

The Odds Doubled

Women and Their Struggle during the Fight against COVID-19



By Karmel Najjar

W

omen in Palestine fall victim to many forms of gender-based discrimination in social, political, and economic life. The challenging and restrictive environment for women has introduced additional

formal and informal barriers that limit their abilities to participate actively in the market economy. Limited mobility, reduced market-access opportunities, and scarcity of market information and resources, as well as the stereotypical social norms and traditions, hamper the potential contribution of women through business ownership and growth. Despite the fact that MSMEs (micro, small, and medium enterprises) constitute 96 percent of the Palestinian private sector, only a quarter are owned by women, and of the 65 percent of Palestinian women who have expressed an interest in establishing a business, only 15 percent have done so.ⁱ This boils down to a myriad of challenges that women face while establishing or sustaining a business, ranging from access to finance and access to markets to scarcity of market information and resources, as well as the legal and regulatory barriers that continue to restrict women's participation in the economy and limit their business development.

Furthermore, in terms of the workforce participation level, women are still underrepresented in the economy and workforce participation. The gap between males and females in the workforce participation rate in Palestine remains very large (according to the results of the Labor Force Survey 2019). Compared to the male participation rate, the female participation rate in the labor force was and still is very low: 18 percent (17 percent in the West Bank and 19 percent in the Gaza Strip). Among males, the rate was 70 percent (74 percent in the West Bank and 62 percent in the Gaza Strip).ⁱⁱ

However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated impacts of the crisis have exacerbated the challenges that already exist and put increased financial strains particularly on groups that are already vulnerable, including women. In Palestine, women-led MSMEs across almost all sectors are on the receiving end of the crisis, bearing the lingering uncertainty and facing dire economic consequences as a result of the unsold inventories and a slowdown in trading activities. Market access has been particularly

challenging to women with small businesses in light of the restrictions imposed by COVID-19. The three-month full lockdown and subsequent partial lockdowns, including frequent closures of cities, have severely affected women-led MSMEs on many different levels, limiting their ability to access markets. A study by UN Women conducted in March 2020 has shown that 95 percent of women-led MSMEs were negatively affected by the pandemic: 27 percent have had to shut down since the pandemic's outbreak, and 53 percent are considering laying off

and the associated economic crisis have increased the drudgery of unpaid work for women as well as the demand and need for both unpaid care work (as women are perceived by society to be the "primary caregivers") and paid work. According to the survey, 9 percent of the women respondents reported that the childcare burden is limiting their abilities to continue operating their businesses.^{iv}

The pandemic has also increased the overall burden on working women who serve as unpaid caregivers in



Photo courtesy of UNFPA.

their workers. In addition, 42 percent of women respondents reported lower demand for their products, whereas 9 percent reported that the movement restrictions imposed by the government limited their ability to access raw materials.ⁱⁱⁱ Moreover, the COVID-19 outbreak

the society, which constitutes work that is over and above their regular everyday job and another layer of burden in terms of homeschooling and childcare in light of school closures. Many women workers are struggling with balancing different responsibilities while dealing with the



■ Sweets from To You from My Home (الكم من بيتي) campaign in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The campaign aims to mitigate the risks of women's businesses and help them market their stockpiled products during the pandemic.

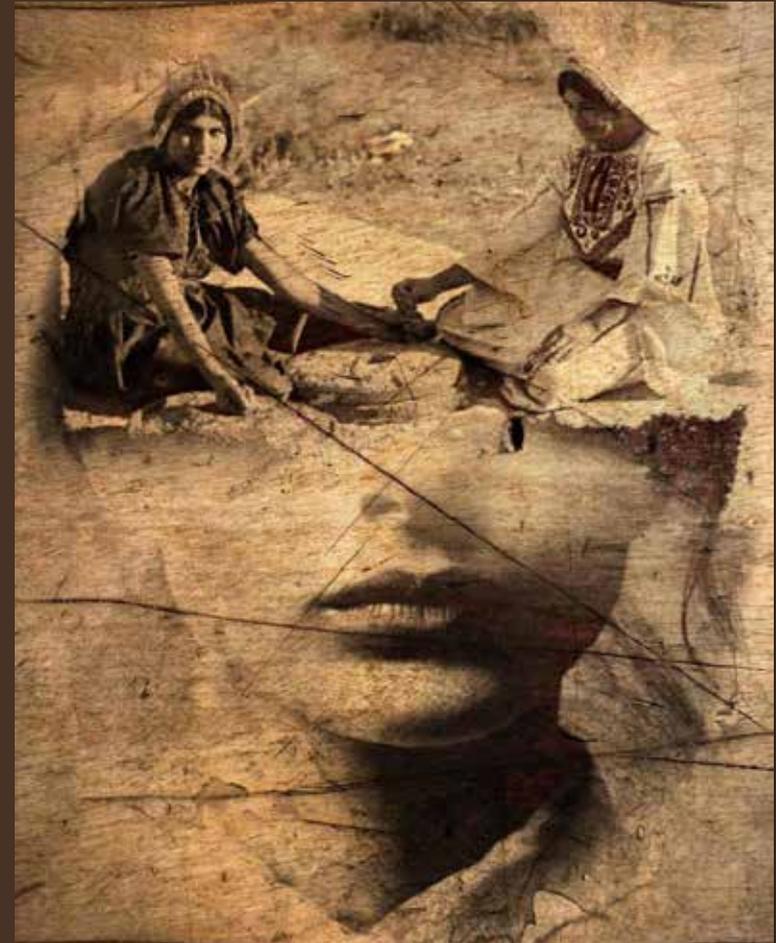
challenging business environment due to the pandemic. Hence, it is necessary for the government to promote flexible work arrangements for female and male workers and equal treatment of female and male workers – particularly those who have children – to ease the burden of working women, especially after introducing homeschooling and online learning due to school closures.

While the negative impacts of COVID-19 will endure for years to come, women will continue to be on the front line of the fight against the pandemic, simultaneously being subjected to different forms of discrimination and facing obstacles on multiple levels. Many livelihood opportunities that women – particularly small-business owners – rely on will be at risk due

to higher levels of vulnerability and lower resilience of these groups because of their business size. This calls for several response efforts and interventions, which should be targeted by the government towards supporting women-led MSMEs to cope with the crisis and mitigate the risks of the closedown of women's MSMEs.

Strengthening women economically through integrating them into markets, increasing their market readiness and their abilities to compete in the markets, and therefore increasing their income is a viable and tested strategy for achieving women's empowerment and eliminating gender inequality, which can provide a platform for greater confidence to promote, support, and increase women's economic participation during and after the crisis. A responsive and meaningful recovery from the crisis must ensure that both women and men can return to economic activities by participating equally in the market economy and civic life as employees, business owners, and active citizens in their communities.

Karmel Najjar is the monitoring and evaluation and reporting officer at The Palestinian Businesswomen's Association–Asala, which is a leading women's NGO that focuses on women's social and economic empowerment.



Artwork by Manal Deeb.

ⁱ Case Study: Bank of Palestine Strengthens Women-Owned Businesses and the Economy, International Finance Corporation (IFC), the World Bank Group, available at https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/15aac7bd-de60-44fb-884a-02eb30d11743/Bank_of_Palestine_English_Case_Study_FINAL.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=m6mdkGE.

ⁱⁱ PCBS: On the Occasion of the International Population Day 11/07/2020 (October 12, 2020), retrieved from Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS): <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/post.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=3774>.

ⁱⁱⁱ A flash survey: Impact of COVID-19 on Women-led MSME's in Palestine, UN Women, March 2020. The results highlight only the responses of 301 women entrepreneurs from across Palestine.

^{iv} Ibid.