

A woman agripreneur, first producer of gluten-free flour in Palestine and main coordinator of UWAF (Urban Women Agripreneurs Forum)

Zenab Abed

Food security and agriculture in Palestine

Palestinian farmers have limited access to land in buffer zones and borders, which represents 40% of Gaza's land. The sector represents 9% of the employment rate, with 87% of feminine work-force in animal production and 54% in horticulture; however, a lot of women are not even paid for their work.

20% of Palestine's surface is used for agriculture, 90% in the West Bank and 10% in the Gaza Strip. About $\frac{2}{3}$ of the 2 million people living in the Gaza Strip suffer from food insecurity; 53% of the population lives in poverty and 69% are unemployed (2018).

The mobility of people and goods is very complex making the Palestinian market one of the biggest importers of Israeli products. By the end of 2017, agricultural exports towards the Israeli market reached 64 million USD; 56,8 of which were fresh vegetables and 7,2 million USD were animal products.

For the UN, the Gaza Strip only will host 3,1 million people in 2030 and 4,7M in 2050; 72,000 jobs will need to be created every year to fill the gaps for the next generations. Agriculture needs to be a productive sector that contributes to the GDP - its contribution went from 36% in 1970 to 3% in 2018 - and offers employment, landscape protection but also food security and environmental mitigation.

How did you get into agriculture? Was it family-bound or a personal choice? What kind of training and education did you get?

Zenab entered the agricultural world thanks to her educational choices. She is an agronomist with a specialty in food transformation. During her last year of study, she had to do a thesis to complete her credits. That's when she really got into food transformation. She read a lot of sources and studies on agriculture in general and educated herself as much as she could. After her studies, she worked with associations working on agricultural matters because she believes it's important to give back and volunteer. It allowed her to gain experience before hearing about GUPAP and their work with agripreneurs and urban agriculture.

What kind of agriculture do you do and promote? How did you start your journey as a woman agripreneur?

After specializing herself in food transformation, she became the first producer of gluten-free flour in Palestine; she wanted to help people with celiac disease who can't consume any. She started in 2016 after her university thesis: she had the idea, the expertise and the knowledge on how to create her project but not the opportunity to do so with unemployment rates over the roof. She decided to launch her own micro-enterprise and kill two birds with one stone: the impossibility of making her

project happen and the absence of employment opportunities.

Entrepreneurship in Palestine and its multifaceted positive impacts:

Entrepreneurship in Palestine has the potential to tackle various challenges. Youth represents over 1/3 of the whole population, an equivalent of 1,37 million people between 15 and 29 that faces an unemployment rate up to 69% in Gaza and 40,1% in the whole country. By betting on entrepreneurship and innovation, they could be their own employer and facilitate the overall socio-economic development and use of innovation and technological advances.

Institutional bodies and programs exist, such as the Multi-donor Agribusiness Programme or the Higher Council for Innovation and Excellence, to support young entrepreneurs financially but the business environment is challenging. The Ministry of Agriculture published its research strategies in agriculture for the years 2017-2021: the focus is put on the creation of startups to develop the agricultural sector through "The Startup Palestine" initiative for example.

From 6 Innovation Support Organizations in 2017, Palestine now counts 44 in 2018; making it the highest (+86%) increase compared to 2017 according to the MIP Report. 50% of the ISOs are related to the general category while 38% are in ICT and 22% in agrifood.

What are your professional perspectives on the long term? What is your professional goal?

Her objective is to have her own factory and promote local produce, with or without gluten, to answer the needs of people with

special diets and promote healthy eating habits. She hopes that one day she will make her ambitions happen.

She is also the UWAF coordinator of the five governorates of the Gaza Strip and works everyday with women agripreneurs to guarantee their rights and the respect of their integrity; either personal or professional. She helps them with their daily issues and technical needs, leads community-led actions and initiatives in coordination with GUPAP. She facilitates GUPAP's work in influencing policies, raising the voice and defending the rights of woman agripreneurs towards enhancing local food systems and achieving food sovereignty in Palestine. The ultimate goal is to make local produce a priority; as local markets are flooded by imported products.

Does your family and environment approve of your activities? Did you have to persuade them or others to let you do your thing?

Her family supports her a lot, since she first started her studies until the opening of her micro-enterprise. However, society did not support her, for example in 2014 they still thought food transformation was about planting trees and didn't believe in its economic potential. They tried dissuading her from choosing this specialty but she stood her ground and relied on her family's support to achieve her goals.

Because of this overall counterproductive environment, after getting her degree, she had difficulty finding a job. Men have more opportunities than Women because they are seen as more capable of doing agricultural work. The latter is perceived as too tiring and difficult for a woman to be productive. Not a lot of trust is given to women even if they're agronomists and knowledgeable in traditional know-how. This implies more complications for the judicial and administrative parts when she tried launching her micro-enterprise. Her specialty being difficult and implying potential physical damage, she had to double up her efforts to make it happen and overcome stereotypes. Producing flour

implies a variety of risks that can either be immediate or on the long term, such as respiratory and ocular diseases because of the flour dust and other microorganisms in the air. Moreover, producing and transforming flour has to be well controlled; just like any other agricultural and food dust, it's flammable and could easily cause an explosion.

Fortunately, she got support from UWAF and GUPAP and realized that with the years, the critical and disappointed looks turned into pride even in people who did not believe in her at all.

If you could summarize what an average day looks for you as a woman agripreneur what would you put forth?

Depending on the activities scheduled and the electricity working hours, Zenab organizes her day after 2 pm when the power is up. The volume of work can change a lot : she can be working a full seven days a week sometimes when she has several orders, while some other times she only spends one day in her workshop. Depending on her needs, she adapts and will sometimes finish really late delivering orders for her last clients.

Her time is divided between her micro-enterprise and her responsibilities as an UWAF coordinator. She has to attend workshops, keep in touch with the 103 women agripreneurs she assists, both new and old ones, in any kind of way they need. She also participates in keeping a constant dialogue with women agripreneurs and tries to alleviate the spirits by sharing success stories.

**How long have you known GUPAP?
How did you meet?**

The first time she heard about GUPAP was in 2019 when she saw an ad on a programme focused on strengthening the resilience of women agripreneurs. She was selected by GUPAP for her project before getting specialized training. She benefited from financial support and material support before starting to think

about the thirty other women participating in the event.

Thanks to the help of GUPAP, a local forum was established to capitalize on the lessons learnt from the workshop. The idea was to continue to keep on creating something after the event; considering the limited means, mutualization and collaboration can compensate.

UWAF is seen as the child of GUPAP because the latter incubated women agri-enterprises and supported them proactively. The network evolved from 30 women agripreneurs to 103. Supporting these women with technical advice, know-how, material and financial support when possible is essential to reinforce their capacity as businesswomen. Since the attacks in May 2021, women agripreneurs need to feel humane and respected in their achievements and objectives.



Photo credits: Feras Bakri

This is one of GUPAP's goal: to support these women agripreneurs in an integrated manner, food-wise (packaging, risk control, legal framework...), by using their local produce in humanitarian food baskets. The objective is to advocate for the promotion of local products over imported ones and the direct support of local producers engaged in the Gazawi economy. 64 products have gained a label and have been marketed since then. UWAF now, in coordination and facilitation of GUPAP and their partners, is implementing a crowdfunding campaign aimed at enhancing the resilience of women agripreneurs in solidarity marketing.

Can you explain the professional ties you have with GUPAP and UWAF and what is your role in the organization?

Zenab gained self-confidence since she started collaborating with GUPAP and UWAF; she developed several soft skills and has more knowledge to assist, to the best of her ability, these women agripreneurs.

Her family and entourage are witnessing this evolution, beneficial to her but also to her relationship with the Palestinian society and the stakeholders she wishes to support. UWAF is lived as a familial dynamic, she doesn't see herself as a coordinator but would rather put some focus on the social link created and guaranteeing women agripreneurs feel supported and fulfilled. Because there are now 103 women agripreneurs to coordinate, there was a need to reorganize and cover every governorate. An UWAF coordination committee, that consists of five coordinators for each governorate in addition to the UWAF global coordinator, was created. This enhanced the quality of the help delivered to the agripreneurs and facilitates the implementation of community-led actions. Every week there is a meeting between GUPAP and the coordination committee to monitor the progress and evaluate the different on-going projects in the Gaza Strip.

Through a WhatsApp group Zenab and the coordination committee stay in contact with the women agripreneurs whatever the hour and the need; thanks to the effectiveness of the application. Different kinds of information are shared: success stories, socio-economic opportunities or knowledge about a practice and/or product.... These discussions sometimes lead to sales which helps local food security gain more resilience.

UWAF has the ability to maintain institutional relationships thanks to GUPAP, which helps to get attractive tax measures through the Ministry of Economy for women agripreneurs opening micro-enterprises and who suffered from COVID-19, the war and everything in between. The judicial recording is done by GUPAP and the difference with other organizations is that they do not think about economic growth from a

benefits point of view. Their main objective is to enhance the economic resilience of women agripreneurs so they can capitalize on what they have and develop their activity on a bigger scale.



GUPAP, winner of the International Spring Prize for Influence (2021)

By helping them financially, by advocating for their rights and by training them GUPAP bets that it will promote healthier eating habits relying on local products from sustainable enterprises. The products of women agripreneurs supported by GUPAP are now in supermarkets and grocery stores which makes them proud. Palestinian people do not want humanitarian food baskets, they want tools to emancipate themselves. They are agronomists, businesswomen and they want to be able to participate actively in the rural and economic development of Palestinian territories.

International Women's Day 2022 - Agrifood systems facing climate change in the MENA region: gender equality for better resilience

On Monday 7th of March, Alaa Jayab - Community Interventions & Relations Coordinator of GUPAP - participated in an CIHEAM-UfM-FAO event to share the lessons learned in the Gaza Strip.

To promote the role of women on different levels Alaa expressed the need for strong policies, strengthening the resilience and sovereignty of these women agripreneurs. They need to be supported on different aspects: access to markets, digitalization, capacity building, improving the quality of their products with labels and certifications... 64 labeling cards now exist and allow some of these women agripreneurs to have proper legal coverage and market access.

UWAF's objective is to counter the specific challenges of Gaza (reduced mobility of goods, restrictions, climate change, pandemic...) by offering a space to gather every entrepreneur, their experiences and good practices to adopt common goals and a similar approach.

Do you work with other structures/organizations to bring awareness to your work? Have you noticed any differences in your way of proceeding?

There are many associations in Gaza and Palestine helping women and agricultural entrepreneurship but some have restrictive conditions. To get in some of them, you have to pay an entry fee which is counterproductive if you are trying to help women without economical means. Others will prevent agripreneurs from marketing their products the way they want; since the organization financially helped the enterprise, it wants to maintain a control over it. These strict regulations are not present with GUPAP, no pressure is put on women agripreneurs. They collaborate with whom they want and do what they deem good for their professional and personal future. The agricultural sector is weak and needs help, women agripreneurs need to live their lives with a perspective that is better than what they have now. The events organized by GUPAP are really important because they allow the creation of synergies between these women and give hope for a better future.

They need financing and putting them in a dependency dynamic is not helping. UWAF is a safe space for these women and for every person who wants to participate in this agricultural and human enterprise without being limited in their activism.

Do you include innovation in your activities? Do you have the possibility to do so?

Zenab's products depend on innovation because they support a vulnerable community for whom this kind of product doesn't exist. She's the only

provider in Palestine, she uses special kinds of flour and relies on quality packaging, sanitary and risk control with a will to export. However, she would rather provide local produce for local markets to help sick Palestinians but she is up against the culture of imported products that is undermining the local economy. Even though all of her documents are in order, she is put aside and would rather not collaborate with big associations because of the pressures and regulations we mentioned above.

What are the differences between young and senior woman agripreneurs, did you notice anything since you work with a variety of profiles?

What is unique in UWAF is that age is not a problem or a factor like in other organizations where they make it a condition to become a woman agripreneur. UWAF believes that every woman has the potential to become an agripreneur whatever her age or her activity, they can all produce quality local produce. What's interesting with generational variety is that seniors have useful traditional know-how without being agronomists. On one side we have younger educated generations, and on the other, the field expertise and when they both meet the discussions can only be fruitful and safeguard ancestral practices.

Transcriber: Lana Khouildi.

The questions of this interview were translated live from English to Arabic and Arabic to English by Alaa Jayab, Community Interventions & Relations Coordinator of GUPAP.

Zeinab Abed is a woman agripreneurial activist and an agronomist specialized in food transformation and the first producer of gluten-free flour in Gaza (Palestine). She has developed her experience and her soft skills through different associations before joining the GUPAP platform and becoming the UWAF coordinator of the five governorates of Gaza. She assists and coordinates a network of 170 women agripreneurs through digital interactive and capacity sharing communication and projects.

Alaa Abu Jayab a community and institutional development activist, holds a degree in English Literature from Al-Azhar University, she holds a higher diploma in NGOs Management and Community Organization approach. She is the Coordinator of Community Participation and Advocacy at Gaza Urban Agriculture Platform (GUPAP); she supervised the establishment of the Urban Women Agripreneurs Forum (UWAF); a key part of GUPAP strategy to enhance socio-economic resilience of women agripreneurs and to facilitate community-led capacity sharing, rights advocacy and policy influencing activities.