

Head of the Household Republic



By Samar Al-Dreamly*

“Head of the Household Republic” is a title that best describes the woman who was sitting in the middle of the house flanked by her sons, daughters, and grandchildren – in total 37 members of the family. Because she loves education, she let her sons and daughters study at local and international universities and they now have prestigious positions and are living comfortable lives at home and abroad. At age 72, her eyes retain the brightness of youth, and she has escaped the wrinkles of life; her face sparkles with freshness and vitality. In addition, she has a lively spirit and is active and energetic. Warmly welcoming us, she answered the interview questions with an open heart.

You are called Um Issam, but what is your real name?

At birth I was named Amneh, and my family name is Hamdan. After I got married, my name became Amneh Bheisi because I now use my husband's family name.

What do you think about women changing their names after marriage?

I think I should keep the name Hamdan because I belong to my family and they are my kin. But because it is the fashion today, I changed my name like all married women.

Tell us more about yourself.

I was born in 1941 in Sawafir Village southeast of Ashdod. Like every Palestinian, I have experienced difficult times, especially after our displacement and dispossession. I have lived through the wars that took place after the 1948 *Nakba*, and one of my brothers was martyred in the 1967 June War. He was an army officer. But despite all odds, I have

survived and struggled for life with a heart full of hope. I was looking for a bright future all the time.

Do you remember anything about Sawafir, the village from where you were deported in 1948?

I remember distinctly every single corner of our village. I can never forget Abu Qawwas Bridge where my sister and I used to play. Fennel flowers grew underneath the bridge. A farmer from Jaffa owned orchards cultivated with cotton and oranges. His name was Shandi. And there was another farmer, also from Jaffa, called Al-Hout. I remember that my father asked us to beat a stick against thin steel sheets and sing loudly in order to keep the birds away from the crops.

With a broad smile on her face Um Issam started to sing the song that she sang when she was little. But now, sixty years later, she sang, reminiscently, from Deir Al-Balah Refugee Camp Block C, "The bird is flying high with a hidden worm in

its beak; the bird flies higher as the hunter takes aim with his rifle."

Tell us about your children.

My oldest is Issam, and he lectures in accounting and information technology at the Islamic University. My youngest is Iyad, and I call him "Bibo." He is a police officer and studied in Dubai. Suheil graduated from Birzeit University and now has a PhD in engineering from a university in the United States. Nasr has a bachelor of accounting, and Ala' graduated from the Police Academy. My daughters got married after they had graduated from the university.

I am proud of all my children. I worked night and day to bring them to this level of education. I washed clothes by hand and carried water in a big jar. I did everything I could to save money. My children were all clever and knowledge seekers. This made things easier for me. I provided them with a quiet environment conducive to concentration and learning.



As we were speaking, her son Nasr joked with her saying that his brother Suheil had initially been content with a bachelor's degree but later "woke up" and decided to earn higher degrees. But Um Issam interrupted him:

I was always behind him. I woke him up and encouraged him to learn more. Whenever Suheil called me, I refused to talk to him and instead reminded him that my happiness was incomplete without his doctorate. And so he got it.

What is the secret behind your keen concern about your children's education?

I enjoy education and used to be first in my class. Also, all my brothers and sisters are well educated. I went to Qandila School in Khan Younis. However, because my mother became ill and the education of girls at that time was rare and difficult, I left school when I was in sixth grade to take care of my mother. But my heart always wished to continue my education.

At school, girls used to rush to comb the hair of the girl who ranked first in class. Not a single day passed without one of my classmates asking me if they could comb my hair.

What did you do after you had left school?

A few years passed and then I married my cousin, Abu Issam.

She points her finger at him and he brandishes his wooden cane wishing her long life and good health.

In your opinion, what is the reason for the increase of violence against women in Palestine? Isn't this true for Gaza even though there are many institutions in Gaza that protect and defend the rights of women?

First, people do not respect religion. Islam honors and dignifies women and safeguards their rights. Second, the difficult circumstances and the stress that women and men alike are facing put a strain on them. Third, women are divided, like everything else in Palestine. Finally,

many of the institutions do not really work for the interests of women.

What is your advice to the fathers and mothers of today?

Parents must not discriminate between boys and girls. They are alike and parents must help them achieve the highest levels of education possible. Both men and women can help build the nation. Our nation is passing through difficult times and this requires that all our children be brought up and educated well.

All around the house were pictures of her sons during school and university graduation or with some Arab leader or during some ceremony. Um Issam pointed to the pictures and gave an explanation of each picture. She said she considers herself a strong, happy, and proud woman. She favors death to needing help from any other person and says "May Allah take me while I am standing erect on my feet."

Um Issam insisted that I drink tea and coffee and eat nuts and also requested that I eat lunch with her. She is a housewife who has laid the foundations for a dozen more households – those of her sons and daughters. In our short interview we learned very little about her, but she is a model for all women who struggle and toil within the walls of their homes. I think that it would be well worthwhile to pay this woman another visit to hear more about her life experience.

*This text was translated from the Arabic by Sammy Kirreh.

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