



# Female Exporters – Women Contributing to the Economy

By Noura Abdulhadi



*am a woman in process. I'm just trying like everybody else. I try to take every conflict, every experience, and learn from it. Life is never dull."*

Oprah Winfrey

With these words Oprah Winfrey, who is arguably one of the most influential women in the twenty-first century, expresses her unrelenting struggle toward womanhood. And yet her words are not unfamiliar to any other ambitious woman living today; in fact, her words are universal. These words embody perfectly the challenges women in Palestine are facing, from the social dogmas to the limitations enforced by the structure of their economy and country.



Photo of Mrs. Ikhlas Sawalha while receiving the honor certificate during the PEW.

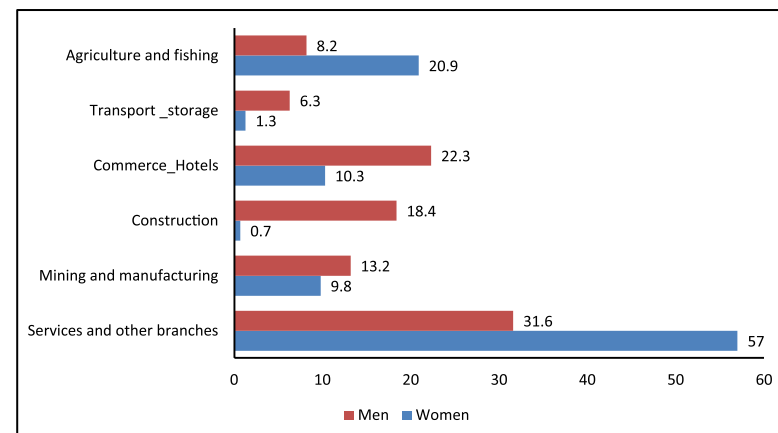


Photo of Mrs. Ikhlas Sawalha product (SIBA) displayed in the showcasing Palestinian products.

Palestinians are hardheaded, determined, and possess an unbroken spirit – which was instilled in them by their mothers who, despite all the social challenges they faced, managed to achieve inspiring feats. According to figures published in 2015 by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS),<sup>1</sup> female teachers represent 55.9 percent of the total number of teachers, outnumbering their male counterparts. The same goes for the number of university students in the years 2014/2015, when female students numbered 127,500 compared to 81,600 male students.

However, when we look at female participation in the labor market, the high degree of gender casting that Palestinian women are facing quickly becomes apparent. As it would seem, our society and labor market are comfortable in channeling the huge potential possessed by females towards “acceptable” professions, which is evident by the high number of female teachers, nurses, and pharmacists, and by the distribution of female labor in the Palestinian productive sectors, where females are mainly concentrated in the agricultural and services sectors (see Fig. 1).

**Fig 1: Women and Men Employed 15 Years and Above by Economic Activity in Palestine, 2014 (Percentage Distribution)**



Source: PCBS 2015<sup>1</sup>

PalTrade was established in 1998 as a non-profit, membership-based organization that is mandated as the Palestinian National Export Promotion and Development Organization. PalTrade is essential in leading the way for the implementation of a National Export Strategy for Palestine. PalTrade's mission is to lead the development and sustainable increase of Palestinian exports as a driving force for sustainable national economic growth by ways of export development, export promotion, and advocacy.

Yet despite it all, the Palestinian women who have overcome many obstacles and challenges still stand as a testament to their unwavering resolve to achieve success and live fulfilled lives. Counting all the achievements gained by Palestinian females may be impossible, but what is possible and what should always be encouraged is to highlight some of their successes that were accomplished both locally and internationally as inspiration for all of us. Such is the case of Fatima Jadaa, one of the many Palestinian women who built themselves from scratch and proved to be effective in improving the Palestinian community around them and providing other women with economic empowerment.

Fatima, who now owns the Al Hana Workshop, speaks of her early years: "I learned sewing in Al Mrabotat Association in Qalqilya, and when I had finished my training at age 18, my father bought me a used sewing machine so that I could start to work. Women from Haabla (a village outside of Qalqilya)

and other neighboring villages used to come and ask me to design clothes and dresses based on their requests. Eventually, I became well-known, and then my business started to grow and expand, which compelled me to think about renting my own place with additional machines."

Five years later, Fatima moved into a larger space, and her workshop has been growing ever since. Currently, the Al Hana Workshop in Haabla has over 150 sewing machines and employs 200 female employees who produce all types of high-quality clothing and textiles that supply many Palestinian commercial shops. Fatima is extremely pleased and proud of what she has accomplished; she is a role model who shows that Palestinian women can achieve success despite the occupation and other various obstacles. She explains: "We Palestinian women have proven that women have the ability to be successful in their work regardless of the difficulties they face, whether socially or related to the occupation."

Another powerful Palestinian woman, Engineer Oriana Nasser, managing director of the Jerusalem Stone Group, noted: "Although, I have been in the stone and marble industry for seven years, people are still surprised to see a woman in this industry. My past experience as an engineer has helped me prepare for being a woman in the male-dominated stone and marble sector." Oriana Nasser is the only female managing director of a Palestinian stone and marble company, a sector where 99 percent of the 15,000–20,000 employees are male. Jerusalem Stone Group is a high-quality limestone factory that specializes in the production of unique architectural elements, slabs, tiles, and cladding. The company exports mainly to the United States and the Gulf states.

She continues, "Nothing is easy to start here in Palestine. The many restrictions that we have to comply with result in burdensome additional costs, including

transportation and shipping," which are made difficult due to restrictions that are imposed on access to Area C of the occupied territories, where most of the stone mills are located. The stone and marble sector is the exporter with the largest value of products in Palestine, valued at over US\$ 30 billion. Worldwide, Palestine is ranked as the twelfth-largest producer of stone and marble, producing 22 million square meters of goods annually (from 100 million tons of raw stone),<sup>iii</sup> and the labor productivity in the sector is almost five times that of other sectors.

Ikhlas Sawalha Shuli, the owner of the Palestinian House of Soap, succeeded in reaching the international markets by creating different variations of natural soap through a small factory that was developed in the basement of her home in a northern town near Nablus. In 2003, she began by producing the soap in the traditional way, but she also continued to experiment with different techniques for soap production until she identified the cold manufacturing method as the best. After conducting many in-depth studies, Ikhlas developed additional supplements, including natural oils, to be added to her soaps that would benefit skin and complexion. Further testing took place in a chemistry

laboratory of the United Arab Emirates where her product Siba Soap was finally created. Siba Soap is currently on the market under 13 different varieties. Ikhlas produces her soap in a local Palestinian workshop. Recently she expanded further and will be moving into a new factory in the Jericho Agri-Industrial Park in April of this year. Siba Soap has been exported to Japan, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Ikhlas explains: "We believe that we can reduce unemployment among women in the local community by letting them contribute to such projects. Our work is based on manual manufacturing in all its stages, even the packaging. We seek to find simple and easy natural solutions for skin problems, without provoking any side effects."

The Palestine Trade Center – PalTrade, traditionally aware of and committed to gender-mainstreaming activities, is currently working with female exporters to ensure that they are prepared for global-market penetration. PalTrade was a driving force in the creation of a Palestinian National Export Strategy that was developed in coordination with the Ministry of National Economy and identifies mechanisms that aim

*Photo of Mrs. Ikhlas Sawalha and her team working on SIBA soap.*





Jerusalem Stone Group booth in The Middle East Stone show 2015 organized by PalTrade.

to support Palestinian exporters in targeting new markets and developing competitiveness in regional and international markets. Al Hana Workshop, Palestinian House of Soap, and Jerusalem Stone Group all entered PalTrade's export development program and have profited from its business management services, which provide recommendations for how to increase a company's competitive edge by examining its marketing, production, and management capabilities. These three women-led companies are recognized as leaders in their sectors, with the potential for further growth, and contribute to the sustainability of economic growth in Palestine. In late 2015, Al Hana Workshop and Palestinian House of Soap received acknowledgement certificates during the Palestine Exporter Week.

These successes by female entrepreneurs show that despite different social backgrounds, educational levels,

and expertise we can manage to achieve our dreams and allow our voices to be heard and our brands to reach international export markets. In this way, we can help improve worldwide awareness of Palestine not only as a producer of quality products but also as a civilized and modern country that is able to provide its population, both males and females, with the opportunity to excel. Such successes should be our motivation to further nurture and respect the enormous potential of our female entrepreneurs in driving forward the wheels of progress and prosperity in Palestine.

*Noura Abdulhadi is Communications/ Public Relations Coordinator at Palestine Trade Center – PalTrade. Noura's voice has been heard in numerous documentaries and ad campaigns, and she has served as an emcee at numerous events. She can be reached at [nhadi@paltrade.org](mailto:nhadi@paltrade.org).*

*Article photos courtesy of Paltrade.*

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Downloads/book2171.pdf>.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Downloads/book2171.pdf>.

<sup>iii</sup> Union of Stone and Marble Industry (USM), July 2011. *Stone & Marble in Palestine - Developing a Strategy for the Future*.