



Active Aging in Ramallah

The Forum of Expertise
(Muntada al-Khibrat)



By Felecia Adeeb

According to data published in the UN report titled *World Population Ageing 2019*, 1 out of 6 people in the world will be over the age of 65 by the year 2050; up from 1 out of 11 in 2019. In Palestine, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistic (PCBS),* by the year 2035 the number of older people will have increased significantly as well. This calls for strategic planning by decision-makers to ensure that the health and well-being of this population group is enhanced by enabling them to remain active and engaged in their communities.

Living a long, happy, and healthy life is a goal for all people worldwide. In order to achieve this objective, preventive and sustainable actions must be taken throughout the five stages of life: infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. While we tend not to like some of the changes we experience, especially during the stage of advanced age, we must realize that they are inevitable and will happen continuously throughout our lives.

For example, as we get older – or more accurately “live longer” – we may witness changes in our physical capabilities, social and professional roles, and social ties and relationships that may include retirement or the death of loved ones, friends, and family members. Our intellectual abilities and memory may deteriorate, not to mention changes that tend to occur to our sight and hearing that require daily efforts to address. Moreover, all these changes or losses may unfortunately come in one package, thus posing multiple challenges for an individual, which can tremendously increase the level of stress if they are not attended to.

Palestinian society, like other societies, undergoes changes that are related to societal progress. Older people may find it difficult to adjust to some of these, such as learning to use new technology. Furthermore, changing traditions also affect the structure of the family. This is one of the most difficult challenges to deal with because traditionally and for centuries, multiple generations of Palestinian families have lived in the same quarters even after marriage. Today’s modern way of living requires a different urban setting where married children seek to own and live in their private homes. Other reasons that adult children choose to move out of the family home include going away to university or seeking employment abroad or in a different part of occupied Palestine.

Elderly parents who find themselves living alone for the reasons listed above may feel deprived of a fulfilled and rich life. This is generally accompanied by loneliness, social isolation, negligence, and the feeling

of being less important and unable to contribute to the community in general; in other words, these elders can feel worthless. Indeed, the COVID-19 global pandemic has characterized the elderly as one of the most vulnerable and at-risk groups, which magnifies the need to invest in protecting this segment of society.

Population ageing raises many important questions, especially in Palestine. At the same time, older people are often denied resources that would allow them to make important contributions to the fabric of our societies. Palestine differs from its neighboring Arab countries in that it has been under military occupation for decades. Resistance and resilience at all levels has imposed and continues to impose challenges on all people who live in Palestine – especially senior citizens. One of these issues is the absence of a well-developed social welfare and health system. The present system is poor and does not compare to the advanced

Exchange of knowledge between generations. Photo by Manar Aranki.





Physical activities for the elderly. Photo Manar Aranki.

systems in other countries of the region. Therefore, it is a duty to provide special care and services for this vulnerable group of Palestinian citizens, not only as a response to their needs but also as a way to show gratitude, appreciation, and recognition for their contribution to building Palestinian society.

Palestinian governmental and nongovernmental institutions provide various services to older people that focus on their health-related, social, and psychosocial needs. One of these is the Forum of Expertise (*Muntada al-Khibrat*) initiative in the city of Ramallah, a knowledge-based community center that operates under the auspices of Ramallah Municipality. Established with the motto “Leave no one behind,” a slogan central also to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the forum focuses on providing senior citizens with opportunities to remain physically, emotionally, socially, and intellectually active, thereby increasing their resilience.

Al-Muntada was established on November 1, 2018, and aims to promote the concept of active aging by providing a venue to exchange and develop the knowledge, skills, and practical experience of participants, who include both members and nonmembers. It develops capacities by engaging participants in lifelong learning activities, such as book club discussions, and organizes recreational activities and a well-being program to help respond to feelings of loneliness.

Adopting a holistic approach towards active aging that directly and indirectly affects the health, welfare, and well-being of older people in a positive way, the initiative encourages senior citizens and experienced retirees who have academic and/or practical experience working in diverse sectors to volunteer and exchange their experiences with others, including young people.

Various training courses and activities have been conducted at the forum over the past three years and have brought much joy to participants. A quote by H.S. (65 years old) says it best: “I hope that such training will be repeated, because interacting with younger people helps my personal development and my ability to listen to different perspectives.” S. K. (72 years old) states: “*Al-Muntada* has changed my life. After retirement, I used to stay at home in my pajamas, sitting on the balcony reading books. The days meant nothing to me then; Fridays were the same as Mondays. Now I shave and dress up and actively participate in the forum’s activities. Every Saturday, I have a Spanish language training session. On Tuesdays I participate in a breathing-yoga session. I also play chess and engage in the book discussions.”

A longer and healthier life brings with it new opportunities, improving the lives not only of older people but also of their families and society at large. Additional years provide the chance to be engaged in new activities such as furthering one’s education, learning a new language, exploring a new hobby, or focusing on a long-neglected passion – activities that one did not have time for earlier in life.

Currently, the forum has more than 650 members who are engaged in various activities. Having gained momentum mainly by word of mouth, these activities include physical fitness, rhythmic dance and salsa classes, as well as chair-, breathing-, and hatha-yoga sessions that aim to harmonize the mind, body, and spirit, thereby impacting participants’ physical, social, and psychological well-being. These are

As the number of older people increases locally and globally, it is vital to provide innovative approaches and build proper facilities to accommodate them at both the individual and community levels. Preparations must include maintaining older people’s engagement in the cultural and social life of their communities and should address their current and future health, social, and psychosocial needs. One way is to build an institution such as the Ramallah Forum of Expertise (*Al-Muntada*) in each Palestinian village and city.



only examples of what *Al-Muntada* has to offer. Other social, cultural, physical, and recreational activities for senior citizens and their families increase their sense of inclusion and belonging to the Ramallah community.



Socializing. Photo by Felecia Adeeab.

The forum premises consist of an old two-story building located in the old city of Ramallah. It occupies an area of 1,350 square meters and contains a small library and a reading area, a multipurpose room, and training rooms that are equipped with desktop and laptop computers. A garden with three olive trees, shrubs, and flowers encircles the old building. A small plot of land is used by members to grow vegetables. This was initiated recently by some members as part of the volunteer program run by the forum administration and has proven to be a big success at more than one level. One tangible benefit was the harvest and distribution of 60 portions of organic green beans and more than 30 portions of organic *baladi* tomatoes as well as some radishes and heads of lettuce that were planted and harvested in season. In addition, mint, parsley, sage, and rosemary are grown throughout the year and are available for anyone to use. It is hoped that this initiative will inspire other organizations to do the same. Growing their own vegetables and fruits not only offers participants the opportunity to reconnect and

bond with the land but also provides them with fresh organic produce and contributes to the social and psychosocial well-being of forum members.

Focusing on the needs of older people is key to the steadfastness of the Palestinian people. It can even influence the younger generation to remain in Palestine and not seek to emigrate to other countries in search of a better life in their old age. In this regard, the forum provides a model for supporting elderly and marginalized groups in the community. It is well developed and equipped with knowledgeable and skilled individuals as well as techniques to meet the current and predicted challenges.

Felecia Adeeab is a medical doctor with a master's (MD/ MPH) degree and more than 25 years of experience in managing humanitarian and development projects. She is interested in well-being, public health, community participation, and geriatric care. Currently, she serves as the director of Ramallah Municipality's Forum of Expertise that seeks to maintain the community engagement of senior citizens and experts in order to contribute to sustainable community change.

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*PCBS press release on the eve of the International Day of Older Persons, October 1, 2021.