



DISLOCATION/ RESETTLEMENT

Women of the Camps

A Special Way of Life

The difficulty of writing about camps in relation to women is that they contain so many highly contradictory realities that to select one aspect at the expense of others leads to gross distortion. Within one small social space we can find women who run projects, and women who only leave their homes to shop; women who have studied medicine in the USSR; women who were taken out of school at thirteen to marry; girls whose brothers encouraged them to join a Resistance group; others whose brothers burned their clothes to prevent them from going out; girls who fight to defend the camp during sieges, others whose only concern is the latest fashions. A camp is a kaleidoscope: depending on where one looks or to whom one listens, it is a crucible of change or a bastion of conservatism.

One tradition has presented the camps as places where certain kinds of "progress" have taken place. Evidence selected ranges

from falling rates of infant mortality due to improved health services (most women give birth in hospitals nowadays, and midwives have been "upgraded"); rising education levels, result of free schooling from six to sixteen; opportunities for skilled employment; later age at first marriage, and the dying out of *ijbari* (coercive) marriage; the break-up of the traditional patriarchal household; and the widespread involvement of women in the Resistance movement. All this is true. But it is important to guard against two kinds of distortion: first, the extent of these changes should not be over-estimated; second, they should not be seen as beginning with the uprooting of 1948. All the most outstanding characteristics of camp women, whether it is their capacity for struggle, or for rebuilding their homes, or for making money stretch, grow directly out of their peasant past, and can only be understood with this time frame in mind.

BY ZAHRA AL-BAHR

Take education: it is true that there were very few schools for girls in Palestinian villages — only forty-six by 1944/45, but the demand for them was building up. Girls schools were established in the 1880s in urban centres, and the cities had a cultural influence over the countryside. Further, the leaders of the national movement attached importance to the education of women. And by the 1940s, there were already women teachers ready to work in villages. Old women in camps often talk about their struggles to be allowed to attend school; hence the pressure they put on their daughters to take the chance of schooling. Many a girl who has succeeded in “completing” her education (reaching university), has done so because she was supported by an illiterate mother or grandmother.

In contrast to Palestinian villages, camps provided free schooling, with the result that, by 1979, overall illiteracy had dropped to 35%. In addition, the proportion of girls in elementary classes was high (85% in Lebanon in 1977/78). However behind these encouraging statistics we find several dark areas. Less than half the girls complete the whole UNRWA cycle to gain the *brevet* diploma that would open up for them some kind of vocational training, while the proportion that continue into secondary school is very low indeed. PLO census-takers in 1978/79 found that 22% of the female population aged above 10 had reached the primary certificate, 8.5% the intermediate certificate, 2.8% the secondary certificate, while only 0.9% had been to university. Perhaps the most startling discovery is the low number of women with any kind of vocational diploma: one cause for concern is residual illiteracy in the school-age population: in Chatila 3.4% of female illiterates were aged between ten and nineteen.

This was the picture shortly before the 1982 war, when Resistance scholarships were plentiful and incomes high. If statistics were available today, they would show even fewer girls going on to secondary school, and higher rates of drop-out all through. Lina, a Chatila girl aged seventeen, an excellent student who was aiming at university, was suddenly catapulted into marrying a young man with a job in the Gulf by parents who had had genuine ambitions for her, and had always proclaimed their intention of letting their

daughters choose whom and when to marry. But times had changed, and they had eight other children to feed and educate. People say this is happening on a wide scale.

As to employment, anyone who visits the Beirut camps will be impressed by the visibility of women working in social institutions — around 70% of Palestine Red Crescent workers are women. Moreover, today, women of camp background are often found *in charge*, responsible for a local centre or a section within an institution. Ten years ago, direction lay very clearly outside the camps, and there was a wider gap in qualifications and powers, whereas in Chatila today there are three or four women of whom the word “powerful” can legitimately be used, who control resources. But before extolling this as proof of “progress,” we need to realize how contingent it is on the existence of jobs and resources. The number professionally employed in fact is very slight, and the possibilities for professional training available to the majority of girls, never extensive, are deeply threatened by present insecurity.

Second, it is only possible to represent the rather low employment rates of camp women as “progress” if we assume that they come out of a background of narrowly defined domesticity. But there is nothing really new about Palestinian women working. In Palestine the role of peasant women in agricultural production was a strong one — they not only produced, but marketed their produce, and were used to handling money. They also possessed a range of artisanal skills other than the embroidery for which they are best known: weaving, pottery, many kinds of food preservation, the making of domestic equipment, and parts of houses. They also managed large households that produced as well as consumed, a better basis than the nuclear family from which to launch into “social production.” It is important to recall these historical facts because, on the one hand, camp conditions caused the loss rather than development of these capacities, and on the other because camp women still possess the qualities bred by their foremothers’ productive/managerial roles: physical strength, mobility, resourcefulness, and manual dexterity. What such women can become is well illustrated by those who have risen from a modest educational

base to senior positions in institutions such as the Kanafani Foundation and Najdeh. Both have made a special point of encouraging women from camp backgrounds to upgrade their qualifications.

But however exciting these manifestations are, they must be set against the stark fact of lack of training and employment openings. The provision of basic literacy to 80% of girls in camps did not, even in good times, open up to them the possibility of skilled employment. This is clear from the low rate of camp women’s participation in the labour force: 6.5% according to the PLO census in 1979 (based on five camps), compared with 18% for Lebanese women, and 11% for Syrian women (1975 figures). The gate to all kinds of professional training (including nursing), is the *baccalaureat*, and between the *brevet*. When UNRWA schooling ends, and the *baccalaureat* stretch three to four years of expensive secondary school. True, a handful of camp girls were beginning to be admitted to UNRWA’s vocational training centre at Sibleen (closed since 1983). True, Resistance scholarships enabled another handful to reach university in Lebanon or abroad. But such chances were not available to the majority. For them the vocational training courses conducted in or near most camps were and are more relevant, requiring only *brevet* or basic literacy. But these courses have been limited in type (mainly sewing and tying), as well as in level. Their diplomas were sufficient for jobs in Resistance offices, but were not recognized by Lebanese employers. Though new vocational courses have been introduced since the 1982 war (including business and office skills, hairdressing, accountancy), very few graduates have found work. This is partly because of the closure of the Lebanese economy to Palestinians, partly because low income levels in camps do not allow the commercial development that generates jobs for Lebanese women.

It would be false to conclude from this, however, that vocational courses are a waste of time. On the contrary, there are many reasons why they should be expanded and developed. Women who work before marriage are more likely to work after, and though this brings strain, it is also a basis of satisfaction, and, in case of widowhood, it gives a woman qualifications to fall back on. Further, many girls leave the camp on marriage, and in the

diaspora they are often able to exercise work skills that had no scope at home. Indeed, many show the capacity of "frontier" women to run a home, do a job, and master strange languages, laws and officials. To see camp women as 'only' housewives would be to miss their flexibility and adventurousness.

Most Chatila girls will marry a *shabb* from this camp or another, whose chance

of employment or migration is equally restricted. Keeping home in a camp means a daily struggle with dirt from dusty or muddy streets; fetching water from distant street taps; patching up thin walls and leaky roofs; washing clothes every other day for families of eight or more; baking bread in temperatures of 80°F; and coping with the many sicknesses that arise from leaking sewers, street dirt, protein-

low diets and poor habitat. This is the daily life of camp housewives in normal times. But since mid-1985 there have been Amal attacks and sieges, leading to a degree of destruction and displacement that makes the hardships of post-'82 invasion days like heaven.

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The Frozen Siege of Chatila

Chatila lies in ruins, exactly as it was on 6 April when a food convoy finally got in. UNRWA has employed youths to clear the main alleys of rubble; a few repairs have been carried out, here a roof, there a pipe; shops are slowly replenishing their stocks. But such signs of normalization are minimal, a reflection of a tangle of unresolved issues, between Palestinians and Lebanese, between the PLO and Damascus. While the mood in the camp is one of cautious optimism — Amal is no longer seen as a serious threat — the danger of internal splits still lurks in spite of the Algiers PNC; and the pressures towards migration generated by insecurity and unemployment are feared by some as much as outright attack.

At the only permitted entry to the camp, on Sabra Street, the road is cordoned off by metal railings, with a Syrian soldier controlling the small gap through which everyone must pass. Only metres away Amal's main local office remains open and its men in civilian clothes watch all who enter or leave the camp. Beyond the roadblock, crowds of Chatila men idle among the ruins; they are forbidden to leave the camp. Nor is any adult male permitted to enter. Though a choker on normalization, the Syrian decree has reduced the danger of Amal attacks on Palestinians outside the camp.

Another visible sign that the siege is only frozen are the Sixth Brigade sentries, still posted around the camp. Further off, Amal sniper/observation posts remain manned. The only way to reach

the inner camp is through smaller alleys of new routes cut through house walls. Though most of the trenches that were the keypoint of Chatila's defensive system have been loosely filled in, the shelters dug under the bases during the siege are still there. "This is the route where they carried the wounded," says a woman whose devastated home stands next to one of the bases. She points to a path leading up from a damp-looking cave where bits of torn mattress and planks still lie on the ground. Situated at the southwest corner of the camp, this quarter is one of the hardest hit. House repairs aren't even on the agenda, partly because vehicles cannot enter the camp, but more basically because the decision to rebuild is a political one, an issue linked to the villages east of Sidon, the Arafat come-back, the politicians' status in Lebanon, and Syria's Lebanon policies.

On the periphery of the camp destruction is almost total. Further in, most floors above ground level had been blasted away to give the attackers an unobstructed aim, but ground floors are still largely habitable. Some families whose homes have been destroyed, and who can afford to rent outside, have left the camp, especially if they have children in school or university. Families who can't afford the high rents and key money being demanded even for the tin huts near Cola Bridge are camping out in the ruins wherever they can find a roof and fix a door. Two of Chatila's three schools have been reduced to rubble-filled ground floors; the third is being used as a base by

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