

A Modern Story of Embroidery



By Doa Wadi
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Palestinian heritage has evolved over many centuries to encompass clothing, embroidery, dance, music, food, proverbs, and several cultural aspects that form the identity of Palestinians inside the State of Palestine and in the diaspora. In his article, "Land, Heritage and Identity of the Palestinian People," Majdi Shomali argues that this heritage evolved in agricultural communities where land was a main means of livelihood and production. Thus, by means of solid family values, Palestinians enshrined traditions and customs related to marriage, childbirth, child-rearing, provision of nourishment, clothing, folk medicine, and handicrafts. They expressed these values in proverbs, dance, stories, and ethical and social beliefs.

Embroidery occupies a central role in the culture and representation of the Palestinian population. Similar to other handicrafts – such as pottery, jewelry, and carpets – Palestinian costumes narrate the local stories from various areas of Palestine through their cut, stitches, and colors. In 1948, there were 800 populated Palestinian villages where women in the hilly and coastal regions used distinct colors and patterns that reflected their very specific hometown. The dresses bore the names of their origin: dress of Ramallah, dress of Majdal, dress of Gaza, dress of Akka, and so on. Mothers passed the craft on to their daughters along with the history of the land.

Following the forced displacement of Palestinians after the 1948 war, embroidery served as the guardian of Palestinian culture. It appeared in various guises: on garments worn by women, on the paintings of artists such as Suleiman Mansour and Nabil Anani, on modern Western-style costumes designed for women, etc. Owning and wearing an embroidered article of clothing grew into something equivalent to a national duty. Indeed, through these bright-colored cross stitches, Palestinian women were telling the world that their

culture would survive and be shared with present and future generations.

In addition to its cultural value, embroidery is a source of income for many women and men. More recently, building on this tradition, the Business Women Forum – Palestine (BWF), which was established in 2006 with a focus on women's socioeconomic empowerment, launched a capacity-building program for women designers. BWF is dedicated to women entrepreneurs and develops activities to promote their businesses. Many BWF members have left their fingerprints on the map of Palestinian businesses, regionally and internationally.

Indeed, BWF has been working with over 450 Palestinian women, 150 of whom work in embroidery, throughout the West Bank, including Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. To these women, embroidery is not only a skill they learned and inherited from their mothers and grandmothers, it is also a daily happening that fills their lives with beauty, color, and joy.

Equally as important, embroidery has empowered women with concrete opportunities, transforming more than 3,000 women into breadwinners for their households. Having benefited from entrepreneurship training, coaching, and mentoring, they have taken the industry a step further and introduced modern patterns and styles while preserving the genuine characteristics of Palestinian embroidery. We have started to see their designs on traditional and modern Western clothes and on jewelry, furniture, purses, and other accessories. Each woman has produced her own brand, focusing on special patterns or fixtures.

BWF, in collaboration with many partners, has organized local, regional, and global exhibitions for its beneficiaries. New ideas are



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always welcome, including knitting, crochet, traditional food products, and drawings and paintings of the Palestinian landscape, as well as entrants into the banking sector, IT, and other services. The beneficiaries have received training in business administration, financial management, marketing, social media, and quality control. They have learned about international markets and how to sell online. They have learned to stand for their rights and understand the intricacies of their contracts.

This success has encouraged BWF to seek more international opportunities for its beneficiaries, including visits to international fairs and the organization of a fashion show in New York and in Russia with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Trade Centre. Thus, BWF has managed to introduce Palestinian embroidery into the latest international fashion designs, galleries, and showrooms under the supervision of Parsons School of Design and the New York



The Business Women Forum–Palestine works to build the capacity of businesswomen and provide investment strategies and access to finance for women entrepreneurs and youth through the Business Development Center and the One Stop Shop, the technical and marketing arm of BWF. Furthermore, BWF encourages entrepreneurship through targeting young entrepreneurs whom it encourages to join either the business sphere or the labor market through tailored programs such as the Internship Programme, Promoting Success Through Promoting Role Models, and the “Wassalny” Programme. Advocacy and promotion of issues related to women in the business sector is another aspect of BWF’s engagement, as the organization has become the voice of women in the business and entrepreneurship sector. An active member in national teams for drafting relevant policies, its engagement includes the National Team for Women’s Employment in cooperation with the Ministry of Labor, the Task Force for National Export Strategy-Paltrade, SMEs, and Women’s Financial Inclusion, together with the Palestinian Monetary Authority. BWF is part of the regional consortium “WE’AM.” BWF counts on its partners, beneficiaries, and the society at large.

School of Design in the United States, and the University of Arts London in the United Kingdom. The event was part of the opening of LDNY Festival, a month-long series of events in London and New York at UN premises. More than 300 people attended the event, which was co-chaired by the associate administrator of UNDP and the executive director of UN Women, and attended by many other international figures.

Ms. Doa Wadi has been the executive director of the Business Women Forum–Palestine since 2008. She is a professional with more than 22 years of experience in business leadership and development. BWF is a nonprofit organization that was established in 2006 with a mission to strengthen the role of businesswomen as leaders in the Palestinian economy through advocacy, networking, and the provision of business services.



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