

Palestinian women make strides in high-tech

February 11 2014, by Karin Laub



Abeer Abu Ghaith, 29, third from left, the first female high-tech entrepreneur in the West Bank, talks to other Palestinian women in the village of Dura. Abu Ghaith set up an Internet employment brokerage and software development firm and has been relentless in the pursuit of her goals, showing how the Palestinian IT sector could transform the lives of other women by giving them access to jobs and financial independence. (AP Photo/Nasser Shiyoukhi)

Growing up in a traditional society, Abeer Abu Ghaith was often told a woman's future is in her husband's kitchen. Quietly, the 29-year-old proved everyone wrong.

Abu Ghaith has become the first female high-tech entrepreneur in the West Bank, setting up an Internet employment brokerage and software development firm. Last month, the Palestinian trailblazer was recognized by regional high-tech leaders as a recipient of the Women in Technology Awards in the Middle East and Africa for 2014.

Abu Ghaith has put in 16-hour days, showing how the local IT and communications sector can transform the lives of other [women](#) by giving them access to jobs and financial independence. Some say the sector, the most vibrant in an otherwise stagnant economy, could double in size over the next five years and employ thousands more.

Palestinian women already make up a majority of students in many colleges and universities in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, but often have trouble transitioning into the job market. After they graduate, the traditional gender expectations usually kick in—that they should get married first and worry about a career later.

Those determined to work face a tough [job market](#) with double-digit unemployment and employers who often prefer male applicants still seen as the main breadwinners. Job choices are further constricted by family concerns that a young woman's reputation could be tarnished if she returns home late from work or has to travel for the job. Only about 20 percent Palestinian women work outside the home, compared to nearly 70 percent of men, according to the International Labor Organization.

"Palestinian women face a lot of challenges," said Abu Ghaith, the second-oldest of nine brothers and sisters, speaking at her family home in the town of Dura, one of the most conservative areas of the West Bank. "We have plenty of qualified women in my area who have no access to jobs.

Abu Ghaith graduated from the Polytechnic University in the nearby city

of Hebron in 2007 and still works for her alma mater as a career counselor for IT students.

Last year, she set up her company, StayLinked, which serves as a talent broker between Palestinian freelancers and businesses in need of services, such as translation, data entry, graphic design, online marketing and website development. Customers include companies in the U.S. and in Gulf countries, she said.

Abu Ghaith has three business partners, including a female friend, a male expert in IT training and a company that offered advice in the early stages. The two women pooled their savings to contribute to \$30,000 in startup costs and control 70 percent of the business.



Abeer Abu Ghaith, the first female high-tech entrepreneur in the West Bank, who set up an internet employment brokerage and software development firm, is reflected in a mirror in her home while she works on her laptop in the West Bank village of Dura, Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2014. Palestinian women already make

up a majority of students in many colleges and universities in the West Bank and Gaza, but often have trouble transitioning into the job market. (AP Photo/Nasser Shiyoukhi)

So far, StayLinked has generated several thousand dollars in business—Abu Ghaith won't say exactly how much—and has provided paid employment for about 40 freelancers, half of them women.

The company hasn't turned a profit yet, but Abu Ghaith said that's in line with expectations. The past year has shown that the business model works, she said, hoping to expand significantly in 2014.

Abu Ghaith has been a cautious rebel, pushing boundaries gradually instead of crossing them at once.

In a nod to custom and her own beliefs, she wears the headscarf of devout Muslim women, prays regularly at a local mosque and lives with her parents and several of her siblings, as is expected of unmarried women.

At the same time, she won't let anyone deter her.

"As a woman, I can help and change the world in my own way, even if the society wants to confine us in the kitchen and the house," she said, sitting at a desk in her cramped bedroom, which doubles as an office. "I have changed the world from the house."

The women who found work through her are grateful.

"She gave us a job opportunity," said Zeina Abu Sneineh, 24, a recent university graduate who believes she'd be unemployed if it wasn't for

Abu Ghaith. "People over here think that what women have to do is get married and have children," added Abu Sneineh, who grew up in Houston but returned to the West Bank with her family.

The "office" of StayLinked is a Hebron coffee shop where Abu Ghaith and some of the freelancers meet once a week. During a recent meeting, Abu Ghaith and three other women sat around a low table, drinking coffee and lemonade while a customer at another table strummed an oud, a guitar-like instrument, and a man smoked a water pipe.

Hassan Kassem, who heads the association of IT companies in the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem, said Abu Ghaith is unique in the sector as a woman who started her own company. Several other women run businesses on the edge of the sector, including firms involved in e-marketing and social media, according to a local business women's group.

Kassem's association represents about 150 medium and larger companies in IT and communications technology that employ about 8,000 people. He said the sector could double over the next five years and make up 20 percent of Palestinian economic activity.

The Palestinian economy has been hampered by years of conflict and continued trade and travel restrictions by Israel, which captured the West Bank, along with the Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem, in the 1967 Mideast war. The IT sector is largely immune to such obstacles.

Kassem said IT jobs are especially appealing to women, in part because they can work from home, within the confines of tradition. He said he expects that "in five years, we will have many Abeers in our country."

Abu Ghaith, meanwhile, hopes the award she won last month, as "best technology enabler and facilitator," will give her venture an extra boost.

The award was one of seven handed out by a group called Women in Technology in the Middle East and Africa. The jurors included executives from IBM, Cisco and HP.

Abu Ghaith couldn't attend the prize ceremony in Dubai because of visa restrictions. As encouragement, the glass trophy now sits on her desk, next to her laptop.

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