for self-development and freedom.

The eldest of four surviving children, Ibtissam comes from an extremely conservative family of *Saada*, descendants of the Prophet. She was born in a village in north Yemen, where women are not allowed to work outside the home and their faces are strictly veiled. There Ibtissam attended Qur'anic classes and stayed at home until the age of twelve, when her mother decided to move to the capital, Sanaa, in order to be closer to her relatives.

The move to Sanaa divided the family. Ibtissam's father, a teacher of Qur'an, was concerned chiefly with religious matters and was never able to cope with economic responsibilities. He could not adapt to life in the capital and refused to stay. After a car accident, which caused some memory loss, he returned to the village. For the past fourteen years he has lived and taught in the mosque there. Ibtissam talks about her father with sympathy and sadness. She remembers his affection when she was young but has never understood why his religious beliefs should be an obstacle to raising the living standards of the family.

In Sanaa, Ibtissam's mother sewed clothes to support her children and send them to school. Her mother, who loves poetry and literature, has played a significant role in Ibtissam's life. One day, after Ibtissam had completed primary school, she accompanied her mother to the hospital. The trip was a turning point for Ibtissam. In the hospital, for the first time, she encountered unveiled women—Egyptian nurses wearing white caps and uniforms. She was fascinated. Later, when she saw a Ministry of Health announcement for community nursing programs, she decided to enroll along with her sister.

Ibtissam's desire to enter the health field was spurred by several factors. She hoped to raise her family's standard of living and "to become like the Egyptian nurses" she remembered so vividly. She was also influenced by the haunting memory of the loss of six siblings to diseases in infancy: "*I always thought it wasn't normal that such ordinary diseases could kill children.*" Finally, at that time nursing and teaching were the only possible professions for women.

In order to register for the program, Ibtissam had to obtain the signature of a *mahram*—a close male relative, such as her father, uncle, or brother. At that moment she realized that any decision in her life required male approval. Since her father was absent and her brothers were young, Ibtissam turned to her maternal uncle, who reluctantly agreed to sign the papers. At the age of 14 and totally veiled, Ibtissam entered the school together with her sister. There they met foreigners and were fascinated by their lifestyles. Ibtissam

remembers, “Once a teacher called on me. For the first time in my life a man had talked to me. I was so stunned, I was unable to answer.” After a year and a half, the two sisters graduated and moved to the Health Manpower Institute for another year of training.

After finishing her training, Ibtissam found work in the Maternal and Child Health Department of the Ministry of Health; her job was to visit governorates and monitor programs for mothers and children. She knew by intuition how to balance the strict traditions of her upbringing with the more open life she was now encountering. Her family came to sense her commitment and maturity, and they allowed her to travel and continue her work.

With this job, Ibtissam became her family’s main source of income. When Ibtissam and her sister were students, they both turned their stipends over to their mother. After graduation, her sister married and, at the wish of her husband, she did not work. At the same time, Ibtissam’s mother stopped working because she was tired and her work was no longer lucrative. Thus, Ibtissam became the only support for her mother and her two younger brothers; she continued to support them even after she married.

After four years, Ibtissam wanted to change jobs and move to another region so that she could work more closely with women, acquire more experience, and make more money. After lengthy discussions, her uncle finally agreed that she could work in a pioneer rural health project in Dhamar governorate on the condition that her mother accompany her. Ibtissam moved to Dhamar with her mother and began work as a training coordinator for women. After a few weeks, her mother decided that Ibtissam was well taken care of by project authorities and was mature enough to stay on her own. She returned to Sanaa to take care of Ibtissam’s two brothers.

For Ibtissam, however, becoming fully accepted in her new position was a gradual process:

When I first joined the health office in Dhamar, I was the only woman there. I used to go into the office and say “good morning,” and nobody would answer, but I kept trying. They all used to think, this girl comes from Sanaa—why did her parents allow her to leave home to come and work here? They wondered about it. Then I started to get to know them one by one, and I tried to explain to them who I was and why I was here. When they got to know me and appreciate my work, we became friends.

As part of her new job, Ibtissam traveled with the male Primary Health Care Coordinator and a driver to meet the Sheikhs on field visits. First, she would sit with the women at home, and then she would meet the men of the village. She tried to convince the men that it was important to encourage their sisters, daughters, and wives to become primary health care workers in order to improve health conditions in their communities. She gained the trust of the villagers by assuring them that this work would not contradict tradition. At the time, Ibtissam was still totally veiled; no one ever saw her face.

The first year, and after many field visits, I was able to recruit 16 girls to join the training program. Their families used to warn me: “Our daughters are your responsibility!” After one year, these girls graduated and went back to work in their villages. Three years later, I visited the project and was very moved to find that not less than one hundred families had come to the health office from those far villages in order to register their daughters.

Nine years ago, there were no female health counselors in Yemen....Today there are 150 female counselors from different areas, free to go anywhere and see anyone. This is like a dream come

true.

To broaden her opportunities, Ibtissam decided to return to the Health Manpower Institute in Sanaa and study to become a licensed midwife. She graduated as a midwife in two years instead of the normal three because of her rich background and experience.

After graduation, Ibtissam decided to stay in Sanaa to be closer to her family. She found a new job as a health coordinator with a British nongovernmental organization. Her responsibilities multiplied. She made contacts with other organizations, monitored health programs, and organized training workshops for female primary health care workers from all over the country. During the 1994 civil war, Ibtissam helped implement an emergency health program. In addition to all these responsibilities, Ibtissam attended to the maternal and child health needs of her own community in Sanaa, delivering babies, caring for their mothers, treating minor ailments, and educating families about health issues. She became so well known and respected that people from other neighborhoods would come to her for treatment.

After much thought and hesitation, Ibtissam decided to take off her veil. When Yemen was unified in 1989, she had discovered that many women wore a head cover over their hair rather than the traditional *litham*, or face veil. Initially, Ibtissam took off her veil when she traveled abroad for conferences but put it back on when she returned to Yemen. At home in Yemen, she found it difficult to counter tradition. In public taxis and buses outside the capital, for example, Ibtissam constantly had to defend the absence of her *mahram*, and she never felt at ease in restaurants.

A three-week stay in Hodeida, an extremely hot locale, finally decided her to remove the *litham*. The heat affected her skin, and she could not bear to wear it any more. When she wanted to take the *litham* off, her mother refused, saying, "You want to make a revolution in our family!" Ibtissam did not want to take such a step without family approval, so she discussed the issue at length with her maternal uncle and brother. Finally, they agreed that she could take the *litham* off in Hodeida but asked her to put it back on as soon as she returned to Sanaa. Ibtissam describes what happened next:

In Hodeida, I took it off. In the health office, they did not recognize me. I introduced myself, but they could not believe it! I heard comments: "Hey! what did the foreigners do to you? They changed you outside and inside!" I told them, "No, they don't change us; we are the ones to change, within ourselves." A woman said, "You unveil in front of Tihama people [who live in Hodeida] and wear the veil for the people of Sanaa?" I said, "No, I took it off completely." It was very disturbing to go around among people who knew me before. I felt shy and blushed more than once, but I told myself, "Don't worry. Try as much as you can." When I was meeting people for the first time, I was happy to introduce myself.

When I came back from Hodeida, I arrived home unveiled. I had decided to take it off indefinitely. But I wanted to get the approval of my uncle first. I wanted to go out with the Islamic veil [a covering over the hair]. He said, "Well, don't come near our house or even to the neighborhood. We don't want anyone from the family to see you like that!" I said, "Is it unlawful? Is it written in the Qur'an?" "No, it is not." "Convince me or accept my arguments. We must make the decision now, and I want to leave your house now unveiled as I want to visit you as much as possible." He finally agreed. I left the house unveiled with my mother. It was such a relief.

Ibtissam always tried to keep a balance between her natural affection for her family and her constant demands

on her *mahrams* (i.e., her uncle and later her brother) for more freedom. “*Can you imagine,*” she says, “*Before I got married, my brother—who is seven years younger than me, whom I carried in my arms and raised—had the power to forbid me to travel or to make any major decision!*” Ibtissam’s steadfast efforts to maintain a virtuous reputation won her the respect of her family and helped her convince her uncle and brother to grant her more rights. Both her uncle and brother felt relieved and content, however, when Ibtissam married and her husband, as *mahram*, became responsible for her decisions. They do not interfere anymore but simply pay ordinary family visits.

With her mother’s support, Ibtissam refused to marry the man to whom she was first engaged at the age of 14. Her mother sold her gold necklace to buy Ibtissam’s freedom. Later, Ibtissam refused other marriage proposals because she wanted to continue her career and support her family. Then she met Ahmed.

I was introduced to him and I liked his personality: kind, open-minded. When he was speaking, I felt he was against the veil, polygamy, and these kind of things. I felt he was different. Before Ahmed went to ask my uncle to marry me, my uncle said to me: “As long as you agree, why should I interfere?” He was afraid that a girl like me would not find any other man, because I was working, traveling.

During the two years they have been married, Ibtissam’s husband has always played a positive role in her life, encouraging her at work, supporting her in her studies, letting her meet new people, and taking care of himself whenever she travels. From the first, Ibtissam and Ahmed decided to plan their family, and they used contraception for two years to delay starting a family. According to Ibtissam:

We would like to have two children, a boy and a girl. My husband would not mind if I don’t have a boy. We don’t want more than two, because it is not easy to raise children. I have my own experience. Being the eldest of my family, I raised my brothers and sister at an age when I needed someone to raise me.

Ibtissam hopes to continue her education and her work. She wants to help women stand up for their rights and play a major role in Yemen’s development. She already serves as an inspiration to girls inside and outside her family. When her young relatives visit Sanaa, they ask her, “Tell us what you are doing, so that we can do the same.” Among the girls she trained as Primary Health Care Workers, at least six are now teaching, and they always cite Ibtissam as their model.

Houria (Yemen)

Houria was born and raised in Dahmar Governorate in a conservative village. Qur'anic classes were the only education she and her sister received. After Houria's father died during the civil war of the 1960s, her mother did not remarry. Following her father's death, Houria's brother-in-law became the key male figure of authority in the family.

Houria and her sister were married at the same time to two brothers, as is often the case in Yemen. At the time, Houria was ten years old, and her husband was working in Saudi Arabia. Houria was so young that she could not bear to be parted from her mother and asked that she continue to sleep in the same room with her. Her husband agreed that Houria could continue to live with her mother until she had her first menstrual period. Two years later, Houria moved in with her husband's family and waited for her husband to return from Saudi Arabia. Although at first she did not know the meaning of marriage, she loved her husband and was happy with him.

Houria shared the household chores and farming with the other women in the family. She had an independent spirit, however, and was unhappy living with her in-laws. Her one friend in the family was her sister-in-law, who was kind and supportive and protected her. Unfortunately, her sister-in-law suffered repeated ectopic pregnancies, accompanied by hemorrhaging, and she eventually died. After her death, Houria felt that she had lost her place in her husband's family. When her husband was in Saudi Arabia, she used to have fights with her brother-in-law when he tried to order her around.

Once he hit me, and I went to my family. My husband can hit me, but his brother has no right to do so. My mother and my brothers were very upset and stood by me. My husband came back from Saudi Arabia and took me back after guaranteeing my family that his brother would not give me any more trouble.

At the age of 16, Houria had her first child but soon afterwards disaster struck. Houria was cooking in the kitchen when an earthquake struck her village. She recalls with tears :

I suddenly felt the floor moving, saw a strange light and heard a big noise. Things around me were falling. I put my hands over my head and screamed, then fainted for some time. When I awoke I found out that I had lost my son, my mother and other family members. Unfortunately, my mother was visiting me and was feeding my baby when this nightmare happened. My husband came back from Saudi Arabia to bury six members of his family.

A few years later Houria had a daughter, but she asked for a divorce because her husband was not treating her well any more and had married another woman. She went back to her own family, taking her daughter with her. Although her husband came after her and took them back home, her marriage was never the same. Her husband began staying in Saudi Arabia for longer periods of time, leaving Houria with his family. Houria became so unhappy that she took desperate action:

One day I ran away at sunset and walked in the mountains carrying my daughter on my waist the whole night until I arrived at dawn in my village. This was shameful. My family almost disowned me for my act and my brother stopped talking to me.

This time her husband did not come for her, and he did not ask about his family for two years. Houria kept asking for a divorce but, when her husband finally sent the divorce papers, they were not legal. The

government jailed her brother-in-law until her husband returned from Saudi Arabia and filed for divorce. Houria refused when her husband asked for their daughter, but he gained custody of the girl after filing a court case against her.

I cannot think back on those days. I told myself I will get her back as soon as I can support her. At least she was at an age where she was able to go to the bathroom alone and dress and eat alone. The day I gave her away it was like being at my own funeral.

At this low point in her life, Houria started to volunteer at a health center near her village that was run by a Somali doctor and his wife, a Filipina midwife. At first, she cleaned the health center, kept track of the patients, and assisted the midwife. Later the doctor and his wife began to teach her more. One evening, the midwife heard Houria crying in her room and found out about her daughter; the doctor and midwife subsequently helped convince Houria's husband to return their daughter to her care.

While Houria quickly learned how to do most tasks at the health center, she realized that she needed to learn how to read, write, and count in order to read the scales and conduct minor procedures. After a struggle with her family, Houria attended literacy classes and then enrolled in a Female Primary Health Care (FPHC) program. After graduating as a FPHC worker, she returned to work in the center. Her family was furious; they opposed her decision to work and disowned her. Houria decided to continue working and to fight for her rights, but she did not defy tradition or local cultural practices. She was cautious in her behavior and kept her face veiled because she knew that even a simple mistake could deprive her of her daughter or force her to give up her job.

Houria worked hard at the health center and became popular with the patients and staff. They appreciated her determination and helped her care for her daughter. Houria also began helping the doctor and the midwife organize outreach activities for the village women, including health education sessions. Houria also participated in home visits to pregnant women and children at risk. She acquired many skills at the health center and became a well-known figure in the community.

When Houria's sister died, Houria followed local custom and married her brother-in-law. This meant a move to the capital, Sanaa. It proved easier than she had anticipated to forge a relationship with her new husband.

He was kind and supported me a lot during the most difficult period. It was strange at the beginning to feel our new relationship, but soon afterwards it became natural. There is love and understanding between us. He takes good care of my daughter and supports me in continuing my education.

Although she and her husband have discussed having another child, Houria feels that they cannot adequately support any more, and she is practicing family planning.

In Sanaa, Houria enrolled in the Health Manpower Institute and became a licensed midwife. During the 1994 civil war, she joined the El Sabeen Maternity Hospital, where she continues to work in the hospital's delivery section, and has established a good reputation with her colleagues. She also works for a local NGO, the Social Organization for Family Development (SOFD), providing maternal and child health and family planning counseling and services. In addition, Houria makes home visits in the poorest areas of Sanaa, during which she addresses cases of malnutrition, monitors pre- and post-natal high-risk cases, and provides counseling on family health issues. Because of her extensive experience in the field, Houria has developed a community outreach program for SOFD, and her contributions to the organization are much appreciated.

At her home in Sanaa, Houria, who is now 30 years old, also takes care of her sister's six children. Her house is always full of people seeking information or requiring medical services. She gets up early in the morning to clean the house, do the cooking, and get her daughter ready for school, after which she goes to work. Houria works hard and looks at life positively. Her dream is to be able to send her daughter to the university.

Samira (Yemen)

Samira comes from a conservative family in the al-Mahweet governorate. Her father was a soldier, and her mother a housewife and farmer. Her father believed that girls should not be educated beyond Qur'anic classes and prevented Samira from attending school. After many failed attempts to go to school, she finally ran away at the age of ten to live with her eldest married sister who, with her husband, supported her pursuit of education. She did not mind that she was older than her classmates and studied hard until the fifth grade.

At the age of fifteen, Samira married a virtual stranger who proposed after seeing Samira shop in his store. Nevertheless, Samira developed a loving and understanding relationship with her husband. After her marriage, Samira dropped out of school for two years and had her first child. At the same time, she encouraged her husband to return to school and helped him with his lessons. Later he joined a training program to become a medical assistant. Her husband, in turn, encouraged Samira to return to school and helped her finish sixth grade and the first intermediate.

A few years later, with her husband's continuing support, Samira began working for an agricultural project designed to improve the farming skills of women. Later she enrolled in a one-year program to become a Female Primary Health Care Worker. Most of her training concerned farming: her job was to help women farmers better plant and preserve their land. As a health care worker, however, Samira integrated a variety of health issues into the farming program, addressing topics such as safe drinking water, nutrition for pregnant women, care of the newborn, and prevention of childhood diseases.

Samira found her work very rewarding; both her co-workers and her clients respected her. Her co-workers at the Agriculture Office were impressed by her dynamism and touched by her sincerity. They developed an excellent working relationship and were extremely supportive of one another:

When I get pregnant, my colleagues help me in every way they can and I do the same with them. We work like one family and we are very committed to our community. We help the women to raise their awareness about many issues related to their roles and work. They have so much confidence in us and are so grateful!

Unfortunately, her family did not react in the same way: they disowned her because she worked outside the home. Even her brother-in-law, who had helped her continue her schooling, opposed her decision to take a job. In their community, it was shameful for a woman to work outside her home. Only her husband stood by her and continued to support her.

One night, however, her father became extremely sick. There was no doctor in the village, and the health center and hospital were far away. Finally, Samira's family called on her for help, and she was able to give her father the treatment he needed to live. Only then did her father begin to appreciate her work, understand her mission, and recognize the importance of her role in the community. After this episode, Samira became reconciled with her family and once again grew close to her father:

You can't imagine how happy I am to have helped save my father's life, and I am so proud that he acknowledged my mission. All the members of the family now have great respect for me and my husband.

Samira gained even more experience in health care when she moved to Hawashia to work with her husband in the health center there. She delivered babies, cared for infants and new mothers, provided family planning

services and counseling, treated minor injuries, and provided first-aid. They worked together as a team: while she looked after the women, her husband mainly took care of the men. They also traveled together to distant villages to provide vaccinations, educate people on health issues, and encourage them to visit the health unit. They became community leaders because of their work in the center and the community outreach program.

When Samira and her family moved back to Mahweet, she returned to the agriculture project, and her husband opened a pharmacy. She was welcomed joyfully both by her colleagues at the Agricultural Office and by the women of Mahweet.

Throughout her married life, Samira has had to care for her husband and children as well as carry out her community and health work. She has five children, whom she adores, and is now using family planning. Samira admits that her multiple responsibilities have affected her health but accepts the situation as normal for a working woman in Yemen. Her husband keeps watch over her health and makes sure she eats well. When she has any complaints about her health, he takes them seriously. Neither Samira nor her husband see a significant connection between her health and her many responsibilities at home and at work.

Samira, now 30 years old, wants to raise her children the best way possible: *“I want to provide them with what I was deprived of. I want to provide equal chances for my son and daughters.”* For Samira, education is the key. When her children were young, she sent them to the nursery while she worked. Now that they are older, she tutors them at home so that they will be better prepared for school. She is hopeful that her struggle for her own rights will help create a better world for her children: *“Things will change in the future. We need to open the road for our children. It is difficult but not impossible.”*

Samira strongly believes in her work and continues to fight for a better life for the women in her community. She herself also wants to keep learning. In recognition of her hard work and commitment, the Health Manpower Institute has selected her to become a teacher assistant in the Female Primary Health Worker program that recently opened in the region. Samira is excited about her new assignment and is busy preparing for the program with her new colleagues. She declares, *“I want to learn more and more, and to teach more and more.”*

A lia (L ebanon)

Alia was born in a small village in south Lebanon close to the border, but her family moved to Beirut when she was young. Her father was an unskilled worker, and the family moved back and forth between the city and the village depending on his work opportunities. She attended school in Beirut but, after four years, decided that she did not want to continue. Her parents did not insist, and they took her out of school and moved back to the village. At the age of 13, Alia was married to a cousin to whom she had been promised since birth. He was twelve years older than Alia and lived in Beirut.

After her marriage, Alia moved into her in-laws' house. Her mother-in-law, a widow and the head of the family, treated her as one of the children. Alia helped with the household chores, quickly became pregnant, and had two sons in three years. The war in Lebanon was raging, and her husband decided to apply for a visa to emigrate to Germany so that they could build a more secure future for their children. At first Alia was scared, but then she decided he was right.

The couple moved to Germany, where Alia's husband found a job in a factory. Alia looks back fondly on her years living abroad:

These were the best years of my life. I had a nice house, my husband was making money, the people treated me as their equal, and I felt secure when pregnant with my third child. The neighbors directed me to the clinic, and I was followed up during nine months. Then I had my baby girl at the hospital. It was so pleasant and so painless, compared to what had happened when I delivered my two boys with the help of the midwife at my mother-in-law's house in Beirut.

Her husband felt homesick, however, and wanted to return to Lebanon where, he was told, the situation was calm and there were jobs available. Alia was shocked by his plans: she had come to appreciate their comfortable existence in Germany and did not want to go back. Her husband finally convinced her, and they returned to Beirut. They rented a small house, since her mother-in-law no longer had a room to spare.

Soon, however, Alia and her husband had to depart Beirut and seek safety in her village in the south. There Alia delivered her fourth child.

There was nothing in that place and I discovered I was pregnant in spite of our efforts to avoid pregnancy. It was bound to happen; there were no pharmacies or clinics to go to for contraceptives... I had to deliver my second daughter in the village... I could not stand it any more and told Abou Hussein, let us go back to Dahia. This is what we did. After we came to Borj-El-Barajneh and settled, I found that I was pregnant again. We were desperate, but we decided this will be the last child... This is how I started coming to the center and discovered that there were possibilities to better my lot...

Alia registered with the family planning unit at the social and health welfare center in her Beirut community. Together with her husband, she decided to have an IUD fitted.

God had been merciful to us and gave us five healthy children of both sexes. Our duty is to raise them properly and give them an education. Our resources were barely sufficient to feed us all. We could not afford to have any more children.

During her visits to the center, Alia discovered that it had a literacy program, which she joined when she

found that she could not read and count well enough to help her young children with their homework. She attended classes regularly for the next two years.

When her youngest daughter entered school, Alia started looking for work because her husband's salary was not sufficient to cover the household expenses and school fees for their children. A friend told her about a job at a laboratory, and she broached the issue with her husband:

I told him, "Look, Abou Hussein, there is no shame in working, there is shame in begging! The work I am offered is good and will not keep me away from home for long hours. I can do all my household duties, and you will not be neglected...." He replied, "I do not want you to get tired and become sick." I told him not to worry. Finally he said, "If you want to work, go ahead and do it." This is how it started.

If her husband had not agreed, Alia would not have taken the job. *"But I didn't worry; I was sure he would accept. I know him; he is a good man and would not be influenced by people's talk."*

For the past four years, Alia has been working at the laboratory, where she is responsible for cleaning and sterilizing the equipment. She works five hours a day and has a flexible schedule. Alia is happy with her work because her employers respect her, appreciate her efforts, and encourage her to ask questions and learn more about what goes on in the large polyclinic where the laboratory is located. She has reconciled her roles as a mother, wife, and worker and feels at ease in her job. She does not intend to stop working because, as she says,

Staying at home makes you feel like a prisoner. You do not know what goes on around in the world.... You cannot learn new things; your horizon is blocked....

Alia is very proud of the new status she has acquired in her family and neighborhood since she began working. Her oldest son calls her "Doctora" because she has become a resource person for her neighbors: they come to her for advice and ask her to make appointments at the clinic or accompany them during their visits to the doctor. She listens to what the doctors and nurses say to their clients, especially about children's and women's health, and tries to apply what she has learned. She feels that the skills acquired through her work have enabled her to help both her family and the community.

Alia, now 33, has a loving relationship with her husband based on mutual respect and trust. He often tells her, "The house without you is nothing, *ya Umm Hussein* [mother of Hussein]." Her husband now works as a driver for a company and always asks Alia's opinion before undertaking any large expense or making a decision that may affect the family. They have divided the household expenses, so that Alia pays for school fees and clothing out of her salary, while her husband pays the rent, electricity, and water bills.

Alia makes all decisions regarding the children, especially with respect to their schooling and training. Her eldest children, the two sons, did not do well in school, so she decided to apprentice them to a plumber and a carpenter. Alia is not concerned about her sons' lack of education since they are becoming good craftsmen and soon will be able to work on their own. In contrast, she is encouraging her three young daughters to continue their education because she does not want them "to be illiterates like me."

Soheir (Egypt)

The eldest in a family of seven children, Soheir was born in a small village in Upper Egypt. Her family comes originally from the Arabian peninsula and has a strong tradition of education and service to the community. Soheir's father, who is considered the elder in her extended family, maintained the family's tradition in his work as a supervisor of Arabic teaching. Soheir's mother also believes strongly in education and community service; although she left school and became a housewife when she married, she continued to read at home, enlisted outside help to train herself in first aid, and began providing first aid services to the villagers.

Although Soheir's parents recognized the importance of educating girls, they did not accept the idea of equality between the sexes. They believed in the importance of family traditions, extended family networks, and male leadership—ideas that permeate village life in Upper Egypt. In the village, Soheir grew up surrounded by poverty, poor health, and lack of information. Her parents constantly reminded her that any knowledge she gained at school would be meaningless unless she used it to help others. In that spirit, Soheir entered the village primary school.

When she was eight years old, Soheir made her first attempt to apply her knowledge to the problems around her. Having just learned about the dangers of polluted water at school, she took a fresh look at the usual scene of women washing their utensils and clothes in the village canal. A few meters away, a dead cow lay in the water. Without a second thought, Soheir went up to one of the women, told her that she was going to die because she was washing her utensils in polluted water, and ordered her to get out of the canal if she wanted to save her life. The woman laughed at Soheir and sent her home. Crying, Soheir ran to her mother, who comforted her and explained that she could not expect her elders to listen to her until she was older and held a respected position, such as that of a doctor or nurse. Soheir vowed that she would become a doctor one day and would teach people better ways of doing things.

After finishing primary school in the village, Soheir had to move to a boarding school in a nearby town in order to continue her education. Her father was reluctant to let her go, and she herself was hesitant about leaving her family, mingling with strangers, and becoming independent.

Despite her reservations, Soheir entered boarding school and gradually learned how to socialize with her new classmates, who came from different backgrounds than her village friends. Soon she became active in extra-curricular activities. She helped organize sports, religious, and cultural events and used them to disseminate bits and pieces of information about health and hygiene.

Exposure to the other girls at school led Soheir to contemplate the social issues of early marriage and arranged marriage. She soon realized that excelling in school was a way for girls to continue their educations and delay their marriages. During her visits home, Soheir raised these issues with the villagers, arguing that girls should have the right to choose their husbands and to continue their education. While her immediate family did not resent her efforts, it was a different story with her extended family and the village at large. Since Soheir had little access to the men in the village, she approached the older women to try to dissuade them from arranging their daughters' marriages at an early age. One area that even Soheir did not dare question, however, was the tradition of marrying endogamously, or within the extended family.

After completing secondary school, Soheir moved to Cairo to attend the School of Medicine at Al Azhar University and realize her dream of becoming a doctor. At first, she obeyed her parent's request to focus on her studies and not get involved in the turbulent Cairo life. Gradually, however, she became involved by

joining several student groups. Soheir became especially active in the Health Education Association and wished to broaden its activities beyond the student body. She proposed that the association set up a health education program outside the university, namely in her own village, to disseminate information to women and school-age children about waterborne diseases, personal hygiene, environmental sanitation, and nutrition. After getting official approval from the dean, Soheir launched a health education program in her village in 1992. Many of the village's formal and informal leaders supported her efforts, although some resented the idea of a young village girl advising others on ways to change their behavior.

Over time, village men as well as women started approaching Soheir for information that went beyond her planned educational program. For example, women asked her about family planning and menstrual cycles; men wanted to know about kidney diseases. When Soheir lacked the answers, she had to go back to her books. The villagers treated Soheir as a doctor even though she had not yet finished her education, and they respected her advice.

Local midwives were concerned that Soheir might threaten their livelihood, but Soheir decided to work with them in order to reach more people. While some midwives rejected her advice, others acted on her recommendations, for example, sterilizing their instruments before each use. Soheir also began working with the midwives on the issue of female genital mutilation. Soheir herself is excised and favors the practice as long as it is performed according to what are believed to be regulations based on the sayings attributed to the Prophet. In her experience, medical doctors do more cutting and removal than necessary, so Soheir's goal has been to encourage midwives to observe strict standards of hygiene when they perform the operation in order to reduce the risk of infection.

Her work in the village also led Soheir to face the problem of poverty. Many families had no way to better their lives, and Soheir tried to find work opportunities for them by writing to the Ministry of Social Affairs and its local branches. Because she had established a good rapport with these officials while developing her health education program, they were willing to consider the cases she brought to their attention.

A new chapter in Soheir's life opened when a fellow student at the university proposed to her. He was sympathetic to her goals and encouraged her activities at the university and in her home village. However, marrying outside the family contradicted deeply rooted traditions within Soheir's circle. Soheir worried especially about her father's reaction, for he was the main male figure in her life and the family elder. After some hesitation, Soheir told her parents about the prospective groom and her desire to marry him—adding that she had performed a special Islamic prayer to help her make up her mind and that it had reinforced her decision to marry him. Her father raged and groaned, refusing even to meet the man. Soheir persisted: she reminded her father that he had always respected her decisions. She attacked the rationale behind the endogamous marriage rule. She explained that her prospective groom came from a good family.

Soheir's father finally compromised and traveled to Cairo to meet her prospective husband without notifying anyone in the extended family. After further investigation, her father decided to allow the marriage. When he broke the news to Soheir's family, many of their relatives objected, while others acquiesced, albeit reluctantly, because he was the family elder. Soheir's uncle and his family boycotted the village wedding, while other family members attended. For the younger generation, including Soheir's siblings, Soheir's wedding set a new precedent and gave them hope that they, too, might choose their own marriage partners.

After her marriage, Soheir settled in Cairo and began practicing at a health clinic, where she treats patients and disseminates public health information. She wants to reach beyond this small audience and is exploring ways to address the entire neighborhood. She is still new to the community, however, and finds its heterogeneity a

challenge. Soheir also continues to work through the university, proposing different activities for the Health Education Association and organizing a new association on environmental issues such as sanitation. In the meantime, her community work in her home village has stopped temporarily due to her pregnancy. Soheir's husband encourages all of these activities and has advised Soheir on how best to replicate her health education program in Cairo. He also accompanies Soheir when she visits the village to check on what remains of her health education program.

Soheir is determined to maintain a strong link with her family and regularly visits her village, where most of her close relatives still live. She is especially close to one of her sisters, a student at Al Azhar University who has decided to follow Soheir's example in marrying outside the family and is counting on Soheir's support. Soheir also has begun thinking about how she will raise her own children. In many ways, she hopes to emulate her parents and keep her family traditions alive. She wants her child to be sensitive to community needs, to be useful, to treat people properly, and to actively pursue his or her chosen career.

Sabah (Egypt)

Sabah's father comes from Upper Egypt, but he moved to Cairo to earn a living. There Sabah, his first child, was born. Because Sabah's father wanted sons, her mother continued to have children. Five of them died in infancy due to tetanus; the other five of Sabah's siblings survived.

In Cairo, Sabah's father entered the business of garbage sorting and recycling. While the work was relatively lucrative, it carried a stigma; the *zabalin*, garbage collectors and sorters, were forced to live in their own, separate community. Because the family was poor, it was necessary that everyone work, including Sabah's mother and all of the children. They would sort through the garbage, pick out the bits of plastic, hammer them into small pieces and wash them, and then sell these to a recycling plant. As time passed and her father saved some money, he began to hire laborers to do this manual work.

Sabah was enrolled in primary school, but from her earliest days there she disliked studying and the rhythm of school life. She did poorly in math and Arabic and had to face the prejudices of the other school children. Sabah asked that she be allowed to leave school, feeling that her time would be better spent helping her mother with the household chores and sorting garbage to earn money for the family. Her parents wanted her to continue her education, but Sabah left primary school without getting her certificate. She later came to regret this decision and, as an adult, has tried to remedy it by seizing every available opportunity for further training and education. She has, for example, learned English and enrolled in a computer training course. She also encouraged her sisters to continue beyond preparatory school.

Sabah's life took on a new direction when a French nurse from the Daughters of Maria monastery visited her mother to discuss the importance of good hygiene after childbirth. Because Sabah had lost so many brothers and sisters to tetanus, she was deeply interested in the nurse's message. When the nurse suggested that she join a team of local volunteers to help her spread information about tetanus and conduct an immunization campaign, Sabah was eager to join. She became one of the first members of an Immunization Team of twelve women working under the auspices of the church. After training as a health promoter, Sabah began visiting neighborhood women at home to convince them of the importance of immunization. She also gave immunizations and checked hygienic conditions after women gave birth.

At first the work was hard and people were resentful, but Sabah used the sad experience of her own siblings to convince women of the need for tetanus immunization. Increasingly, pregnant women began to visit a new neighborhood clinic to receive their immunizations, and home visits became less important. Sabah continued to play an important role at the clinic, however, making sure that women came to the clinic on schedule and motivating others to register at the clinic.

While working on the immunization program, Sabah came to realize that traditional beliefs had serious implications for community health and might block the adoption of new ideas and practices. In the case of tetanus, for example, many mothers disputed Sabah's explanation that their babies had died from tetanus infection. Rather, they believed that their newborns had lost their lives during a fight with their opposite-sex spirits. Because the outcome of this "spirit fight" was not known immediately after birth, local women did not believe in registering their babies' births; indeed, they thought registering the birth would inflict the evil eye on the baby. Combating this belief and encouraging the registration of births became an important part of Sabah's efforts at health education.

Sabah's husband was to become an important support in both her personal life and her work. Considerably

better educated than Sabah, Ezzat proposed to her while he was still studying at the university. As Sabah's cousin, he was gladly accepted as her husband, in keeping with family tradition. After their marriage, Sabah, then 18, moved to the home of her in-laws (who were in fact her father's brother and mother's sister), who also worked in the garbage sorting and recycling business. Eleven members of the household shared a three-bedroom apartment, but her father-in-law planned to expand the number of floors once there was enough money. Sabah and her husband decided to make that renovation one of their first goals. They began saving as much money as possible—not an easy task since Sabah's work was purely voluntary—and eventually added another floor to the building, to which they then moved.

Getting married did not put an end to Sabah's involvement in community work. On the contrary, Ezzat encouraged her to continue her activities, and indeed her marriage gave Sabah an additional incentive: she felt that her community work compensated for her lack of academic accomplishments and put her on a more equal footing with her well-educated husband. Sabah's standing within the community, as well as her feelings of personal self-esteem, were deeply linked with her work as a health promoter.

Two weeks after her marriage Sabah resumed her work with the Immunization Team. The project was growing. Initially supported by the church and monastery, the team was adopted by the Garbage Collecting Association and then received funding from Oxfam. Assessment of the Team's activities indicated the need for a broader health education program about disease transmission among children and new mothers. A new Health Promotion Team was formed, and Sabah was selected as a member because of her previous outstanding work. The new team members attended a training program in primary health care, maternal and child health, first aid, and nursing. Sabah is proud of the primary health care certificate she earned in this course and the knowledge that it symbolizes.

Eventually, Sabah's volunteer work translated into a paid position at the Community Development and Environment Protection Association. This has allowed Sabah to help improve her family's financial standing, which is a constant concern for her, while maintaining her involvement in community affairs.

As the work of health promotion continues to grow, Sabah is growing with it. She participates in periodic training programs on preventive health care, maternal and child health, reproductive health, and family planning. She also has received training on information dissemination mechanisms, community work, health education methods, and follow-up and evaluation techniques. More recently, Sabah has expanded her interests and begun to address several sensitive social issues, including early marriage, family planning, traditional virginity proof practices, and female genital mutilation.

Given the constant need for more hands in garbage collecting, sorting, and recycling, education is not highly esteemed in Sabah's neighborhood, especially for girls, and early marriage is common. To encourage girls to delay marriage, the Environment Protection Association has begun to offer them paid jobs and to promise them a cash wedding gift if they do not marry until the age of 18. Sabah and the other health promoters complement these efforts by stressing the adverse health consequences of early marriage and pregnancy during their home visits. Providing information about the benefits of family planning has also become a priority for Sabah, all the more because local households still desire large families to provide more labor power.

Two other important issues relating to women's reproductive health and well-being that Sabah has addressed in both her personal and private life are traditional virginity proofs (*dukla baladi*) and female genital mutilation, or excision. Sabah directly confronted the issue of virginity proofs when she became engaged to Ezzat. With his support, she refused to undergo the procedure. Sabah also firmly opposed her parent's intentions to have

her sister undergo this practice, which can be deeply traumatic both mentally and physically.

In regard to female genital mutilation, Sabah herself was excised and was initially in favor of excising her daughter. However, as she learned more about the detrimental effects of the procedure—based in part upon her personal experience following marriage—she came to reject the practice. With her husband’s support, and in the face of great opposition from their parents, she refused to have her daughter excised. Further, Sabah and Ezzat extended their concern for the harmful effects of this practice to the community at large. They organized a campaign against excision, building on the support of the church and the Environment Protection Association's Health and Development Sector. As part of this effort, Sabah and Ezzat helped to write a short play about the practice, which was performed in the neighborhood and at their daughter’s school. Subsequently, they videotaped the play so that it could be shown at health seminars for local women.

Sabah feels that she has gained enormously from her work. She has developed self-confidence along with the ability to express herself, exchange information effectively, and motivate others. Her work has also fortified her relationship with her husband and strengthened their marriage. She and Ezzat, who now have two children, make all important family decisions jointly. Their plans for the future include sending their daughter to a private school and building upon their family’s base in the community by purchasing a plastic recycling plant, which would be operated by their parents.

Now 28 years old, Sabah takes pride in her accomplishments, which have been recognized on a wider stage as well as locally. Because of her leading role in the community, she was chosen to represent the Environment Protection Association at the International Women’s Conference in Beijing, where she gave a presentation on female genital mutilation. Changing patterns of behavior is a lifelong vocation, but Sabah is ready to continue in her efforts for as long as she can be of service.

I man (Egypt)

Iman was born in a rural community near Alexandria that has gradually been absorbed into the city as Alexandria has grown. The eldest of six children, Iman grew up in an extended family that was headed by her grandmother, who was the chief decision-maker for the household. Iman's father was a laborer; her mother, a housewife. When Iman was a child, her grandmother decided that, for a variety of reasons, she should quit school: it was too far away, the schedule was inconvenient, and it was proper that the eldest daughter should stay home and help with household chores. Further, her grandmother felt that educating Iman was unnecessary since a cousin had already been chosen to be her future husband. Upset by the prospect of leaving school, Iman asked her father to intervene; he was unable, however, to convince her grandmother to reverse her decision.

When Iman sought family approval to undertake paid employment, her efforts met with greater success. With her mother's help, Iman's father was persuaded that it was important for her to work and earn some money. Iman's grandmother, with some reluctance, gave her consent as well. Iman successfully applied for a job at the food processing plant in Edfina and worked there for a year and a half until a better opportunity came her way. A friend told her about a new voluntary association, and Iman sought a job there.

She began working in the association's nursery school and was responsible for feeding, changing, and looking after the children. Iman was a quick learner and, having missed her opportunity for a formal education, was eager to gain whatever knowledge was offered. She observed the teachers' work with the students, learned their techniques, and absorbed the content of the lessons. Whenever a teacher was absent, Iman volunteered to substitute.

Through another friend, Iman was introduced to the head of a family planning center. Although Iman knew little about family planning, her mother's continual pregnancies made her appreciate the value of contraception and smaller families. Iman began training for community work at the family planning center. She learned about contraceptive methods, reproductive health, child care and nutrition, information dissemination techniques, and health education methods. In a few months' time Iman became a *ra'ida* (community health care worker), with the responsibility of disseminating information about health and family planning to local women.

Initially, Iman invited neighborhood women to attend family planning information sessions at the clinic; she found that many declined, however, for lack of time or interest. To help persuade women that the sessions were important, Iman began visiting new mothers and other women at home. She also modified her teaching methods, focusing the informational sessions on concrete problems facing local women and working with them to find solutions. Gradually, Iman's talks began to attract an audience, and women began approaching her with questions outside of the sessions. Often she had to ask the doctors at the clinic for answers, thus increasing her own store of knowledge.

From the start, Iman wanted to help the women in her immediate family—her mother, aunts, and nieces. In fact, her mother became one of Iman's first "success stories" when she adopted family planning. With her mother, Iman actually was working on several fronts at once: informing her of the benefits of family planning, convincing her that girls were valuable so that she did not feel the need to keep trying to have sons, and teaching her how to read and write. Iman strongly supports education for women, in part because of her own experience. Her mother is one of eight women to whom she has taught reading and writing, using the materials and simple communication techniques she acquired at the nursery school. Iman also has pressed for the education of her siblings, working hard to convince her grandmother to allow them to stay in school.

From the start, Iman realized that it lay within her grandmother's power to put an end to her community work; she therefore sought to gain her grandmother's support for her activities. She has asked her grandmother for advice on matters relating to her work and has been careful to let her know whenever she was going out. Iman's efforts have been successful, and her grandmother has allowed her to continue her work.

Home visits to pregnant women are a regular part of Iman's job. She discusses child care and health, especially basic hygiene, nutrition, and immunization, drawing on the information she gained at the nursery school as well as her training as a *ra'ida*. She urges pregnant women to go to a medical facility instead of relying on the services of a traditional midwife, or *daya*. Iman considers rising clinic attendance for prenatal care and delivery to be one of her greatest accomplishments.

Since family planning is a responsibility shared by men, Iman has reached out to them as well as to women, beginning with her uncles and other male relatives. Men are willing to listen to her because she has a friendly, engaging personality, uses humor to convey her points, and can discuss a wide range of issues with confidence and ease. In one instance, she was able to convince an older man with an already sizeable family to adopt family planning by bringing the supportive arguments of a prominent *ulama* to his attention.

Iman also uses the information acquired through her training as a *ra'ida* to address such matters as the widespread preference for sons and the custom of early marriage, which have vital consequences for family size and women's reproductive well-being. She takes particular care to inform young girls and women of the health effects of early marriage and pregnancy, making use of drawings and stories to get her points across. And, although Iman is aware that some perceive her as being too persistent and candid in her discussions, she does not mind; she feels that addressing such issues is an essential part of her work as a health promoter and that there is no shame in discussing "scientific" matters.

Iman's position within both her family and the community has been strengthened by the fact that she has also offered help on the issue of infertility. For example, after many years of marriage, her uncle's wife remained childless and her uncle vowed to remarry. Iman intervened, taking her uncle's wife to see one of the doctors at the clinic; following treatment, the wife became pregnant. Iman's first aid and primary health care training has further enhanced her status in other ways, since she is able to give injections, clean wounds, and provide other simple medical services to community members.

The issue of female genital mutilation posed a stumbling block in Iman's work. Her first experience in this area occurred when she tried to persuade a cousin not to excise her daughter, citing the detrimental health consequences. Her cousin, angered by what she considered Iman's interference, told Iman's mother that she was challenging an age-old practice that preserved the good name and reputation of the family. Iman's mother told Iman to stop meddling and asserted that Iman would not prevent her younger sister from being excised. Recognizing the strength of this traditional practice, Iman moderated her approach and began encouraging women to have doctors perform the procedure, rather than the gypsy women they traditionally used. In this way, she hopes to reduce the incidence of infections, hemorrhages, and other physical problems associated with the practice.

Now 24 years of age, Iman recently married her cousin and is expecting their first child. Her grandmother had decided on this match when Iman was a child. No one within the family disputed the arrangement, for although Iman's community is no longer rural, rural traditions such as marrying within the family still persist. Iman enjoys a good relationship with her husband, who supports her activities within the community. Her husband has also agreed with Iman's wish to limit the size of their family. He shares her hopes of educating

their children so that they will have the best possible opportunities for a bright future.

Iman's commitment to social and economic development extends beyond her immediate family. Ultimately, she hopes to improve the lives of the women in her community. Experience has shown her that overcoming poverty is as important as addressing health and family planning issues. She has tried to make a difference in this area, too, by suggesting places where women can go for training in simple handicrafts and by devising ways for women to raise capital for small ventures, such as peddling. Iman has helped women launch a variety of income-generating activities, some of which have failed while others have benefitted the women involved. With her husband's support, Iman herself is planning to start a small shop where she can sell simple household items. Iman has already expanded her horizons and improved her status greatly, but she is eager to make further progress.

The Profiles

F ethia (T unisia)

Fethia comes from a small resort town in the suburbs of Tunis and attended school until twelfth grade. Her father was a teacher, and his dedication to his work made a deep impression on her.

From an early age, I lived in an educational environment and in schools. As a matter of fact, my father worked in schools located in working class neighborhoods. When I think of my father, I always have this image of someone providing help to those who deserved it, of someone involved in various social activities in order to improve the social situation of needy students from very poor backgrounds. His attitude impressed me very deeply and I could never forget it; that's why I always come to the assistance of whoever needs and asks for help.



When Fethia was 16, her parents arranged her marriage to a cousin who was 16 years her elder and also a teacher. Before she had children, Fethia worked in the schools, first as a lab assistant and then as a study monitor. Once she became a mother, she stayed home to look after her children. She remained a housewife for quite a long time because one of her three children suffers from developmental and learning disabilities. However, during that time, Fethia enrolled in a wide variety of classes, including sewing, typing, data processing, and accounting, in a deliberate effort to expand the range of her knowledge.

Fethia's life changed when her husband left the country to work in Mauritania for four years. During that time, she became responsible for managing the household finances. To supplement her husband's income, Fethia first sought training in dressmaking and started doing couture work at home, selling her goods through boutiques. Then she decided to purchase a small grocery store, which she operated for three years. She also offered customers at the store her services as a seamstress, sewing during the slow times when there were few people in the shop. The work was exhausting because she had to take care of everything herself, from buying supplies to working behind the counter.

It was then that Fethia had the idea to open her own vocational school. She had always been interested in teaching and felt there was a need for vocational training for the young people in her working class community outside Tunis, many of whom lacked the skills and education needed to get a job. She successfully applied for the necessary government permits and for a government-sponsored bank loan for small and medium businesses.

The vocational school got off to a rocky start. Its first location proved to be a poor choice, so Fethia moved the school to a site near the center of the community, not far from the market. Initially, there were too few students to cover the costs of operating the school. But, as Fethia describes,

...little by little, thank God, the number of students started to grow and I could pay the rent and the teachers. As for the profits I made, I used them to renew the equipment so as to keep and increase my clientele, and that is how my school came to finance itself.

About 150 students from nearby neighborhoods are currently enrolled in Fethia's school. The co-educational institution offers classes in dressmaking, hairstyling, typing, and computer science.

Fethia finds her work as the director of the school challenging but rewarding. There are many unemployed young people in the neighborhood who are on the verge of delinquency and drug use. She views her school as an important community resource for these young people, because it provides them with the credentials they need to get a job at one of the local industrial parks. Fethia strongly believes in the value of education and often recites the adage: "Generations are the reflection of the education that we give them." She herself would resume her studies if only she had the opportunity and the time. She wants her students to benefit as much as possible from education, even encouraging some to leave her vocational school and return to regular studies in a public school. Both young women and young men attend Fethia's school; increasingly, girls recognize that it is for them to gain practical skills that will enable them to earn a living.

Fethia's long-term plans for the school revolve around her children. She has worked hard to make the school profitable, in part because she knows that her handicapped daughter will never be able to provide for herself: "*Everything I undertake, I do it in order to leave her enough to live on so that she won't be dependent upon anybody.*" To ensure the school's future, Fethia is preparing her older son to eventually take over as director; for example, she is having him learn computer science and electronics.

It is not easy for Fethia to balance the demands of her job as director of the school with her household responsibilities, and, in the past, her active life occasionally triggered conflicts with her husband. These conflicts have been resolved for the most part, however; in fact, her husband's flexibility and willingness to share the housework help make her ten- to twelve-hour workdays possible. While Fethia supervises the children's studies, her husband helps out with everything else, as he describes:

Strictly speaking, we don't really have set roles; we kind of complement each other whenever the need arises. In fact, when it comes to housework, we share the same tasks to such an extent that my older children even ask me to cook for them.

Fethia's husband appreciates his wife's patience and stamina and describes himself as "the happiest husband on earth." Recognizing the difference in their ages, and concerned about providing for his family's future, he has registered the house in Fethia's name.

Fethia has several interests outside her work and her family. Because of her daughter's disabilities, for example, she takes a strong interest in the local institution for the mentally disabled. She arranges for her hairdressing students to cut and style the patients' hair, while the sewing students make curtains and sheets for the institution. Fethia also is active in the National Tunisian Women's Association and attends meetings of the Destourian Democratic Party. She tries to help needy families by putting them in touch with those in charge of local party units.

According to Fethia, it is essential that women, including homemakers, participate in politics. She herself is currently serving as president of the committee for young people and children in her municipality. In the course of this work, Fethia has faced criticism that her committee has not been sufficiently active and has accomplished little. She considers the criticism unfair and thinks that it is directed at her solely because she is a woman:

I feel that many of my colleagues have a difficult time accepting the fact that a woman can be the president of a committee and direct the discussions, handing the floor over to someone

and taking it back from somebody else.

Fethia, at the age of 43, continues her diverse activities, and has recently been able to realize her hopes of opening a second vocational training school.

A mina (Palestine)

Amina grew up in a small town near Nablus with her four younger brothers. Her mother is American, and the occupation prevented her Palestinian father from returning to the family home. The separation from her father and her own inability to speak Arabic made her early childhood very difficult.

Amina entered the village school but had to interrupt her studies for two years when the Israeli authorities barred her from the public schools because she did not have citizenship. Amina continued studying at home with the encouragement of her father, who followed his children's progress from afar and wanted them to maintain their educational standards so that they could eventually re-enter the school system. When Amina did go back to school, she passed successfully. Private schools were not an option, both because her parents were not aware of their existence and because they could not afford tuition for five children. Amina took on much of the responsibility for her younger brothers and was expected to help them with their studies.

After Amina completed her secondary education in 1983, she spent a semester at the Najah National University studying literature. Her education was interrupted once again when her father died and the family financial situation became critical. Amina did not accept this change in fortune passively. Instead, she tried to find ways to help her family and to give her brothers a chance to continue their education. She attended some training sessions and started sewing to earn money.

Sewing, however, did not cover all of the family's expenses and, in addition, it isolated Amina from the social, educational, and scientific developments in which she longed to take part. She decided to work as a nursery school teacher for the town's benevolent committee in the mornings and to do her sewing work afterwards, often continuing until late at night. As she developed a reputation for the accuracy of her work, more people came to her and her income increased. Eventually, she was able to buy her own machine to work on.

Amina felt that her work as a teacher was a substitute for the university education that she could not afford, especially because she attended training sessions as part of her job. She never felt inferior to her co-workers and remained convinced that one day she would be able to continue her education. During the training sessions, Amina became acquainted with different regions. In addition to religious and archaeological sites, she also visited kindergartens, especially those within the Israeli borders, so that she could learn new educational techniques. She successfully emulated the techniques that were suitable to the habits and traditions of the village and introduced them to the nursery.

During the eight years that Amina worked as a teacher for the benevolent committee, she attended approximately 25 training sessions on kindergartens through UNICEF and the Childhood Center in Jerusalem. She also attended some computer courses, including programming, in order to introduce the children to the world of computers. Continuing her education in this way made a great impact on Amina's life. Her self-confidence grew, and she gained the respect of the people around her, setting an example for other women to follow. In fact, Amina herself encouraged many of her women friends to leave the house and seek an education in order to be able to become financially and socially independent.

Amina also served as the anchor for her family. In addition to the income she provided, Amina assumed many responsibilities beyond the usual duties of a sister and daughter. Her mother was not able to speak Arabic easily, so Amina was expected to obtain whatever was needed for the house and to help address the needs of her brothers. She paid for their education, and regularly advised them. She also arranged to have the house renovated, and the furniture restored. Even after she married, her family continued to seek her advice and consult her before making any decisions.

During the Intifada, Amina took on new roles. She worked with a women's committee to develop a national and social awareness that did not yet exist in her village. She acted as a translator for groups of foreigners who came to evaluate the situation and visit the wounded. She would accompany the visitors to different regions and sometimes offer them the hospitality of her own home because of the lack of hotels in Nablus. She also was responsible for bringing medical teams to visit the school.

Amina's many responsibilities increased her self-confidence and put her in contact with a variety of individuals and groups from different backgrounds. She was careful, however, never to defy traditions, lest she become the victim of rumors and lose her credibility among the people. For example, Amina was always concerned about not staying out too late at night.

Eventually, Amina realized her dream of continuing her education and enrolled at the University of Jerusalem. There she had the opportunity to gain better acquaintance with the man who would become her husband, whom she had already met through her voluntary work. Her husband is extremely proud of her and of all her activities. The couple have a happy marriage and an egalitarian relationship. Now 30 years old, Amina has stopped teaching, although she continues to sew, and she is planning to open a workshop with her husband. They have one small child and have agreed not to have more than two children.

Karima (Yemen)

My mother raised us alone under very hard circumstances. We had neither relatives nor friends in Aden but she wanted us to be educated. She was convinced that had she been educated, she would not have suffered as much. She always wanted me to be someone important in life. I was the first one in the family who entered the university.

Karima was born to a family of farmers in rural Yemen, but her family moved to Aden when she was young. At the age of seven, her life changed dramatically when her father died suddenly. Her mother was left in poverty with six children to raise. Despite the hardship, Karima's mother, who had never had the opportunity to go to school herself, encouraged Karima to get an education. In school, Karima always excelled, and her siblings—especially her elder brother who later became a captain in the army—were very proud of her and encouraged her to continue her studies.

When she was fifteen, Karima met her future husband, a soldier who was attending the military school. When he proposed marriage, Karima and her mother agreed with one major condition: that Karima should continue her education. He agreed, and they married. Since their marriage, Karima and her husband have lived with her mother:

My mother helped us a lot. She raised our first two children. I had my first baby when I was sixteen years old. She was a great mother to all of us. My children adore her. I don't remember one day she ever complained. Every day we come home from our schools, both my husband and myself, we found everything running smoothly with the children and the house, we had all the time to study. Thanks to my mother and my husband, I was able to graduate from law school and get a degree in psychology.

Karima's in-laws, as well, have been supportive of her determination to continue her education, and take pride in her achievements.

Karima had her fourth child when she was 24 years old and was studying law at the university. Throughout her four pregnancies, Karima never interrupted her education. Returning to school ten days after delivery, she was the talk of the town. Once she had to take important examinations just three days after giving birth.

After their second child, Karima and her husband began using contraceptives to plan their family. Her husband took good care of his family's health, keeping track of Karima's appointments for prenatal care during her pregnancies and of the children's vaccination schedules. When they moved to a home of their own, her husband shared the household responsibilities.

My husband is very genuine and supportive; we have a trusting relationship. After my mother, my husband is my model in life. He did everything he could to help me continue my education without letting me feel guilty. He helped me in my studies whenever he could. Once I received a scholarship to continue my education in Bulgaria, [and] he encouraged me to take it. It was unusual, and I felt it was too big of a sacrifice for him. I decided to stay near my family. I am so lucky to have him as a husband and father of my children.

In 1990, Karima graduated from the university after being elected by the students and teachers as the "ideal student." Soon afterwards, she began work as a high school teacher, thus fulfilling her legal commitment as a university graduate to teach for two years. Karima was interested in many different fields, including

philosophy, psychology, and civics, and teaching gave her a new outlet as an educator and counselor. From her first years as a teacher, Karima became deeply involved with her students. She listens carefully to their needs, discusses issues openly, always treats them with respect, and stands by them when they face problems. Her students at the girls' high school where she teaches see her as a role model.

Karima has played a significant role in the community as an advocate of girls' education. She organized monthly meetings for parents in order to raise their awareness of their children's development and to convince them of the importance of continuing their daughters' education. She visited parents in their homes and received them in hers. She has an assertive but kind personality that encourages parents to trust in her and listen to her advice. Karima remembers:

Once, a girl in the sixth grade wanted to drop out because of her father's strictness. I paid him a visit, and after much effort I was able to convince him to keep her in school. Now she is continuing her education. This is an issue I face often.

The civil war and political turbulence of 1994 marked a turning point in Karima's life. "Our house was taken, [as were] our furniture and other personal belongings. We have had to start from zero. But we are still lucky compared to others who lost much more." Karima's husband is unemployed, and she now supports the whole family.

An ambitious and determined woman, Karima continues her struggle to promote education for women. Recent political events have made her frustrated and angry, because many rights that women had acquired have been lost. Karima sighs when remembering the times before the civil war:

Girls were enrolled in many activities. We sat in classes next to the boys. Girls were given the same chances and opportunities as boys at all levels. The atmosphere was very healthy, there were hardly any problems and no shameful stories. Now, there are no more mixed schools and it is very difficult to walk in the street without a veil to cover my hair. But there is no way that I will cover my face.

It is a constant fight for Karima to keep her daughters from being veiled. At times they have come home from school in tears, pleading: "Mom, we should put on the veil. No one but us remains unveiled and nobody talks to us anymore, we are losing our friends. Even our teacher is asking us about it." In response, Karima went to the teacher and advocated for her daughters' right not to wear the veil.

Karima and her husband openly discuss with their children the changes and pressures that they face, and they resolutely treat their son and daughters equally. Karima says: "I always fight with my in-laws about not treating my son any differently from his sisters. It is difficult in this society. We keep struggling with these issues. I help my daughters to be strong." It is largely because of her children that Karima, now 32, remains committed to her work:

I cannot imagine that I would ever give up studying and working; I am determined to continue the struggle for a better world for my children.

Salma (Yemen)

Salma comes from a middle class family in Aden; her father was a policeman, and her mother a housewife. She has four brothers and one sister. Although her father did not believe in educating girls, Salma was

determined to go to school.

For many months, I used to go to school without the knowledge of my father. I used to sneak out of the window in the morning while he was having breakfast and come back home before he comes back for lunch. Eventually he discovered the truth. My brothers strongly supported me and after much discussion, they managed to convince him.

Salma eventually completed her primary and secondary education and then entered the teachers training school. In addition to receiving a diploma in educational studies, Salma was also accepted at the university where she obtained a degree in fine arts. After graduation, she was assigned as to work as a teacher. Her talent for teaching and her creative ideas helped her students to distinguish themselves.

Before the unification of Yemen in 1989 and the civil war of 1994, schools in Aden were mixed and both boys and girls participated in the various youth activities. Salma was an active volunteer in the youth political movement, and in 1982 the government sent her to Cuba for a year to gain experience in community work.

My father objected to my traveling, but again my brothers supported my decision and convinced him to give me the chance to pursue my career. My father loved me deeply but was always torn between the struggle for my rights and our traditional beliefs. On the other hand, the political system was encouraging women to participate in the development of the country. He was scared and worried that I would lose my reputation and would suffer afterwards. My brothers who were supportive of the Party in general and of women's rights in particular helped in minimizing my father's fear.

Salma's trip to Cuba was rich and productive: "I learned a lot from the courses and the people I worked with, about the way of life, the traditions, the language. It was a great experience." When she returned, she was interested in exploring other opportunities in addition to teaching, and found a job at the Information Department in the Ministry of Education. She became a television programmer for children in schools; this position involved both broadcasting and conducting research. Salma traveled to a different region of the country each week with a television crew; they visited schools and taped interviews with students about their problems, their dreams for the future, their family relationships, and other topics. These interviews were broadcast throughout Yemen on a popular television program and also published in an educational magazine. Salma became well-known because of her work on this show and was promoted to direct another television program on education. Salma has always loved television work:

Standing in front of a camera is something you are born with. During my first interaction with the camera, nobody believed that it was the first time in my life. I enjoy my work tremendously, that is why I am successful.

Salma has an excellent relationship with her brothers, who have supported her efforts to pursue a career since she was a child. She views her oldest brother, a political party administrator who has been especially helpful, as a role model. Salma also finds support for her activities from her mother, and from her older sister. This sister, who was married at age 13 and is now raising 14 children, admires Salma's professional and educational achievements, and considers them as a sort of "compensation" for her own lack of schooling. Salma, for her part, recognizes that her own life would have been very different had she, like her sister, married early and not pursued her education.

On teachers' day in 1986, Salma met the "man of her life," as she calls her husband; they were married that

same year:

It was my choice to get married. My husband is tender and loving. He trusts me and encourages me to continue with my career. At the beginning, both our families objected to our marriage, but after some struggle they finally agreed. When you want to marry someone from outside the family, you find rejection right away. My husband's family was a bit scared of my career; my husband stood up for me. Now, we support both of our families financially, and have a good relationship.

Since her marriage, Salma has had four children: three boys and one girl. Her husband, who works as a doctors' assistant at a United Nations health clinic, has been very supportive: "During my pregnancies he always accompanied me to the prenatal check-ups; he insisted I give birth in the hospital." Salma and her husband are satisfied with the number of children they have and are now practicing family planning.

An energetic and motivated woman, Salma continued to work extremely hard after she had her children and tended to neglect her health. In addition to looking after her family, she held multiple jobs in the ministry, on television, and in the party's socio-political committees. "When I am not working," she explains, "I feel like I'm nothing. I am a person full of curiosity. I love to work and don't like to be stagnant and remain at a standstill." However, while pursuing an around-the-clock schedule, she fell sick and was hospitalized for overwork. Her husband was very concerned, and Salma reduced her work outside the home to eight hours per day:

Now my schedule has changed, and I do only half of what I used to do. I prepare my family's breakfast, each one of my children takes along his sandwiches to school, and I go to my work. I stay at work until 2 PM and that's when I return to clean the house and cook. Then I work another two hours in the afternoons. My husband...takes care of the children when I am busy.

Salma, 32, and her husband are in agreement on how to raise their children. They feel that it is essential to treat their sons and their daughter in an egalitarian way. They both struggle to keep their little girl from being veiled, and they allow her to play with boys of her age. Salma feels strongly that her daughter should have the opportunity to pursue her dreams for the future:

I would like to see her work according to her own inclination...She can be a doctor, or anything she wants. If, for example, she says, "I plan to apply to this or that faculty," I'd say to her, "That is possible." It would be according to her own wishes.



The Profiles

Jacqueline (Lebanon)

The truth is that I have encouraged myself. I had everybody against me. They asked me, "Why do you want to work? Your health and your eyesight will be affected." I am happy to be doing something new.

Jacqueline was born and raised in a resort village of Mount Lebanon. She comes from a relatively well-to-do family of shop owners and completed 10 years of education. When she was 18 years old, she fell in love with a distant relative who was twice her age. Her parents would not consent to their marriage because of the disparity in their ages, so they eloped. Afterwards, her parents accepted her husband and Jacqueline went to live with her in-laws in a poor suburb northeast of Beirut. Her in-laws relied on her husband, who was the youngest son, to take care of them; in return, they registered their house in his name.

When Jacqueline first married, her husband made a good salary working at a car company in West Beirut and life was not difficult. Jacqueline soon delivered their first child, a daughter. By the end of 1979, however, when their daughter was still a baby, her husband had to leave his job because it had become too dangerous to cross the demarcation line. For a while they lived on his work indemnities, and together they decided to postpone a second pregnancy for a few years.

Jacqueline gave birth to their second child, another daughter, after her husband had found a job as a driver for the Social Development Center close to their home. Soon afterwards, she became convinced that she, too, needed to work.

Until the birth of my second daughter, I was contented with my lot. My husband was working and we could manage to survive. But I always felt deep inside me that I had to do something.... There were difficult times, we had to run away twice from our home in search of security.... As long as my daughters were still at home, there was no pressing need for more income. It was when they went to school and my husband's income was not sufficient to cover their school fees and other expenses that I decided to work. But this was not easy. My husband being older than me, he had a very traditional attitude toward women's roles. He considered that their place was at home and that it was his duty to provide for the household.

Jacqueline's opportunity came through the center where her husband worked. At holidays, the social workers invited him to bring his wife and children to the center and there Jacqueline learned that they offered sewing courses. Her husband agreed to let her attend because he had grown to trust the director and the social workers at the center. However, once Jacqueline had finished her training and proposed working at home as a dressmaker, her husband and his parents objected. Although Jacqueline abided by their decision, she decided to learn a new craft at the center, pearl embroidery. This time, when her in-laws and her husband opposed her efforts to her earn money from her talents, she persisted.

Life was becoming more and more difficult, so I decided I was going to start producing



children's toys, lined baskets, and pearl ornaments for brides at home. My in-laws and my husband objected. They made life difficult for me. I was forced to lock myself in my room and work on the bed. I used to work hard to make sure everything was cleaned before my husband came back from work. I was always worried he would find a pin or a needle in the bed. Slowly people came to know my work... My husband's objections became less vehement. I started making money!

At first, Jacqueline found encouragement in her neighbors: each one asked her to embroider a dress, a collar, or a lining. Inspired by what she saw in magazines, she searched for someone who would be willing to teach her how to make pearl flowers. She learned with the help and encouragement of a neighbor and an Armenian merchant.

Jacqueline soon discovered that selling her products from home was not very lucrative, and she decided to market her products herself. Since she specialized in head ornaments, this decision meant traveling to hairdressers in different neighborhoods of the city and in the suburbs, but her husband refused to give her money for transportation. Jacqueline had to save part of the family's food money to pay for bus fares. To reach more distant locations, she depended on her brothers and neighbors.

Gradually, Jacqueline's husband became more supportive of her efforts:

Now he even gives me advance money to buy raw material for my work. When I sell the goods, I give him back the money. However, he will never accompany me during my marketing tours; he does not want people to say he is exploiting his wife.

When her in-laws died, Jacqueline felt more free to make her own decisions. Her business grew, and she had many orders. However, she always took care to attend to her domestic duties so as not to anger her husband. "Sometimes, I had to cook at 1:00 at night. I did not complain; this was the price to pay for my self-fulfillment!"

Jacqueline's own parents did not object to her work:

They were pleased by the fact that I was working on my own, from my house, and that I was creative. They would have objected if I had to work as a maid or a nursing aid. They consider my job quite respectable.

Jacqueline's career moved to a new level when the director of the Social Development Center convinced Jacqueline's husband to let her work in a West Beirut factory. There she joined a training program that enabled craftswomen to gain industrial experience in their field. The condition set by Jacqueline's husband was that she be back home every day before 2 p.m. Working at the factory changed Jacqueline's attitude towards her craft because she discovered the old adage that "time is money." Before then, she had priced her goods without considering the length of time that she had spent making them.

As Jacqueline's success grew, her husband's attitude toward her work continued to improve. He now recognizes that, given the current circumstances in Lebanon, it is impossible for one person to adequately support a family, and he is proud of his wife's accomplishments. Jacqueline says:

Now I feel I exist, and my husband trusts me and is convinced of my capabilities. He now knows that there is no shame in having a working wife. His work at the center has positively affected his perception of working women. Our relations have become more egalitarian and we make our decisions together. He is no longer jealous of me, and I always make sure to

show him respect whether at home or outside.

Jacqueline's husband also points out that, since his wife continues to take care of the house and all the domestic tasks, the family does not suffer from her working. Jacqueline agrees that her duties as a mother and wife are equal in importance to her work. But she also strongly believes in the importance of working outside the home for women. Women, she declares, "*must be productive and make it on their own. Their role should not be restricted only to the kitchen, the house, the children and the husband. They must get organized and fill their lives.*"

In addition to creating and marketing her goods, Jacqueline has undertaken the role of instructor at various social service centers in Beirut, where she teaches pearl embroidery and silk flower-making. She derives great personal satisfaction from this added role: "*Imagine ... young girls and women call me 'the teacher' and show me respect. I feel I am giving something of value to them. I feel proud of myself!*" When asked how she learned to teach, Jacqueline replies, "*... I don't know; God helped me to make my way in it. I like to teach what I know, so I teach with all my heart.*"

Another source of pride for Jacqueline is her position as an advisor to a factory that imports embroidery samples and reproduces them. During her periodic visits, the manager shows her the latest samples, asks for her advice, and sometimes commissions her work. Initially, she found this role difficult, as did the men at the factory:

At first, men find it hard to share a conversation with a woman on an equal basis and do not accept any remark or advice from her. This depends on the approach of the woman. She must be able to convince him with facts without imposing her opinion.... At the beginning I was a little bit shy, but now things have changed. I go in and feel as if it is a man to man meeting.

During the last two years, the demand for Jacqueline's goods has somewhat decreased because of imports from China. Now 36, Jacqueline continues to work, however, and teaches her craft at three development centers around Beirut. "Work," she says, "*has given me satisfaction, self-esteem, and freedom.*" Jacqueline's sisters-in-law, who are housewives, admire her ability to be a fine craftswoman and teacher as well as a good wife and mother. As for her two daughters, when they were young they became upset when Jacqueline left the house to go to work, but later grew accustomed to the idea. Now they are older and help with the work of pearl embroidering. Jacqueline and her husband have agreed not to have any more children, and are glad to be able to afford their daughters a good education.

Tagia (Yemen)

Tagia was born into a conservative family in Sanaa. She and her older brother are the only survivors of 13 children. After her father, a soldier, died when she was two years old, her maternal uncle took responsibility for her and became her *mahram*, or principal male guardian.-Tagia's mother is a housewife. As a girl, Tagia only attended only Qur'anic classes because her family did not believe that girls should attend school after the age of 6. They felt that her proper place was at home, helping her mother and waiting to marry.

From an early age, Tagia was attracted to music. In the period of the Imamate prior to the 1962 revolution, however, music was not encouraged, and when young Tagia overheard a neighbor singing, she would listen furtively. Sometimes she would go for a ride with this neighbor, who worked as a truck driver, and he would sing. He encouraged her love of music:

Once, I couldn't help it, I sang one of his songs, and he told me you have a beautiful voice and a good ear, but I told him: "I can't sing, my family would kill me." He used to encourage me and taught me some tunes. What a joy I felt!

Her career was launched at the age of eight when she assisted a professional female singer in a wedding ceremony. She was paid for her work and gave the money to her mother. A few days later, the singer asked Tagia to accompany her to other women's gatherings. Her mother and maternal uncle agreed that she could work with the singer regularly, and her mother used to accompany her to the gatherings. Tagia's singing began to support the family financially. After eight years, she was recognized as a professional and many local families requested her to sing in their houses.

I used to memorize the songs and listen to traditional music the whole night. It became my world; I felt I was an artist and no one could stand in my way. They told me no one would marry me, but I did not care.

While her mother and maternal uncle encouraged her singing career, Tagia faced resistance both from her brother and from the larger society. Her brother did not approve of her profession because he believed it was forbidden by religion, and he threatened to kill her several times. For many years he forbade his wife even to speak to Tagia. During the early years of her career, Tagia also faced general disapproval:

In the neighborhood, people used to avoid looking at me. Sometimes, in the street, kids would follow me with sticks and cans, and try to imitate my music, just to mock me. I used to shout at them, but it took a while and a lot of hurt until I gained respect. Now the children greet me and their mothers visit me regularly. We discuss many things; they share their problems with me as they know I will always do my best to help them.

With time, people came to recognize that Tagia was a serious performer. Her role model was a famous old Yemeni musician who accompanied her on the flute; the fine quality of their traditional songs brought them great success. Tagia became the first woman in Yemen to broadcast her songs on radio programs, although at first she did not record alone but performed together with famous male singers. Later, Tagia was invited by government officials to perform patriotic songs at national events. She became famous throughout the country.

Not only did Tagia succeed in singing in a society where women are forbidden to do so, she made her profession respectable and gained acceptance in Yemeni society. She herself always shows respect for

established traditions as much as possible. For her first appearance on stage, she had to take off the veil which usually covers her face:

I had to do it if I wanted to sing in front of the public. It was one of the hardest moments in my life. But after a few minutes I was able to control my feelings and things went beautifully. After I left the stage, I put my veil on again. That is how it goes usually; I only take it off on the stage.

Finally, even her brother accepted her profession. Tagia admits, “*It is not easy for him to be the brother of a singer in my society. He must have suffered a lot, but I couldn’t stop.*” When her brother had a serious heart attack, Tagia sold all her gold and jewelry and took him to Cairo for treatment. It was the first time in many years that he had seen his sister, and he was touched by her concern and by his wife’s revelation that Tagia had been helping to support his family even before his illness. In Cairo, he also saw how people from Yemen and other Arab countries treated Tagia with respect and appreciation, and realized that she always behaved in accordance with traditions. Since that time, they have become friends once more.

Each of the three times that Tagia married, she told her prospective husband that she intended to continue singing. Her first marriage, at the age of 16, was to a man twice her age whom she thought would protect her. They did not get along, and after one year she was able to get a divorce. She waited until she was 24 to marry a second time, this time to her driver’s brother. “*I felt I should accept marrying him since he let me sing. I was not thinking much about marriage; I was so preoccupied with my professional life.*” After several miscarriages and infertility treatments, Tagia had two children but only her son survived. When Tagia found out that her husband had been married secretly to another woman, she asked for and obtained a divorce.

The third time Tagia married, it was for love. Her husband was a younger man who was studying law at the university. Tagia remembers him fondly:

He was independent and decent. He never wanted to use my money, he used to appreciate art and to encourage my singing. He was the real love of my life.

Unfortunately, Tagia’s husband was murdered only seven months after they were married. In the wake of the crime, Tagia used her savings to hire lawyers to investigate the case. Ultimately, Tagia did obtain justice, and her husband’s family both appreciated and admired her persistence.

Now that her career is established, Tagia continues to sing both in Yemen and abroad. She has her own band, which consists of two other women, and employs two business managers. As her fame has spread, she has begun representing Yemen at festivals in other Arab countries, in Europe, and in the United States.

In each country I visit to perform festivals, the Yemeni ambassador honors me. In Paris, the ambassador brought me flowers personally on the stage in front of thousands of people. I am so happy to be my country’s messenger to the world.

At home, Tagia is an established businesswoman who supports a large family, including her mother, her son, her brother’s family, her brother-in law’s family, two helpers, and, on occasion, distant relatives. She is encouraging her sixteen-year-old son, who is enrolled in the language center, to continue his education at the university. With her earnings, Tagia has built two large houses and divided them into several apartments. She supervises the rentals, and her ex-husband’s brother takes care of the maintenance. She has a clear business mind and always keeps track of her property and assets. “*In between my trips and singing programs, I always*

manage to spare time to maintain my wealth, which I struggled and worked very hard to earn.” Tagia also was among the first veiled women in Yemen to learn how to drive.

Tagia has worked hard and long to achieve her present status. Now 42 years old, she is a leading figure in her community and a role model for many girls. At least six of the young women she has taught are now professional singers. Her determination has paved the way for other women and encouraged them to challenge restrictive practices. People also seek Tagia’s advice on family, medical, and property problems because of her fame and her connections with people in influential positions. A strong and self-confident woman, Tagia is optimistic about her future.

The Profiles

Nazha (Lebanon)

Nazha was born and raised in a farming village in the fertile Bega'a Valley. She attended school until the age of nine and learned to read, write, and count. Because her father did not own any land, Nazha and her brothers and sisters had to begin helping the family from an early age. Nazha started working as a paid laborer as soon as she left school, and continued until she married. Her parents married her to a landless peasant from the village when she was 18.

Nazha had her first child one year after she married and continued to have a child almost every year thereafter. After having six daughters in a row, she finally bore two sons. Then Nazha and her husband decided they did not want any more children, and she began using contraceptives. Despite her many pregnancies and her demanding work in the fields, Nazha has never experienced any health problems. However, she does not encourage her daughters to have as large a family as she did:

Times have changed. Now it is costly and difficult to raise many children. They need proper medical care and proper education. I would advise them to have two or a maximum of three children.

During the first 14 years of her marriage, Nazha lived in a gloomy one-room house with no kitchen or toilet facilities. She had to build a shack in the courtyard for purposes of cooking and washing. Her husband earned little, and life was difficult. Nazha herself stopped working for ten years because of her multiple pregnancies. To earn a little money, she would bake *Markouk* bread at home and sell it:

Imagine that during the war in 1978 or 1980 there was no ready made bread in the village. In one day I baked 30 kilograms of flour and made 30 Lebanese Pounds. Quite a sum considering the wages paid to agricultural laborers!

Nazha was not satisfied with her earnings, however, so when her eldest daughter was 10 years old, she decided to go back to work in the fields. She prepared the food and left her daughter in charge of the younger children while she worked in the fields from 5 a.m. until 4 p.m. When she came home, she would resume her household chores with the help of her daughters. By that time, Nazha and her husband had inherited a small piece of land suitable for building a house and planting a small vegetable garden. Her dream was to have a two-room house with a kitchen and toilet. She says, "I knew I had to work hard and take risks because my husband was and is still content to be a simple laborer."

After a few years, Nazha had saved enough money to rent a piece of farmland. She took the initiative in locating the land and fixing the price. Once she had negotiated a good price, she told her husband about the deal and convinced him to co-sign the papers. Her strategy was to rent land that she would be able to work herself with the help of her young children, so that she would need to hire as little manpower as possible. Every year since then, Nazha has rented more land to cultivate. She always chooses the land herself and decides on the crops. So far her plans have succeeded, and her husband has begun to help with tasks that



require heavy labor.

As Nazha describes, the work was hard but ultimately rewarding:

I used to leave the house at one in the morning, accompanied by my three young daughters aged 10, 8, and 7. My oldest daughter would stay at home and take care of the house. During the high season, work was very hard, but it was profitable... Now look! I have a four-room house and beautiful kitchen and all facilities. God has been good to us!

Nazha makes most of the decisions at home. She is responsible for managing the household expenses and the rented agricultural land, as well as for the upbringing of her nine children. She has used her earnings to build and furnish a large house for her family, and to ensure that all of her children achieved a basic level of education. Her oldest daughter has married, and four other children now hold jobs, variously, at a local cooperative, in the post office, as a hairdresser, and as a paid apprentice at a garage.

According to Nazha, her most important achievement has been to earn respect and recognition in the community. She reports that, "It was a long hard battle to win. I could do it thanks to my early training as an agricultural worker, my husband's good nature, and my love for the land." Her 20-year-old daughter reports that "everybody in the village thinks very highly of my mother. She is considered as an ideal woman." Her parents and her in-laws are also proud of her accomplishments. Now that Nazha has achieved such high status in the community, she no longer has any problems negotiating with landowners for the rent of their fields.

Nazha, who is now 44 years old, is ambitious and her plans continue to expand. This year she has rented a very large piece of land and, for the first time, intends to grow sugar beets, a crop that requires mechanized labor. She knows the sugar refinery will buy all the beets she can grow, while increasing competition has made selling other crops a risky proposition. She has persuaded her husband and brother, both of whom trust her managerial skills, to invest in the venture and help her tend the crops. Nazha loves the land and looks forward to farming for many years to come, secure in the knowledge that "hard work always pays back."

Zohra (Tunisia)

I don't pay attention to what people say. I have confidence in myself since I know that I'm working to guarantee my children's future. And finally, even those who disapproved of what I'm doing end up admiring me. They realize they were wrong about me, and they acknowledge the fact that I have succeeded.

Zohra comes from a farming family that has lived in the Zaghouan region for two or three generations. As a girl, she helped her father on the farm and learned about beekeeping, cultivating crops, and other farm work. From her mother, she learned about cooking, housework, and working with wool. Her only formal education consisted of Qur'anic classes.

When she was 17, Zohra married the man of her choice, a cousin who lived nearby and worked in construction. Because her husband was poor and did not own land, they lived with her in-laws. One year after she married, Zohra gave birth to a son; she and her husband then practiced family planning for five years before having their next child, a daughter.

As their family started growing, Zohra and her husband thought about purchasing a plot of land, but the couple could not afford it. To accumulate the money they needed, her husband went to work in Libya for seven months while Zohra sold her gold jewelry. This gave them enough money to buy three hectares of land. As soon as they acquired the land, they began to develop it.

All by ourselves, we built a house with five rooms and a veranda. We did not have the help of any construction worker. We started working on our house every afternoon and continued until 9 or 10 p.m. every night. I had organized my time in such a way that I could prepare lunch and dinner in the morning and be free in the afternoon.

When we came home at night for dinner after working on our house, my hands were so sore from the work I did with my husband—I gave him the cement bricks—that I couldn't even use them to cut a piece of bread or dip it in sauce. I had to wrap my hands in a dish-towel to eat.

As soon as we settled into the house that we had built, I started growing vegetables—peas, fava beans, and other things. I would draw water from the well with a pail and I would fill up 12 barrels to use for watering my vegetable field and my trees. We didn't have a pump.

To get the most out of her land, Zohra quickly began to diversify. Inspired by her neighbors' example, she decided to raise chickens. With assistance from the Program for Integrated Rural Development, she erected a building that contained 2000 chickens and then proceeded to learn how to raise poultry.

In order to succeed in my undertaking, I took advantage of the advice that those who bred and sold chickens gave me when I visited them. I would ask them all sorts of questions and they would advise me as to the best way of running a semi-industrial poultry farm, how to protect the chickens against diseases, when was the best time to sell them, and that's how gradually I learned everything about that field.

Her next venture was beekeeping, which she had learned from her father when she was still a girl.

Beekeeping is the most profitable activity. You really have to work hard at it, but it requires practically no expense...beekeeping is a blessing ("baraka") because of the abundant yield and substantial profits that it brings.

Thanks to our beekeeping, we meet our material needs better and we have become known internationally. We receive orders from abroad, from countries such as Belgium and Saudi Arabia. My honey has even been exported to the United States of America by Hawari who works at the farm cooperative. I sold large quantities of honey abroad and beekeeping enabled me to earn a considerable amount of money.

However, Zohra's thriving beekeeping enterprise was nearly destroyed when local authorities decided to spray pesticides throughout the region to end an invasion of locusts. Since the authorities did not forewarn farmers about the aerial spraying, Zohra was not able to protect her bees from the pesticide. Despite this devastating setback, Zohra persisted:

... I lost all my bees since I didn't have the time to take the necessary precautions and put them in their hives, which would have spared me considerable losses. Confronted by that situation, I filed a claim with the local authorities and asked for compensation but I received no financial help. All my efforts were in vain. I did not give up though and I started again from scratch; gradually, I managed to resume my beekeeping activities.

Another one of Zohra's ventures, raising dairy cows, has also encountered problems. When Zohra discovered that small farmers were eligible for loans to build cow sheds, she applied. Once the stable was built and inspected, however, Zohra waited in vain for the five cows she had been promised. In the meantime, she had to keep renewing her loan. Zohra is still waiting for her cows, although she has pursued the matter with the appropriate officials.

I went as far as to meet the governor to explain that I was unable to pay back the loan, that the bank had granted me a loan that only enabled me to build walls. "How can you make money with walls? You can come and take them if you want to! The walls I built with your money are here."

Zohra has had more success with her most recent project, an orchard of almond trees. She planted the orchard three years ago with the help of the Project for Fruit Orchards. The trees are already providing food for her family, and Zohra hopes to market the nuts in coming years as the harvest grows.

Zohra's work is not limited to farming; she also must market her products. She goes to the market at Zaghuan herself to sell her vegetables and chickens, which is not a common practice for women. She has developed a regular clientele at the market who always buy from her. Selling the honey is less difficult; since Zohra has developed a reputation for her honey, buyers come directly to her.

All of this work Zohra has done alone. Her husband has never been able to help her with the farming because his construction work brings home the money that covers the family's everyday expenses. She has taught farm work to her two sons, however, and her eldest son, Nabil, is becoming increasingly involved

in the farm. (Her younger son is studying hairdressing.) After Nabil completed his military service, Zohra encouraged him to get his driver's license:

...I bought him a truck and with it, he helps me carry the beehives, the chicken feed and the sawdust. Thanks to his help, I am not as tired as I used to be, since I used to do that work when my children were still little and went to school.

In order to succeed as a farmer, Zohra has networked with other farmers and taken advantage of special opportunities offered by the government. At first, she attended meetings of the Tunisian Women's Association; then she joined the coordinating committee of the Destourian Democratic Party (RCD) and the Farmers' Association. She uses these meetings to keep herself informed and to exchange ideas with other farmers. Zohra is never afraid to follow up an idea, even if it means dealing with high-level government officials. Always assertive, Zohra describes how she went about getting electricity for her farm:

Nobody is encouraged to buy a water pump or to install electricity. It so happens that I have a power line right in front of my house but I wasn't benefiting from it, so I went to the Ministry of Agriculture and demanded to be connected. I was seen by the minister and he listened to me. I presented my problem to him; he agreed with me and said: "You have the right to have electricity." Then, he gave his instructions to the governor and the delegate of Zaghuan who, consequently, summoned me. I went to see them. They asked me to apply in writing for electricity. I applied, I was asked to pay a fee of 2500 dinars for the connection, and after I paid, I had the electricity.

To supplement her income, Zohra engages in other activities in her free time. She sometimes bakes and sells bread by the roadside. She also learned how to weave kilim rugs at the Women's Association. This type of weaving is new to the region where previously only wool rugs were made, and Zohra now teaches local women how to make the *kilim bel Ouarda*. After Zohra taught her daughter Sonia to sew, Sonia went on to study sewing in a school so that she would be able to work in a factory.

Zohra has been fortunate that her husband and her parents have always supported her efforts. "She inherited her strength of character from me," her father comments. "I encouraged her by granting her absolute freedom when she was yet a child because I am aware of my daughter's worth." Zohra's husband expresses deep trust and reliance in her, and the couple agree on all important matters, such as work and how to raise their children. For her part, Zohra always consults with her husband before making a decision, and recognizes the vital role that his support has played in her achievements:

When a woman finds support and encouragement from her own husband, she is able to assert herself.

Jamila (Tunisia)

Jamila was born into a farming family in the governorate of Zaghouan. The eldest of seven children (six girls and one boy), Jamila and the other girls in the village did not attend school. The nearest school was more than one hour's walk away, and parents feared for their daughters' well-being, especially since both boys and girls attended the school. When she was in her early twenties, however, a radio program inspired Jamila to learn how to read and write; she was especially moved by the opening words of the broadcast, from the Qur'an: "Read in the name of Allah." She sent away for books, listened to the literacy lessons broadcast on the radio, studied at home with the help of her sister, and took a series of exams at home. Ultimately, she completed all three years of the literacy program. Since then, she has become an avid reader and now even writes some poetry in the Tunisian dialect.

While Jamila herself was not able to attend school, she was determined that her younger sisters receive an education.

I tried very hard to convince my father not to deprive my sisters of the light of knowledge, but he, may God have mercy on him, was obstinate, and my mother was helpless. So I took it upon myself to continue my efforts and Allah helped me. When I sent my three sisters' documents to get them enrolled at school, the principal accepted two, but rejected the third because she was beyond the legal age for attending school. All went well with my three younger sisters. One of them is now a schoolteacher, the second is a kindergarten attendant, and the third, who has a dressmaker's diploma, works at home.

She was less successful with her brother. After he was dismissed from school, she went to great effort to re-enroll him. He did not like attending school, however, and refused to attend classes.

Since her twenties, Jamila has been interested in regional politics and social issues. She helped establish a local unit of the Amaim Party and became its leader, despite the opposition of some other members. When she learned of intentions to hinder her candidacy by not informing her of the deadline for nominations, Jamila went directly to the party official in Zaghouan to offer her name as a candidate—without letting her father know of her plans.

He did not know I had presented myself as a candidate until my name appeared on the list, so it was too late for him to try to prevent me from participating in the party convention. And gradually he realized that I was doing something noble, that was of benefit to everybody. Seeing that my conduct was good, and that I was sincere in my objectives, he gave me the freedom to work on condition that I never spend the night outside my home, which I accepted.

Jamila remained at the head of her party's local unit for four years and continued to play a leadership role for another six years, during which she supervised the construction of the unit's headquarters. Ultimately, she decided to withdraw from the unit in order to devote more time to her family responsibilities and to give new members the opportunity to join the leadership.

After the death of her father in 1985, Jamila, as the eldest child, became the head of the family and assumed new responsibilities. (Her one brother, the youngest of the children, has never helped support the family.) Because of her role in the family, Jamila never married and today she lives with her mother, brother, and two unmarried sisters.

Although Jamila came from a farmer's family and had worked the land since she was a child, she had never thought of becoming a farmer herself. When her father was dying, however, he urged her to take care of the land. Jamila resolved not only to continue farming the family's land, but to develop it further:

My father used to grow grain and keep cattle depending only on the rainfall. He never thought of irrigation or of growing fodder. I started thinking of other methods, such as using underground water, and I hired a worker to clean out the neglected well and to deepen it.

Jamila took charge of all activities on the farm, from organizing the work to ordering supplies and marketing the produce. She established a truck-farming operation to complement the farm's other crops and began growing a wide variety of vegetables, such as parsley, spinach, artichokes, carrots, and turnips. She also started working her aunt's land in return for a percentage of the profits. Jamila is afraid of becoming indebted, however, and refuses to borrow money from banks or agricultural development projects. This concern has limited her farming operations, since, for example, she cannot afford to further improve the farm's well and increase her water supply. Nevertheless, her income has enabled her not only to meet the everyday needs of her family, but to substantially improve their standard of living.

At first, Jamila sold her crops to brokers and barely made a profit. When one of her neighbors advised her to go to the market and sell the vegetables directly to customers there, Jamila was reluctant. She thought it would be difficult, and she was worried about mixing with commercial society. For the sake of her family, however, Jamila overcame her fears and became the first woman to sell vegetables at the market.

Ten years have passed since that day. Now Jamila goes to the market to sell her produce every Sunday and rents a regular spot from the municipality to display her vegetables. She hires a small van to carry her crops, dealing only with her relatives. In the beginning, her cousin used to accompany her to the market; now her brother-in-law transports her crops. The market has become an important part of her life.

As soon as I stand by my produce, both male and female customers come to buy from me, because everybody knows me in this place where I have been coming since 1986. Selling and buying are over around 10 or 11 a.m., after which I go back to work on the land. I like the market because I meet many people there, men and women with whom I have established relations based on mutual respect. They like my way of selling because I never yell to attract buyers as some women do. I hate to do that.

Farming is hard work, and Jamila is concerned about the future. She believes that most young people do not care for the land; many girls, she says, seek factory jobs instead. In the short run, this raises wages and makes it difficult for her to find labor. In the long run, she worries that the land will become barren and the country unable to raise enough food to support itself. To prevent this, and to ensure agricultural self-sufficiency, Jamila suggests that "state land be divided into lots and given to the young people who want to work it."

One of the poems Jamila has written conveys her feelings about her livelihood:

*Oh toiling farmer,
May God give you strength...*

*Women and men, you produce, reap the benefits.
You are not lured by profits.
Oh Gracious God,
May You convert his weakness into strength
May You grant him wealth and success...*

Jamila's self-confidence has grown steadily as she has gained experience both in farming and in politics. She became a member of the Tunisian Women's Union and has participated in several of their conventions. After a seven-year absence from political activities, Jamila also returned to party work at the repeated requests of party officials and local people. She is dedicated to working for the community and has taken action on the behalf of many local people. Indeed, Jamila believes that the true purpose of political activity is to gain a hearing for the underprivileged, especially women and widows. Thanks to her lobbying efforts, small farmers in her area received funds from the Agricultural Development Fund to drill sixteen wells. She also successfully advocated for provision of a bus to take local children to school. Now, at the age of 50, she is working to bring piped water to the area. Jamila's efforts have earned her the respect and confidence of the community, and she is using her position, in part, to encourage other women to make their voices heard at public meetings.



The Profiles

Samya (Egypt)

My life is all action. Today I take a train, tomorrow a bus; I carry my merchandise. When I go to Cairo you can see me running here and there...

Samya was born to a very poor family in a village in Menoufia. Her father was an agricultural laborer and had five children to support. With so little money, it was impossible to educate Samya and her siblings beyond the compulsory primary level. All of them, except for one brother who was able to reach the preparatory level, had to leave school and contribute to the family's income. Samya was sent to the village tailor to learn how to sew clothes for local women. When a sewing assembly line was established in the village, Samya joined it, seizing the opportunity to get a permanent job with a regular income. In addition, the sewing factory provided workers with a variety of other resources:



They paid me well. They also taught us many things about family planning and how you deal with your husband and children. We also learned how to read.

Shortly thereafter, a cousin proposed to Samya and they married; *“In the country, we usually marry our relatives,”* Samya notes. She was 20 at the time.

Marriage did not improve Samya's financial standing. She moved into her in-laws' home, sharing a two-bedroom adobe house with her new extended family. They all depended on her father-in-law for support, but he, too, was a poor agricultural laborer. Despite the family's economic hardships, Samya's husband refused to allow her to work. Her new role was to stay at home, do household chores under the watchful eye of her mother-in-law, and start a family. This came as a blow to Samya, who not only lost her income from the assembly line but also her opportunity to socialize outside the family and to attend training courses.

After she had been married for three years, Samya's husband was called to complete his national military service and the family lost the little money he earned as a construction laborer. Only her father-in-law's small and irregular earnings remained to support the family, and Samya decided that it was time for her to go back to work. She told her own father about her intentions, but he said that the decision was up to her husband. The next time her husband visited the village, Samya told him that she wanted to return to the assembly line. He was opposed and argued with her, but Samya persisted. She argued that, since he could not help support his children while he was away, it was her duty as a good wife to stand by her husband and help raise their children. After many lengthy discussions, her husband eventually agreed.

Samya went back to her job at the assembly line and also tried to earn some extra money by buying and selling chicks. Her income, however, was still insufficient for the family. Next she tried to earn more by increasing her production at the assembly line, but that proved impossible given the way the work was organized.

Because she was finding it difficult to support her children, Samya was interested in the family planning talks held at the assembly line. She remembered that her own brothers and sisters had less of a chance in life because there were too few resources for the many children in the family.

I gave birth to Samar, then Khaled. My husband and I agreed that that was enough, but my mother-in-law was insisting I should have a brother for Khaled. I gave birth to a girl. Then I told her that's enough: we have to take care of these children. Now we are using the IUD, thanking God for our 3 children.

To improve her prospects, Samya enrolled in the adult education course offered at the assembly line. After she received her certificate, she had to decide what to do with her new credentials. Samya decided not to seek a job as an employee, which would have improved her social standing but added little to her earnings. Instead she decided to become an entrepreneur like her sister, who traded in household items. She grew even more determined as she compared her life to that of her sister. Both had little to start with, yet her sister now had a good house, could buy gold for her daughters, and was satisfying all her family's needs. In contrast, Samya was struggling just to get by.

On her husband's monthly visit Samya told him that she was quitting the assembly line, was planning to sell the two gold pieces that she had received as a wedding gift, and was going to join her sister's business in the distant town of Menoufia. Samya's father was enraged that his daughter was selling her gold because her husband could not provide for her. Her husband, however, yielded to her wishes and accompanied her to a nearby town to sell the gold. For two years, Samya traveled to her sister's home in Menoufia every Friday and learned how to buy and sell, how to cater to the needs of the customers, how to contact suppliers, and how to keep accounts. Gradually Samya started developing her own circle of clients and network of suppliers, traveling among different towns and cities in search of new goods and new suppliers.

After working with her sister for two years, however, some tensions arose: her brother-in-law became concerned that Samya's burgeoning trade presented competition to his own wife's work. Samya decided to start her own business in her home village. At first, she only set up a stall to sell sandals during the weekly market. Her problems began when she decided to set up a stall daily in front of her house. Her neighbors threw garbage at the shed and tossed dirty water on the spot where she sat. Things grew worse when her husband completed his military service and returned home. He found it difficult to accept that, while he was unemployed, his wife was supporting the family, even traveling to other towns and cities to buy and sell goods. He fought whenever the neighbors taunted him about being supported by his wife or made insinuations about women who traveled alone.

Samya learned the hard way how to absorb the anger and jealousy of her husband and neighbors. She realized that she did not conform to the traditional mold of the ideal, typical wife, but she felt it was more important to ensure her future and that of her children. Gradually, her husband began to accept the new balance of power in the family. He helps his wife in her business, going with her to buy goods, and undertakes some of the household chores like cooking. He is proud of his wife's accomplishments and is the first to come to her support when they have a problem with the neighbors. "Now," Samya says, "*our situation is much better. We have more money. My husband helps me....*"

In addition, Samya's father-in-law is supportive of her work and helps with running the stall: "*In the morning, we spread the goods. I sit by them when Samya goes home and prepares our lunch. She comes back with the food, we eat and drink tea and thank God.*"

Over the course of her life, Samya feels that she has changed, and her husband and neighbors agree. Her travels and her exposure to new and different people have broadened her outlook on life. She has developed

negotiating skills and feels competent to resolve problems when they arise in both personal and professional spheres. She interacts with the suppliers from whom she purchases her goods with increased confidence and self-assurance. Samya's experiences also are influencing her family and the village: she introduces whatever new items come on the market along with fresh ideas, stories, and information. At the age of 35, Samya believes that she still has much to accomplish, but she feels confident that she has started on the road towards the future:

I want my family to be self-sufficient, my husband and my children happy. I wish to have a real shop instead of the sidewalk. Gold is not important; the important point is that my children have higher education. Then I'll be very happy, and thank God.

Rachidé (L ebanon)

Rachidé comes from a village in south Lebanon, but her family moved to a poor neighborhood north of Beirut when she was young. Her father worked as a porter at the harbor. Rachidé never went to school and at the age of 10 was apprenticed to an Armenian dressmaker. When she was 15, her parents married her to a distant relative, and two years later she had a baby boy. Shortly after his birth, her husband divorced her, took the child, and sent her back to her family. One year later, her parents arranged another marriage for her, this time to an illiterate vegetable peddler.

After her second marriage, Rachidé settled with her husband in a poor suburb south of Beirut. She bore a child almost every year, and life was difficult. She started sewing at home and had many customers, but her husband resented her work. It also grew increasingly difficult to work in her small house because her many children would play with the unfinished clothes and make a mess of her machine and materials. So, after four years, she gave up dressmaking.

When Rachidé's husband became ill and was hospitalized in 1978, the family lost its income. Rachidé decided to buy a secondhand industrial sewing machine on installments so that she could support the family by sewing. In the mornings, she tended to the needs of her children, cleaned the house, and cooked. Then she went to the hospital to visit her husband, and in the evenings she stitched scarves until late at night with material provided by a nearby factory. When her husband came home from the hospital, he needed care and a long convalescence. To save money, Rachidé went to a nearby welfare clinic and learned how to give her husband his daily injection. She continued caring for her family by day and stitching scarves at night until the factory closed in 1979. By that time she had seven children.

Rachidé did odd jobs for a couple of years and also joined the literacy program at the Social Health Center. She discovered the program when she took her sick children to the center for treatment. After a year, she was able to read and count. When she heard that women in the area were making good money peddling clothes from door to door, Rachidé decided to investigate. She needed money badly. Her husband had bought an old car and was operating it as an illegal taxi, but his income was small and sometimes the children went hungry. Peddling seemed a good opportunity, especially since her older children had grown enough to take care of their younger brothers and sisters and to help with the household chores.

To learn the business, Rachidé found out which merchants supplied the goods and then observed the transactions at their shops. When she was ready to start peddling, she took all of her savings to buy her first lot of clothes. At the shop she found a woman peddler bargaining with the owner over a lot of baby pajamas; the peddler wanted to buy only the good pieces, while the owner wanted to sell the whole lot. After the peddler gave up, Rachidé bargained with the owner and agreed on a price for the whole lot of pajamas. Since she had only part of the purchase price, she then had to convince the owner to give her part of the clothes until she could return and pay for the rest.

Expecting opposition from her husband, Rachidé didn't tell him about her new business. She peddled her clothing while the children were at school and her husband was out working. When her husband came home early one day and discovered her secret, he was angry and told Rachidé that she was divorced. She told him she was going to continue working because she could not see her children hungry and out of school. Her husband left the house, but was brought back the next day by some of his male relatives.

Rachidé's husband continued to resent her work and accused her of neglecting her household duties. To avoid his nagging, whenever she arrived home late, Rachidé would pass her bags of clothing to her children

through the kitchen window and then enter through the front door, claiming she was out buying tea or coffee. Eventually her husband tried to stop her from working. This time he went to the Sheik and came back with divorce papers. Rachidé asked him to leave the house, but his father brought him back a week later.

When the war forced Rachidé to flee Beirut with her children, she went to her native village in the south. Since she did not have a home in the village, she had to live in a settlement for displaced persons. The experience was so bad that Rachidé decided to build a house of her own in the village. She used some of her savings to buy a small piece of land and then made plans to build a two-room house. Her husband was angry when he heard about the purchase, but there was nothing he could do. Rachidé borrowed money from a well-to-do cousin and asked her relatives to help her with the construction. Three months later she had a roof.

After Beirut grew calmer, the family returned because there was no work in the village. Rachidé resumed her peddling. Her happiness did not last long, however, because her house in the village was bombed by the Israelis. She did not give up but applied for war damages, which she used to fix the roof and add the structure for a second floor. Since then, she has been repaying her debt to her cousin in small installments and saving as much money as possible to finish building the house. While the house is still not complete, Rachidé has not lost hope. She is sure that she will finish it some day, especially now that her husband is working and is supporting her endeavors.

Rachidé now lives with her husband and twelve children in a small two-room apartment in a poor neighborhood close to Beirut International Airport. Her oldest daughter is married, two other daughters work, and the rest of her children are in school. Rachidé tried several times to avoid getting pregnant but failed because, she says, of her poverty:

The only way to avoid unwanted pregnancies was to put in a loop. It costs \$50 and this I could not afford. Family planning services were disrupted during the war, and we were busy looking for food and security.

Since the birth of her last child, she has been using contraceptives and is registered with the family planning unit of her community. When asked whether she wants her daughters to have a large family like hers, she says, “*God forbid!*” While Rachidé does not believe her many pregnancies affected her health, she does say, “*You know the proverb: you cannot raise a body without wearing out another body. And I have raised 12 children!*”

Rachidé’s customer network now encompasses all three southern suburbs of Beirut, and she sells her goods—children’s and women’s clothing—from her home as well as door-to-door. She takes goods from three different merchants on a consignment basis and pays them in weekly installments. The merchants trust her because she pays her debts regularly. In turn, Rachidé offers credit to her customers because she knows and trusts them. She has developed an original accounting system to keep track of each customer’s weekly payments on their purchases. The customers themselves record their names, down payment, and installments in a large notebook, and each week Rachidé calculates their remaining debt.

Her husband has grown to appreciate Rachidé’s contribution to the family’s income and to admire her accomplishments. Now 40 years old, Rachidé makes most of the decisions related to her children’s education and household expenses. She thinks of herself as a successful business woman and is proud of her achievements. Will she ever stop working?

Never! Why should I? Now I feel like an empress with all my children around, and I am so

proud to have been able to send them to school and provide for them. I was also able to buy a piece of land and build a house in my village in the south. I encourage all women to come out of the house and become productive. My own sisters and my sisters-in-law envy my freedom and my way of life at home.

Halima (Tunisia)

Halima was born in the region known as “the Sahel,” on the east coast of Tunisia. Her father, a farmer, traded in poultry and eggs in a suburb of Tunis, while her mother stayed in the village to care for her six daughters and three sons. When her father visited them from time to time, it was as if he were a guest in his own home. Neither Halima nor her sisters went to school; instead, their mother taught them to keep house, sew, and weave the *mergoum*, a kind of carpet. At a very early age, Halima showed an interest in commerce, sewing clothes and making *mergoums* to sell at the weekly village market—even hiring other women to help spin and dye the wool.

When Halima was 20, she married a cousin. They immediately moved into a house rented by her in-laws’ house in a slum area of Tunis. Her husband worked in a bakery in the neighborhood in which he had grown up. Halima continued to sew and weave, putting aside money to buy a 1,000 square-meter plot of agricultural land. Luck was with her: the land was zoned for construction, and Halima profited from the situation. She began to build a house of her own and, in the process, was inspired to go into business:

I got involved in building materials when I was building my own house. That was when I realized how important bricks were in the construction of low-cost housing. And since the neighboring areas were developing rapidly, there was a fast-growing need for this type of material. I watched how these bricks were made by the mason who built our house, and realized that it was not at all difficult. So I asked him to work for me. I gave him the raw materials, and he made as many bricks as he could, for which I paid him by the piece at the end of the day. I began the project with a capital of just one hundred dinars. The worker began making bricks, and soon the courtyard of our house was filled with them, and I began selling them without even leaving the house. Thank God, the business began to go extremely well, and the project grew into what it has become today.

Building up her business into the major venture that it now is was a gradual, dynamic process for Halima. As is the case with many small enterprises, in the initial years she worked without official authorization; after establishing her project, she obtained authorization for selling building materials, then for making brick and pipes. Halima set up her business in a 3,000 square meter garage near her house, over the entrance of which she hung a streamer announcing “Halima the Sahelian—Building and quarry materials for sale.” Because of its convenient proximity to her home, Halima considered the location advantageous even before the road separating the garage from her house was the busy thoroughfare that it is now.

Initially, she relied on a middleman for the materials but, after her business grew, she began dealing directly with the suppliers, carefully selecting reliable wholesalers located nearby. At the same time, she diversified from bricks into other building materials, such as cement, iron, gravel and sand. For sand and gravel, she has an agreement with two or three truck-owners who purchase these materials directly from quarries and deliver them to her. Now her business is so large and well-established that she orders directly from the country’s largest brick works, which are located 170 kilometers away, and does not need to pay for materials until she has sold them. Her aim, she says, “*is to provide our customers with whatever they need and to see that we never have to say to them, ma fammech (there isn’t any more).*”

Today, Halima sells cement, iron, bricks, sand, gravel and tiles. She has a street-front office, with a telephone. The garage area, now walled in, includes a section for storing sacks of cement and a wing where the bricks are made. Halima has a truck and two cars; when she needs to, she rents another truck or two for

the day in order to insure that her customers receive their merchandise without delay. She employs three full-time workers and takes on four to five temporary workers when necessary.

Halima's success is based on a combination of skill in commercial transactions, a commitment to service, and tremendous personal energy. In particular, she works hard to insure that all involved—suppliers, workers and customers—are kept satisfied. *“Most of our customers are private individuals,”* she explains, *“except for two or three small businesses. I’ve built my reputation on the principle of keeping my word, and on sincerity, trust, and a smiling welcome.”*

Halima's personal commitment to her work is an essential factor. She arrives at work at seven in the morning and leaves around eight at night; at noon she eats with her workers so that the store can remain open at lunchtime. She maintains this schedule seven days a week, including holidays; her sales peak on Sundays and holidays, because other stores of the same type are closed on those days. Since she lives nearby her business, customers sometimes knock on her door in the evening, and she sends her son to open the store and give them what they need. She cites the example of one client who only comes during the evening, in order to avoid traffic. *“We’re here to satisfy our customers,”* she says with a smile.

Halima is a savvy businesswoman and has attracted added business by selling bricks at a reduced price as well as by giving her customers discounts on deliveries of sand and gravel. She regrets not being able to go below official prices for cement and iron, but profits are extremely low on those products.

Halima keeps all the accounts in her head, does not use banks, and does not have a checkbook. She refuses to sell on credit because she has lost money that way; she only accepts checks reluctantly, for fear of receiving bad checks. If a problem ever arises regarding payment, she tries to work out a solution amicably, avoiding the courts.

Although the construction business is usually considered a male stronghold, Halima has never faced disapproval from her neighbors: *“I have never encountered anything but respect from them; they give me nothing but encouragement and admiration.”*

Halima attributes part of her success to her family. She points out that it was her parents who inculcated in her a capability for commerce, and she remains on good terms with them.

My parents are still alive, and I visit them from time to time, but I never stay more than a day, because I can't leave my work. All my family's neighbors and friends welcome me warmly, and seem to be proud of my success. You know, my experience is not unique. I have a sister, who is married to my husband's brother, who opened a bakery... and she is very successful.

Halima also points to the good understanding that she has with her husband:

Our relations are very stable. He respects me and my work as he should, and I respect him. I am faithful to him and don't try to order him around.

Although Halima avers that she and her husband “agree on everything,” she describes conceding to his wishes on one specific occasion:

At one time, I wanted to take driving lessons. He refused absolutely, and I had to give up the idea. I never tried to discuss it with him to find out the reasons for his refusal.

Her husband knows little about and is not interested in the construction materials business; he now works as a porter for the Ministry of Agriculture. After Halima's business began to prosper, he thought about giving up his job, but Halima has encouraged him to continue working so that he has something to do.

Of Halima's four sons, one works with her in her business, as a driver; he was the only one who did not do well in school. The eldest boy earned a university degree in accounting and management and now works in a company, while the other two are a mechanic and a scrap metal dealer. Halima relies on her three daughters, two of whom are still in high school, to take care of most of the housework and cooking. Her eldest daughter, who learned dressmaking after dropping out of school, brings lunch to Halima at the office each day and sometimes helps out at the store.

Halima says that business has been down in the last two years, reflecting a decrease in construction work which, she suggests, is linked to the slowness of the municipality to issue authorizations for building. However, Halima has expanded her activities and investments beyond the construction materials trade. She owns and rents out commercial and residential buildings and is planning to build more rental properties.

All told, I am worth approximately a million dinars, counting materials and real estate, including ten commercial premises that I rent out, three houses and a 3,000 square meter lot serviced for building. Everything I earn goes into building, since my project no longer needs any financing. I can get all the materials I want in whatever quantities I need without paying a millime, with a promise to pay after they have been sold!

Now 47, Halima is still full of ideas and continues to plan new ventures to benefit herself and her family.

I thought of opening a new warehouse to sell building materials in the Al Ghazala development, where I have several jobs. But I was afraid of spreading myself too thin, and I thought the children might not be able to take care of things. I would like to build a Turkish bath, and to set up a dressmaking studio for my eldest daughter, and I would also like to buy a farm, because I like farming. You see, above all I am still a farmer's daughter.

Habiba (Tunisia)

I am like this. This is God's will. After I got married, I rented a house nearby and continued to work....

Habiba was born in a coastal town. Her father, a small farmer, worked hard to support his five daughters and one son. When she was eleven, Habiba chose to go to school even though she was five years older than the usual age. She did well at first, but ultimately failed the high school admission exam.

At the age of sixteen, Habiba joined the town cooperative as a vendor at a clothing and textile stand; she thus became the first woman in town to work in trade. This job gave her the confidence to go into business for herself when the cooperative collapsed a few years later. She turned to her father for help: he sold the donkey cart he used on his farm to raise the money she needed to rent and stock a stand of her own. The stand prospered because Habiba had a natural talent for business:

I did not confine myself to selling clothes and fabric, but added foodstuffs, spices, tobacco, and other merchandise. I also adapted my business to the needs of the clients as the occasion required. In the summer, for instance, when weddings, circumcisions, and other celebrations became frequent, I offered what was needed for the festivities, and with the approach of the new school year, I sold stationery and the like. Clients, especially women, preferred to buy from me because of the choice and good reception I gave them.

Habiba used her profits to repay her father and take him on a pilgrimage. While she was away, her younger sister took charge of the stand. Ever since then, Habiba has left selling to her sister while she is responsible for providing the merchandise and keeping the accounts.

The retail trade became just the first of many ventures for Habiba. Her next investment was a pick-up truck. She borrowed money from friends to buy a truck after she noticed how inexpensive cars were during a visit to France. She cleared the necessary legal hurdles to export the truck to Tunisia, taught herself to drive and got a license, and began transporting produce from local farms to Tunis. Always flexible, Habiba switched to trading in charcoal when she found that there was little money to be made carrying produce.

I used to wake up at 3 a.m. and go with my father, or my brother or brother-in-law—sometimes alone—to buy charcoal and then sell it where the prices were good. Sometimes I sold charcoal all over the south...and I came back home at night.... [Then] the idea come to me that I should not drive back with my truck empty, and I thought trading in sheepskins might be profitable. So after selling my load of charcoal, I bought all the sheepskins I could on my way back, and sold them at a coastal town where people worked taking the wool from the skins and selling it.

Habiba has always relied on and helped provide for her family in her many business ventures. One of her goals was to help her brother, the youngest in the family, to become self-reliant. After he completed his military service, she opened a grocery store near her home for her brother to run. Habiba found another opportunity when one of her sisters took a course in carpet making from the National Handicrafts Board. The course gave her sister the right to open a workshop and get a small business loan. Habiba applied for the loan on her sister's behalf and used the money to build and outfit a textile workshop. While her sister supervised the weaving, Habiba supplied the raw materials, dealt with the employees who worked at home, arranged for

the finished pieces to be inspected and classified by the Handicrafts Board, and then sold the carpets in larger towns and cities. This workshop proved so successful that Habiba opened a second and larger textile workshop in a nearby village, which employed as many as 80 workers.

Even as Habiba was making her mark in business, she also became involved in politics. After sitting on the municipal council for five years, she was elected to the party unit and served there for more than a decade, taking on a wide range of activities.

I took part in the armed patrols that were organized following the Gafsa events, taking up arms like the men and spending the nights out at the municipality or at party headquarters to deal with emergencies. I also stood firm in the face of religious extremists. At that time the women's unit had no organization [in town], so I took charge of mobilizing the women, visiting them at their houses and bringing them out to exercise their voting rights. Not a single father or husband rejected my visits, because they knew their daughters and wives were in good hands.

Habiba married at the age of 37, but refused to live with her husband's family and assume a woman's traditional role. She has never enjoyed typical female pursuits and finds her greatest pleasure in working. In fact, Habiba considers herself "manly by nature:"

I did not change my manners toward my family because I was their "man" and they used to seek my advice in everything, small or large. Even if they came to me late at night I would go out to help them solve their problems.

Two years after her marriage, Habiba faced the biggest challenge of her life when she became entangled in the legal system. Her difficulties began when her brother drove off in pursuit of a gas bottle supplier who had overlooked his store. Afraid that he would get into trouble, Habiba went in pursuit.

I rushed out into the street and stopped the first car that came by to ask for help. In the car were a man and a woman, apparently his wife. To my surprise, the woman spat in my face. I did the same to her, and at this point the man got out of the car and slapped me in the face, and we fought until some passers-by separated us. I went back to the workshop, and some time later the man came, accompanied by policemen who wanted to arrest me on the charge of violently attacking a judge. It turned out that the man with whom I had quarreled was the judge of the district court.

Habiba and her sister, who tried to intervene, were both arrested and quickly sentenced to prison terms despite her family's protestations and a petition from the workshop employees. What especially shocked Habiba was that all the local party officials and comrades with whom she had worked for twelve years abandoned her during her troubles. When Habiba was released after almost a year in prison, she had to face the consequences of the scandal, which ranged from disagreeable gossip to the loss of the larger textile workshop.

... I endured the bitter reality with patience, and confronted people on my release with courage. In fact, people were very understanding, because they knew I had been wronged. I decided to give up political activity and devote myself to my work, and I said this to

everyone. The material losses I had sustained amounted to over 50,000 dinars,³ since there was no one to do my work while I was in prison.

Habiba's imprisonment also exacerbated her problems with her husband, who did not like her unusual ways. They were divorced after five years of marriage. Rather than returning to live with her parents, Habiba stayed on in her rented house and eventually built a spacious apartment on top of the textile workshop for herself and her niece. She is proud of her home because it reflects her material success.

Another source of pride for Habiba is the social status she enjoys—a status that is difficult for a woman to achieve in Tunisia's male-dominated society. She is widely respected by both men and women, is sought out by girls for advice, and on occasion even helps reconcile disputing spouses.

Families consider me an example of attaining success and at the same time maintaining my purity and honor. I have raised the status of my father, who was a small farmer, and I have helped all the members of my family and will continue to do so. My asset in life is above all my good reputation; money is useless if it does not bring with it the respect of others.

Habiba has some regrets about her success in business having come at the expense of her marital life. However, she looks forward to expanding her entrepreneurial activities. She enjoys working and, at the age of 47, is thinking about starting an export-oriented business. She has refused all offers of partnerships and is committed to working on her own.

³Approximately US \$45,000

Mariam (Lebanon)

Staying at home is sterile, you do not meet people who know more than you do, you cannot profit from experiences of others, you cannot grow.

Mariam was born and raised in a small village in south Lebanon. The youngest of six sisters, she went to school for five years but failed the primary level examination. When her parents decided that she should leave school, and apprenticed her to a dressmaker, Mariam was very unhappy. She had wanted to pursue her education.

When Mariam was 17, her family arranged her marriage and she moved to a poor community outside Beirut. Her husband is barely literate and works as a truck driver. At first, Mariam could manage on her husband's income. As her family increased and times grew difficult, however, Mariam decided that she had to work and help her husband support the family. This meant reorganizing her life to include paid work as well as her household duties.

It was impossible for Mariam to take a job that would keep her away from home for long hours since she still needed to look after her eight children. Therefore, she decided to look for a business that she could run from her home. She discussed the matter with her husband, who did not object to her looking for a decent means to make some money. Mariam went ahead with her plans without regard for what relatives or friends might think, because, as she says, “[*My husband and I*] have always taken our decisions together, and do not care for what people may say. This is not their concern, but ours.”

Mariam decided to peddle goods from door to door in her neighborhood. She asked a merchant she knew to supply her with goods to sell on a consignment basis, and he gave her bed linens, blankets, table linens, and towels. Her prices were fair, and she soon became known in the Borj-El-Barajneh area. When her clients started coming to her house, Mariam no longer had to sell from door to door. Today she conducts business from her two-bedroom apartment and takes orders. She has a stable clientele, and many mothers come to her to order their daughters' trousseau.

When the Save the Children Federation launched a small loan program for enterprising women, Mariam joined with a group of six women to apply. The women selected her as the group leader who would be responsible for monitoring their work and making sure that they paid their weekly installments. With her share of the \$400 borrowed, Mariam bought additional goods and was able to sell them for a profit. Now that the loan is repaid, the women must decide whether to take out a new loan, and the others are coming to Mariam for advice. Mariam is undecided as she thinks that conditions for the original loan were hard to meet because the interest rate was high and the sum was too small for a profitable investment.

Working has benefitted Mariam in many ways. Her husband has always taken a positive attitude towards her work, and he is proud of her ability to earn money while continuing to care for the family. Mariam believes that working has strengthened their relationship and made it more egalitarian. In fact, she takes sole responsibility for decisions regarding her children's education and well-being. Her earnings also have allowed Mariam to provide her children with an education and to pay the medical expenses of her two sons. One her sons has epilepsy, while the other has asthma. Perhaps most importantly, working has given her personal satisfaction.

When her oldest daughter, who is an elementary school teacher, got married, Mariam advised her to continue

working. Mariam is proud of her children's success, much of which is due to her efforts to keep them in school. Her two oldest daughters are teachers, and her third daughter has completed the course work for a degree in business administration while working in a book shop. Her fourth daughter is studying to become a nurse. Her older boy, who did not finish his secondary education, now works in a restaurant. Mariam still has four more children to put through school. For the time being Mariam cannot afford to pay tuition and school fees for all of them, and one of her daughters remains at home while she waits for a chance to go to nursing school.



Umm A li (L ebanon)

Thank God, I have an understanding husband who supports me. We discuss all problems together. A woman should gain the admiration of her husband, and she should always show him respect.

Umm Ali was born and raised in a poor community outside Beirut. Her father was a loving and fair person, who sent all twelve of his children, boys and girls alike, to school. Umm Ali had six years of schooling. When she was 15 years old, she registered to become a nurse's aide, but she had to leave the program after two years because she failed the exams. She decided to marry a man 25 years her elder. At first, her parents objected to her choice, but Umm Ali insisted on marrying him. She felt that he was a good and gentle man and that she would be secure with him.

During the first years of her marriage, Umm Ali stayed at home and looked after her children, but money was short because the war had left her husband, a carpenter, without regular work. She decided to take a job cleaning the school grounds each afternoon without telling her husband or any other member of her family. Her husband discovered the truth, however, when he came home early one day. Umm Ali had to convince him that her earnings would make it easier to feed their family and buy clothes and books for the children.

After working at the school for a year, Umm Ali met an old family acquaintance, a garment merchant who had been a neighbor when she was young. The merchant asked if she was interested in peddling clothing in the neighborhood, and Umm Ali immediately accepted. She invested most of her savings in clothing and took the merchandise to her cousin's home. Her cousin had a wide circle of friends and acquaintances, and Umm Ali was able to sell all her stock at a substantial profit. She decided to go ahead and buy a bigger lot of clothes, but to sell them she had to travel to other neighborhoods far from her home. Once she had to wait until evening for the fighting to stop before she could return home. Umm Ali persisted, even though she did not find peddling easy: *"At first, I was ashamed to knock at doors, then I forced myself to be more confident in my capacities. I wanted to succeed; I organized my daily schedule."*

Umm Ali's business grew as she met other tradesmen and expanded her network of customers despite ongoing objections from her husband and her brothers. Her husband was strongly affected by neighborhood gossips who used to say, "He stays home doing nothing while his wife goes to work." One of Umm Ali's brothers was even more influential:

I have a brother who gets upset if a woman goes out to work. But me, I shake hands, I laugh with others. My brother started to set [my husband] against me. [My husband] listened to my brother, who told him, "She will be better off without working. In our family, women do not work." I asked my husband, "Are you married to my brother or to me? What do you care about him? Does my brother want to buy me a new dress every day? Let him provide for his wife!"

...But work is getting me somewhere. It allows me to have a life. Before that, things were different. I am working for my children; I want them to have a decent life. I don't want to bring them up in deprivation.

It was difficult for Umm Ali to convince her husband that it was all right for her to work. On occasion, she even resorted to threats, saying: "I am married to you and not my brother. If you do not like the situation you can divorce me, but I will keep the children." Periodically, her husband would urge her to stop working, but

Umm Ali always managed to demonstrate to him the advantages of her activities. Her husband never insisted that she stop, and she continued to work.

As Umm Ali has become more successful, her husband's respect for her abilities has grown. He says, "My wife is a tough woman. She cannot be deceived or fooled. She is capable, all right!" He is now convinced that she has to work and no longer pays attention to what people say; he argues that men who forbid their wives to work outside their home simply do not trust them. Umm Ali's husband also has become extremely cooperative and shares the home responsibilities with his wife. The couple does not argue over money: no matter who earns it, the money goes into a drawer and is spent on the household. Umm Ali deeply appreciates her husband's change of heart.

Her brothers also have changed their attitudes. Everyone in her family is proud of her, and even her conservative brother asks for her advice now. Umm Ali says that now her brothers "*show me respect, love, and high esteem.... My opinions matter to them.*"

Umm Ali has also won respect from the wider community as she has proven her business skills. Because they trust her, merchants supply her with goods on credit and let her exchange merchandise. Her clients, recognizing that she is honest and trustworthy, are loyal to her. She, in turn, sells her goods on the installment plan and manages an efficient accounting system.

When the Social Development Center announced that it was granting small loans to women, Umm Ali joined a small group to take advantage of the opportunity. She was chosen as the group leader and is responsible for repaying the loans. Beginning with a small loan of \$250, the group has invested, profited from, and repaid a series of ever-increasing loans. The loans have allowed Umm Ali to invest in her business without becoming indebted to tradesmen. Umm Ali also is a member of a self-help association of over 60 women from her neighborhood who participate in a group savings scheme. Each woman pays a small sum of money into the association every week. At end of each week, one of the women takes all the cash to spend on some necessity, such as school fees, a refrigerator, or health costs.

A true entrepreneur, Umm Ali is willing to take risks in order to make more money. Some years ago, she visited her native village in the south to sell her goods, and her father gave her the idea of subletting an olive orchard.

I went to speak to the owner of the field, a woman. She wanted to lease it for 7,000 Lebanese pounds, which was a lot of money at that time. I proposed to pay her with clothes and towels and she agreed. She was quite satisfied and told me, "The olive trees are yours to exploit." I picked the olives and they made me more money than the towels would have. I would have sold the towels for one Lebanese pound but I sold the olives for four Lebanese pounds. I made a double profit. I was quite happy about it. I produced extra income to benefit my family.

Although the profit gained from the olive grove varies from year to year, depending on the yield from the trees, Umm Ali is committed to continuing this venture. She also feels that the week her family spends together harvesting the olives is good for her children because it teaches them to appreciate hard work.

For Umm Ali, the biggest achievement of her working life has been earning the money needed to educate her five children. Both Umm Ali and her husband focus on providing their children with a good start in life.

Before, I was not able to send my children to school. I was forced to turn to others for that.

When Ibrahim entered school, courses had begun a couple of months before. He used to stand by the door and tell me, "Mom, when will I go to school?" His words hurt me very much; they made me cry.

Umm Ali is proud of her eldest son, who is a good student and will graduate from high school next year. Two of her other sons did not do well in school; after they completed their primary education, she placed them as apprentices so they could learn a craft. Her youngest son is in primary school. Umm Ali has paid special attention to her daughter's education.

To me, there is no difference between boys and girls. They are equal and all must attend school because education is the grounds for everything. It would be a shame if one or the other didn't go. Girls are capable of doing what boys can do. The other day, I went into a building by chance and I saw a girl joining electrical wires together. There is nothing a girl or woman cannot do anymore.

Umm Ali sends her daughter to a private school and requested a scholarship for her. She successfully pleaded her case with the Sheik, explaining, "The Sheik respects me and knows how much I work to secure the future of my children." Neither Umm Ali nor her husband want to have more children, so she is using the pill.

Umm Ali has successfully integrated her work and home life. She visits her customers, delivering merchandise and recording new orders, in the mornings after her husband and children have left. She always returns home in time to cook lunch for her family. Now 35 years old, Umm Ali has made ambitious plans for the future with her husband: she hopes to open a shop that he will manage for her while she continues visiting her loyal clientele at their homes. However the future unfolds, Umm Ali is committed to working:

I will be like a fish out of water if I had to stay home. Work is important. I do not work in order to amass a fortune. I work because I want to raise my children properly, make of them good citizens who live according to God's values.... I will encourage my daughter to work as long as she knows how to respect others and be respected.

Nourhan (Palestine)

Nourhan was born in Nablus, where she lived with her parents and her two sisters and two brothers. Even as a little girl, she was aware of the differences separating her mother and her father. Her father decided to emigrate to Kuwait, but her mother refused to follow and insisted on staying in Nablus. When her father remained in Kuwait and found himself a younger wife, Nourhan's mother worked hard to earn money for her family by sewing clothes for neighbors and acquaintances. Nourhan learned from her mother to be self-reliant and confident and not to submit to a husband, but to treat him as an equal.

When she was 16 and had finished her elementary education, Nourhan was engaged in the traditional way to a young man from the old city of Nablus. His family was of lower socio-economic status. After her marriage she lived in a small house near the home of her husband's elder brother. Nourhan felt the social difference between her family and her husband's family, and she complained to her husband about how his family interfered in their lives. Nourhan's husband asked his brother and his wife to stop interfering. When the situation was remedied, Nourhan was able to plan social visits the way she and her husband found suitable.

It was five years before Nourhan was able to conceive a child, a delay that irritated her husband and put stress on her marriage:

When we used to go visiting some relatives, my husband would start caressing the children. Then the women would ask me about the reason of the delay; I would answer that this was God's will. When we were back home, we would start fighting. When I had my first baby, my parents and his were very happy and my husband distributed sweets (Knafe) among the family and neighbors.

Today Nourhan has three boys and two girls, each born two years apart except for the youngest. Her last child was conceived after a six-year gap. Nourhan contemplated having an abortion because her husband did not like big families; however, the gynecologist refused to perform the operation for safety concerns. Nourhan now relies on the IUD for contraception because the pill gave her severe headaches. She and her husband are convinced that they have enough children already and that it would be wrong to have more.

When life in Nablus became difficult and dangerous in 1976, Nourhan grew afraid for her son. She asked her husband to move to the Northern Mountain, but he found it difficult to leave the place where he grew up. Eventually, however, they did move to the Northern Mountain near her mother's house. According to Nourhan, "*Getting away from the traditional environment where I was living helped improve my relationship with my husband.*"

During the Intifada, Nourhan's husband, a butcher, could not open his shop in Nablus. He considered moving the freezer and all the slaughtering materials to his house in the Northern Mountain where the situation was better. He consulted Nourhan, and they decided to move his business into their house. Nourhan began to help her husband in his work:

Since the first day of the opening of the butchery, I helped my husband with selling and preparing the grilled meat. My husband did not mind my helping him, on the contrary, he taught me all about it. He did not feel awkward about my interaction with the clients, and that was because he trusted my capacity for dealing firmly with men.

When Nourhan's brother, who lives in Germany, sent her 200 dinars,⁴ Nourhan decided to try a different line

⁴ Or about \$285 (\$1 U.S. dollar is roughly equivalent to .7 Jordanian dinars).

of work. She used the money to buy some clothes from Israel through her brother-in-law. Then she sold them at a profit to neighbors and relatives. Initially, her husband objected to this clothing business because he thought Nourhan would lose money on it. Nourhan says:

At first, it was difficult to sell the outfits, but after a while people started trusting my ways of dealing and I gained 700 Jordanian dinars. I earned that money through the outfits that I had brought in with the help of my sister's husband who works in the clothing business in Israel. I sold them at prices below the market.

As competition in the clothing business grew, Nourhan figured out a way to expand and differentiate her business by selling bridal accessories. She attended courses in order to put her plan into action.

When Nourhan first started working, she heard a lot of gossip from the women in the neighborhood. They said that she was a strong, authoritarian woman who controlled her husband. Nourhan accepted the censure philosophically:

Their words were only motivated by jealousy of my success and my practicality in facing life. But today, after four years of work, they changed their opinion about me, because I was able to prove to them that a woman who wins her freedom and goes out to work is also capable of protecting her honor and the honor of her family.

When Nourhan travels to buy and sell clothes, her husband prepares the meals for the family. He likes to do it and in fact has experience cooking because he used to own a restaurant in the old city. Nourhan says: "Helping me with the cooking has become a daily habit for my husband and he is not ashamed of it even when we have visitors or relatives."

In recent years, Nourhan has also become involved in politics. She began to actively support the Intifada after a young man from the neighborhood encouraged her to get acquainted with the working women's committee. Nourhan immediately felt that she should play a role and started visiting prisoners' families.

My husband was at first resentful about my committee work, but I tried to convince him calmly. And after he got acquainted with the committee supervisor, as she started coming to our house, he allowed me and my daughter to take part in their activities. Again, I was faced with the neighbors' gossip, but because of my husband's support and the positive role that I played in helping those released from the Israeli prisons and providing food for the needy during curfews and strikes, they changed their opinion about me. Some women started coming with me to the committee.

Working with the women's committee has built Nourhan's self-esteem and made her marriage more egalitarian.

After I got acquainted with committee work, my self-confidence grew and I felt that I was an independent entity and I was able to discuss everything with my husband on equal grounds.

N adia (Palestine)

Nadia's family was large and poor. At the age of 15 Nadia married a man who was 20 years her elder and bore four sons. Nadia found that she had married and had a family so young that when she had finished having children, girls of her generation were still studying in universities.

Looking after the house and the children did not fulfill Nadia's life. She wanted to do more but was not sure what. She did not want to have any more children, because she had suffered both financially and psychologically from growing up in a family with too many children. She thought about continuing her education and asked her husband if he would allow it. He agreed, provided that she studied at home and did not go to a college. After some more thought, however, she realized that she could succeed in working at home if she started sewing in a professional way. Before she had sewed only as a hobby. Nadia began by buying a knitting machine to work on. Since her husband did not need her earnings, she reinvested her income in her business. After a year, she bought a new machine and employed a girl to help her. Her business grew and she continued to expand until she had her own workshop with many employees and many different types of machines.

Nadia's enthusiasm and talent drew the attention of the company that supplied her knitting machines. When the company asked her to market their machines in the north, Nadia agreed to sell the machines and to train the buyers in exchange for a commission on the profits. The company gave her a training session on how to use the machines in their offices in Beit Sahour. Then the mother company in Switzerland noticed Nadia's remarkable efficiency and offered her still more advanced training. Nadia attended sessions on the use of the machines, their maintenance and repair, and workshop management. While many people were surprised to see her working for such a company, especially attending the maintenance sessions, her husband never felt that way. On the contrary, he used to encourage Nadia and encourage her and do so in front of other people.

When she started working, Nadia used to hear negative comments from neighbors and acquaintances but assumed that they were generated by jealousy and spite. Some men tried and, for a time, succeeded in pressuring her husband to limit her work. Nadia, however, was able to change her husband's mind through negotiation. Now Nadia is admired by those same men and is an example for their wives. Some women in the neighborhood have even named their daughters after Nadia. They consider her to be an example of a highly successful woman and hope that their girls will follow in her footsteps.

Nadia's influence has even reached the school. When a school competition asked students to interview leading people in the community, Nadia's daughter interviewed her and won! During the interview, Nadia spoke compellingly about her job and about women's work in general. She articulated the importance of work to enable women to mature and grow; she is concerned about women who have never had the chance to work and be productive.

Working has strengthened Nadia's position at home, and her earnings—while not necessary to support the family—have benefitted her children's lives. Nadia herself had a difficult childhood. Although both her parents worked, they could not provide the essentials for their many children. Nadia is determined that her children will have a different life; she wants to give them everything she did not have. For example, she was able to realize her son's wish to go to university even though he did not have the grades to qualify. When his father refused to send him to a public university, she insisted on giving him a college education and used her income to send him to a private university. She has also bought a stereo for her children with her earnings, as well as a car for herself (after she learned how to drive).

Nadia's husband is convinced that her approach to child-rearing is effective and so has given her primary

responsibility in that arena. Nadia treats her children as friends. She does not impose her opinion on them or pressure them, but advises them in a non-authoritarian way. As a result, they talk to her frankly about private matters and consider her their guide.

Nadia's great ambition is to attain commercial success; she dreams of having a huge textile workshop with many workers. However, she recognizes the need for flexibility, and is prepared to pursue other business opportunities should demand for her current products diminish.



Chapter III. The Profiles in Context

Through the thirty profiles presented in the preceding section, individual women have spoken from their own experiences and milieux. This chapter is intended to give the reader a deeper understanding of the environment that Arab women inhabit.

The Sociocultural Context

The women profiled in this project view their achievements within the context of their families and their communities. In Arab culture, the individual is more deeply embedded in a closely connected social network than in most Western contexts and becomes actualized by being part of and working for the well-being of that group. Rather than being measured by Western standards of personal success and individual gratification, achievement is recognized chiefly through contributions made within this familial and social context. As noted by Jacobson (1994:26), “Western notions of autonomy based on the concepts of privacy and individual rights, for example, may be less relevant to Muslim women who value the interdependence of individuals, families and communities.” Except under extreme conditions, these women do not want to jeopardize their marriages or compromise their roles as wives, mothers, daughters, and daughters-in-law. They are constantly engaged in resolving the tensions between their personal needs and domestic responsibilities, individual aspirations and social obligations, and household duties and participation in public life.

The result is a complex blending of respect for and resistance to established traditions. On the whole, these women do not perceive themselves as revolutionaries who seek to challenge social norms. Most of them comply as much as possible with prevailing customs in order to fulfill the traditional roles of wife and mother, to protect their reputations, and to deflect unwanted gossip. For example, Tagia departed from certain traditional attitudes within Yemeni society when she became a professional singer, but throughout her increasingly distinguished career she has continued to follow many of the prescribed rules of female behavior, such as wearing a veil whenever she is not on stage. Adhering to tradition in this way gives women more leverage when they negotiate with family members for permission to undertake new ventures and increases their credibility when they promote behavioral changes in the community. Husbands and neighbors are far more likely to respect a working woman when they see that she fulfills all of her domestic duties and behaves modestly.

Sometimes women find it difficult to resolve the inherent contradictions between their personal ambitions and their day-to-day lives. Houria, for example, has been pulled in two directions throughout her life. At the age of ten, in traditional Yemeni fashion, she and her sister married two brothers. As Houria grew increasingly unhappy with her marriage and living situation, however, she reacted in ways that challenged the accepted norms of women’s behavior—running away from home, seeking a divorce, and subsequently training to be a health care worker—all at great cost to her relationships with her family and daughter. Yet when her sister died, Houria followed traditional practice and married her brother-in-law, with whom she has settled into a happy marital relationship, balancing her work as a midwife and the care of her sister’s children.

While the women profiled here work within parameters set by their social and family situations, every one of them has found a way to redefine and expand her opportunities. In some cases, the women have set and achieved modest goals, expanding their experience at the margins. For example, a job cleaning laboratory equipment has given Alia greater self-confidence and earned her the respect of her Lebanese community, but it has not changed her essential commitment to home and family. In other cases, small initial steps have eventually led to dramatic life changes. When Ibtissam first asked her uncle’s permission to study nursing in Yemen, for example, she did not foresee that she would eventually become a qualified midwife, travel and deal

with men as part of her job, financially support her family, and, ultimately, stop veiling her face. On the individual level, as on the collective level, incremental changes often presage and make possible more dramatic transformations.

Reproductive Health Conditions

Social, economic and political rights are not just interrelated in principle; their implementation is bound together in practice. Thus, women's access to reproductive health services is constrained by their broader social deprivation, including the lack of resources for or priority to their health, restrictions on social participation, and limited access to information due to illiteracy. (UNFPA, 1997:48)

Inadequate or inaccessible services, barriers of distance and cost, limited mobility, lack of clear information, and insufficient awareness of their personal health needs and options are among the factors that contribute to poor reproductive health status for women in developing countries. The effects of these conditions pervade the profiles. It is significant that many of the women profiled here devote themselves, formally or informally, full-time or in part, to improving the conditions that underlie negative health outcomes for women. Ibtissam, Sabah, Houria, Samira, Iman, and Atteyat, among others profiled here, address such issues as the consequences of early marriage, frequent and unspaced births, maternal mortality, infant mortality, and the effects of female excision. It is significant that in several instances this work is naturally linked with efforts to improve literacy skills and promote consciousness of social and civic rights among women in their communities. In Egypt, Soheir emphasizes not only the detrimental health effects of early marriage, but also the importance of a woman's right to choose her own husband and to postpone marriage in order to continue her education.

Statistics show that age at first marriage is rising in several countries in the Arab world as many young women explore different life options. Some of these pursuits have resulted in postponing marriage and childbearing.⁵ As these cases illustrate, however, early marriage (sometimes against the wishes of the young bride and often followed by early pregnancy) is still practiced in parts of the Arab world. Parents arranged marriages for many of the women profiled here when they were 15, 16, or 17 years old, or even earlier, to ease the family's economic burdens or to conform with prevailing local practice. In Yemen, for example, Houria was married at so young an age that she was allowed to delay moving into her in-laws' home until she had her first menstrual period—two years later, when she was twelve.

Early marriages put an end to many women's hopes of continuing their education and permanently reduce their earning power. Pregnancies at an early age not only limit the life options of women but also threaten their health and the health of their children. The World Health Organization estimates that adolescent girls have a 20 to 200 per cent higher risk of dying from pregnancy-related causes than adult women (WHO, 1989). Children born to adolescent mothers have increased risks of disease and death. Nevertheless, within one or two years after their marriages, many of the women profiled were pregnant and bearing their first children. Those who were not, like Nourhan, frequently faced the disappointment and disapproval of their husbands and their families. An additional stress affecting women's reproductive decision-making and well-being is the pressure to continue childbearing in order to produce sons. Samya experienced this pressure from her mother-in-law.

The consequences of early marriage and frequent pregnancies, like other factors that contribute to adverse reproductive health status for many women in the region, should be considered in the light of both prevailing

⁵ In 1995, average age at first marriage was 23 years in the Arab world.

medical conditions and sociocultural considerations. Indeed, current conceptualizations of reproductive health reach beyond strictly medical considerations to encompass “reproductive choice, dignity, successful childbearing, and [the absence of] gynecological disease and risk” during the reproductive years and beyond (Zurayk, 1994:8). Reproductive choice implies access to health care services, including contraception.

Approximately 31 percent of women in the Arab world rely on modern contraceptive methods and an additional 6 percent use traditional methods (IPPF, 1996). The use of modern methods ranges from a high of 46 percent in Egypt to a low of 6 percent in Yemen (*Ibid.*).⁶ For a variety of reasons, many women who have achieved their desired family size do not make use of contraceptives. Rachidé recounts that the disruption of health services during the war in Lebanon prevented her from practicing family planning; Alia, as well, cites the absence of resources that frustrated her wishes to adopt family planning after her third child. Demographic and Health Surveys throughout the region have found that concerns about side effects and health consequences are a major impediment to contraceptive use. The experience of the women profiled here, who reach other women with services and information either in health facilities or their homes, supports the idea that access to a fuller contraceptive method mix together with adequate family planning counseling could lead to significant increases in the percentage of women who use contraception successfully.

Monitoring the health of the pregnant woman and her fetus and assuring delivery by a trained birth attendant are critical to safe pregnancy and successful childbearing. The availability of these services varies widely throughout the Arab world and is quite limited in many parts of the region. According to a 1992 survey, over 30 percent of pregnant women in the Gaza Strip lacked access to adequate prenatal care; more than half of all deliveries were not attended by a trained midwife; and only 17 to 30 percent of women received post-natal care. This situation has recently been addressed by the opening of the area’s first integrated reproductive health and family planning clinic in 1995 (UNFPA, 1997). As of 1995, only 16 percent of births in Yemen were assisted by trained personnel (IPPF, 1996).

⁶ While the contraceptive prevalence rates in the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf region remain rather low, at about 35 percent, infant mortality and maternal mortality rates approach those found in the technologically developed countries. Since these countries are not represented by the profiles, health and demographic indicators for the Gulf countries are not discussed here.

Inadequate access to and availability of appropriate care during pregnancy and childbirth translates into high maternal death rates for women in many parts of the Arab world. In Northern Africa, as an example, there are approximately 360 maternal deaths per 100,000 births. Given an average fertility rate of 4.5, a North African woman's lifetime risk of dying from pregnancy-related causes is estimated at 1 in 62. By contrast, the risk facing a North American woman is 1 in 4,000 (United Nations, 1997). Zurayk (1994:7), notes that the lifetime risk of maternal mortality starkly illustrates the impact of inadequate health conditions on "the quality of life and even survival of women in the our region." The fact that maternal deaths in the Arab world—as throughout the developing world—occur overwhelmingly from a few treatable conditions reflects the lack of priority that has been given to ensuring that appropriate reproductive and maternal health services, including emergency obstetric care, are widely available.⁷ Supporting and exacerbating this situation are sociocultural factors that veil matters relating to women's reproductive health, including widespread attitudes that pain and suffering related to pregnancy and childbirth are "normal" and to be borne in silence (UNICEF, 1996).

Another grave threat to women's reproductive well-being, gynecological morbidity, is underreported and understudied. Reproductive tract infections are often difficult to detect, and even when symptoms are painfully obvious, they may be ignored or neglected by women; again, the veil of silence that surrounds women's reproductive functions serves to discourage discussion of and delay prompt attention to such conditions. Self-reports certainly underestimate the prevalence of gynecological morbidity. A study in the Giza governorate of Egypt found a prevalence of over 50 percent for reproductive tract infections, genital prolapse and anemia among women in two villages. While not representative of Egypt or the Near East region, the study is a striking indication of the need for improved reproductive health services (Zurayk, 1994).

Adding to the burden of these conditions are the detrimental effects of such traditional practices as female genital mutilation, also known as female circumcision or excision. In different forms, the practice appears in several countries within the Arab world as well as in West, Central, and East Africa. Although unsupported by the tenets of Islam or indeed any religious doctrine, the practice is nearly universal in Egypt (El-Zanaty et al., 1996). While the degree to which excision contributes to female and infant morbidity and mortality has yet to be carefully quantified, research shows that both severe, immediate health effects and long-term complications are common (Dirie, 1992). Immediate effects, besides the severe pain caused by the procedure, can include hemorrhage, shock, sepsis, ulceration, and damage to tissue in the surrounding area; long-term consequences include chronic infections, cysts, scarring, painful sexual intercourse and sexual disfunctioning as well as difficulties in childbirth (WHO/UNICEF/UNFPA, 1997). Many medical practitioners also feel that excision increases women's susceptibility to hepatitis and HIV infection through the use of often unsanitary instruments and because of the scarring that results. No less significant, though less measurable than the physical effects, is the extreme psychological and emotional trauma caused by the procedure.

The practice of female excision is an entrenched social norm facing the Egyptian women profiled here. Social pressure to marry at an early age and immediately begin childbearing confronts them, along with many other

⁷ An important and exceptional example to note in this context is the case of Tunisia, where the widespread availability of maternal and child health care services and virtually universal access to family planning have contributed to reducing maternal mortality rates to the lowest in the region (Jacobson, 1994). As noted by Carla Makhoul Obermeyer, of particular significance is the fact that establishment of these services was accompanied by wide-ranging reforms instituted within the context of the Islamic legal code. These included measures requiring the formal consent of the bride for marriage, abolishing polygamy, and legalizing abortion services, as well as reforms granting women greater rights in marriage, divorce, and inheritance. The example of Tunisia suggests "the possibility for reforming gender and reproductive health policies while respecting cultural and religious traditions" (Jacobson, 1994:23).

women in Yemen, Palestine, and Lebanon. The vital need for better, more widespread reproductive health services and accurate information on reproductive options and well-being are recognized by virtually all of the women in the profiles. The specific ways in which many of these women have devoted themselves to helping address these needs are discussed in Chapter 4, Analysis of the Profiles (p. 107).

The Legal and Religious Dimensions

If any do deeds of righteousness—be they male or female—and have faith, they will enter heaven, and not the least injustice will be done to them. Sura Al Nissa, Verse 124.

O mankind, We created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other, verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is the most righteous.
Sura Al Hujjarat, Verse 13.

In principle, women in most Arab states enjoy equality with men in education, employment, and nearly all spheres of public life. Religion is a vital force in Arab countries and, while not all Arabs are Muslims, Islamic tenets and mores are prevalent throughout the Arab world. Qur'anic law gives women the right to own property, conduct business, and enter into contracts without their husbands' or fathers' consent (Omran, 1992). Rachidé of Lebanon understood this right and, with neither her husband's consent nor his consultation, bought a small piece of land in her own name. Nazha, however, sought her husband's cooperation and, once she found a piece of land suitable for her agricultural endeavors, asked her husband to join her as a co-signatory to the rental agreement.

Legal rights, however, do not always translate into reality. Many women, unaware of their full entitlement under the law, are unable to exercise their rights. Instead, as these stories illustrate, Arab women frequently are governed by customs and traditions that discourage women's active participation in social and economic affairs beyond the home, resulting in circumscribed opportunities that limit their contributions to community development. Clothed in the language of religion, tradition has often prevailed even when at odds with religious texts. While the Qur'an exhorts "seeking knowledge is the duty of all believing men and believing women," Arab women are often kept from formal schooling. In practice, they often must get permission from fathers, husbands, or other male relatives before enrolling in school, accepting a job, marrying, or taking any important action—or risk being disowned. The experiences of Hayat, Ibtissam and Samira in Yemen highlight this situation especially vividly. For these women, parity exists only on paper.

Reactionary movements, which have gained considerable momentum in recent years, seek to limit women to a few home-based activities, the most important of which are childbearing; taking care of infants, children and elderly family members; managing the household; and attending to husbands' needs. Women are allowed to participate in other activities only to the extent that such undertakings do not detract from their primary duties, thus perceived. This view of women's abilities arises from traditional patriarchal stereotypes that depict men as rational, strong and decisive and portray women as emotional, weak and compulsive. Such gender constructions contradict Qur'anic texts, in which no distinction is made between men and women with respect to belief and practice and therefore with respect to the determination of the individual's worth from the perspective of the Almighty.

Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has Faith, verily to him will We give a new Life and life that is good and pure, and We will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions. Sura Al Nahl, Verse 97.

Indeed, as noted by Riffat Hassan,

Not only does the Qur'an emphasize that righteousness is identical in the case of man or woman, but it affirms, clearly and consistently, women's equality with men and their fundamental right to actualize the human potential that they share equally with men. In fact, when seen through a non-patriarchal lens, the Qur'an goes beyond egalitarianism. It exhibits particular solicitude toward women as also toward other classes of disadvantaged persons. (Hassan, 1996:67)

Jurists throughout the ages in Muslim societies have relied on *Ijtihad*, or interpretation, to determine the correct meaning or significance of the Qur'anic texts. Different interpretations have been set forth by scholars living at various times and in diverse places because the Qur'an is perceived as inexhaustible in depth and scope and, hence, eternally responsive to evolving conditions. The rules that spring from the interpretations of the Qur'an and the *Hadith* (the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed) are known collectively as the *Shari'a*.

Historically and temporally situated, the *Shari'a* has been rendered understandable to each age and community by male jurists, all of whom lived within the closed circle of patriarchal societies and embraced the traditions and customs prevalent during their times. Consequently, the five major schools of interpretation and law that predominate today continue to reflect the assumptions and biases of the historical reality from which they arose, reducing the status of women to that of inactive, dependent beings who are neither full-fledged citizens of the state nor in full control of their destinies. The contrast with the status of Muslim women during the life of the Prophet, however, is striking and instructive. These early Muslim women were actively involved in every aspect of public life: they were business women, poets, religious leaders, and even warriors.

In fact, the ethical impulse of the Qur'an is toward equality for all. While specific, legalistic formulations do treat men and women differently—even, one could argue, unequally—these are temporally and spatially determined and, therefore, subject to further interpretation. Since the Qur'an values the human person as God's creation, it also values the individual's right to live in equality with other persons under God.

Gradually, Arab women are recognizing their rights, expanding and enriching prevalent gender constructions, and attempting to separate religion and tradition. It is essential for women in Muslim societies to attain a fuller understanding of their legal rights and to become well-versed in Islamic teachings; only in this way will they be able to advocate for and exercise those rights on a personal and/or collective level. In this manner they may help bring about social change that reflects the egalitarian principles of Islam.

Chapter IV. Analysis of the Profiles

The narratives presented here reflect the inseparable nature of women's multiple roles as producers and entrepreneurs, teachers and trainers, home managers and health workers, community organizers and political activists, wives and mothers. They also show that, despite their diverse circumstances, these women share certain attributes that have sustained them in their endeavors. To gain a fuller understanding of the process of self-empowerment, it is useful to consider the stories in light of the traits that enabled the women to realize their goals. These women are:

- **resourceful and innovative**, whether in pursuing alternatives to formal education, developing new economic opportunities, or addressing obstacles to personal goals;
- **spirited, determined, and persevering** in the face of various obstacles and the forces of adversity;
- **hard-working and goal-focused**, not wavering from essential aims (e.g., to succeed in a chosen field, to improve conditions for their families), though
- **adaptable to changing conditions and flexible** enough to assay different approaches to these ends;
- **invigorated by hope for the future**, particularly by prospects of improved opportunities for their daughters and for women on the whole;
- **self-aware**, with a clear sense of the conditions that color their personal situation, and conscious of potential limitations as well as possible options;
- **open to change**, and eager to develop new skills and gain new perspectives;
- **community-oriented** and eager to share skills and information they have acquired with others through both formal and informal means, and
- **interdependent** with, and respectful of, those within their social networks.

The narratives demonstrate that, regardless of the type of work that engaged them, the spirit with which these women approached their goals enabled them to feel empowered, rather than discouraged, when challenged. These women were able to change course when difficult situations arose, without altering their vision. As they developed new skills and embraced new ideas, they discovered new choices and capabilities. By strengthening their own capacities and sharing the benefits of their achievements with others, these women were able to reinvigorate the interdependence that has long sustained couples, families, and communities in the Arab world.

The analysis of the stories is divided into two parts. The first section considers the key *influencing factors* that have shaped these women's lives and enabled them to expand and redefine their roles. The second section examines key *spheres of action*—that is, the central areas of involvement these women have entered and the activities they have undertaken.

Although discussion focuses on primary spheres of action, it is important to recognize that many of the women profiled here pursue multiple involvements that are intrinsically related. Samira, Houria, and Hayat in Yemen; Atteyat in Egypt; Jamila, Halima, and Zohra in Tunisia; Jacqueline in Lebanon; Maysoon in Palestine; and others engage in diverse activities that nourish one another. Community outreach intersects with health education and literacy efforts; farmers, artisans and artists become entrepreneurs; and all, in essence, become teachers.

Further, the factors and conditions that spur women to take action often become the focus of their own endeavors. Many of the women profiled here struggled to acquire the education or vocational training they needed to become involved in activities outside the home. Sometimes they taught themselves. A profound

appreciation of the importance of education has led many of them to work in that area, promoting literacy classes, teaching, even founding schools. In the same way, their involvement with community health and development organizations not only encourages the women to consider alternative roles by exposing them to new ideas and information but also later offers them volunteer and paid positions working in the community.

Influencing Factors

The women profiled here are regarded as leaders, innovators, and role models within their communities. Their willingness to embrace and promote change sets them apart from other women. But what factors shape their capacity to step outside traditional roles, find new opportunities, and take on unconventional responsibilities? The profiles suggest that there are four major influences:

- Family members, especially parents and husbands;
- Broader social networks, including friends, neighbors, and colleagues;
- Education; and
- Exposure to new ideas and behaviors.

A fifth element—the resilience that grows out of personal struggle in the face of diverse obstacles—informs virtually every story included here. Each of these factors is considered below in light of relevant examples from the profiles.

Family Members

Research shows that people are more likely to adopt a new behavior when they believe that other people will approve, especially those whose opinions they value. Immediate family members, such as parents, grandparents, siblings, and spouses, can be especially important sources of inspiration, persuasion, motivation, and support. If they oppose a behavior, they can be equally important sources of discouragement, disagreement, and resistance.

Parents and grandparents. Parents and grandparents impart basic values, beliefs, and attitudes to their daughters and granddaughters during childhood. They also control girls' access to education, work, and sometimes marriage. Several of the women profiled cite the examples of independence and action set by their own mothers and grandmothers. Some grew up with mothers who financially supported the family in full or in part, in some instances after choosing to separate from their husbands. Others recalled their mothers struggling to provide their daughters with opportunities they never had, making sure that daughters could continue in school or, in one case, literally buying their freedom from an unwanted marriage.

Fathers also exercised a strong influence on many of the women profiled. Some of the women modeled themselves after supportive fathers. Zohra, a successful farmer in Tunisia, learned basic agricultural skills from her father as a child and still enjoys the fact that he encourages her endeavors. Soheir, an Egyptian doctor, and Fethia, a Tunisian educator, both identify their fathers as key sources of their social awareness and desire to help the community.

At times, fathers played an inhibiting role in their

“Can you imagine, before I got married, my brother—who is seven years younger than me, whom I carried in my arms and raised—had the power to forbid me to travel or to make any major decision!” —Ibtissam

daughters' efforts to move beyond traditionally defined women's spheres. Conflict sometimes defined the father-daughter relationship, but this conflict emerged as a vital, shaping force when resistance led to change. Hayat looks back on her childhood in Yemen as one long, continuous fight with her father over her right to an education, to choose her own husband, and to work. Similarly, after being disowned by her family for pursuing a career as a health worker, Samira, another Yemeni woman, was finally accepted by them when her professional skills enabled her to save her father's life. Recognition of her capabilities led to their appreciation of her chosen role and to reconciliation.

For still other women, the loss or absence of their fathers had a profound effect. In instances when a father died or was living elsewhere, the women were raised by their mothers, perhaps with the help of an uncle or some other male relative. The absence of a father may have taught these women to appreciate their ability to earn money, encouraged them to assume greater responsibility in the family, and inspired them to enter public life. In the striking case of Jamila, the eldest in her family, the father's death resulted in her taking on responsibility for the support of her mother and siblings. Largely owing to his inspiration, she took charge of her family's land and became a successful and respected farmer. Unique among the women profiled here, Jamila never married, devoting herself instead to her work and to fulfilling her role as the head of her family.

As many of these women became adults, married, and left home, they continued to look to their families for moral support. Fatima, a Palestinian activist, drew strength from her parents when the other residents of the refugee camp questioned her political involvements. On occasion, women sought their parents' backing when faced with disapproving husbands and in-laws. Jacqueline, a Lebanese craftswoman, could take comfort in the fact that her parents thought her job was respectable, even though her husband and in-laws disapproved of her working. (In contrast, when Samya asked her father about returning to work, he told her that she needed her husband's permission.)

Siblings. In the large families from which these women come, siblings are also an important factor during childhood and beyond. Salma was able to attend school in Yemen as a child because her brothers helped convince her reluctant father to permit it, while Samira obtained an education by running away from home at the age of 10 to live with an older married sister. In adulthood, Samya looked to her sister to teach her how to go into business when her husband would not cooperate, and Jacqueline asked her brothers for help delivering the hair ornaments she crafted. Siblings do not always play a positive role, however. A conservative brother of Umm Ali was her greatest obstacle in persuading her husband to allow her to peddle clothing, while Tagia's brother was deeply opposed to her career as a singer.

Husbands and in-laws. Once a woman marries, she enters a new series of family relationships, primarily with her husband but also with her in-laws, who may hold different assumptions about female roles from those of the family into which she was born.

Given traditional expectations about female roles, it is inevitable that tensions arise when women become involved in matters beyond the hearth. To avoid these problems, some women chose to marry men who supported their personal goals and outside involvements. Others in marriages arranged by parents or grandparents were fortunate enough to find that their husbands sympathized with their aspirations. Family tradition in Egypt, for example, dictated Sabah's marriage to a cousin. In this case, however, he became her greatest source of support, urging her to continue her health promotion work and even collaborating with her on a campaign against female genital mutilation.

In many cases, however, men initially resisted and even resented their wives' participation in community and economic activities. Remarks by family and friends about the proper role of a wife as well as community

gossip often reinforced their negative attitudes. Men felt especially threatened when they were unemployed or earning too little money to adequately support their family. When women like Rachid , Samya, and Umm Ali found ways to earn money to pay for their children’s basic needs, their husbands had to face the taunts of neighbors and acquaintances about men who could not support their families.

How do women cope with the tensions that arise when their roles change but their husbands’ attitudes and roles remain static? With few exceptions, the women turned to the arts of persuasion and negotiation. Rather than challenge their husband’s position as head of the family, they worked within the existing system to maintain family harmony. Their strategy was to defer to their husbands, gradually gain their support, and eventually win their respect. In this way, the women retained their husbands’ esteem, their families’ equilibrium, and the respect of the community while beginning to make and act upon their own decisions.

The profiles illustrate just how effective this strategy can be. There are many cases in which a husband who initially opposed his wife’s working outside the home slowly came to respect her accomplishments. A few husbands have begun to help their wives, either by joining their businesses or by taking on certain household tasks. For example, Jacqueline’s husband, who strongly believed that a woman’s place was at home, now admits that families in Lebanon need to have a second income and advances her money to buy raw materials for her crafts. Like other husbands who have grown to appreciate their wives’ contributions to the family’s well-being, he also has begun to share with her the decision-making on important matters. No matter how dramatically the relationship between husband and wife changes, the fundamental understanding of their roles remains the same: men continue to be regarded as heads of household and women continue to be responsible for the home and children, even when those women are the primary breadwinners in the family.

“Thank God, I have an understanding husband who supports me. We discuss all problems together. A woman should gain the admiration of her husband, and she should always show him respect.”

—Umm Ali

When faced with conservative parents and grandparents, unmarried women use the same combination of negotiating tactics and persistence to get permission to attend school, marry the man of their choice, or work outside the home. Rarely do they flout conventions by taking action without first getting permission. For Soheir, an Egyptian physician, this meant presenting a whole battery of arguments—social, religious, and personal—to convince her father to allow her to depart from tradition and marry outside the family. For Iman, an Egyptian health worker, it meant gradually eliciting the support of the grandmother who supervised her family by telling her about work-related issues, asking her for advice, and providing her with accounts of Iman’s movements outside the home.

Social Networks

Between the family and the community are informal social networks made up of friends, neighbors, and coworkers. Both information and social influence travel along the pathways provided by these networks, creating the potential to effect change. Informal networks are not constrained by a rigid hierarchy, so their routes of influence vary and are often unpredictable.

As young women grow up, friends and neighbors may exert a strong influence on their lives. Often they provide the support that girls need to follow their own aspirations, which may run counter to social convention and parental expectations. When Tagia was a small child in Yemen, for example, it was a neighbor, a truck driver, who encouraged her interest in singing despite the negative attitudes toward music that prevailed in the conservative community. For Maysoun, growing up in Palestine, friends from a nearby refugee camp played a critical role, giving her the strength to resist a marriage arranged by her father and to pursue a college education. Gihan, in Egypt, could not have developed or pursued her political ambitions without the group of like-minded friends with whom she founded an organization to lobby for women's rights.

Later in life, friends and neighbors may continue to provide women with the opportunities and encouragement they need to pursue their ambitions. Umm Ali began peddling on the invitation of a merchant and former neighbor, while Jacqueline's resolve to sell her pearl embroidery was reinforced by her neighbors' requests for her products. Some women found, however, that their immediate neighbors and the broader community impeded progress. Many women had to cope with gossip motivated by jealousy and anger when they first began to work outside their homes. In Samya's village in Egypt, some people intentionally left refuse and poured dirty water on the spot in front of her house where she set up her stall. In Palestine, men in the neighborhood pressured Nadia's husband to limit her work when she set up a sewing workshop. For a time, they succeeded.

The social networks of most Arab women are confined to the immediate community. A few of the women profiled here have networks that extend to colleagues and coworkers. In the formative stages of her career as a professional singer, for example, Tagia drew support from a nationally known traditional singer who served as her mentor—a role that she herself now fulfills for younger aspiring artists. When her family disowned her for pursuing work outside the home, Samira could rely on her colleagues at the Agriculture Office to help her through her pregnancies as well as to assist her with her work as a health promoter and agricultural outreach worker.

Participating in community-based activities and the networking that it entails galvanized many of the women profiled here into taking on expanded roles. Initially, many women found themselves the beneficiaries of organized outreach efforts. Sabah's family was contacted by a nurse to discuss the importance of good hygiene after childbirth. Because Sabah had lost many siblings to neonatal tetanus, she was deeply interested in the nurse's message. For Sabah and many other women, becoming informed about some area of social or community development led naturally to their participation in local activities. Many became outreach workers themselves. In Sabah's case, her newfound knowledge led her to join a team of volunteers promoting tetanus immunization in her Cairo neighborhood. Eventually she became a paid health care promoter and ultimately

***“The girls there were different from us, their dreams were different, what they wanted was different. Probably I am strong today because the little girls in Al Farah taught me to be.” —
Maysoun***

represented her community at an international conference. Community participation advanced her own opportunities and at the same time enabled her to improve her neighbors' lives.

Other women have been drawn into activities outside their homes by informal social networks of friends and peers. Friends told Iman about the local voluntary association and family planning center in her Alexandria community that provided her with training and job opportunities, leading to her work as a *ra'ida* (community health worker).

Bringing women who have led relatively isolated lives into a group with a clearly defined purpose—such as a literacy class or a small business loan program—begins a process that neither the individual nor the group's sponsor may have foreseen. When women come together in self-help and solidarity groups, they acquire knowledge and skills, add to the breadth of their experience, and assume new, more dynamic roles. The group helps strengthen their self-image and enhance their sense of efficacy. As they become involved, women become empowered. Participation changes them, transforming them into active members of the community and role-models.

Two factors are at work in these groups, both of which help women recognize their own capabilities and a wider range of options in their lives. First, the programs and activities sponsored by the group may teach new skills that have immediate, practical value. When Alia mastered reading and writing in a literacy class, when Jacqueline learned how to sew and embroider in a vocational course, and when Iman attended a primary health care course, these experiences changed the way these women viewed themselves. They felt able to find work and to advise other women. Second, the accomplishments of each woman in a group serve as an inspirational and practical model for others to emulate. Peer support and mentoring can build women's confidence, enhance their awareness of opportunities around them, and allow them to learn from the experiences of others.

Education

For the women in these profiles, education—ranging from basic literacy skills to university degrees—has profound value. It has given them the skills they need to achieve their dreams, create new opportunities, and overcome obstacles. Attaining even the most modest educational goals, however, has frequently involved considerable struggle. Many of these women received little or no education as children, either because their fathers opposed the education of daughters on principle, except for Qur'anic classes, or because the family lacked the money to pay the school fees. Some women dropped out of school in order to earn money for the household. Others were thwarted later in their choice of studies. Fatima was forced by her highly conservative brother to study elementary education in university rather than physical education because he felt that the latter would place her in classes with many men.

I used to go to school without the knowledge of my father. I used to sneak out of the window in the morning while he was having breakfast and come back home before he returned for lunch.” —Salma

Though often denied schooling as children, these women clung to their dreams of obtaining an education into adulthood. A combination of tenacity and effective use of available resources allowed them to achieve many of their personal aspirations despite practical obstacles and the opposition of family members. They have seized every possible opportunity for learning: enrolling in literacy classes to learn how to read, write, and

count; attending vocational courses to learn a craft; volunteering for primary health care training; acquiring business skills such as typing and accounting; and attending workshops and training courses offered by their employers.

Some women had parents who appreciated the importance of education. They made sure that their daughters as well as their sons had the opportunity to attend school, although their family's socioeconomic status dictated just how much education was affordable and appropriate. Umm Ali's father, for example, sent all 12 of his children, boys and girls alike, to primary school in a poor community outside Beirut. The families of Soheir and Gihan had a long-established tradition of higher education and encouraged their daughters to attend university. Karima became the first person in her family to attend university, largely because her widowed mother was determined that her daughter would have the education that she herself had been deprived of. She helped make sure that Karima finished her degree despite an early marriage and several pregnancies.

Exposure to New Ideas

Depending on their upbringing and their environment, women may be more or less aware of the restrictions and inequities prevailing social conditions impose on them. Awareness dawned on Ibtissam, for example, when she decided to enter a nursing program at the age of 14 and realized that any major decision she made in life required male approval. How individual women perceive their situations and the kinds of survival strategies they develop depend largely on how aware they are of different options in life. But as Mayoux (1995:243) notes, "The nature of poverty and gender inequality ... mean that many women are likely to have had less exposure to alternate ways of acting and thinking." Most often it is the women who are most disadvantaged, whose contacts and movements are most limited, who have the fewest opportunities to learn about different life options. These are the women for whom exposure to new ideas and strategies could make the essential difference.

Perhaps the most remarkable characteristic shared by the women profiled here is their ability to gain access to new ideas and opportunities. When Ibtissam entered the nursing program, she saw unveiled Egyptian nurses working and interacting with male doctors and patients. This experience impelled her to apply for training as a health worker. Many of the women were not exposed to new ideas and attitudes until later in life.

For some, a whole new array of options became available when they first visited a local community center to seek health care for their children or family planning services for themselves. Once there, they discovered literacy programs, sewing classes, health talks, and, above all, different ideas and outlooks. Attending community development programs became the first step in a personal odyssey for many. For example, after listening to health talks at a local clinic in Egypt, Atteyat became an informal family planning and health promoter in her neighborhood.

***For the first time in my life
a man had talked to me.
I was so stunned,
I was unable to answer."
— Ibtissam***

Attending university broadened the horizons of some of the women in these profiles. Fatima's university experience shaped her political and social awareness and provided her with the skills she needed to carry out her innovative community work in children's literacy and welfare. University training gave Soheir the institutional support she needed to launch a health education program in her village. Work itself led other women to discover different options and new ideas. When Samya joined the newly opened sewing assembly line in her Egyptian village, she found more than a job. She also discovered opportunities to socialize with people outside her family and to attend family planning talks and adult education courses. Similarly, Zohra gathered new ideas and information when she attended meetings of farmers', women's, and political associations in Tunisia. Political parties and political youth organizations enriched the experiences of Fethia and Jamila in Tunisia and Salma in Yemen and shaped the lives of Gihan in Egypt and Magida in Palestine.

A few of the women have also found inspiration in travel outside their communities. Samya's journeys to buy goods in nearby towns and cities in Egypt have broadened her outlook on life, and she, in turn, is bringing these outside influences to her village. Alia's ideas about life in Lebanon have never been the same since she lived with her husband in Germany for some years. Three of the Yemeni women profiled (Salma, Ibtissam, and Tagia) have traveled outside their country.

Persistence and Resilience

As the cases illustrate, Arab women must struggle for empowerment. To the extent that they seek to depart from entrenched practices, the Arab women profiled here meet resistance from and arouse the ire of close family members and the wider community. These reactions can be extreme, as when Rachidé was threatened with divorce, Samira was disowned by her parents, Houria was beaten by her brother-in-law, and Gihan was harassed by her male boss at an oil company. More moderate responses can be equally disheartening. Salwa's in-laws, who opposed her attending school, deliberately timed their visits so they would arrive when she was studying for exams. Neighborhood children would follow Tagia and mock her music by banging on sticks and cans.

In addition, many of the women have faced great hardships and losses completely unrelated to their own struggle to expand their opportunities. For women in Lebanon, Palestine, and Yemen, war and civil uprisings have been a painful fact of life, widowing their mothers, destroying their homes, disrupting the economy, and eliminating their husbands' jobs. Some have suffered losses from illness, natural disasters, and violent crime (Tagia's beloved husband was murdered).

No matter how great their losses or how numerous the obstacles, however, these women persevered. In many cases, their resilience is truly remarkable. Rather than acting as a disheartening influence, adversity appears to have reinforced their efforts to pursue cherished goals. These stories suggest that struggle is an essential component in personal growth and development. Adversity has nurtured leadership skills, encouraged the development of survival strategies, required decision-making, and provided opportunities essential to the process of empowerment. For several women in Palestine, the Intifada served as an outlet for political aspirations, provided an opportunity to establish networks with other women in the community, and even spurred the women to learn new skills. In Yemen, Houria's many personal misfortunes (including the loss of her father to civil war, her sister-in-law to ectopic pregnancy, and her mother and son to a devastating earthquake) increased her sense of self-reliance and strengthened her determination to struggle for independence and happiness.

***and I drowned myself with work
again in an attempt to change my
present and
my future.” —Magida***

In virtually every case, persistence has been rewarded, although it has taken some women many years to gain the approbation of others. Ultimately, these women have been recognized for their achievements and have won the respect of their families and peers. Some were accepted in the workplace and in the community long before their new roles were accepted at home. These women are proud to report that relatives, neighbors, and coworkers admire them, ask them for advice, and urge young women to emulate them. Some women, like Nazha, a highly successful farmer in Lebanon, have realized their goals of providing for their families, educating their children, or building a home or business. Although some women consider earning the community's respect and recognition to be their greatest accomplishment, most view improving their children's and family's welfare as their number one achievement.

Spheres of Action

As these profiles illustrate, Arab women are actors in every domain of life—sociocultural, economic, political, and public. Virtually all of the women profiled have multiple roles as wife, mother, community volunteer, and wage earner. Their activities are diverse, interconnected, and mutually reinforcing. A woman like Fatima is as much a community organizer and political activist as she is a teacher and entrepreneur. Jamila, as well as being a successful farmer, is active in local politics, focusing her efforts on community development initiatives. Atteyat, while working in her clothing store, disseminates health education messages and recruits women for literacy classes. Yet the life of each woman tends to have a focus—a vocation or avocation—that falls into one of the following spheres of action: community development; social and political activism; community and reproductive health; education; and the economy.

Community Development

The profiles of the women featured here as leaders in community development reflect the inseparable and natural links that connect community issues. Through their activities, these women show that being engaged with one aspect of social development means becoming engaged with others. Spurred by the wish to improve adverse conditions that have affected their families and friends, and working chiefly as volunteers, these women devote themselves to promoting literacy, improving community health conditions, increasing women's access to family planning and other services, and encouraging others to join in collective, ongoing efforts to ameliorate their situation. Their activities promote integrated approaches to development that encompass cultural, socioeconomic, health and educational concerns.

The literacy classes that Atteyat has organized provide vital skills in reading and writing to women in her Cairo neighborhood. But they also serve as a comfortable setting for Atteyat to offer information about family planning, health promotion, nutrition, and hygiene. In Yemen, Hayat's contributions to the community extend beyond her own milieu to reach women of all classes, including the *Akhdam*, a marginalized group whose members work primarily as street cleaners. She has developed a curriculum to teach disadvantaged girls and women to read, continues to teach classes herself, and even visits parents in their homes to promote better health practices and advocate continued education for young girls.

Promoting both literacy skills and formal education is also central to the work of Maysoon, but many of her activities are also aimed at raising awareness about vital public health issues in her Palestinian village. With the nursery that she established as a central locus, she has organized a campaign for safe drinking water, helped guide efforts to protect children and families from an epidemic of Maltese fever, and encouraged women to vaccinate their babies. Like Hayat, and like her compatriot Fatima, Maysoon also makes home visits in order to communicate directly with women who might not otherwise be reached, sharing important information with them and establishing and reinforcing social bonds.

Local groups or associations often raise individuals' awareness of social issues and stimulate their involvement in community activities (and sometimes beyond). In the same way, dynamic and committed individuals can act as catalysts, engaging others in community development efforts. Maysoun promotes women's active participation in the public sphere because she views such activities as an important aspect of women's responsibilities as citizens. Participation in community development starts with established networks and generates new and diverse types of partnerships. Fatima, in Palestine, drew not only upon her educational training but also on various local resources to create innovative programs at the children's library she directs. Working closely with the local women's committee, parents, health professionals and a local theater group, she has established imaginative programs for children and their families that fulfill important needs in the community and promote ongoing involvement by others. Fatima, like many of the other women profiled here, has become a catalyst for engaging others in transformative action within their communities.

Social and Political Activism

For some women, community involvement goes beyond addressing the immediate economic and health problems of their neighbors. These women have a broader vision: changing the status quo within society at large. Their personal experiences with the constraints facing women has spurred them to work in the larger political arena in an effort to transform those aspects of family, social, and political relations that disempower women. Karima, who teaches high school in Yemen, sees her job as more than educating the teenagers in her class. She considers herself an advocate for girls' education and meets with parents to convince them to allow their daughters to remain in school. In Egypt, Gihan

and her friends felt compelled to establish a political organization, the *Bint el-Ard*, to disseminate their belief in women's rights and to lobby against laws and traditions that discriminate against women. Despite formidable obstacles set in their way by those in power, Gihan and her colleagues are determined to get their message out to as many women as possible.

Given the wars and civil unrest in Lebanon, Palestine, and Yemen, it is not surprising that some of the women profiled have focused considerable energies on political issues. Magida was drawn into the Palestinian liberation movement at an early age and was twice imprisoned for her active role in fighting the occupation. Other Palestinian women, including Maysoun and Nourhan, have established or joined women's committees in support of the Intifada, participated in demonstrations, and helped political

prisoners and their families. Maysoun hopes that by participating in a political support group, the women in her village will themselves become more independent and willing to break with conservative traditions.

As women broaden their outlook to include wider political issues, their changing perceptions of gender roles and responsibilities help shape the next generation. As these profiles indicate, well-informed, socially

“Staying at home makes you feel like a prisoner; you do not know what goes on around in the world... You cannot learn new things; your horizon is blocked.”— Alia

conscious, economically active mothers are more likely to perceive the importance of investing in the health and education of daughters as well as sons. These women try to treat their sons and daughters the same, often over the protests of older family members. They advise their daughters to stay in school, to have small families, and to continue working after they marry. These child-rearing strategies will have a permanent impact, because the children are being raised to recognize the importance of women's roles and equality between the sexes.

Community and Reproductive Health

Historically, women's reproductive health needs have been neglected by women themselves as well as by their families, their communities, and the wider society. The women profiled here have made concerted efforts to improve maternal and child health within their own families and in the larger community. They have helped to provide family planning information and services, worked to reduce infant and maternal mortality, and, as their knowledge has grown, campaigned against harmful practices such as early marriage and female genital mutilation.

Family planning. Nearly every one of the women in these profiles practices and advocates family planning. Several of them cite the toll multiple, closely spaced pregnancies took on their mothers as an influence in their own decisions to plan their families, while others point to the material and emotional deprivations they suffered growing up as part of a large family. These women view family planning as an important tool in realizing their dreams of giving their own children every possible opportunity and advantage. Even women who have large families themselves recognize, without exception, the importance of family planning for the physical and mental health of women and their children; they also fully appreciate the financial burdens of raising many children. Most of the women profiled state that they would encourage their daughters to have one or two children and to space their pregnancies.

Being able to regulate their fertility and having access to infertility treatment are crucial not only to empowering women but also to wider social and economic development. Repeated, closely spaced pregnancies, encouraged by husbands and in-laws who believed that producing children was their main contribution to the family, have kept some of the women profiled here tied to their households for longer than they wished. Seeking family planning services marked an important and necessary first step in taking control of their own lives.

Enhanced communication and understanding between spouses is another benefit that often comes with family planning. Before adopting a contraceptive method, the women profiled here discussed their desire to space or limit the number of their children with their husbands. Negotiating family size can encourage joint decision-making in other areas, such as how to spend the family's income or educate the children. As a young wife, Alia felt obligated to follow her husband to Germany and then back to Lebanon, although she opposed both moves. Discussing family planning with her husband and coming to a joint decision to use a contraceptive method was an important step in changing their relationship to one of mutual respect, in which they consult one another on important household and family matters.

but we decided 'this will be the last child....' This is how I started coming to the center and discovered that there were possibilities to better my lot."

— Alia

Recognizing the importance of family planning, several of the women have volunteered for family planning outreach activities or pursued a career as a family planning and health worker. The information Atteyat received when she visited a local health care association for family planning services was so compelling that she became an informal family planning promoter in her neighborhood, even accompanying women who were hesitant to see a provider alone. In Iman's case, her mother's continual pregnancies motivated her to become a family planning promoter even before she married. After she finished her training as a *ra'ida* (community health worker), her mother became one of Iman's first clients.

Community health care. In countries with high rates of maternal and infant morbidity and mortality, women are sensitized to health problems from an early age. They see death and disease taking its toll on their immediate families, as when Maysoon's mother died in pregnancy, Sabah's newborn brothers and sisters succumbed to tetanus, and Houria's sister-in-law suffered repeated ectopic pregnancies. This kind of personal experience has motivated many of the women to work for improved health conditions in their communities, frequently as outreach workers visiting women in their homes to explain the importance of hygiene, immunization, family planning, prenatal care, and medically supervised delivery. After further training, some have become qualified midwives, while one, Soheir, has realized her childhood dream of becoming a physician and working to improve public health conditions in her Egyptian village. Iman, working as a *ra'ida* in her Alexandria community, feels that her greatest achievement has been to help increase the number of women who come to the local clinic for care during pregnancy and childbirth.

Health-related concerns are so pervasive that they draw the attention even of women who work in other fields. For example, Maysoon's overall goal is to improve the quality of life in her Palestinian village, and she considers education to be the key. Because of the great need to improve local health conditions and raise public awareness of health concerns, she uses her nursery school to disseminate information about maternal and child health, communicable diseases, safe drinking water, and other community health issues. Similarly, Alia has used her job cleaning laboratory equipment in a clinic to learn about maternal and child health. Now she draws great gratification from her unofficial position as health advisor in her neighborhood.

In the Arab world, the fact that primary health care workers deal mostly with women and children, rather than men, contributes to the notion that health care is an appropriate field for women seeking work outside the home. But many of the women profiled still had to contend with considerable obstacles when they sought to work in health services. In conservative areas of Yemen, for instance, any type of work outside the home is considered inappropriate for women, and both Samira and Houria were disowned by their families after pursuing careers in health care.

Early marriage. For women who work as health care promoters and providers, including Iman and Sabah in Egypt, arguing against early marriage may become an integral part of their job. Most people in Sabah's poor Cairo community, for example, see early marriage and large families as desirable because they create more hands to work in the labor-intensive garbage recycling trade. To fight this view, Sabah and the other health promoters stress the health consequences of early marriage and pregnancy and refer the girls to a local development association that offers paid jobs and the promise of a cash wedding gift to those who delay marrying until they are 18 years old.

The women profiled here seem to appreciate the obstacle that early marriage and pregnancy present to pursuing an education even more than they do the health consequences of early pregnancy. Three of the women profiled (Hayat, Ibtissam, and Maysoun) took the unusual step of rejecting early marriages arranged by their parents, largely to stay in school. As a teenager, Soheir actively campaigned in her Egyptian village for delaying marriages until the brides have completed their educations.

“Then I decided that I didn’t want this man as my husband and that my ambitions lay in continuing my education. It was a giant step forward and, from then on, my life started.”
—Maysoun

Female genital mutilation. The traditional practice of female genital mutilation, also known as female circumcision or excision, is a primary concern of women aware of its dangers. In Egypt, where the practice of excision is nearly universal (El-Zanaty et al., 1996), four of the women profiled have taken action to mitigate the potential health impacts of female genital mutilation. Their varying approaches to the problem illustrate the tension between tradition and change that permeates the lives of all of the women profiled. With the active collaboration of her husband, Sabah has organized a campaign against female genital mutilation in her Cairo neighborhood and has helped write and videotape a play on the issue. Atteyat has kept a lower profile on this potentially volatile issue, discussing the arguments against the practice only with women who know and trust her. Conceding to family and social pressure to support excision, Iman focuses on discouraging women from resorting to nontraditional practitioners so as to minimize the risks of infection. Soheir, who has been trained as a doctor, supports the practice on religious grounds and is solely concerned with how it is carried out. She encourages traditional practitioners, whom she feels excise less tissue than physicians, to perform the operation and teaches them how to improve their standards of hygiene.

Ethnographic research suggests that female genital mutilation continues because there is little social support to end it. If women opposed to it are widely seen and heard, they will serve as role models for other women who will themselves become active opponents of excision. As Iman’s painful compromise illustrates, however, it can be extremely difficult for women to speak out against such a deeply rooted tradition. Sabah and Atteyat are both making important contributions in this direction by spreading word of the detrimental effects of excision in their communities, but they began to address the issue only after establishing themselves as respected community authorities on other health and development issues. Their words also carry extra weight because they speak directly to women as peers who appreciate the force of tradition, rather than as outside experts.

Education

In countries with high overall illiteracy rates, the literacy rates and educational levels of women tend to lag far behind those of men. In most Arab countries the majority of adult women are illiterate (Zurayk, 1994.) Even after a century of girls’ education in Egypt, the illiteracy rate among women remains high, at 46 percent, while female illiteracy rates in Morocco and Yemen are 69 and 88 percent, respectively. Some authors have argued that Islam inhibits women’s education, but others dispute this view. One theorist notes, “The prevailing notion that Islam is an impediment to female education is inaccurate” (El-Sanabary, 1989). The Qur’an, as well as supplementary religious texts, exhort men and women alike to pursue learning and scholarship as an integral aspect of the faith and practice of Islam. Moreover, contemporary evidence demonstrates that Arab women have made significant strides with respect to educational achievement in the past three decades. In Jordan, illiteracy among girls 15 to 24 is only 3.5 percent. (Ibid.) These stories show,

however, that for individual women in several of the Arab countries, obtaining access to even basic educational opportunities can be an intense struggle.

Education is critical to development. It enables women to become aware of options and opportunities and to gain knowledge and skills that will inform their life decisions as well as better qualify them for remunerative work. Research shows that educated women are more likely than their less educated counterparts to marry later, have smaller families and healthier children, and use effective methods of contraception (UN, 1995). Jordan and Lebanon, the countries with the highest rates of literacy among women in the Arab world, show high rates of utilization of health services during pregnancy (Zurayk, 1994). Further, educated mothers are more likely to send their daughters to school and less likely to pass on traditional attitudes toward gender roles than women with little or no education (World Bank, 1994).

Every woman profiled in this project, regardless of her own educational level, appreciates the overwhelming importance of education and wants to extend its benefits and opportunities to other people in her family and community. For these women, educating their children, especially their daughters, is a top priority. They are determined to send their children to school even if they have to earn the money for school fees themselves. Some have even enrolled in literacy classes so they can help their children with their schoolwork. Many of the women have also encouraged other family members, including their siblings and aunts, to get an education. Iman personally taught her own mother and her uncles' wives how to read and write, and Samira encouraged her husband to train as a medical assistant and helped him with his lessons.

The commitment to education often extends beyond the women's own families to the larger community. They have become literacy workers, vocational trainers, teachers, and educational advocates. Two of them, Maysoon and Fethia, have even founded schools (a nursery and a vocational school, respectively), in the belief that learning is the greatest gift that they can give young people. A third, Fatima, has expanded the programming at a local children's library so that it has become an educational haven for children. And Salma, who as a young girl steadfastly persisted in her efforts to attend school, has excelled in her unusual and dynamic position as a producer of educational television programs for Yemeni students.

“I want to do better than my parents. I would like my children to pursue their education. I do not want my daughters to get married early and start worrying about babies and money.” —Nohad

While some of the women work with young people, others devote their energies to teaching adult women who have never had the opportunity to attend school. These women consider education to be an integral part of the larger issue of women's self-empowerment. Atteyat uses her literacy classes as a forum to discuss family planning, health matters, and the importance of women's roles, while Magida develops vocational training classes for Palestinian village women to help them become independent and realize their dreams.

While the individuals profiled here universally respect the power of education to broaden women's opportunities, varying attitudes emerge regarding the valuation of education for men. Alia, for example, readily apprenticed her two sons to a plumber and a carpenter when they did poorly at school, certain that they

would be able to earn a good living as skilled craftsmen. In contrast, she is encouraging all three of her daughters to continue their education. Umm Ali apprenticed two of her sons who were not performing strongly as students immediately after they finished primary school. Her two other sons are successful students, but she has invested particularly heavily in her daughter's education, sending her to a private school and seeking a scholarship for her.

Such decisions are informed by practical considerations as well as by individual academic aptitudes. To some degree, they represent reactions against prevailing mores. Iman's Alexandria community, for example, is marked by a gender-based disparity in education that, at first glance, favors women. Girls tend to stay in school longer than boys, so that women frequently are better educated than their husbands. However, underlying this situation is the attitude that holding a "proper" job and earning a steady income is more important than education, a bias that places a higher value on men's activities than on women's. Her awareness of this discrepancy has done much to shape Iman's commitment to advancing women's educational and occupational opportunities in her community.

Economic Activities

A constellation of factors, including economic conditions that limit job opportunities for both men and women, customs and traditions that restrict women's mobility outside the home, and a lack of marketable skills, often hinder women in their efforts to find employment. Social networks can also temporarily impede women's entry into the job market. According to some husbands, parents, in-laws, and neighbors, it is improper for women to work outside the home or even to earn money. They argue that it is the man's job to support the family financially and the woman's to take care of the home and children. Some husbands became resentful when their wives earned more than they did or suspicious when the women's work involved interacting with other men. Local gossip and derogatory comments from neighbors and acquaintances (according to the women, often motivated by envy and jealousy) reinforced these husbands' opposition.

Despite these entrenched attitudes, many of the women profiled did enter the labor market, for a variety of reasons. For many, going to work was a matter of simple economic necessity because the family's breadwinner had died or lost his job. Amina dropped out of university and began sewing at home when her father died and left the family without any source of income. Rachidé repeatedly tried to find paying work because her husband's income was both limited and erratic. Other women, such as Nazha and Alia, viewed work as the only way to realize their dreams for their family. Their husbands could support the family at a subsistence level, but the women wanted more: to send their children to school, to build a house, and to improve their standing in the community. Still other women, such as Iman and Tagia, sought self-fulfillment in work. They wanted to do something with their lives beyond marrying and caring for a family.

Whatever their circumstances, these women have been innovative in their search for work. For those with children, finding a part-time job or work that they could do at home was a priority. Many found the flexibility they needed by going into business for themselves, either by purchasing a sewing machine to use at home or peddling goods from door to door in the neighborhood. Many women relied on informal social networks to learn about job openings and business opportunities. An old family neighbor suggested peddling clothes to Umm Ali, and a merchant with whom Mariam was acquainted helped her gain entry into trade.

Other women found ways to acquire the skills or knowledge they needed to find employment, attending vocational classes or asking people in the business for advice. Rachidé was one of the most persistent and creative: once she learned that peddling clothes was a good way to make money, she taught herself the basics of the business by carefully observing the transactions at garment merchants' shops. Samya traveled to her

sister's home in a distant town every week for two years to learn how to deal with suppliers, attract customers, and keep accounts.

Informal social networks are also an important source of credit for women. Women with little formal education, only negligible experience with formal institutions, and little or no collateral are often unprepared and, consequently, often reluctant to approach established financial institutions for credit. The availability of informal and semi-formal credit networks can provide seed monies for a fledgling business. Umm Ali joined a small group of women that borrowed money from a local social development center to expand their businesses. Members of the loan group rely on one another for mutual support and practical advice, and the success of one member inspires the others.

Like many of their peers who live in traditional settings, these women frequently began their economic activities inconspicuously, with "women's work" such as sewing or by peddling goods to their immediate neighbors. As these profiles demonstrate, their first modest successes gave the women the self-confidence and capital to expand and formalize their activities. Clothing peddlers (like Atteyat and Rachidé) opened boutiques. Nazha, a landless agricultural worker, rented land to cultivate for her own profit. One of the women profiled, Nadia, used the earnings from her sewing at home to build up a large textile workshop with many employees. A knitting machine manufacturer later hired her to market its products and gave her more advanced training.

Then there is the remarkable example of Halima, a Tunisian entrepreneur. While building her own house, she realized how important having high-quality basic materials is to sound construction. Starting from a meager capital base of 100 dinars and demonstrating uncommon resourcefulness, commercial savvy, and energy, she built up a thriving business in construction materials.

Once these women decided on some kind of work, they were willing to make sacrifices and take risks in order to succeed. Some exhausted their savings or sold their jewelry to purchase goods to sell, a sewing machine, or a plot of land. Zohra has been willing to take out development loans to try new ventures, such as poultry and dairy farming, even though they do not always repay her investment. For other women, the problem has been finding the time rather than the money to put into their work. They have had to incorporate their new jobs into already busy schedules, working while children are in school and staying up late to make sure that household chores are completed or relying on older children to help with household tasks and child care.

"Sometimes I had to cook at 1:00 at night. I did not complain; this was the price to pay for my self-fulfillment!"
— Jacqueline

Without exception, these women have found their sacrifices to be worthwhile. In some cases, the financial rewards have had a profound impact on the family's quality of life, because the women spend their incomes on their families—especially their children—rather than on themselves. They pay for day-to-day household expenses and school fees and sometimes, like Nazha and Rachidé, save for new homes. Research has confirmed the beneficial impact of women's work on families, showing that "expanding women's economic opportunities and increasing the income they control result in greater economic efficiency, reduced child mortality, improved child health and nutrition, and less poverty, as well as giving women greater control over their own destinies" (World Bank, 1995:6). These cases are further evidence of this relationship: Alia and Nadia note that their work has both enhanced their own decision-making roles in the family and allowed their children to continue their studies.

Economic success builds women's sense of self-worth, provides them with an income, and so strengthens their negotiating position within the family. When a woman contributes to the family's finances, she moves from a dependent or even submissive role to a new, stronger position. Many of the women profiled found that they had a greater say in family decisions once they started contributing to the family's income. Some, like Alia and Nadia, have complete control over their earnings, directing most of their money toward their children. Nadia paid for her son to attend college when her husband refused to do so. Others, like Umm Ali and Atteyat, combine their earnings with their husbands' and jointly decide on expenditures. Regardless of how their earnings are used, the women's newfound influence in household matters has extended beyond purely economic decisions to other areas, such as family size and child rearing. This change has been particularly notable among women whose social networks accentuate gender inequalities in domestic roles and responsibilities.

Once the value of a woman's work becomes clear, her status within the community is enhanced. This community recognition may be the most gratifying result of all. Working women report that their sisters, sisters-in-law, and other women in the neighborhood envy them their freedom and their way of life and respect them for their ability to contribute financially to their family's well-being. Nadia is considered such an exemplary role model in her Palestine community that women have named their daughters after her, while Tagia has become so famous a singer that she represents her country at official events nationally and abroad.

Among the entrepreneurs featured here are women who have used their talents to educate or train other women so that they, too, can learn a remunerative trade. A case in point is Jacqueline who, after nearly a decade of experience as a skilled craftswoman, began to share her expertise in pearl embroidery with students in three development centers around Beirut. Teaching has given her a deep sense of purpose: "Imagine that when I go to the Dahia, young girls and women call me "the teacher" and show me respect. I feel I am giving something of value to them. I feel proud of myself!"

This discussion of the market economy is not intended to minimize the vital contributions women make in the non-cash sector and in the personal development of their families and their communities. To do so would reinforce the assumptions of too many national economic surveys and research studies that seriously underestimate all types of women's economic activity: within the household, as seasonal and part-time laborers, and as unpaid workers on family farms and in family businesses. Nevertheless, as these profiles illustrate, entry into income-generating activity is an important factor in the process of self-empowerment. Thus increased access to opportunities for remunerative work is essential to broadening women's overall life options.

"...my self-confidence grew and I felt that I was an independent entity and I was able to discuss everything with my husband on equal grounds."
—Nourhan

I would ever give up studying and working; I am determined to continue the struggle for a better world for my children." —Karima

Conclusion

Enabled, and in some cases compelled, by their personal experience and circumstances, the women portrayed here have moved beyond the bounds of hearth and home to transform their lives. They have made exemplary use of available resources; they have sought and gained access to information, education and practical skills. Access to these resources and information has in turn revealed an expanded range of choices, opening the way to new life options; by exercising choice and building on these options, these women have created still other opportunities that help them to realize their hopes. Their activities and achievements in the world outside the home—whether holding a job, establishing a business, or volunteering in a community program—have brought them self-confidence, the social skills needed to make their way in the world, and greater financial security. In turn, these achievements have strengthened their role as respected decision-makers within their family circle. Women thus empowered become role models for others: often unknowingly, their actions and attitudes influence those of the people around them. In this way, the transformed individual becomes a transforming force in and for her environment.

Recommendations and Implications for Women's Social Development Initiatives

These profiles portray women who have effectively overcome obstacles that might have circumscribed their lives. Drawing on their inner fortitude, and supported in their endeavors by friends, family, or acquaintances, they have changed their circumstances for the better. They have also provided greater opportunities for a better life for their children and others whose lives they have touched. These narratives offer compelling accounts that may instill in other women a sense of self-efficacy and inspire them to action.

An important goal of this project is to encourage agencies involved with women's social development initiatives to base their project design and funding decisions on the real needs of women at the community level. The following recommendations embody that approach:

- **Offer access to new ideas, information, and resources that can help women expand their life options, including those affecting their economic, social, legal, and health status.** Awareness of diverse options and exposure to new ideas are essential prerequisites to making informed life choices and pursuing broadened opportunities. Women need to know that options exist and that change is possible. Development programs are well-positioned to promote awareness of the possibilities for such change within the context of each community.
- **Promote diverse economic opportunities that move beyond women's traditional income-generating activities.** Traditional approaches to women's "income-generating activities" that feature sewing and embroidery projects have all too often been embraced by development agencies, with the unintended consequence of keeping women in the developing world on the fringe of economic change. Such projects have not helped women to become full participants in economic life and have kept them largely confined to their homes, with little engagement in the public sphere. Further, the income generated has been, in general, insignificant compared with the time spent on the activities. Increasingly, women have discovered that such activities are not economically viable and have turned to other, more lucrative pursuits, often without the help of development entities or organizations. Meeting the needs of women who are ready to undertake a more vital involvement in the economic life of their communities is a key challenge now facing development agencies.
- **Facilitate the process of obtaining credit and loans.** Financial credit given to women is a worthwhile investment. No matter how small the actual sum might be, it furnishes the initial encouragement to launch an economic activity. The example of revolving funds based on collective commitment or "social collateral," as used by the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, demonstrates that women repay their loans in almost all cases. Such funding resources are essential in promoting women's economic participation, especially as women often lack the necessary collateral to obtain loans from formal financial institutions. The confidence women gain through applying for, obtaining and repaying a loan is hard to measure but is of critical importance.
- **Foster social support for women's education, personal development, and active participation in public life.** The support of family members is a powerful enabling factor in a woman's efforts to reach her full potential. Promoting support for girls' and women's education is crucial in this regard. This effort can be integrated into parent-school interaction and outreach activities within communities and should be promoted through the mass media. Parents must be reminded of their pivotal role in supporting their daughters and encouraging them to be independent and self-confident.

- **Help project compelling, realistic depictions of pro-active women that offer inspiring examples and counter inaccurate stereotypes.** As the 21st century nears, the images of passive, subordinate Arab women found in schoolbooks and the media are outdated and no longer relevant. Women's groups, social development entities, and responsible communication professionals should project new images reflecting the diversity and dynamism of women's roles in the community, home, and workplace.
- **Help women better understand their legal rights and how to obtain them.** If women do not know what their rights are, they cannot claim them. As noted by Makhlof Obermeyer, the fact that "Islam explicitly recognizes women's rights to own property, engage in commerce, and manage their own affairs [is] an aspect of Islamic doctrine... that can become the basis for broader interpretations of equality under the law." (Cited in Jacobson, 1994:31.) Knowing what one is entitled to and how to obtain it is empowering. Development agencies can help support projects and local initiatives that address this largely unmet need.
- **Build on the strengths of social networks to provide outreach and support to women.** Development agencies can tap these networks to reach women who may be otherwise relatively isolated from information and opportunities and assist them in gaining access to services and programs.
- **Help women safeguard their health by becoming informed about their needs and their rights to appropriate and adequate services.** Not only do many harmful practices persist, but also conditions relating to reproductive life and childbearing are poorly understood and shrouded in silence. Women suffer—and die—needlessly as a consequence. Persistent high maternal mortality rates throughout the developing world attest to this situation. Women should be encouraged by community groups, women's associations and development agencies to become health activists, capable of recognizing their needs and demanding and exercising the right to necessary services.
- **Seek women's active participation in decision-making about project design and approach.** When local women help define development needs and design development projects, they will share responsibility for as well as influence over the decisions and resources that can affect them and their communities.

Activist women around the world are combating discrimination against women in education, health care, employment, and involvement in public life. In the Arab world, countless women—particularly those of lower and lower-middle socio-economic status—still confront social and legal barriers in their efforts to attend school or university, gain practical skills, seek employment, and exercise options perceived elsewhere as elemental rights. Local, national and regional women's organizations should address the pressing needs of these women by designing innovative yet realistic programs—programs that arise from local definitions of development—that support women and their communities in the building of equitable societies.

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The following video profiles are available as part of the *Arab Women Speak Out* project.

Egypt

Atteyat
Samya

Lebanon

Jacqueline
Umm Ali

Palestine

Magida Fethia
Maysoon

Tunisia

Ibtissam
Zohra

Yemen

Salma

For copies of the video profiles, additional project materials or information, please contact CAWTAR or the Near East Division at JHU/CCP.