



Fishing for Life

Madeline: Gaza's Youngest Fisher

By Samar Al Dreemly



Like a fairy playing her harp, she is overjoyed with the sea breeze, smiling at waves dancing to her music, dreaming of her beloved sea while sleeping in her bed in a modest house in Gaza.

Madeline Kullab, 21, is the youngest fisher in the Gaza Strip, as well as the only female fisher.

Like any courageous fisher, Madeline wakes up at 5:00am to prepare her material and gear. She packs sufficient quantities of fuel, drinking water, and canned food. From experience, she realizes that she might stay in the middle of the sea for more than three hours. She also might be sleeping on her small fishing boat, fearing no waves, darkness or tides. "I love this atmosphere," she says enthusiastically. "In fact, I dream of it while sleeping."

Madeline Kullab, the only fisherwoman in Gaza.
Photo by Mohammad Al-Za'noun.



Photo by Shareef Sarhan.

Facts and figures about fishing in Gaza

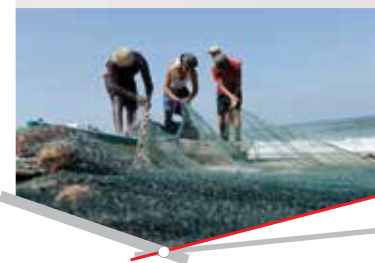
- Gaza has 4,000 fishermen, and approximately 30,000 families members who depend on this source of income.
- The annual need of fish for the Gaza Strip is 5,000 tons. What is actually being fished is only 1,000 tons, mostly sardines.
- Although Israeli authorities expanded fishing zones from three to six miles along the Gaza coast; Palestinian Fishermen are routinely denied their right to reach fishing zones by Israeli authorities who fire at fishermen, ruin their equipment, and confiscate boats.

She sails back to the coast when her fishing nets are filled with a decent amount of fish. When the boat moors on the beach, she throws herself on the sand to relax, while her family collects the fish off of the fishing nets. She is excited that she can support her family and that the fish she catches secure much-needed cash for household necessities.

"I pride myself in becoming knowledgeable on the various types of fish," Madeline says. "Sometimes I clean some of the fish I catch, then cook it for my family. Fried or grilled—it depends on the type of fish. It warms my heart as we all gather around the table for dinner. When we sit around the table, we feel more grateful for the grace God bestowed on us and we feel more love for the sea."

"When I was six years old, I was fascinated while watching my father treating his fishing nets, operating his boat, and jumping on board, sailing away to bring us food back," Madeline recalls. "I used to observe him throwing the net to the sea after setting the bait, then pulling up a fish-filled net onto the boat."

"As years went by, I developed a special relationship with this profession. When I turned 16, I went on my first fishing trip. It was a necessity, because my



father suffered a disability and I had no choice as the eldest but to replace him and ensure we have our income. Living in Gaza is very tough."

Madeline explains that her parents were pained that she took on this very tough male-dominated profession as her job.

"They think I was pushed to fishing, ignoring my young age and neglecting my feminine side," she explains, "but

I look at it differently. I love what I do. I also believe that fishing saved me and my family from poverty and secured a good living for us. I'd rather be working and ensuring a better life for us, than playing like little kids! It is not important what you do. What matters is why you do it."

Madeline lives with her family in a modest home in the northern Gaza Strip. She has two brothers and one sister. At 18, she became a certified rescuer by the Palestinian Civil Defense. She plans to complete the requirements of her high school certificate so she can enter university to study physical education. "I chose this major because it could help me master swimming and fishing by enhancing my existing skills."

Madeline taught her sister, Reem, and younger brother, Kayed, some fishing skills. "They join me for some of my fishing trips. Kayed joins me especially when I have to be out at sea overnight."

Gaza Strip enjoys 37 km of coast on the Mediterranean Sea. The regular fishing zone for Palestinians permitted by the Israeli Navy that was once 21 miles, has shrunk to just six miles. Around 4,000 fishermen support their families from fish in this very limited zone. Twenty-one-year-old Madeline Kullab is the only female fisher among them.

"The worst that can happen to us while fishing is a boat flip-over. This requires immense power and force to put it back to its upright position. Needless to say, people in nearby fishing boats rush to help when this happens."

Madeline confirms that her colleagues respect her very much and treat her as their own daughter or sister. They extend support to her and give her a hand with what she needs during fishing trips. They also secure her return route to the coast when the Israeli Navy conducts their typical harassment activities.

"Just like any other fisherman in Gaza, I am irritated by the Israeli Navy harassment. It is a nightmare. Sometimes their brutality and atrocious acts force us to sail back empty-handed. Sometimes we must return to the shore carrying colleagues who have been injured or murdered by an Israeli attack."

"Israeli atrocities prevent us sometimes from working within the six-mile fishing zone that is granted to us by international agreements."

It is worth mentioning that the six-mile fishing zone was 21 miles not too long ago.

Speaking of her future and if she considers marriage, Madeline says: "I will decline any proposal that makes quitting my current job a condition. I love fishing. It has become an important component of my personality and my life. It is my special tranquil warm bond with Gaza's geography. It is where I feel safe."

Samar Al Dreemly is an award-winning freelance journalist from Gaza, and the coordinator of Media Programing in the Women's Affairs Center in Gaza. She



Photo by Shareef Sarhan.

is also the secretary editor of the Al Ghaidaa Magazine issued by the Center, which specializes in women's issues.

She edited and coordinated a number of books and publications concerned in women's issues, with particular focus on female journalists, such as "Women in Confrontation with the Israeli Occupation," and "Media Workers and Gaza that is Unconquerable by the Clouds" in November, 2011.

Samar is a member of the International Union for Journalists, vice chair of Community Media Center, member of the Palestinian Journalists' Syndicate, and a member of the general assembly for Adameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association.

Our Readers Say ...

"What is so real and different about my days is that they always have the same question: how could a female work in technical support? Like do females know how to hammer a nail properly? And I always have to answer: if you know how to do it yourself, please be my guest!"

Zeina Kayed, Technical Support