

Palestinian Women

*Juheina Khaldieh reviews
Jehan Helou*

The journalist Juheina Khaldieh first published her review of Jehan Helou's landmark study in the Lebanese daily newspaper As Safir in December 2009. We are pleased to publish a full English translation. Jehan Helou is President of the Palestinian branch of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY Pal). Her husband, the Palestinian intellectual, Hanna Mikhail, also known as Abu Omar, served on the jury of the Second Russell Tribunal on Repression in Latin America, before his disappearance in 1976. An interesting and informative website dedicated to his memory has recently been established (www.abu-omar-hanna.info).

Tales of many women who – like men – struggled for a people's right to return to their country, for self-determination, and for the right to build their state; tales of Palestinian women who took part in political life and the resistance, who influenced the revolution; tales of the general social status of women freedom fighters and the effect this had on the individual, the family and the community. Through these women's tales and through their words the history of the Palestinian people is reviewed in Jehan Helou's book*, published by the Palestinian Women's Research and Documentation Centre at UNESCO.

The 53 women 'pursued' by Helou in Lebanon, Occupied Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Paris said a lot. But before we get to what they said, Helou herself told *As Safir* that 'this book documents the yet unwritten heroic acts of Palestinian women and their sacrifices in the history of the modern Palestinian national movement'. Thus, these testimonies are meant to compensate for the negligence in documentation from which Helou considers the contemporary Palestinian Revolution suffers. This leads to the obliteration of events with the fall of each martyr or loss of a freedom fighter. Thus, the problem of Palestinian women is multiplied, despite recognition of the importance of their participation in the struggle, as the extent of this influence remains blurred. This is because Palestinian women freedom fighters have remained in the shadow and not in forward positions in the leadership of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, or among the influential leadership in the battlefield. Thus, the male perspective was the dominant one.

Helou's book tells stories of women freedom fighters in their own words, stories untold except maybe to their families and in female circles, even though they are stories that helped determine the course of the Palestinian cause. Much more than novels or tales, these stories are closer to the experiences which must be used in new studies and analyses of the Palestinian Revolution and its stages, and for Palestinian history in general. Perhaps the main thing that such testimonies reveal are the faults that accompanied the various stages of liberation and revolution in our region, since the middle of the last century, such as confining the work of the liberation and resistance movements to politics, and almost completely ignoring the importance of introducing social changes and resisting prevailing traditions.

For the reader, it is a resourceful book, containing hundreds of thousands of sentences literally transcribed without any interference by the writer. The writer asks all the questions, and the women relate their experiences in their own words and style, speaking of their role during important periods in the history of the Revolution. The Palestinian woman was a main participant in the national struggle on all levels. A number of female leaders had qualifications that surpass those of some male leaders, and here lie the two main problems that concern Helou. The first is the recognition of the role of Palestinian woman without recording it in history, and the second is not matching it with frontline leadership roles. This is exactly what Dr. Shareef Kanaaneh expresses in the foreword to the book when he says, 'Try to remember with me the names of the leaders of the Palestinian Revolution, its heroes and martyrs. If you use the word 'Abu' (father) everyone, including our children, can fill the blanks with tens or hundreds of 'abus', but how many names can you fill after the word 'Um' (mother)? Mothers are very rare in the history of the Palestinian Revolution.' In Kanaaneh's opinion, those 'mothers' who received the title did not get it 'due to their heroic acts or the leadership positions they occupied, but they inherited it from a martyr husband or leader'. So the title (mother of) was a consolation for their mishaps and not in recognition of their achievements.

Palestinian Women in Lebanon was published 17 years after some of the interviews were conducted. The first ones were recorded in 1993, and the rest in 2007. The book alternates, with great care and precision, between the beginnings of the Revolution and more recent times, without skipping phases or personal experiences.

The beginning of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon, as Helou says, was the arrival of a hundred thousand refugees into camps that lacked

humanitarian services. The repression machine was taking hold of their lives, restricting their movements and the practice of most professions and businesses. This is what Zahra Yousuf recounts:

‘The Deuxième Bureau (Lebanese intelligence) did not allow people to move at all. They took in a woman with her husband simply for throwing some water to clean in front of her house! If people were spending the evening together; they used to knock on their doors and ask them which radio channel they were listening to, what were they talking about?’ (p9)

With all this misery, as Ibrahim Saleh says, ‘the dirt and lice between the Palestinians were neck-to-neck’ (p36). The Revolution for the Palestinians was, according to Helou, ‘the dream of liberation and return and getting rid of deplorable living conditions’.

Were the beginnings as easy for women as they were for men? Helou says that ‘at that time the social restrictions were restricting women and consecrating their inferiority; so it was not easy to take part in any organization or struggle activities because of social constraints’. One testimony expresses this by relating how, sometimes, mothers objected more than fathers to the participation of their daughters in the struggle as ‘women were raised to be against themselves!’ (p11). But this changed with women participating in the organizational framework and the establishment of unions, and even in the *Fedayeen* (commandos) struggle and military training. Raya Abu el Heija says ‘in 1969 they took us to Amman, to Al Naour Camp. It was the first military training session and there was a large group of Palestinian girls from Lebanon’ (p12).

The women freedom fighters cite legendary heroic acts by tens of women who were killed while securing food and medicines for the besieged Camp at Tal-el-Zaatar, and of their exceptional strength in rebuilding the Ain-el-Helwi Camp, which was completely destroyed by Israeli occupying forces. We cannot but pause at the testimony of Amneh Jibril, at her role as a woman, and men’s acceptance of this role. She says ‘some used to ask “what? - a woman leading us?” Once when I got upset and wanted to leave the Camp, Abu Ammar told me “Amneh, how will you leave your brothers?”’

Helou relates all this and then asks ‘why did women remain in the shadow?’ She and the women of her book criticize the PLO/Resistance, as ‘it did not, from the beginnings, have any revolutionary vision for social changes that are directed towards changing the structure of exploitation and subordination in society. Though the political programme of the Palestinian Liberation Organization stressed promoting and developing the

performance of women in the national struggle, yet in the general framework there were no programmes or committees dedicated to that.

Hamda Iraqi expresses this problem when she says:

‘I asked to go to the besieged Camp of Tal-el-Zaatar. I asked permission of the Director of Central Operations, Abu Walid. He refused, but I insisted. The trip along the mountain roads was difficult. Despite the danger and suffering, my mother told me: “you are an embarrassment to the family and everyone is talking about you”. She later admitted that I now enjoy great popularity at the Camp (p13).’

In the introduction to *Palestinian Women in Lebanon*, Helou dwells on why women were excluded from leadership roles. She does not exclude the experience of the ‘General Union of Palestinian Women’, which was established in 1965 in Jerusalem following a decision of the Palestine Liberation Organization, and its effect on national unity and the improvement of political positions. The Union succeeded in imposing itself. It established day-care centres and the ‘Home for Children of the Resistance’, which cares for and raises children who lost their parents at Tal-el-Zaatar. It also participated in other institutions, such as ‘Samed’ and the ‘Red Crescent’, for educating cadres and issuing political statements. Despite all that, the author and her heroes remind us of some lost opportunities for the Union ‘such as publishing a special magazine for the Union to contribute to developing political, social and cultural knowledge of women’ as ‘the Liberation Organization was not in favour of having an independent platform for the Union’. Moreover, not enough attention was given to women’s social, personal and family problems, which affected the development of the women’s movement and the liberation of its members. This was expressed in one of the testimonies:

‘The important thing for some of us was that women were participating, but there was no women’s movement. This means that the Palestinian people did not actually know a women’s movement that clearly expresses a vision of freedom and liberation.’

But Intisar Al Wazir, who was Minister of Social Affairs in the Palestinian National Authority (1994-2004), and also a member of the leading Committee of Fateh in the Syrian Region (1961), as well as a member of the Secretariat General of the Union, points out that ‘it would have been difficult in matters of the revolution and daily struggle to pose issues related to the ideology of women and our vision of their liberation. Even in the National Council the percentage of women did not exceed ten per

cent.’ Several other testimonies confirmed the same idea.

In summing up the testimonies, Helou talks about important social changes that affected the lives of thousands of women who sometimes achieved substantial progress, resulting from the revolutionary environment and despite the absence of a personal factor that embraces the change and pushes it forward. Helou names this phenomenon ‘The Beginning — A New Palestinian Woman’ who is self-confident and can work and move outside the home, travel to study, work and choose her husband. Fadia Fiddah says in her testimony:

‘My participation in the struggle helped build my personality and broaden the scope of my thinking. I now enjoy having status and recognition among my family and the women and men in Burj el Barajneh Camp. Despite all the frustrations of that period, it was the best period of my life. We had hopes to achieve our goals.’

But this state did not really continue, particularly because the course of women’s liberation was closely linked to the course of national liberation. Helou explains this by saying:

‘the defeat of the Revolution in Lebanon, despite the fantastic resistance of the Lebanese and Palestinian peoples, squandered several acquisitions of both women and men! The Palestinian people, particularly the women, were left to their dark fate in the absence of civil rights and the deteriorating economic situation. But, worst of all was losing hope after the signing of the Oslo Accords.’

Details of this situation are related by a freedom fighter in the field of social work, Kassem Aina, who said ‘before 1982 it was the bright era for men and women; after that we started declining. Concepts changed and the bad treatment of women by men was increasing’.

The writer’s summary does not end with a final reading of the women’s testimonies. It is not complete until her analysis reaches ‘the end of the Revolution’ and its results, pointing out that the Lebanese people embraced the Revolution despite its mistakes, as described by one of the cadres who said ‘when the Resistance withdrew from Beirut the Lebanese suffered from a rice crisis from sprinkling the fighters with rice as they were leaving’. Helou’s most important question is ‘why did we lose the Lebanese arena, which is an important arena in our struggle for liberating Palestine, after losing the Jordanian arena? Will there be another revolutionary opportunity? Why didn’t the Liberation Organization discuss the reasons and results of this defeat seriously, the decline in the performance of the Palestinian Revolution, and the ensuing disasters and

the intense suffering of the Palestinian People?’

These questions go beyond a transformation related to women’s abilities and strengthening and enhancing their awareness of their human qualities and rights. Helou doesn’t provide many answers to these questions. She moves on from questioning to pointing out that ‘the matter of liberating women remains curtailed and limited and cannot encompass all women, except with the development of the general course of liberation, as they are connected to the course of the national struggle and its accompanying social connotations’, considering that the changes which have occurred may not be taken away from women. But the question remains, where are the masses of Palestinian women espousing their cause in the Occupied Land, in Lebanon and in the Diaspora?

Jehan Helou’s book of 516 big size pages reflects the Revolution and its history between the years 1965 and 1985 from different points of view. Though they may be similar, they are not identical, because of the different leaders and women interviewed, whether in their role, level or position, with names such as Amneh Suleiman (Jibril), Samira Salah, Intisar Al Wazir (Umm Jihad), Bayan Nuwaihed el Hout, Isam Abdul Hadi, May Sayegh, Shadia Helou, Khadijah Abu Ali (Ummbbb Ammar), Hasna Rida, Wafaa Al Yaseer, Leila Khaled and others.

Perhaps the most important thing about Helou’s book is that it is fertile soil which may be used as a reference for many issues that require analysis, research and follow up, as described by the Director of the Palestinian Women’s Research and Documentation Centre, Zahira Kamal, in her introduction when she says ‘the stories included in this book are full of issues that need studying. This requires similar work in the West Bank to document women’s experiences during the same period and to compare the social changes by studying the two experiences’.

The last question to Helou is about her own experience in the Union with the ‘Ummahat’ (mothers) of the Revolution and with her husband, freedom fighter and martyr Dr. Hanna Mikhael (Abu Omar). She says ... ‘I must write, soon!’

**Palestinian Women in Lebanon: The Resistance and Social Changes – Live Testimonies of Palestinian Women in Lebanon 1965 – 1985 by Jehan Helou, published in Arabic in 2009 by the Palestinian Women’s Research and Documentation Centre, which itself was established, in 2006, by UNESCO in collaboration with the Palestinian Ministry of Women’s Affairs. An abridged version of this review article appeared in Liberation magazine.*