



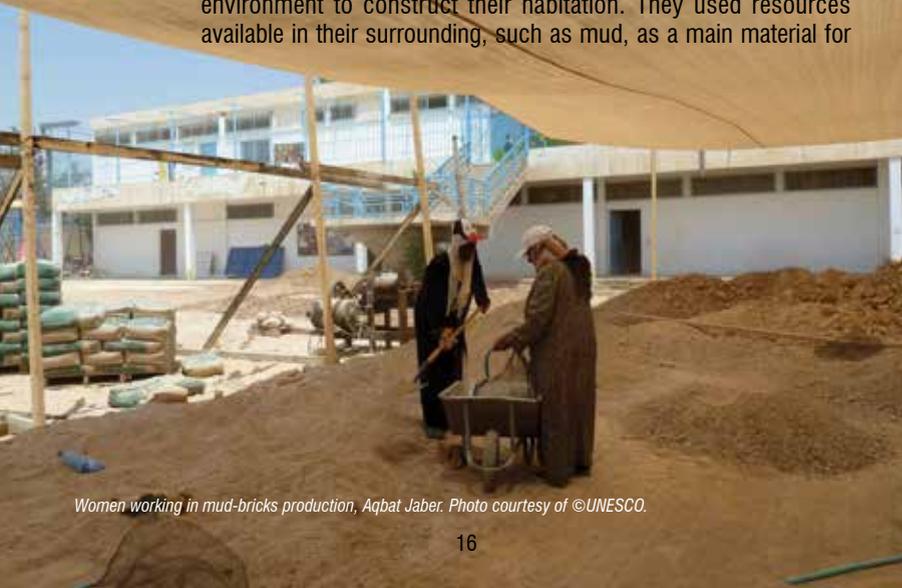
# The Role of Women in Reviving Traditional Built Heritage

## Earthen Architecture in the Jordan Valley

By Mohammad Abuhammad



Palestinian cultural and traditional built heritage is one of the richest and diverse in the region due to the successive civilizations that have inhabited the area for millennia. Its richness and diversity are a result of the adaptation of people to various geographical settings and climatic conditions. The Jordan Valley, which extends from the Sea of Galilee in the north to the Dead Sea in the south, has been a home for ancient civilisations up to today; the abundance of water that led to the flourishing of agriculture has been a major incentive for habitation. Having a sustained source of livelihood, the inhabitants of the Jordan Valley looked into their environment to construct their habitation. They used resources available in their surrounding, such as mud, as a main material for



Women working in mud-bricks production, Aqbat Jaber. Photo courtesy of ©UNESCO.



Adyouk Women's Center during construction. Photo courtesy of ©UNESCO.

construction and developed techniques of producing mud bricks (adobe), which are similar to those used by other civilisations in Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley and utilized in the oldest mud-brick settlement in the world in Tell Es-Sultan in Jericho.\* But mud-brick buildings in the Jordan Valley are an important part of the Palestinian built cultural heritage that today encounters several challenges due to neglect, the spread of urbanization, and modern methods of construction.

Between 2010 and 2013, the UNESCO Ramallah Office was part of the Human Security Joint Programme for the Jordan Valley, implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), UNESCO, UNRWA and UN Women. The project was designed to respond to the protection and livelihood needs of selected vulnerable Palestinian communities and to improve their living conditions by providing them with skills, tools, and techniques to help them mitigate and cope with the threats that confront them. UNESCO's contribution in this program focused on reviving earthen architecture in the Jordan Valley to help the Palestinian inhabitants develop alternative methods for raising housing standards, as 30 percent of the inhabitants of that area, which includes refugees, Bedouins, and economic

migrants, are deprived of their right to adequate housing due to continuously deteriorating living conditions. The project developed criteria to revive earthen architecture by manufacturing mud bricks according to traditional and universal standards and using them to construct three buildings, all with the aim of providing community services mainly for the vulnerable women in the Jordan Valley communities.

This project was the venue for an interesting experience with the women's community in the Jordan Valley. The story started with women being a significant part of the working teams. They stood hand in hand with men to learn the techniques for the productions of mud bricks and were well prepared to be the holders of the know-how of making the first element needed for the safeguarding of their threatened local cultural heritage. Thirty women were trained on how to select the proper soil, test its ingredients, calculate mixture ratios, use the compressing

Three structures, built by men and women with mud bricks as building material, now provide services for women and the entire community in Aqbat Jaber Camp and the Ein Dyouk and Bardala areas.



Women working in mud-bricks production. Aqbat Jaber. Photo courtesy of ©UNESCO.

machine, and employ a method of storing. They enthusiastically received the new knowledge, which is part of their living sphere as they are used to seeing the mud-brick buildings in their surroundings, even though they were also keen to live in modern structures built with stones and concrete. The paradox of the need to preserve the traditional know-how of mud-brick production and the dream to live and work in brand new buildings has posed a great challenge. Women in the programme showed interest in the learning process and became accomplished to the extent that they were successfully able to replace absent male workers. They efficiently participated in the process of erecting three structures in Aqbat Jaber Camp and the villages of Ein Dyouk and Bardala, overcoming challenges, such as working in extremely hot weather in dusty locations and dealing carefully with ratios of mixing materials. In fact, the women dealt with these challenges in positive and impressive ways, as Um Firas Al-Akhras, one of the women who participated in the construction commented: “During the construction of the Aqbat Jaber Camp building, we women worked side by side with

men with even more motivation and enthusiasm.” This contribution of the women’s community in the Jordan Valley area led not only to their learning how to preserve a type of cultural built-heritage technique, it is also a proof of their capacity to handle one of the most difficult jobs that is not usually accessed by women. Beyond the construction work, they were able to undertake such tasks as storing and moving bricks, jobs that are socially considered to be for men only. Hence, these women broke a prevailing stereotype in the working field about the capacity and will of working women.

Today, women are important contributors to the sustainability of their new mud-brick premises by using and operating those premises on a daily basis. Beneficiaries and visitors can find in each structure a compression machine for making mud bricks as well as a manual that explains the process of making and using mud bricks in new construction. Thus, the women’s institutions that run the three newly constructed mud-brick structures now have the knowledge and tools to teach others the methods of mud-brick production. They could



An Aqbat Jaber mud-brick kindergarten. Photo courtesy of ©UNESCO.

start a small business to provide mud bricks to the market and to people who are keen to experience an alternative building material for their private and public buildings. This can be an auxiliary source of livelihood that could later be developed into a business venture. Moreover, it could help the people who are deprived of access to proper housing to build decent structures that are environmentally sound and less costly. As Najat Abo Ermaila from the An Nuwai’ma and Adyouk Women’s Society asserted, “The various capacity-building and training activities have empowered women and improved their productive and communicative skills, which has enhanced their ability to play a leading role in building the local community.”

The competence of the women who participated in the implementation and realization of the most visible outputs of the Reviving Earthen Architecture program is clearly recognized by all parties and implementation partners. Their story is a clear manifestation of the possible involvement of women in economic production.

The structures and exhibits can be visited in Aqbat Jaber Camp (3 km southwest of Jericho), Ein Dyouk (8 km northwest of Jericho), and Bardala Village in the northern Tubas Governorate. More information is available on the project’s Facebook Page: Reviving Earth Architecture in the Jordan Valley – Palestine.

*Mohammad Abuhammad is an architect and urban planner. He currently works as a project coordinator in the culture unit at UNESCO Ramallah Office.*

Economic production processes should be mainstreamed to emphasize the right of women to participate in the workforce in a way that reflects the fact that they constitute half the population.

\* Pacione, M., Urban Geography, A Global Perspective. New York: Routledge, 2009.