

# Embassy of the State of Palestine

General Delegation of Palestine to  
Australia, New Zealand and the  
Pacific



INTERN POLICY REPORT

Friendship for Enfranchisement: The Potential  
for an Australia-Palestine 'Women in Business'  
Network

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## Executive Summary

This paper will outline a potential strategy to facilitate a bilateral 'women in business' relationship between Australia and Palestine, to broaden the international networks currently available to Palestinian women. This is in the shared goal of increased social capital and economic empowerment for women globally, as well as a broader strategy to increase exports to Australia.

To this end, I collected qualitative research from women's groups in both Australia and Palestine that have a focus on female economic enfranchisement. These interviews gauged the viability of such a network, and the interest levels of the groups in question in facilitating these relationships. Ultimately, it was concluded that the majority of Australian women's civil society groups are not yet ready or willing to engage in this type of relationship with Palestine.

As a result, three key recommendations will be made:

1. That a staged approach be taken over a period of years, to build person-to-person links as a first step.
2. That Palestinian groups highlight their value-add to Australian groups.
3. That corporate sponsorship be considered an alternative or additional program.

## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

Palestinian women are highly educated and severely underutilised in the Palestinian economy. Women-led enterprise has been shown to improve the health, education and financial outcomes of the communities in which they are based, as well as increasing employment opportunities for other women. However, a lack of social capital has been noted as a key area of disadvantage for businesswomen in Palestine and beyond. A lack of networks can be linked to lower growth expectations, lower income, and higher exit rates for women-led businesses.

This report seeks to explore the potential for a bilateral network for Australian and Palestinian women in business. This is in the shared goal of increased social capital and economic empowerment for women globally, as well as a broader strategy to increase exports to Australia. First, I will clarify terminology and justify the methodology used in this paper. Existing literature on the use of networks in business will be discussed, followed by the political and economic background of Palestine and Australia, and the growth potential of non-traditional enterprise in Palestine. I will then discuss my findings surrounding the Palestinian and Australian positions on engagement. Finally, potential contributing factors to these results will be noted, along with final recommendations, including areas of further research.

## Terminology

For the purposes of this paper, 'businesswomen' will be defined as those women who are engaged in commerce, including but not limited to women who are executives, owners, or leaders within companies or enterprise.<sup>1</sup>

Female entrepreneurs will be defined as women who start up their own business enterprise, and therefore fall under the umbrella term of businesswomen.<sup>2</sup>

Traditional enterprise has been defined as those businesses which are both traditional to Palestine, and/or conventionally female. This may include sewing and textiles, farming, and handicrafts. Non-traditional enterprise may include the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sector, freelancing, and photography.

## Methodology

Data used in this paper has included qualitative primary data, from a combination of semi-structured telephone interviews and email exchanges. Secondary data has also been used from academic articles, and publications by reputable international and local NGOs and government organisations.

The use of qualitative research interviews is a well-established approach to political and social science research, allowing for a more exploratory

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<sup>1</sup> Cambridge University Press. 2011. *Cambridge Business English Dictionary*.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

approach to evidence collection.<sup>3</sup> This approach was considered more likely to capture social and political context, allow for a freer flow of ideas, and offer a more nuanced insight to the feelings and opinions of the women interviewed. It also allowed me and the General Delegation of Palestine to critically select participants.

Semi-structured interviews have also been considered a feminist research tool that rejects the false dichotomy of emotion and rationality, as well as allowing for greater understanding and connection with the interviewer, and less oppression or exclusion of the interviewee.<sup>4</sup> The direct exchange of views and perspectives through open discourse therefore allows for more holistic exploration of female perspectives.<sup>5</sup> As I exclusively interviewed women in my research, and my paper is centred on relationship building and networking between women, this is an appropriate method of data collection.

A major consideration concerning my semi-structure interview methodology was the potential impact of conducting interviews in English, the second language of all of the Palestinian interview participants. However, there has not been academic consensus that it is necessary to conduct interviews in the interviewee's native language, and studies have suggested that the use of a

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<sup>3</sup> Qazzaz, Hadil Risq, Shu'a Mrar, and Yousif 'Adwan. 2005. "Female Entrepreneurs In The West Bank And Gaza Strip: Current Situation And Future Prospects". Ramallah: Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS).

Yunis, Mohammad Sohail, Hina Hashim, and Alistair R. Anderson. 2018. "Enablers And Constraints Of Female Entrepreneurship In Khyber Pukhtunkhawa, Pakistan: Institutional And Feminist Perspectives". *Sustainability* 11 (27). <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/11/1/27/pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Westmarland, Nicole. 2001. "The Quantitative/Qualitative Debate And Feminist Research: A Subjective View Of Objectivity". *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 2 (1). doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-2.1.974>.

<sup>5</sup> Hesse-Biber, Sharlene Nagy. 2011. "FEMINIST INTERVIEWING: Experience, Talk, And Knowledge". In *Handbook Of Feminist Research Theory And Praxis*, 2nd ed. SAGE Publications.

second language may, in fact, make up part of the findings.<sup>6</sup> This was true in the case of my interviews with Palestinian women, where noting the capability of the women interviewed to communicate fluently in English informed the recommendations made around a potential relationship with non-Arabic speaking Australian women. Despite this, a basic outline of the interview questions was provided in English and Arabic to interviewees prior to the phone discussion, to mitigate any potential misunderstandings or language barriers where possible.

The data was then analysed via thematic analysis.<sup>7</sup> This involves re-reading and relistening to interviews, categorising the material, identifying themes, and identifying connections, as a basis for explaining results and informing recommendations.<sup>8</sup>

## Literature Review

### Networks: The Rationale

Several studies on female entrepreneurs in the Palestinian territories have cited a lack of non-familial networks as a key barrier to women-led business.<sup>9</sup>

It has been well researched that social restrictions, coupled with smaller social and business circles hamper the promotion and growth of women-led

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<sup>6</sup> Welch, Catherine, and Rebecca Piekkari. 2006. "Crossing Language Boundaries: Qualitative Interviewing In International Business". *MIR: Management International Review* 46 (4). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40836096>.

<sup>7</sup> Attride-Stirling, J. 2001. Thematic networks: An analytic tool for qualitative research. *Qual. Res.*, 1, 385–405.

<sup>8</sup> Yunis, Hashim, Anderson. 2018. "Enablers And Constraints Of Female Entrepreneurship "

<sup>9</sup> Qazzaz, Mrar, and 'Adwan. 2005. "Female Entrepreneurs In The West Bank And Gaza Strip" Sandouka, Muhannad. 2016. "Gap Analysis Of The Enabling Environment For Women In Business And Entrepreneurs". Asala Palestinian Businesswomen's Association. [http://www.asala-pal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/REVISED-Gap-Analysis-Report\\_Final-1.pdf](http://www.asala-pal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/REVISED-Gap-Analysis-Report_Final-1.pdf).

Qubbaja, Adnan A.A. 2019. "Access To Finance For Women-Owned Smes In Palestine". *Research Journal Of Finance And Accounting* 10 (8). doi:DOI: 10.7176/RJFA.



businesses, both globally and in the Palestinian Territories (PTs).<sup>10</sup> Myriad studies have suggested networks as a key remedy to the comparative lack of social and business capital that female entrepreneurs and business leaders enjoy. As such, social and business linkages have been cited as a key component of international market expansion strategies. They can offer business referrals, assist in finding assemblers and distributors, connect businesses to partners and investors, and function as an informal insurance policy.<sup>11</sup> They can transmit information about jobs, new products and technologies, and local market knowledge.<sup>12</sup> For women in particular, networks can offer social support and solidarity in volatile regions and circumstances where social and cultural constraints on women in business are prevalent.<sup>13</sup>

## Relevant Background

### The State of Female Economic Empowerment in Palestine

The economic situation in the West Bank and Gaza is deeply troubling for both men and women, with a fragmented, restricted and deteriorating economy impoverishing many Palestinians. As of 2Q19, Palestine had a

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

Sandouka, Muhannad. 2016. "Gap Analysis Of The Enabling Environment For Women In Business And Entrepreneurs"

<sup>11</sup> Wheeler, David, and Ashoka Mody. 1992. "International Investment Location Decisions: The Case Of U.S. Firms". *Journal Of International Economics* 33 (1-2).

Rauch, James E. 2001. "Business And Social Networks In International Trade". *Journal Of Economic Literature* 39. [https://econweb.ucsd.edu/~jrauch/pdfs/JEL\\_Dec\\_2001.pdf](https://econweb.ucsd.edu/~jrauch/pdfs/JEL_Dec_2001.pdf).

Jackson, Matthew O. 2010. "An Overview Of Social Networks And Economic Applications". *Handbook of Social Economics*. <https://web.stanford.edu/~jacksonm/socialnetecon-chapter.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup>Coviello, Nicole E. 2006. "The Network Dynamics Of International New Ventures". *Journal Of International Business Studies* 37 (5). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4540377>.

Sandouka, Muhannad. 2016. "Gap Analysis Of The Enabling Environment For Women In Business And Entrepreneurs"

<sup>13</sup> OECD/SWAC. 2019. "Women And Trade Networks In West Africa". Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/7d67b61d-en>.

negative trade balance of \$1,179 million USD, leaving its economy highly exposed to regional and international economic shifts<sup>14</sup>. The World Bank ranked Palestine 129<sup>th</sup> out of 189 economies in regulatory quality and efficiency, or ease of doing business, in 2016.<sup>15</sup> GDP growth in 2018 was barely positive, and aid cuts, wage cuts, and widening funding gaps for critical services providers only compounding existing challenges.<sup>16</sup>

Studies have shown that female economic participation and empowerment boosts the productivity, diversification, and sustainable development of a state's economy.<sup>17</sup> Women are inclined to spend more of their earnings on their households, therefore improving the health and education outcomes of their communities.<sup>18</sup> Like their male counterparts, female entrepreneurs and business executives in Palestine also almost exclusively run micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), as opposed to large enterprise. Women also tend to run labour-intensive enterprises, which create new jobs, often for other women.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS) & The Portland Trust. 2019. "PALESTINIAN ECONOMIC BULLETIN". Bulletin 156. Ramallah: The Portland Trust. [https://portlandtrust.org/sites/default/files/peb/septemper\\_2019\\_english\\_a4\\_d2.pdf](https://portlandtrust.org/sites/default/files/peb/septemper_2019_english_a4_d2.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> World Bank. 2016. Doing Business 2016: Measuring Regulatory Quality and Efficiency. Washington, DC: World Bank Group. DOI: 10.1596/978-1-4648-0667-4. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO

<sup>16</sup> World Bank. 2019. "Palestine's Economic Update — October 2019". World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/westbankandgaza/publication/economic-update-october-2019>.

<sup>17</sup> International Monetary Fund. 2019. "PURSUING WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT". Washington D.C: International Monetary Fund. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Policy-Papers/Issues/2018/05/31/pp053118pursuing-womens-economic-empowerment>.

<sup>18</sup> World Bank (2011), World Development Report 2012: Gender equality and development, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Qazzaz, Mrar, and 'Adwan. 2005. "Female Entrepreneurs In The West Bank And Gaza Strip"

Using the below model, I have calculated the GDP impact if female labour force participation rates in Palestine were brought up to Swedish levels of female participation. The results were that Palestine's GDP would increase by 21.4%, or nearly 3.2 billion USD. It is clear that Palestinian women are a segment of the population that need to be invested in – particularly with the threat of recession looming.

Calculation 1. <sup>20</sup>

$$\begin{aligned} \text{GDP Boost} &= \\ &(\text{SwedenFLFP} - \text{PalestineFLFP}) \times (\text{Labour Share of Income}) \\ &= \text{USD } 3,152,905,674 \end{aligned}$$

Despite the clear imperative for investment in women-led businesses, economic participation amongst Palestinian women is amongst the lowest in the world.<sup>21</sup> Even with higher education attainment on average, women have more than double the unemployment rate of men, and double the graduate unemployment rate.<sup>22</sup> For graduates of Computing or Business Administration, the unemployment rate triples that of their male counterparts. The overall female labour force participation rate for 2018 recorded at 19%, with an

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<sup>20</sup> Calculated using the Solow Growth model.

Labour share estimate based on average ratio for emerging economies as per Dao, Mai Chi, Mitali Das, Zsoka Koczan, and Weicheng Lian. 2017. "Why Is Labor Receiving A Smaller Share Of Global Income? Theory And Empirical Evidence". IMF Working Paper. IMF. Sweden Labour Force Participation Rate as per Yong, Jing Teow. 2019. "Women In Work Index 2019". <https://www.pwc.co.uk/services/economics-policy/insights/women-in-work-index.html>.

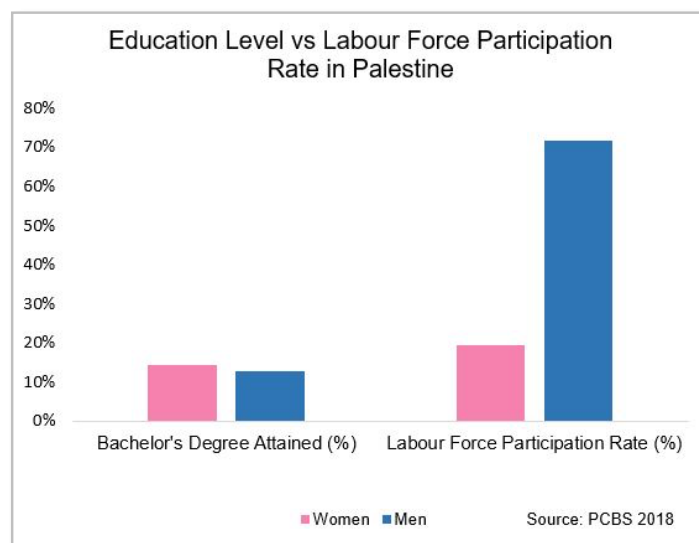
Palestine Labour Force Participation Rate and GDP as per Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. 2017. "Foreign Trade Statistics 2017". Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS).

<sup>21</sup> United Nations Development Program. 2019. "Labour Force Participation Rate (Female-Male Ratio)". Human Development Reports. United Nations Development Program. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/labour-force-participation-rate-female-male-ratio>.

<sup>22</sup> Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. 2018. "Women And Men In Palestine: Issues And Statistics". Ramallah: PCBS.

unemployment rate for women of 48.2%.<sup>23</sup> A 2005 study showed that 65% of Palestinian women would consider launching a business project, but despite this promising figure only 26% of MSMEs are owned by women.<sup>24</sup> Women-led businesses then continue to suffer lower growth expectations, fewer staff, lower revenues and less income.<sup>25</sup>

Figure 1.



Studies have cited a host of social, regulatory and financial barriers as contributing to this challenging environment for Palestinian entrepreneurs and women in business. Concepts of family honour and social norms have restricted women to socially acceptable and traditional fields of work, as well as places of work.<sup>26</sup> Further to this, regulatory barriers on at-home businesses, tax exemptions for working husbands and not wives, and a lack of affordable

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Qazzaz, Mrar, and 'Adwan. 2005. "Female Entrepreneurs In The West Bank And Gaza Strip"

"Advancing Palestinian Women Entrepreneurs". *Cherie Blair Foundation*.

<https://cherieblairfoundation.org/advancing-palestinian-women-entrepreneurs/>.

<sup>25</sup> Sandouka, Muhannad. 2016. "Gap Analysis Of The Enabling Environment For Women In Business And Entrepreneurs"

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

or tax deductible childcare provide additional challenges.<sup>27</sup> Traditional inheritance and marital practices leave women with limited access to assets, capital, and credit.<sup>28</sup>

### The State of Trade Relations Between Australia and Palestine

The Palestinian Government has been 'actively seeking to expand its international and regional partnerships' in order to mitigate its financial crisis and attract support.<sup>29</sup> Total Palestinian exports to Australia were valued at USD 140,000 in 2017 according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.<sup>30</sup> This is in comparison to the respective USD 659 million and USD 17.1 million exported to Australia from neighbours Israel and Jordan respectively.<sup>31</sup> This number is undoubtedly minute in comparison to Australia's other trade relationships, however it represents a 148% increase on the year before, and demonstrates the significant growth potential of exports to Australia.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ridao-Cano, Cristobal, Friederike Rother, and Janvier Sanchez-Reaza. 2017. "Jobs In West Bank And Gaza Enhancing Job Opportunities For Palestinians". Washington D.C: World Bank. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/523241562095688030/pdf/West-Bank-and-Gaza-Jobs-in-West-Bank-and-Gaza-Project-Enhancing-Job-Opportunities-for-Palestinians.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Sandouka, Muhannad. 2016. "Gap Analysis Of The Enabling Environment For Women In Business And Entrepreneurs"

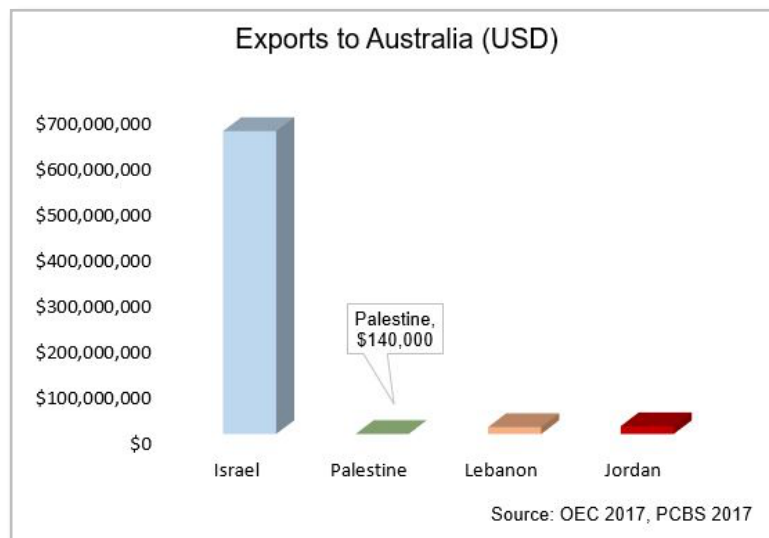
<sup>29</sup> Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS) & The Portland Trust. 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. 2018. "Women And Men In Palestine: Issues And Statistics". Ramallah: PCBS.

<sup>31</sup> Simoes, Alexander. 2017. "Exports By Destination". *The Observatory Of Economic Complexity*. [https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree\\_map/hs92/export/zaf/all/show/2017/](https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/export/zaf/all/show/2017/).

<sup>32</sup> Simoes, Alexander. 2016. "Exports By Destination". *The Observatory Of Economic Complexity*. [https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree\\_map/hs92/export/zaf/all/show/2017/](https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/export/zaf/all/show/2017/).

Figure 2.



The political and trade relationship between Australia and Palestine should also be considered within the context of Australian development assistance to the PTs. An estimated 42.6 million dollars in Official Development Assistance (ODA) is budgeted for the 2019-20 financial year, in line with Australia's commitment to a two-state solution with a Palestinian state.<sup>33</sup> Australian aid equates to 0.17 percent of GDP in the PTs, and is split between support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the World Bank Multi-Donor Trust Fund (MDTF), the Australian Middle East NGO Cooperation Agreement (AMENCA 3), and education scholarships.<sup>34</sup>

The promotion of gender equality and female economic enfranchisement has been fundamental to Australia's foreign policy strategy and international aid program, including to the Palestinian Territories (PTs). The Australia Middle East NGO Cooperation Agreement program (AMENCA 3), in addition to

<sup>33</sup> Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. 2019. "AID PROGRAM PERFORMANCE REPORT 2018-19 Palestinian Territories". Canberra: DFAT. <https://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Documents/palestinian-territories-appr-2018-19.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> [Ibid.](#)

Australia's policy dialogue with UNRWA, and Australia's scholarship program, all contain female empowerment targets as a key component of Australia's development assistance. The establishment of a network between Palestinian women's business organisations, and Australian women's groups can provide a platform for export growth into Australia. This will contribute to the common aim of increased female economic equality, economic security, and economic leadership worldwide.

### The Potential of Non-Traditional Enterprise

Australia's AMENCA 3 Program is almost exclusively focused on 'Connecting Farmers to Markets'. The three outcomes of the program are: to make farming production in the PTs more market ready, encourage farmers to engage more sustainably and profitably in value chains, and for women and youth to be economically empowered.<sup>35</sup> The Palestinian National Policy Agenda of (2017-2022) notes revitalising agriculture and strengthening rural communities as a key area of business development, as does the Palestinian National Export Strategy (2014-2018).<sup>36</sup> As a fifth of Palestinian women work in agriculture, with agriculture and food production totalling 51.3% of exports in 2017.<sup>37</sup>

However, it has been suggested by key commentators and Palestinian government publications that non-traditional enterprise also become priority

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<sup>35</sup> DFAT. 2019. "AID PROGRAM PERFORMANCE REPORT"

<sup>36</sup> The State of Palestine. 2016. "National Policy Agenda 2017-2022". Ramallah: The State of Palestine.

[https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/npa\\_english\\_final\\_approved\\_20\\_2\\_2017\\_printed.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/npa_english_final_approved_20_2_2017_printed.pdf).

Ministry for National Economy. 2014. "THE STATE OF PALESTINE NATIONAL EXPORT STRATEGY 2014-2018". Ramallah: The State of Palestine.

<https://www.paltrade.org/upload/multimedia/admin/2014/10/5448e728e1bd3.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> Simoes, Alexander. 2017. "Exports By Destination". *The Observatory Of Economic Complexity*. [https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree\\_map/hs92/export/zaf/all/show/2017/](https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/export/zaf/all/show/2017/).

sectors for women and men.<sup>38</sup> Online, technology-based enterprise is less vulnerable to physical trade restrictions and the effects of occupation, and demand is only increasing.<sup>39</sup> Palestinian youth have been noted as technologically capable, with high levels of multi-lingualism, particularly among university graduates.<sup>40</sup> The number of Arabic-speaking internet users has risen to more than 170 million people, with the Gulf noted as a key region for demand.<sup>41</sup> Online companies typically require smaller investment and less government involvement, as well as allowing for flexible work environments and hours. These sectors therefore mitigate many of the reported difficulties facing Palestinian women in business. Furthermore, these nascent service sectors and online businesses can heavily benefit from networks, particularly international mentorship.<sup>42</sup>

## The Palestinian Position on a Bilateral Network:

### Palestinian Stakeholders interviewed:

Executive Director: The Business Women Forum

*“The Business Women Forum (BWF) is a national non-profit association established in 2006, to help strengthen the role of businesswomen as leaders in the Palestinian economy”<sup>43</sup>*

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<sup>38</sup> Ministry for National Economy. 2014. "THE STATE OF PALESTINE NATIONAL EXPORT STRATEGY 2014-2018"

<sup>39</sup> Ridao-Cano, Rother, Sanchez-Reaza. 2017. Jobs In The West Bank And Gaza Enhancing Job Opportunities For Palestinians".

<sup>40</sup> Ridao-Cano, Rother, Sanchez-Reaza. 2017. Jobs In The West Bank And Gaza Enhancing Job Opportunities For Palestinians".

<sup>41</sup> Kaufmann, Yadin. 2017. "Start-Up Palestine: How To Spark A West Bank Tech Boom". *Foreign Affairs*, , 2017. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2017-06-13/start-palestine>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> "Who Are We". 2019. *Business Women Forum*. Accessed October 22. <https://www.bwf.ps/index.php/en/about-us/who-are-we.html>.



The BWF supports the establishment and growth of female-led enterprise in the PTs, through training, capacity building and facilitating access to regional and international networks. The organisation also maintains a database of businesswomen in Palestine, and promotes female entrepreneurial projects.

Former Executive Director: Palestinian Businesswomen's Association: ASALA

*"Asala empowers marginalized Palestinian women to realize their economic and social rights."*<sup>44</sup>

Founded in 1997, Asala provides support to women in the PTs through lobbying and advocacy, capacity building for women entrepreneurs, and facilitating access to local and global markets for women in their network.

President: YWCA Palestine

*"The YWCA of Palestine envisions an independent and free Palestinian democratic state where justice and peace, tolerance, equality, respect for the rights and dignity of human beings, gender equity, freedom of expression, social justice, pluralism and cultural diversity and women's leadership are promoted and sustained."*<sup>45</sup>

The YWCA Palestine was established in 1918, and is one of 100 other countries where the YWCA operates. The organisation provides education,

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<sup>44</sup> "Mission, Vision & Values". 2019. *Palestinian Businesswomen's Association: ASALA*. <http://www.asala-pal.org/>.

<sup>45</sup> "About YWCA Palestine". 2019. *Facebook: YWCA Palestine*. Accessed October 22. <https://www.facebook.com/YWCAPalestine/>.

training and advocacy to promote the equal participation of women at all levels of society.

### Summary of Findings:

All three interviewees spoke to a desire to network with Australian women as a first step to expansion into the Australian market. This enthusiasm appeared to extend further than just Australia, as it was noted by two respondents that any market expansion opportunities would be beneficial. There was consensus that the prospective initiatives listed were realistic and achievable activities; joint business training and mentoring programs, bilateral professional networking and joint conferences, trade exhibitions and events in Australia, an agricultural or rural women's network, and a formalised Australia-Palestine women in business networking group. However, the efficiency and utility of some of these items was questioned. Specifically, it was noted that many Palestinian groups were oversaturated with materials and activities around general business training. Instead, specific trainings relating to gender or certain business sectors were suggested as potentially more beneficial. Furthermore, it was noted that friendship, support and solidarity with Palestinian women through advocacy could also make up part of the bilateral relationship.

Views surrounding growth and investment in non-traditional enterprise were mixed. It was agreed that there had been recent success stories, particularly from young people in non-traditional sectors. However, there was a general perception that there were not enough women in these sectors for growth or

expansion to be on the horizon, due in part to a lack of female role models. All interviewees confirmed that the majority of female entrepreneurs engaged with Palestinian Women in Business groups were based in traditional enterprises, and often came from agricultural backgrounds.

The challenges discussed primarily surrounded language barriers, and the educational disparity between businesswomen and female entrepreneurs that will likely impact the approach to a network. The term 'businesswomen' generally referred to 'sophisticated' and well-educated Palestinian women executives, with a good command of English. According to interviewees, they've benefitted from the Ramallah-centric programs available, and the mentoring and international support that exists almost exclusively in English. However, female entrepreneurs were much more likely to be based in rural areas, have limited English, and require more specialised support.

## The Australian Position on a Bilateral Network

### Australian Stakeholders interviewed:

There appeared to be significant hesitancy to engage with this research on the part of Australian organisations. Only one formal interview was secured of the fourteen interview requests emailed out. However, there were four total responses that did offer some insight into the Australian position on engagement.

### Summary of Findings:

Three women's organisations, who declined to be interviewed, responded that they felt this initiative was outside of their current area of focus. Of these three, one group responded positively, stating that they were focusing on domestic growth as a priority, as well growing the relationship with their North American business. They did note, however, that a more globalised network of women in business is part of a much longer-term strategy. Another of the declining organisations appeared disinterested in the prospect of a network with Palestine, despite having existing international relationships. Similarly, the only Australian organisation to give a complete interview noted that they were focusing on providing these networking and business support opportunities their own domestic members first. However, they did note a commitment to growing the relationship with similar Palestinian groups.

## YWCA Case Study: Individual Relationships as a basis for Organisational Networks

### Context:

This case study is based on two interviews, conducted separately with the Australian and Palestinian branches of the YWCA. Both organisations have a focus on female economic empowerment and economic security, and offer networking and professional development opportunities for their members.

### Relationship-Building:

YWCA Palestine has regularly engaged international branches of the organisation with their work and women's advocacy. This has included holding and inviting international representatives to two of their major conferences, as well as organising side-events where other YWCA offices have been present at meetings at the UN or other conferences.

The Australian YWCA interviewee was introduced to her Palestinian counterparts through one of these conferences, while she undertook a young women's leadership internship with the World YWCA. During her internship, she attended a youth conference held in Palestine. This conference provided workshops and networking opportunities to bring women together from all over the PTs in common feminist advocacy. The trip also included visits around Palestine, to allow foreigners an opportunity to understand and witness life in the PTs and the issues affecting women who live there.

During this time, she met and worked with the President of YWCA Palestine, and the two travelled together to the organisation's regional conference in Jordan, for two days of workshops. Upon her return to Australia and work as an Executive Officer for the organisation, she maintained a relationship with her Palestinian contacts.

#### Impact:

Following these international networking opportunities and repeated interactions, a bilateral friendship has developed on both a personal and organisational level between Australia and Palestine. Both women reported being keen to develop the relationship between their organisations in the shared goal of female empowerment.

The Australian branch spoke to an organisational desire to 'not be so insular', and to share different learnings and experiences that cross cultural and transnational barriers, with the potential for a formalised, bilateral network in future. Despite such a relationship being at the early stages of conception, suggestions for support for Palestinian businesswomen ranged from online

forums, to casual meets and networking events, to large gala events with key Australian corporations and executives. It was mentioned that, while the initial stages will be centred on connecting people and engaging in shared advocacy, this has the potential to progress to 'the exchange of skills and networks' between Australian and Palestine.

Similarly, YWCA Palestine welcomed 'any relationship that can support the economic empowerment of women in Palestine', noting that this would likely be contingent on the level of engagement that YWCA Australia would be willing to provide. While the Australian branch is keen to increase its international outreach, it was the Palestinian branch that reached out initially, and has shown a greater commitment to international support and solidarity. The Palestinian branch considers there to be 'lots of room for partnership' in the area of economic empowerment for women, ranging from solidarity and public support, networking, capacity building, business management, marketing, technical support, linkages to Australian Fair Trade organisations, and support in direct exports. There is also significant interest in leveraging Vocational Training curricula and materials from Australia, in order to address high levels of female graduate unemployment in Palestine, and provide high-potential women with practical skills.

#### Findings:

Firstly, this relationship is asymmetric in favour of the Australian branch. Their desire for increased international outreach is one that can, realistically, be achieved through a bilateral relationship with any number of member countries. In terms of providing international networking and conferencing

opportunities for businesswomen, this could also be done with any number of less politically sensitive, English speaking, and more economically developed states, who can potentially add more value to the network of their Australian members. As a result, this relationship will be largely altruistic from an Australian perspective, though still in line with the organisational mission. This will likely be true across any bilateral network that emerges between Australian and Palestinian women in business groups and civil society organisations, and may impact its viability as an approach to market expansion.

Secondly, this relationship case study emerged within an existing structure of a single, global organisation. As a result, both organisations had a shared history, shared mission, an informal relationship, and existing organisational mechanisms to foster the repeated interactions necessary for genuine relationships to form. As there are few organisations that promote female economic empowerment and have offices based in both Australia and Palestine, this may be difficult to replicate.

However, this is a relationship with incredible potential, and one that speaks to the power and possibility that comes from social and business networks. This is an example of how a personal friendship has evolved into the potential for a formalised bilateral network, that can directly assist and support Palestinian women in business. The various levels of support discussed in these interviews will provide a platform for Palestinian businesswomen to grow and refine their businesses and have support in international expansion,

as well as to provide education and training to a new generation of businesswomen.

## Final Results:

Is a bilateral women-in-business network between Australia and Palestine viable?

The desire for this network exists predominantly on the Palestinian side. Australian Women's Groups appear largely focused on domestic activities, and improving the available resources and networking opportunities for their female members at home. There is the perception that a relationship with Palestine would offer minimal benefit to their Australian members. Conversely, Palestinian women's groups are keen to network and build relationships with Australian groups and Australian women. Solidarity and relationship building with Australia, as well as direct business and training support to grow women-led business, is welcomed. For this reason, it appears that the majority of Australia organisations are not yet ready for this project. However, it is likely that this may be a more successful initiative in future, when Australian groups become more established in their domestic activities.

## Potential Contributing Factors to Current Levels of Engagement

### 1. Politicisation

A series of well-publicised controversies surrounding the Israel-Palestine conflict in recent months may be contributing to a hesitancy to engage with Palestinian civil society groups as a whole. Top of mind for Australian groups may be the ongoing investigation into corruption and misconduct at the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), calls from the Australian Jewish Association for the Socceroos to boycott their Asian Cup group match against



Palestine, and the 'hate campaign' targeting a Sydney Muslim doctor for working with the Australian Jewish community to help sick children in the PTs. However, further research is required to fully evaluate the impact of these, and other events.

## 2. Limited diaspora and Lack of Awareness

The Palestinian diaspora in Australia is relatively small, with 11,803 people recording Palestinian ancestry as at the 2011 Census. Diaspora communities have been shown to foster interpersonal and professional links that then improve Australia's bilateral relationships.<sup>46</sup> A lack of person-to-person links may be contributing to a reported lack of understanding or lack of engagement with Palestinian issues. Australians described feeling uninformed about Palestinian issues, with a recent poll showing only 44% of Australians know either "a lot" or "a fair amount" about the Israel-Palestine conflict.<sup>47</sup>

## 3. Geographic Distance

Australia's geographic isolation from the PTs also likely detracts from the relationship, with studies noting the correlation between geographic distance, low international cooperation, and low levels of bilateral trade as a consequence.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Parliament of Australia. 2011. "Diaspora Communities". House Of Representatives Committees. Canberra: House of Representatives Committees.

<sup>47</sup> "Roy Morgan Opinion Polls On Palestine". 2017. *Australia Palestine Advocacy Network*. [https://apan.org.au/apan-activities/opinion\\_poll/](https://apan.org.au/apan-activities/opinion_poll/).

<sup>48</sup> Chang, Yuan Ching, Solomon Polachek, and John Robst. 2004. "Conflict And Trade: The Relationship Between Geographic Distance And International Interactions". *Journal Of Socio-Economics* 33 (4). doi:10.1016/j.socec.2004.04.004.  
Disdier, Anna-Celia, and Keith Head. 2008. "The Puzzling Persistence Of The Distance Effect On Bilateral Trade". *Review Of Economics And Statistics* 90 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1162/rest.90.1.37>.

#### 4. Self-Similarity, Language and Cultural Barriers

The majority of Australian organisation respondents noted having international partnerships with other English-speaking, OECD countries. This implies a preference for cultural and linguistic similarity for bilateral relationships, perhaps due to the perceived difficulty of language barriers and cultural differences. Furthermore, businesses and organisations have been shown to engage in 'similarity bias', whereby cultural similarity may impact the selection of a business or strategic partner.<sup>49</sup> This also is an area likely requiring further research.

### Recommendations and Further Areas of Research

#### 1. A Staged Approach

Networks are facilitated over time, through repeated interactions. Australian groups do not appear ready for a formalised network with Palestinian organisations, or to immediately being providing tangible support to Palestinian businesses. However, this could be approached in stages. This may begin with cultural exchanges between Australia and Palestine, as in the case study, or a visiting delegation from Palestine, in order to build relationships and open up communication channels. A relationship can progress from there over time, to include:

- Joint business training and mentoring programs
- Bilateral professional networking and joint conferences
- Trade exhibitions and events in Australia

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<sup>49</sup> Bierly, Paul E., and Scott Gallagher. 2007. "Explaining Alliance Partner Selection: Fit, Trust And Strategic Expediency". *Long Range Planning* 40 (2). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lrp.2007.03.001>.

- Bilateral agricultural/rural women's network
- A formalised Australia-Palestine women in business networking group, with an online presence

## 2. Add Value to Australian Women's Groups

Any network will need to have a clear connection to the organisational mission of the Australian groups contacted. Some Australian women's groups are committed to the economic empowerment of women in Australia and beyond and are looking to grow their international outreach. However, many are focused only on their domestic activities. For this reason, a clear benefit to the Australian groups may need to be highlighted to provide a basis for initial engagement. This may include a cultural exchange or media opportunities.

## 3. Embrace the asymmetry: Consider corporate sponsorship

A potential alternative to networks facilitated by Civil Society Organisations, is a corporate partnership that embraces the asymmetry of the Australia-Palestine relationship. The Israel-U.S Binational Industrial Research and Development (BIRD) program is a prime example of an asymmetrical, bilateral relationship with the aim of growing business in an emerging economy.<sup>50</sup> It involves the match-making of start-ups and growing organisations with their counterpart in a more economically developed country. The partner then provides mentoring, specialised capacity building support, financial risk sharing and a platform for international expansion. With the cultural shift toward corporate ethics and social justice in business, Australian

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<sup>50</sup> "What Is BIRD?". 2019. *Binational Industrial Research And Development Foundation*. <https://www.birdf.com/what-is-bird/>.

businesses may be inclined to support women-led businesses in emerging markets. This is an area for further research and does not fall within the research scope of this paper.

## Conclusion

While this paper has concluded that Australian women's groups are not yet ready for this proposed level of engagement, there are many positive signs that such a relationship may be possible in future. It has been noted that a network should be approached incrementally, to build the interpersonal links that will later provide a foundation for a more formalised relationship. However, the enthusiasm of Palestinian organisations to engage with their Australian counterparts, as well as the positive case study included in this paper, point to the achievability and potential that exists within person-to-person relationship-building. With time and open-mindedness, networks such as these can make the world of commerce a little bit smaller, and a little bit more accessible to women in business across the globe.

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