The Concrete Ceiling | March 2017

Women in Gaza on the impact of the closure on women in the workforce
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Gender equality was probably never foremost on the minds of those responsible for Israel’s policy toward Gaza residents. The permission given in late 2014, following Operation Protective Edge, for the marketing of products made in Gaza to the West Bank, as well as the sale of Gaza-grown eggplants, tomatoes and eventually textiles, furniture and scrap-metal in Israel, mostly benefitted the few in Gaza who could afford the considerable costs involved in transporting products. The industrialists and traders who are able to take advantage of this change in Israel’s policy and whose activity provides employment to others in the Strip are wealthy, established businesspeople, and are typically men. While this does not negate the significant value in opening markets outside of Gaza to these individuals or the positive impact their business activity has had on Gaza’s economy, the question remains: what about the thousands of people, including many women, who cannot afford the shipping costs and cannot benefit from the change in policy?

Israel purports to decide what is best for Gaza’s economy. The decision to allow the sale of goods from Gaza in Israel and the West Bank also dictates what goods can be marketed, positioning Israel as an agency implicit in designing and managing Gaza’s economy. The Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) admitted that “manufacturing capacity, supply and demand in the relevant markets – both the originating market and the destination market” were some of the considerations guiding its decisions. In other words, COGAT claims that prior to deciding whether certain products may or may not be sold in the West Bank, they surveyed the markets in the West Bank, assessing the economic potential of certain products and the manufacturing capacity of manufacturers in the Strip. If COGAT considers itself entitled to run Gaza’s economy – should it not consider the social impact of its policy as well?

The bar for taking advantage of the opportunity to market products in Israel and the West Bank remains too high. The conditions stipulated for the passage of goods through the crossings, the correlating costs and the requirement of physical presence in the West Bank so as to pay taxes for transactions, have all kept this possibility out of reach for many. Women, who mostly work in civil society organizations, public service or...
small businesses, rarely meet the criteria set by Israel for permits to exit Gaza or transport products out of it. Only two percent of trader-permit holders are women (53 out of 2,438 permit holders, according to COGAT’s response (Hebrew) to a Freedom of Information Application, received October 2016). Consequently, policy changes concerning movement of goods, such as types of produce approved for marketing, without substantial changes to movement of people, forsake a large portion of the job market, denying many, and women in particular, professional development opportunities.

A decade of closure, severe restrictions on access, and periodic military operations, have left their mark on Gaza’s job market. More than 70% of the population require humanitarian aid; 47% suffer from food insecurity. Unemployment rates have risen drastically in the last decade, currently standing at 34.4% among men and 65.3% among women, compared to 35.2% among women in 2005. While the number of jobs available in Gaza has steadily and significantly dropped, the number of women able to work and looking for employment has increased dramatically – more than 200% (from 9.1% in 2005 to 21.7% in the second quarter of 2016). The few available jobs are mostly offered to men. Before the closure was imposed, many men worked in Israel. Since Israel no longer allows laborers from Gaza to work within its borders, they are forced to find work inside the Strip, shrinking the pool of jobs available to women even further.

This situation in which more and more educated women join the workforce and seek employment as the number of jobs decreases is particularly problematic given that many women have become the sole breadwinners for their families following the death, incapacitating injury or imprisonment of their spouses. As a result, increasing numbers of women have no choice but to enter the labor market, venturing into professional fields previously considered predominantly “masculine”, such as banking, investment and management.

Restrictions on movement affect all residents of Gaza - men, women and children, but their impact on women is particularly severe because of a systemic preference toward men. Women experience greater initial difficulty entering the job market and advancing within it. The women interviewed for this study explained that access restrictions prevent women from developing a competitive edge because they cannot leave Gaza to acquire crucial professional tools and skills that are unavailable in the Strip. ♦
Dr. Riham al-Wahidi

Business Consultancy

Dr. Riham al-Wahidi, founder and co-director of a consulting firm that works with commercial companies and non-profits located in the Gaza Strip, describes how much of the communication with potential clients in the West Bank and abroad revolves around the challenge of receiving permits and the low probability of staff members obtaining a permit so that they can meet with clients and finalize work contracts. In other words, relationships with potential clients begin with exerting considerable effort to face obstacles that stand in the way of cooperation, rather than concentrating on the capacities of the consulting firm and the services it provides: “Rather than negotiating the quality of work, we find ourselves thinking about the extent to which the organization we’re working with might be able to ensure our exit so that we can do what we need to do,” al-Wahidi says. The likelihood of permit requests being rejected costs the firm many potential contracts: “No company or organization is willing to take a risk and put money into working with a company in Gaza whose employees’ chances of exiting are unknown.” Losing business opportunities and profits stops al-Wahidi from hiring additional employees, including women, as al-Wahidi is committed to having at least 50% female staff working for the company.

In March 2016, al-Wahidi was invited to give a lecture on the Palestinian economy at a conference in Oman but wasn’t granted an exit permit from the Israeli authorities. “When a woman, rather than a man, is invited to give a lecture on the Palestinian economy at such a large event, it’s an achievement. I could have overturned some conventions and prejudices about Gaza, but I didn’t get a permit.” Al-Wahidi feels that Israel’s conduct is arbitrary and follows unclear procedures that seem to differ from one case to another. The ongoing uncertainty regarding permits has a negative impact on employees’ personal and professional development as well: “In the consulting business, our product is actually our business thinking skills”, al-Wahidi explains. “Developing our expertise and gaining experience relies on securing contracts and creating opportunities to meet new people, get to know new markets and new business fields. It is nearly impossible for the company to develop and adapt itself to what goes on in the market without being able to get to know the market and study it.”

Israel’s stringent criteria for who is considered a trader, and can therefore file an application for a trader permit, do not include consulting companies or recognize al-Wahidi as eligible, because her business does not involve import or export of goods, defined as a condition for receiving a trader permit. “My business is a financial business through and through. I issue invoices. I belong to the financial sector. We feel that the Israeli authorities don’t recognize our work or the need to give us permits.” A functioning, thriving economy is based on a wide variety of business activity, including companies promoting commerce or providing related services. Nevertheless, Israel only issues trader permits to businesspeople who export and import goods, closing the door on many businesspeople in Gaza and their ability to pursue their professional goals and contribute to Gaza’s economy.

Suha Khader

Banking

Suha Khader also objects to Israel’s narrow and limited conception of economic development and trade. Khader began her banking career in 1994 in the customer service department at the Bank of Palestine. She was soon promoted to director of the VIP customer department and went on to direct the public relations and marketing department, the credit department and ultimately the bank’s development department. After 15 years with the Bank of Palestine, Khader took up a position with the Palestinian stock market and today
she directs the Gaza district of al-Quds Bank.

Between 2010 and 2015, while she worked at al-Quds Bank, Khader held a permit that was renewed every three months. In April 2016, when she applied for another renewal, she was told she was blocked for security reasons and would not be able to apply for a permit for 12 months. She is now unable to advocate for the district bank’s interests with the general management and senior board members, seeing as all meetings with them take place in the West Bank. Despite her position as district director, Khader won’t be able to take part in the bank’s strategic planning or influence budgetary matters concerning her bank.

Lately, Khader says, many branch employees and managers in Gaza have been told they were blocked from travel for security reasons. “The bank’s future is certainly compromised”, says Khader. “How can we manage the bank and its financial affairs, especially vis-à-vis customers, when we cannot get out, consult with our partners in the West Bank and participate in the decision-making process?” Given the restrictions on movement and the fact that bank managers and employees in Gaza are denied permits, many training seminars and management development activities have been either postponed or cancelled. “Last year (2015) we had no problems getting applications approved, but this year we have suffered from it and it has had a negative impact on us. Managers and employees need to undergo regular training in order to advance and improve.”

Al-Quds Bank, like many other banks, sees women as an important target audience, one that is growing and developing. The bank offers women benefits and support to promote their businesses. Such was

Israel’s policy has to change and adapt to the changes around it. The fact that there are women who are involved in commerce, who sell goods in the local market, who run companies, but do not export or import goods through the Kerem Shalom crossing, must be acknowledged. (Suha Khader)
the case of one woman, who had begun selling her home-made desserts and sweets to relatives and neighbors, gradually advancing to opening a supermarket. Khader says that participation of women in the workforce is increasing and that opportunities available to women who initiate projects or start small businesses are also on the rise. Before the closure, many women exited Gaza to work or sell goods in Israel, transporting products through Erez Crossing in their hand luggage. Women had greater financial independence and relied less on loans or grants from civil society organizations or banks.

Suha Khader: “Israel’s policy has to change and adapt to the changes around it. The fact that there are women who are involved in commerce, who sell goods in the local market, who run companies, but do not export or import goods through the Kerem Shalom crossing

Maha Abu Sidu

**Marketing of embroidered goods**

In recent years, due to travel restrictions into and out of Gaza, more and more women turn to online sales of jewellery or embroidery. Some are officially registered as merchants in the Palestinian Ministry of Economy and the Gaza Trade Bureau. These women transport their products with merchants or acquaintances traveling out of Gaza, or, in many cases, through private delivery companies at a high cost, sometimes partially covered by customers. Maha Abu Sidu has been selling embroidery items online since 2010. She worked previously as the director of the continuing education unit at al-Aqsa University and in the IT department of the Palestinian cellular communications company Jawwal. Her embroidery business began as a side project run through Facebook. Today Abu Sidu employs 50 women, most of them from disempowered groups, for whom this is their sole source of income. The number of women Abu Sidu employs has grown consistently since 2011, with a new employee added almost every month.

“It is important for me to be able to exit Gaza and travel,” says Abu Sidu. “I long to take part in business fairs in the West Bank, Jerusalem and abroad. I want to expand the business, reach new customers, get to know more markets, gain experience, and most importantly to learn how to engage with costumers, and what the trends and fashions are in certain places, so that I can meet my customers’ needs. Direct business and commerce relations would be better than long distance ones. I might be able to realize my dream of exhibiting the clothes I design and embroider, to start a chain or open a branch in Qatar, where I have the most clients.” Abu Sidu attributes a great deal of importance to contact with her West Bank counterparts: “Women in the West Bank are more exposed to private clients and business customers. They have more experience. Getting to know them would be very beneficial. We could learn about different ways of working and support each other.”

Abu Sidu lists numerous work opportunities that were lost because she could not obtain an exit permit. At one point, she took a training course provided by the Gaza Transporters Association for women who run independent businesses, where participants were given guidance on finance, monetary management and different methods of shipment and transport. The participants were slated to visit Ashdod Port as part of the course in order to learn about shipment of goods. Fifteen women applied to exit Gaza and participate in the tour. All were refused.
In 2016, on one exceptional occasion, Abu Sidu managed to exit Gaza, when the Bank of Palestine and USAID applied on her behalf so that she could participate in a special program for businesswomen held in Ramallah. “I’m 35, and this was the first and only time I’ve ever left Gaza. For a brief time, I encountered another world and different people.” Abu Sidu has since tried applying again through international organizations but has been repeatedly denied. “I still wonder- if my exit was approved once, why can’t it be approved again?”

Abu Sidu purchases fabric outside of Gaza through traders who have trader permits and can therefore travel in and out of Gaza. As there is no possibility of bringing in supplies at a low cost, nor are there available commercial mail services, she is unable to officially import the materials needed. Consequently, Abu Sidu procures her raw materials in a complicated, roundabout way. She arranges for the materials to be shipped to Jordan and then contacts traders from the West Bank, asking them to bring her order with them when they return from business trips to Jordan. Once the materials arrive in the West Bank, Abu Sidu asks businesspeople she knows from Gaza to bring the materials back to the Strip when they return. A similar process is put in motion to send her products to customers outside the Strip. As a result of the marked increase in trader permits denied due to “security blocks” during 2016, Abu Sidu has recently had trouble bringing raw materials into Gaza and transporting orders out of the Strip. The project she participates in through the Businesswomen’s Association is looking into the possibility of receiving permits to bring in materials in limited quantities. Abu Sidu finds the current situation, in which senior merchants are blocked for security reasons, denied their permits and unable to exit Gaza, discouraging and frustrating. “If merchants who have gotten used to exiting regularly are suddenly security blocked, I feel even more threatened, especially given that I’m only just starting out.”
It’s a personal achievement for me, as a woman, to advance at work, to get to know the customers and meet them face to face, to encourage them to invest in more projects. These roles are usually filled by men. The right to be a businesswoman from Gaza is not self-evident. (Hiba al-Tamimi)

Hiba al-Tamimi

Information and Communications Technology

Online marketing and the development of the high-tech sector do not eliminate the necessity of professionals from these fields to travel. Working online, like any other professional field, depends on the creation and development of personal relationships, which cannot remain exclusively virtual. Hiba al-Tamimi, a senior co-director at Unit One, an IT company, has filed several applications for a trader permit to be able to exit Gaza. Her applications were refused or, in some cases, never answered. As a result al-Tamimi has been unable to attend numerous conferences and business meetings. “There is a difference between a woman communicating with her clients long distance and meeting with them face to face,” which allows the clients to get to know the person responsible for managing the project and getting the work done. “It’s a personal achievement for me, as a woman, to advance at work, to get to know the customers and meet them face to face, to encourage them to invest in more projects. These roles are usually filled by men. The right to be a businesswoman from Gaza is not self-evident. It takes a lot of hard work on my part because I can’t leave Gaza. Why is it that most of the merchants who do exit are men, while many women try to get exit permits and trader permits but their applications are refused?”

Maha al-Masri

The Third Sector

For the past decade, Maha al-Masri has been running an organization that supports women who work in agriculture. According to al-Masri, many of these women are not compensated for their work, and many independently work on land they own. The organization’s objective is to help these women attain financial independence.

We are detecting a drop in the number of women working in agriculture, even among women who have land. (Maha al-Masri)
During Operation Protective Edge, the agricultural sector sustained a great deal of damage. Fields and crops were destroyed, and many women lost their jobs. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, during the second quarter of 2016, 2.8% of women in the workforce worked in the agriculture and fishing sector, compared to 26.7% in the second quarter of 2014, before the last round of hostilities. Al-Masri described a project that would restore six farming areas, including in Khuza’ah, which was completely destroyed during the fighting, and would provide work for 200 men and women. While planning the project, al-Masri and her team visited Khuza’ah and were shocked at the damage: “It was impossible to tell where the farmland had been and where people had lived.” Restoring farmland in the area was dangerous and required intensive work with families living there, in tents, among the wreckage of their homes. “These conditions make planning and implementation of work difficult. You don’t work under normal conditions in Gaza, and still, there are successes.”

There is a lot of untapped potential in Gaza, says al-Masri. Women in Gaza are full of talent, motivation and leadership, but lack experience that could be gained through trainings in farming, food manufacturing and more. Travel restrictions keep women from selling food products they make—pastry or honey, for instance—in the West Bank or Israel, which would allow them to increase their profits. Gaza’s market is not large enough to make a living selling these items in the Strip alone. Goods made by women have hardly left Gaza over the last decade, as they lack the financial capacity to ship them outside the Strip.

Claiming that terrorist elements had been using mail services to smuggle prohibited items, Israel placed a temporary block on postal services and parcel shipments into Gaza in the summer of 2016. Yet, all parcels shipped into and out of the Gaza Strip, by any means, undergo the same individual security checks and x-ray scanning. This raised not only questions regarding the motives for the decision, which appeared to be more a punitive measure than a necessary response to a security threat, but also awareness of just how dependent small businesses,
which include many women-run businesses, are on the postal service, as they have no other way of transporting goods. This limitation clearly does not fit with the prevailing discourse on the need to help Gaza recuperate and remove any unnecessary obstacles.

“We are detecting a drop in the number of women working in agriculture, even among women who have land,” al-Masri concludes. “Because of the closure, more and more women leave this sector because the work doesn’t pay. Farming is hard work, and the income doesn’t justify the effort.”

Sabah al-’Aweisi
Education

Following a distinguished career in education and teaching, Sabah al-’Aweisi, a doctor of psychology, currently manages a chain of daycare centers and a private school in Gaza. In 2004, al-’Aweisi opened a center that offers computer lessons and private tutoring to school children. In 2007, she opened the daycare center and the school and looked for teachers and early childhood educators with at least two years of experience. Al-’Aweisi says she received many applications from women with only a few months’ experience or no experience at all, who applied for the job even though they did not meet the requirements, proof that many women need, and to no lesser degree want, to work.

Daycare centers and private schools offer essential services, particularly when women work and need to find childcare solutions. However, it has been increasingly hard for early childhood educators to make a decent living during the years of the closure. An early childhood educator working 7-hour days earns 500 shekels per month, and could go up to 1,000 shekels after three months of work. Despite the conditions and the low wages, the scarcity of jobs available to women in Gaza and the difficult financial situation drive many women, including those with academic or engineering degrees, to turn to al-’Aweisi in search of work, any work.

Al-’Aweisi says that daycare centers and child

homecare services were not common in Gaza until recently, and that it was difficult to find employees with the right child care experience. Therefore, she decided that the 15 teachers and early childhood educators would receive training in the West Bank. However, because of difficulties obtaining exit permits for the staff, al-’Aweisi had to rely on training given in Gaza by nurses, which, naturally, focused mainly on nursing care and health rather than early childhood education and childcare.

Training and counseling for educators are essential, says al-’Aweisi. Gaining skills, as well as familiarity with new material, teaching methods, ways of coping with students and electronic and online teaching aids – are all critical for developing teachers’ abilities and improving the quality of instruction students receive. However, Gaza teachers hardly ever receive permits to take part in seminars and training offered by the Ministry of Education in Ramallah. At some point, al-’Aweisi admits, when one refusal followed another, they simply stopped applying.

These days, al-’Aweisi is working on opening a personal care business, which would offer cosmetic treatments, a spa and a Turkish bath. To bring in the necessary equipment, including laser devices that have not been cleared for entry yet, al-’Aweisi registered a company in her name. The business is set to open in the next few months, if the equipment is not delayed by Israel. Al-’Aweisi is now working on training staff. Though she would have preferred to train her staff outside Gaza, she knew that would have been unlikely given the difficulties obtaining permits. “There is no other business like it in Gaza,” says al-’Aweisi.
The women who were interviewed for this report managed to overcome obstacles, prejudice and social limitations. Yet they still struggle to break the barrier of access restrictions Israel imposes on the Gaza Strip. This affects both their personal and professional advancement, and the possibilities for advancing and developing Gaza’s economy.

Ever since 2007, travel in and out of Gaza has been limited to what Israel considers to be exceptional humanitarian circumstances. Israel has also restricted the transport of goods into and out of Gaza, leading to the near complete collapse of Gaza’s economy, some of the highest unemployment rates in the world and a growing dependency on humanitarian aid. One of the exceptions to the closure is a small number of businesspeople who are able to exit Gaza in order to sell goods outside it. Women, however, who are more likely to work in civil society organizations or the public service sector, or manage small businesses, do not meet Israel’s criteria for permits to exit or sell goods. As a result, women who, in the past, worked or sold their goods outside Gaza have found themselves without work and without a livelihood. Women are an integral part of any healthy, thriving work force. Their potential contribution to the advancement and development of Gaza’s economy is immense.

Many top political and security figures in Israel believe economic recovery in Gaza would contribute to Israel’s security as well. Travel restrictions, especially those affecting businesswomen and female merchants, clearly run counter to Israel’s security interests. They impede stability, development and growth, and deny a life with dignity to all residents of Gaza, and the region as a whole, both women and men.

Recommendations

- In the absence of movement of people, including women, between Gaza and the West Bank and between Gaza and the world for business and trade - there is no chance of economic recovery for Gaza, which is central to a stable future for the entire region. Israel must recognize the legitimate needs of businesswomen, women traders and women working in civil society organizations in Gaza and allow them to travel abroad and between the parts of the Palestinian territory (subject to individual security screening).

- A functioning, thriving economy is based on a wide variety of businesses: commerce, service provision, small companies and civil society organizations. Israel must modify the criteria for receiving exit permits so that women who are not engaged in large-scale export and import can obtain permits, enabling them to expand their business activity and contribute to Gaza’s economic development.

- Israel must improve conditions at Kerem Shalom Crossing and open an additional commercial crossing near Erez Crossing, in the northern Gaza Strip. This would reduce the cost of transporting goods into and out of the Gaza Strip, allowing a wider variety of traders and business owners to sell their products in the West Bank and Israel. Israel must also allow goods to be transported in hand luggage and refrain from blocking the passage of parcels by mail.

- Regardless, it is time to end the closure.