

Women Working Together in the Rural West Bank

UNDP/PAPP, in partnership with UNIFEM, has been involved in a range of community-centred projects in the West Bank, aimed at the social and economic empowerment of women in rural communities.

Women Working Together

Talfeet is a picturesque village, tucked into the West Bank hills, just south of Nablus. Olive trees dot the landscape and the old, stone buildings in the town's centre, narrow, winding streets, and elderly men and women tending to their gardens give the area a nostalgic air.

A little way down the hill from the town is the Talfeet Women's Center, where a very different atmosphere pervades. Constructed by UNDP/PAPP, and activated through UNIFEM's Sabaya programme, this women's centre is part of the programme's pilot phase. The centre was originally built to serve as the premises for the Talfeet village council; however since it was completed in 2001 the centre has stood unoccupied - until now.

Equipped with computers and teaming with women, young and old, eager to learn and juggling both families and a number of courses, the centre is now a central part of life for many of Talfeet's women. Courses include literacy and Tawjihi classes – the



Palestinian secondary school diploma needed for entrance into university; agricultural training; sewing and embroidery; and computer literacy and internet skills.

“Since the centre was activated, it has become like a second home

for many women,” explained the centre’s director Myasar Saeed. “It has provided them with a safe environment in which to develop and learn new skills.”

The centre has revitalised many women in the community who had felt marginalised in a society

under threat from a range of social and political issues. Due to its geographical isolation and conservative social structure, women felt that they had no way of contributing towards improving their life or the lives of their families. According to Myasar, women in the village felt lost and as though they had no prospects.

Although Talfeet is only a short distance from Nablus, many

have often been cut-off from employment opportunities.

“Our range of courses has also produced employment opportunities for educated men and women in the village, who otherwise would have to travel a far distance to reach their places of work,” said Myasar. “The men in the village do not have access to the same facilities as the women, and we are incredibly proud of our centre and what we have accomplished.”

One of the most successful aspects of the programme has been the

nine children, who already had a job,” Myasar said. “She would come for her Tawjihi classes after work, as she became the sole bread winner in her family after her husband fell ill. She was motivated by the fact that she saw the difference between herself and the teachers in the school where she was working as a cleaner to support her family. Since her graduation, she has begun an English degree at university.”

Tales of remarkable women abound in this village. Another is that of 36 year-old Fiddah Abdel Latif, who wears the niqab

Open discussions: Women in Talfeet air their views and work together at the UNIFEM women’s center.



young women have been unable to attend university, as the village is separated from the regional centre by Huwara checkpoint. In addition, with the village mainly relying on agricultural jobs to employ its 3000 residents, women who have been lucky enough to obtain a university degree

Tawjihi courses for mature-age students. Since the programme began in 2004, fifteen women have graduated with their Tawjihi qualification, which would enable them to continue their education at tertiary level.

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- Myasar Saeed, Director of the Talfeet Women’s Centre

- a veil that fully covers her face. She had attended school until year nine, at which time the girls were expected to move onto another school to complete their studies. However, Fiddah’s particularly conservative family did not want her to travel to a new school, so she was forced to finish her education at the age of

15. Jumping at the chance to finally finish her schooling some 20 years later, Fiddah enrolled in the Tawjihi course at the Talfeet Women's Centre, graduating in 2005 with the highest score in the centre. She is now studying English through Al Quds Open University.

The centre has changed the village of Talfeet in a number of ways, with some citing improvements in the educational level of women; the enhancement of the status of women in the village; the development of women's skills; and increased respect and equality and participation of women within the community. Some of the women also give credit to the centre for improving their parenting skills, as they have been exposed to different ways of helping their children, particularly their daughters.

"The centre is the first thing in the village that has just been for women," said 23 year-old Oraib Abdul Qader. "Women are able to come here and express themselves, as well as learn how to do things for themselves and their families, rather than rely solely on their fathers or husbands."



Above and right: Examples of the work produced by the women's center.



In Her Words: Myasar Saeed

"I was born in 1946, in the small village of Jureesh, not far from Talfeet. My husband is from Talfeet, and I have spent most of my adult life in the village as a full-time mother to three boys and three girls, all of whom are in school now. My husband is a teacher, and since my appointment as director of the Talfeet Women's Centre, he has supported me in all aspects of my work.

Unlike my children, who are all very academic and able to continue their studies, I was prevented from finishing school due to the death of both of my parents in the same year. My elder brother was living in Kuwait, so I

became responsible for my sisters and had to leave school. I did manage to go back to college, where I obtained a Diploma in Arabic Language, but then the first Intifada broke out in the late 1980s, and everything went on hold, particularly after I started having children.

Now that my children are old enough, I have more time to myself and I am determined to do something for myself and my family. I have very good relations with the other women in the village, and was elected as the director of the Talfeet Women's Centre by my peers. They have given me a lot of support and strength in my work and it has been a very positive experience, working with women and seeing how the organization has grown. It has taught me and a lot of the women who come here that to achieve a goal, you have to work hard, but it is absolutely worth it and inspires more self-respect.

We could not have achieved the success that we have without the support of the village council as well, which has been extraordinary. The simple fact is that if the men were not supportive, they would not have sent their wives to the centre. But, everyone can see the results of women working together, using their new skills in all aspects of their life and inspiring greater cooperation.”

Myasar Saeed is the Director of the Women's Centre in the West Bank village of Talfeet.

Her Words: Fatihaya Ahmad

“In 2005 I started literacy classes at the Talfeet Women's Centre. Before I took the classes I couldn't read or write, as I had never been to school. When I was a child, the school nearest to my home was coeducational, so my father did not want me to attend. My six brothers all went, but I was not permitted to go.

I was encouraged by the centre to start literacy classes, so that I could learn to read for the first time in my 57 years. I wanted my life to change, and I also joined some of the agriculture classes.

I have 16 children, with 12 of them still at home, but I was still determined to do something that was just for myself.

Now I know how to read signs and my children are very happy and incredibly proud of the fact that I have accomplished this so late in life. My husband is a retired school principal and also helps me a lot with my studies.

I have received so much support from everyone, including the other women at the centre and my daughters who also take courses here. We are all together at the centre, like one family, which is how it should be.”

Fatihaya Ahmed is a 57 year-old mother of 16 from the West Bank village of Talfeet. Since 2005, she has been attending classes at the UNDP/PAPP constructed women's centre in the village, through the UNIFEM Sabaya programme.

