



The Seamstresses of Barta'a Sharqiya



In a shoebox-sized living room, 23 women are huddled around the electric bar heater. They all talk at the same time and their chatter echoes through the house. They talk about home and family and friends left behind in the nearby village of Ya'abad, southwest of Jenin. Two words are repeated obsessively: gate, permits. Since September 2003, the gate has fenced off Barta'a, isolating it from the rest of the West

Bank. Israeli-issued permits are the only way to cross the gate, in either direction.

Barta'a, a village west of Jenin town and adjacent to the Green Line, has become an enclave totally surrounded by razor wire. It is only accessible to permit-holders, through two gates manned by Israeli soldiers.

Since the gate was erected at the entrance of Barta'a Sharqiya as part of Israel's 'security' barrier, the women's lives have been in turmoil. Of the 23 seamstresses in one of Barta'a's five sewing factories, not one has obtained a work permit. Their presence in the Palestinian village became 'illegal' in the eyes of the Israeli authorities and their daily commute between Ya'abad and Barta'a impossible. The Israeli government considers Barta'a a 'Closed Military Area,' where only holders of 'long-term resident' permits are allowed to work and live. Usually these permit-holders are residents of Barta'a itself. They need to apply for permits in order to live in their own village. All other 'outsiders,' workers, traders and visitors are forbidden to enter.

The seamstresses are the sole breadwinners in their extended families and could not leave their jobs in Barta'a, one of the few West Bank villages where sewing factories are still active. These factories provide a major source of livelihood to hundreds of Palestinian women. Many have worked in Barta'a for more than a decade. They chose to stay in the enclave without permits.

Each month, they send their salaries home through the same 'back-to-back' procedures that are used to transfer vegetables, medicines, merchandise and patients in ambulances between West Bank villages. A youth from Barta'a takes the seamstresses' money and passes it through the gate to another one who takes the money to Ya'abad and personally distributes it to their families.

Each month, the women anxiously await a call from home indicating that the money has arrived safely. They hope that this system will continue to work; sending money home is

the only reason they have chosen to remain in Barta'a at such high personal cost, away from their homes and families.

The 23 women have not been home for more than two months. They live in a compact three-bedroom apartment 50 metres from the sewing factory. Their plastic carrier bags are



Seamstresses in one of the four square-metre bedrooms. There are six women per bedroom. The rest sleep in the living room.

their only closets, which they keep under the living room couch or behind doors. Some keep nuts and candies in their limited allotted space. 'We derive more comfort from food than from privacy, which we do not have anyway,' one says. Their beds are thin foam mattresses that they keep lined up against the wall during the day.

On their rare days off, they 'watch television, dance, or cry, because there is nothing else to do,' one of them says. Unanimously, the women say they do not look forward to their days of rest. 'Why take a day off if we cannot spend it with

our families? We feel like immigrants anyway, so we would rather work than stay at home.'

The women do not even dare go to one of Barta'a's few restaurants because they are afraid they would be rounded-up during one of the frequent clampdowns on 'illegal' workers in Barta'a by the Israeli Border Police. If caught, the women would be heavily fined and banned from entering the 'Closed Military Area' again. The unmarried women even worry that they will not find husbands if they stay in Barta'a for too long. Jokingly, one says: 'we would need a busload of men from Ya'abad for all of us to get married! But how would *they* cross the gate?'

They say they resent the social disruption and loss of family life more than anything else. Economically, they are often better off than the men in their families, who relied on jobs in Israel and are now unemployed. They have a skill, a job and a salary to count on at the end of the month. But because of the gate and permit system, they are socially isolated. They live a life of confinement behind the barrier and behind walls, in the factory and at home.

Each woman misses her family, longs for home and has a story to tell.

Assia, the caretaker

Although she lives in her own house in Barta'a, paradoxically Assia is one of the women whose life has been most disrupted by the gate. A vigorous 35-year-old, she has been working in the same sewing factory for 11 years and owns the apartment where the 23 women are now squeezed in. The factory owner proposed to free her from her duties as a seamstress, maintain her monthly salary and pay for extras if she would agree to host the women and look after them. A mother of two and married to an UNRWA-registered refugee from Nablus who is now unemployed, Assia agreed. With much pragmatism, she says: 'I could not possibly have refused. These girls support many members of their

families. They would have lost their jobs, and the factory would have closed down. I would have lost my job as well. None of us can afford that.'

Following this decision, Assia's life took a drastic turn. Her husband moved to his in-laws' house in order not to 'disturb or embarrass the seamstresses,' he says. Assia's social life vanished; she now spends her days cooking and cleaning for her 23 'girls'. She seldom can afford to spend some quiet time with her two small daughters, who have lost all sense of discipline and routine. Tranquillity has become a rare occurrence; the house always resonates with noise. Assia's private and family life has ceased and in many ways she now shares the seamstresses' predicament. Gone are the quiet family evenings.

Assia says that for everybody's sake, she has decided to take upon herself the psychological wellbeing of the women as part of her 'new job.' She understands their loneliness and sense of oppression and often has to intercede in arguments. 'It is such a big responsibility. I feel like a mother but also as an officer in this house. Frustration, yearning and sometimes desperation can poison the atmosphere over the most trivial things.' Assia knows that the place is too small and too crowded to allow for animosity or hard feelings. With much skill and diplomacy, she keeps things 'manageable.'

Zuhdi, Assia's husband, also contributes to his wife's new role. He is in charge of shopping and taking the girls to the doctor if need be. Even that has become more complicated because of the gate. There is only one private doctor in Barta'a Sharqiya and crossing the gate to go to the nearest hospital is out of the question (the nearest hospital is in Tulkarm, 23 kilometres away). For night emergencies when the Barta'a Sharqiya doctor is unavailable, the only solution is to smuggle the girls to Barta'a Gharbiya in Israel¹. However, doctors in Israel are liable to face penalties if they treat a West Bank ID holder. One night, Zuhdi had to take one of the girls to Barta'a Gharbiya. The Arab-Israeli doctor grudgingly agreed to give the girl some medicine but did not treat her and told her to see a doctor in the West Bank.

How long will Assia and Zuhdi continue hosting the seamstresses? The answer comes after a long pause: 'we do not know. We do not have plans. Our plans depend on the gate'.

Two sisters away from home

Amani and Mouna are sisters, and the youngest of the 23 women living in Assia's apartment. Like the others, they have not gone home for many weeks. The sisters, aged 22 and 19, have been working in the same sewing factory for several years. They were both pulled out of school at age 13 to support their seven-member family and support one of their brothers at Najah University. For six years they did not complain about having started work at such an early age. It is not an unusual situation for young Palestinian women. However, since the gate has been in place they say that feel estranged. Work is becoming increasingly difficult because they miss their family's support, although they both acknowledge Assia's invaluable motherly care and attention. The sisters are UNRWA-registered refugees and say that they *feel* like refugees because they live in a house that is not theirs, do not have the luxury of privacy and miss their loved ones. 'Ya'abad is so close, and yet so far away,' Amani says.

¹ The two villages were divided in 1948 into 'western' (on the Israeli side) and 'eastern' (on the Palestinian side) Barta'a, but they have kept strong social and economic ties.

A daughter's farewell

Salam's father died recently, after the seamstresses' 'seclusion' had already started. She had not seen her family for seven weeks. The day her father died she decided she would go to the funeral even if she did not make it back to Barta'a and lose her job. 'The gate kept him away from me for 55 days, I could not miss my last chance to say goodbye to him,' she says.

Salam attended her father's funeral and next day reluctantly came back to Barta'a for the family's sake, all of whom now depend on her salary. She came back with no permit and no fake ID². She says she simply told the soldier she had gone to pay her last respects to her father, a father she had not seen for almost two months because the gate kept her away from home. In a surge of compassion, the startled soldier allowed her through the gate and asked no further questions. Yet Salam now feeds a blind and bitter hatred towards the gate, which she blames for her loss.

A child looking for his mother

On Saturday, 3 January 2004, Abdallah, an 11-year-old boy showed up in one of Barta'a's sewing factories. To the seamstresses who were looking at him with astonishment, he asked only: 'Where is my mother?'

A frail woman, Ikbal looks at a loss, searching for a point of reference in the cold, fluorescent-lit sewing factory. Yet she tells her story in a steady and soft voice, which quivers only when she mentions her three sons, Abdallah, Khatib and Ahmed, left behind in Ya'abad, 'on the other side.' Like the thousands of Palestinian men who used to work in Israel, her husband lost his job shortly after the *intifada* began in 2000. When she could not feed her three sons and baby daughter properly, she decided to look for a job in Barta'a, her original home village. Ikbal, who is now 28, had left Barta'a when she married at age 15 and rarely returned home afterwards.

When she accepted the job as a novice seamstress, she did not anticipate that the gate would impede her free movement and keep her away from her family. She had no other choice but to accept.

Although Ikbal soon became conscious of the sacrifices involved, her sons did not understand. That Saturday, prompted by his younger brothers, Abdallah, her eldest son, took a bus from Ya'abad to the Barta'a gate. He got off at the gate and told the soldier that he was looking for his mother. Perplexed, the soldier allowed him to cross; as a boy under age 12, Abdallah does not need a permit to enter the enclave. From there Abdallah took another mini-bus into the village and eventually found his way to the sewing factory.

It takes Ikbal a few moments to gather enough strength to continue. 'He said he was hungry. He thought that the reason there is nothing to eat at home is because I am not around to cook. The real reason is that I have not worked long enough to be paid and all our savings are gone,' she says in a whisper. She sent Abdallah back home the next day and told him she would come to bake bread soon.

Her grief is compounded by her seclusion in the enclave. Ikbal knows that even when she gets paid, she will not be able to go home. Even for a permit-holder crossing the gate takes hours; she would need to change buses several times and the cost of public transportation has more than quadrupled because of movement difficulties across gates

² Some people have started a lucrative business, lending fake IDs with Barta'a addresses to workers trying to cross the gate. A 'passage' like this can cost up to NIS 200, an exorbitant price for most Palestinian workers.

and checkpoints. Before the gate was installed the 10-kilometre journey from Barta'a to Ya'abad cost three shekels and took 15 minutes. Now it costs 20 shekels for a one-way trip, and can take as long as five hours, depending on the soldiers. A round-trip would cost her almost as much as what she earns in one day, an expense she cannot afford.

Ikbal says that she hates the gate because it keeps her away from her children. 'When I see mothers in Barta'a holding their children against their chests, I get sick inside. I want to be with my children, but I need to work to buy them food and notebooks for school.' Because of the gate, she cannot commute back and forth, as hundreds of Palestinian women did for years before the gate went up. It is the first time Ikbal has worked and although she says she does not dislike it, she looks uncomfortable in a village that is no longer hers, uprooted from home and away from her sons. 'My body is here because I have to work, but my mind is beyond the gate with my children all the time,' Ikbal says, staring at the floor.

The seamstresses' tales have no end. Neither does their need to talk, to communicate and to feel connected to the 'outside' world on the other side of the fence, beyond the walls that keep them away from family and home. The impact the gate has had on their lives goes beyond economics and politics. The gate and the fence have intruded on the most intimate aspects of their personal and family lives. For the 23 seamstresses, the real plight is personal. As Ikbal put it simply, 'it hurts.'