

Sayigh, May. Interviewed 2011. Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.

Our departure from Jordan to Lebanon was also a rich experience, a huge experience. We arrived to a world that was wide open, a world malleable to everything. The Lebanese parties were demonstrating in the streets and people were joining the Palestinian resistance. There was intensive participation, and all the patriotic forces supported the Palestinian revolution. In every aspect it was a truly huge experience. Of course this all took place under aerial bombardment, threats of invasion, and attacks on the south. The entire situation was on fire, and the revolution was exploding everywhere. For the first time, the Palestinian camps were able to breathe. They were surrounded by the police and constant sieges, and the Palestinian people were not allowed to work. Even now, they are not allowed to participate in a great number of professions. The Lebanese authorities are afraid that the population increase would disturb the sectarian balance, which would then affect the peculiar Lebanese political set-up.

In this environment we were asked to reconstitute the General Union of Palestinian Women. The leadership asked me to carry out the task. Of course, the organisation had had a presence in Lebanon before we arrived - when we had established the union, we had also created a presence in all Arab countries: we had established a branch in Jordan through the general secretariat, and we had also formed branches in Iraq, Kuwait, the Emirates, Qatar, Lebanon, Syria, and the Arab Maghreb. We had branches wherever there were Palestinian women. So the union existed before our arrival, and their experience was rich: we formed a merger between the forces that came from Jordan and those already in Lebanon.

As the numbers grew, the leadership asked me to organise a women's conference inside the Fateh movement, which we held with Palestinian women delegates from all the Arab countries. This was for the women of Fateh, the women of the movement. They elected me as Secretary of the Fateh Women's Bureau. We formed a women's bureau as there was growing recognition for the need to educate and organise women within the movement. This was especially the case after our experience in Jordan, which was so intense, giving us both capacity and reach, and showing that any woman has a latent force within her that she could use to develop herself and her struggle - a force hitherto unused.

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Our women's organisation within Fateh became the main engine of feminist work within the party. This was despite some of the reservations I had had earlier. As I mentioned, they had allocated a male to oversee our women's committee in Jordan; it was not a woman but a man! Initially that had been a shock, because in my previous party experience (in the Ba'ath) there was no difference between men and women and we would meet together. This was especially so in the student branch I came from. There was no difference between a boy and a girl: the struggle was joint and so were meetings. So in my time in Jordan I felt there was discrimination against woman and no belief in her abilities. Like men, she had studied at university, and was able to compete on the level of knowledge. Now, when it came to society and political work, they placed themselves above and had to be the leader. One did not take account of her capacities and so appointed a male leader above her to teach her how to struggle! This issue really would upset me, so when we went to Lebanon where I was asked to convene a Fateh conference for women, we organised a special women's organisation alongside the party itself. We needed work especially geared to women, so as to make each woman feel her individual strength and ability, while allowing her to contribute to the general organisation of Fateh.

That was a successful experience: women contributed to their causes and issues, and trained politically, inside their own organisation. A female cadre would have other tasks from those of struggle, other than party, political, and military levels. Women had a different struggle, a social struggle, where she was exploring her potential, experiencing her equality, and learning there was another fight to be waged. Traditions, customs, and inherited values had become deeply established institutions, defining what was permissible and what was not, what was right, and what was wrong. What could change that? Changing things required great effort, and a long struggle, and could not happen if women only carried arms, fought on the front, or gained high positions in the party organisation. Even if a woman's role in society became equal to a man's, she could go back home to find her husband or brother oppressing her, because their heads were still filled with the cobwebs of old customs. Equality was not going to be realised in a day and night, unlike how we used to think in the beginning, when we would only emphasise the need for joining the struggle and feeling equal. No, equality emerges through setting an example: when a woman becomes educated, capable of struggle, capable of carrying arms, able to present her view, and working as seriously as a man, then she becomes the example that reinforces the role of women in society, and the revolution; this is what changes prevailing concepts.

Concepts did change considerably. In the camp, at first a man would not accept his wife or sister going out to join the struggle; he would have hit her if he learnt that she was going to struggle along with the young men. However, when they later understood that a woman owns her own personality and was in charge of her own affairs, capable of working just like a man, they had to respect her. Even when it came to women who would not join the struggle, we believed in the need for them to work and to produce. After all, when a woman brings income home her respect increases, and the man feels her importance, and the significance of her participation. Plus she stops feeling that she is dependent on a man, that her role was only to cook and clean; you were capable of doing other things than just household work.

This was why we created the ateliers and workshops that were transformed - or as I am ashamed to say, were taken over - by Samed. That experience was originally female-led: we established small workshops inside the camps, and employed women in embroidery projects, kindergartens, and nurseries. We taught skills such as gathering medical herbs, then marketing and selling them. We taught marketing not just embroidery and sewing, plus there were several other fields we developed, I cannot now remember what, but it was a really big operation. There were the women's education centres that would allow women to fulfill their role, and this was all in addition to women's participation in the revolution. This participation was extremely high, not the least because the Israeli assaults and attacks never stopped, especially in south Lebanon. Afterwards, of course, there was the full-scale invasion.

Our struggle in the international arena didn't distract us from more important work on the internal level, but it was vital on the political level to engage in the international arena and emphasise your cause and your national rights. Also, we had to carry basic responsibilities towards our people and women, which was especially the case after the Tal al-Za'tar massacre. The events began in 1975, and by the time the battle had finished, after a siege of 40 days, [in August 1976], so many were killed, and some who survived it were then killed at the checkpoints. There was such a large number of children who had lost their mothers and fathers - I remember how we stood on the street, waiting for the trucks that were bringing those forced out from Tal al-Za'tar: the wounded, the martyrs, and the children; there could not have been an uglier sight.

Finally the truck transporting the children arrived, the truck filled with those who had no one left. Someone from the Red Cross was standing next to me and he asked: "what should we do with these children?". I replied, "these are *our* children; they are for us to care for." A journalist then reported that the

Women's Union had assumed responsibility for the children of Tal al-Za'tar. So I went to meet Abu Ammar along with my friend, sister Najal Nseir, who was a member of the general secretariat of the Women's Union. My eyes filled with tears as I told him, "these are our children, and we shall take them". He replied, "done." It was remarkable - he was a very caring person, and despite everything, he possessed an incredible capacity for compassion.

The dilemma was where to take them at that moment. We first placed them at the Islamic orphanage. Then we acquired a house that was up for sale: a large villa with a garden, which we bought and improved. We then brought and trained a group of girls who were also from Tal al-Zaatar - they were very young, and we trained them to become replacement mothers. For example, after the parents were killed, you would have three or four children left without a mother or father. So we put each family of siblings into one room with their replacement mother. After a while the children felt that life was slowly returning.

Those children have now become old! We adopted them properly - each house was a home. We made them feel they were at home and not in an orphanage. Full care was given, and oversight also provided by various UN organisations. Everyone helped to supervise it. We also benefited from the various organisations around. Even now, the adoption is proper: we would hand over kids who had a relative, an aunt for example, and willing to adopt them. We kept those with no one in Bayt Atfal al-Sumoud (the Children of Steadfastness House). Of course, the house expanded and grew - after the 1978 invasion of Lebanon, the number of martyrs and orphans grew constantly, as we would assume responsibility for them, and built and expanded the house. We were about to establish a training school for those who had not done well at school, or who we were unable to send to university, to have a chance to learn a trade, and support themselves. But when the 1982 invasion began we became worried, and moved the children to a school in Souq al-Gharb. The old Women's Union, established by the first generation of women who came from Palestine in 1948, had a house in the mountain in the village of Souq al-Gharb, and the children stayed there for a while. When the invasion reached them we were forced to send them to Syria. The move to Syria was a tragedy; I mean, the children were psychologically destroyed because it took place under constant bombardment and slaughter. It took three days to reach the Syrian border, and we then placed them in the Martyrs School in Damascus. Some of them grew up and ventured into the world, others went to Tunis with Abu Ammar.