



***Women Reborn***  
**Year I Final Report**

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**Center for Religious Tolerance**

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# ***WOMEN REBORN : SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT FOR PALESTINIAN WOMEN***

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Prepared by Andrea Blanch, PhD; Jelilah Judith Allen; and Diane Elliot

## **Background and Overview**

*Women Reborn* was the inspiration of Ibtisam Mahameed, a religious Muslim woman from Fureidis, an Arab village in northern Israel. The program began in January, 2008, with funding from the Clark Charitable Trust in England; administrative support from Shin, an Israeli feminist organization; and technical support from the Center for Religious Tolerance, a US-based nonprofit. The curriculum for Year I was developed with the assistance of Givat Haviva, an Arab-Israeli Peace Center. *Women Reborn* completed its first year of operation in December, 2008. The findings included in this report came from a series of individual and group interviews conducted in June and November, 2008.



WOMEN REBORN CLASS PHOTO 2008

*Women Reborn* has 3 objectives: 1) to assist Palestinian women in the Israeli Arab town of Fureidis to develop the skills to become more independent and to increase their level of economic self-sufficiency; 2) to develop an ongoing support network of Palestinian women; and 3) to train a group of women leaders who can expand the program to additional towns and villages. Under the guidance of Ibtisam Mahameed, the project

director, the program has been a constantly evolving endeavor, responding to the needs and expressed desires of the women of Fureidis.

### About Fureidis

Fureidis is an Arab municipality with a population of approximately 11,000, located south of Haifa, several miles from the sea. Many of the residents were forcibly relocated to Fureidis from their homes along the beach when the state of Israel appropriated the beach and waterfront after the 1948 war. While fishing remains one of the major sources of income, the relocation of the village severely affected its economic viability.

Designated as a “village,” Fureidis receives the lowest rate of revenue from the Israeli government. As a result, roads, infrastructure, town services and education are all in



FUREIDIS FISH MARKET

need of significant improvement. Demographic information is not readily available, but unemployment is high and annual income low. The comparison with Zichron Yaakov, a neighboring Israeli town filled with beautifully landscaped homes, shops, hotels and restaurants, is an ongoing source of tension among Fureidis residents.

Virtually all of the residents of Fureidis are Muslims. They speak Arabic, and most have roots in the region going back

hundreds of years. Fureidis is surrounded by Israeli Jewish towns, and public transportation is poor, leaving the residents largely isolated from others of Arabic descent. Although there have been several workshops on interfaith dialogue in Fureidis sponsored by nonprofit organizations, *Women Reborn* is the first (and currently the only) ongoing social or community development project.

### Program Overview

Participants were recruited using local advertising and personal outreach by the project director, reassuring families that the program is not anti-Islamic or risky in any way. The program was originally designed to serve 30 women. However, limited funding required a reduction in class size. Of the 18 women recruited, 17 finished the first year.

Participants range in age from early 20's to mid-50's. Most are married with children; one is divorced, raising two children alone; and several are single. Most have limited education (elementary school or some high school); two have completed some college.

The women participate in classroom instruction, group discussion, community service projects, and field trips designed to support individual and group empowerment. Women also receive coaching in job skills and job placement. Optional instruction in Hebrew was added at the request of participants. All teachers are local Arab women who understand the unique circumstances of Palestinian women. The project is managed by a team including Muslim Arab and Israeli Jewish feminists, modeling an interfaith alliance and helping to gain access to resources from both sectors of society.

The curriculum was designed to move from a focus on the individual, to the family, and then to the community. The first six months of the program dealt with issues of individual growth and empowerment, communication and relationship issues, and family dynamics. The second six months focused on rights, group process and community building, including planning and implementing community service projects. Field trips to women's groups and conferences connected participants with the larger women's movement in Israel/Palestine. Additional issues and topics were added to the curriculum as they arose, giving the participants a direct voice in shaping their own experience.



THE MANAGEMENT TEAM: SARIN ANGEL, IBTISAM MAHAMEED, AND TSIPI GLICKMAN

### Months 1-3: Getting Ready

Although the program began with a defined curriculum, it quickly became clear that the women lacked the self-confidence necessary to move through the program as planned. At first there was concern about gossip in the village. Many of the women worried that people were talking about them and that what they said in class might get back to their families. This led to a discussion about respect, trust and betrayal, the importance of taking responsibility for one's own words, and what it feels like to do something outside of accepted community norms. Eventually the group made a strong commitment to confidentiality and to the program. They began to develop strategies for talking about what was happening, and to see gossip in the neighborhood as a positive sign that people knew about the program

A second major step towards empowerment occurred about five weeks into the program. In discussions about their families, the women almost always talked about their husbands, fathers and sons, but rarely mentioned their mothers or daughters. They also seemed unable to set goals for themselves – rather, they talked about the program in terms of how it would help their families. When made aware of this pattern, the women began to realize that they had been trained to “make themselves small, to stay in the background,” and that they were bringing up their children in the same way. As one woman said: “We send our kids to their father to ask permission - he holds the key, the power - and eventually they learn to push their mother aside. When they get married, they act the same way (with their wives).” In the following weeks, the women opened their hearts and talked about themselves and their mothers and their daughters. They came to recognize how they had been limiting their expectations for themselves and their girls. By the end of the first three months, each woman was able to state that she *herself* was worthy of having a goal, and was able to set a goal for her own life.

### Months 3 - 6: Developing Skills and Supports

As they started setting goals for themselves, the women began to identify concrete skills they needed to move forward. Many felt their lack of ability to speak Hebrew was the primary barrier to getting jobs or participating in Israeli public life. Additional funds for a Hebrew instructor were obtained from the Clark Charitable Trust, and 12 women began taking Hebrew in addition to the empowerment course.



HEBREW CLASS

Significant attention was paid during this period to communication skills, both for developing the women’s own potential and for handling relationships within family and community. Learning to negotiate with their husbands in decision-making was important for many. As one woman stated, “We learned to grow with our families rather than against them.” For other participants, relationships with women in the extended

family were very sensitive. Several of the women didn’t tell their sisters or sisters-in-law about their participation in the program until almost half-way through the year. Finding

ways to talk about their experience with their families was critical to the women and key to maintaining support for the program.

During this period, the issue of the women's relationship with their religion also arose. Virtually all of the participants consider themselves to be observant Muslims, and many wondered how their "empowerment" comports with Islam. Guest speakers were brought in who helped them to discern between the true message of the Qu'ran and interpretations that serve to maintain the dominance of men. The process of renegotiating their religious identity – and helping their families to come to a new understanding of the position of women in Islam – is an ongoing process.

### Months 6 -9: From Private to Public

In the beginning, the women were generally uncomfortable in public situations. However, as the program proceeded, they were increasingly called on to get involved in the public sphere.

Several challenges arose as a direct result of program activities. The first involved a backlash from some men in the community. While initially supportive of the program (even making space available at no cost), community leaders became increasingly resistant as the program gained momentum. The women tell stories of being locked out of the meeting space, not being allowed to have their own keys, not being given enough chairs, having the blackboard removed and not returned, being criticized for disrupting prayers in the mosque next door, and so forth. These instances were used as "learning opportunities" to discuss how doing things counter to cultural norms will always engender resistance. The women remained firm, gaining self confidence each time they had to confront one of the public leaders and demand a change.

A second challenge arose from the women's desire to work. The nearby Israeli Jewish town of Zichron Yaakov provides the only viable source of employment. However, there is significant discrimination against Arabs throughout Israel, especially in the rural areas. Even with improved Hebrew, the women felt they would not be accepted for jobs in public situations. When several expressed interest in working at the supermarket, the management team arranged to meet with the owner and secure his support for hiring the women.



ON THE JOB

### Months 9-12: Getting Political

By November, the participants in *Women Reborn* were beginning to understand their collective power. When the local mayoral election rolled around (two weeks after the Presidential election in the US), *Women Reborn* hosted a public forum where the five candidates could present their positions on women's issues. Three hundred women turned out. The women then decided to campaign for the most progressive candidate. They organized a grassroots campaign, put up posters and went door to door encouraging women to vote. Against significant odds (the 25-year incumbent had been



MAYOR YUNIS WITH WOMEN REBORN LEADERS

widely expected to be re-elected) the “women’s candidate” won.

For virtually all of the women, this was the first time they had been involved in political activities. Even the fact that the women decided who to vote for was significant, since within traditional Arab culture, women are expected to vote with their husband and their “hamula” (extended family).

Many believe that Mayor Yunis’ victory is due in large part to the women’s involvement. The new mayor has made education and women his two top priorities. In March, 2009, at the graduation ceremony of the first *Women Reborn* class, he announced plans to establish a Women’s Division within the municipal government, with a budget and full time paid director, and set a target of serving 200 women during the first year. This is the first such Division to be established in an Arab municipality in Israel.

*Women Reborn* received significant support from other women’s groups and organizations in Israel and Palestine, and is now a source of inspiration for others. Givat Haviva has recently referred to the program as a model that should be replicated in other Arab towns and villages in Israel and in Gaza and the West Bank.

### Individual Outcomes

The 17 women in the empowerment program and the 12 women in the Hebrew classes have been profoundly affected by the project. At the start of the program, few could conceive of having a goal for themselves; now all have goals and plans. Five have achieved full or part time employment (three in the supermarket in Zichron Yaakov, one in housekeeping and one in agriculture), three are studying for their matriculation exams (high school equivalency), and two are pursuing higher education at nearby Beit Berl college. Several others are hoping to return to school. In addition, two women are studying to be group facilitators at Givat Haviva, two are taking a course in fundraising, two are studying administrative skills through Shateel (an Israeli nonprofit organization), and two are taking a course in women's leadership at a nearby Arab college. One woman has begun planning a daycare center for the village, and several want to pursue the skills necessary to set up small businesses. All of the women in the Hebrew class have improved their language skills considerably, and several now feel comfortable enough with the language that they are willing to speak Hebrew in public.

In addition, the women have formed strong friendships. They continue to meet regularly as a group and often socialize with women they met in the program. For many, this is the first time they have had women friends from outside their extended family.

### Family and Village Outcomes

Given the extended family structure that forms the basis of Arab life, it is safe to say that 600 – 800 people have been directly impacted by *Women Reborn* during its first year of operation, through the participation of one of their family members. Anecdotal evidence supports the notion that the women are inspiring their children and families – especially their sisters and daughters. One woman reports that her daughter wants to start a group for girls. Another woman notes that her 16 year old son was initially very antagonistic, wanting his mother to be home for him. He is now happy that she is making such progress, and that they can do their homework together.



IBTISAM WITH VILLAGE TEEN

In addition, the entire village has been affected by the women's political involvement. The day after the mayoral election, a second wave of Fureidis women interested in the program emerged.

## Next Steps

All of the women in the first class of *Women Reborn* intend to remain involved with the program during its second year, continuing to work on their own goals, supporting a new group of women in the program, and staying involved with community improvement projects. Two women are being trained as assistants to Ibtisam. A new group of students has already formed, and classes in computers and English have been added to the curriculum.

In addition, *Women Reborn* is seeking funds to expand in several new directions. A scholarship program is needed to assist women in continuing their education and to help them establish small businesses. Their situation is particularly difficult, since Arabs within Israel are generally very poor, the cost of living is high, and Israeli society has all of the restrictions of an affluent society. Scholarship programs for Arab women are scarce, and small amounts of money like “micro-loans” do not cover the basic costs for education or job preparation. Clearly, additional resources are needed in order for the women to meet their educational and vocational goals.

The women have also requested assistance in dealing with the impact of the ongoing and historical trauma they have experienced over the past 60 years. Many women (and men) in Fureidis suffer symptoms of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and other trauma-related conditions (inability to concentrate, sleep disorders, hyper-vigilance, physical health problems.) Much of this is related to the ongoing conflict and to the Nakba (the “Catastrophe” – the term used by Palestinians for the 1948 war) but histories of physical and sexual abuse are also not uncommon. A plan is emerging for a trauma education program that would include 1) trauma resiliency training, to be introduced as a component of the *Women Reborn* program; 2) intensive skills training for community trauma work and ongoing trauma groups (listening circles) to include women from the program as well as other women from in and around Fureidis; and 3) a comprehensive trauma healing program serving both Arab and Israeli women with a variety of treatment, training and community educational modalities.

*Women Reborn* is also expanding and deepening its interfaith relationships. The program director, Ibtisam Mahameed, is a visionary leader whose personal work includes interfaith peacebuilding as well as women’s empowerment, and the program was developed through a unique alliance of women with different religious backgrounds. In a geographic area where cooperating across religious boundaries is often politically difficult, *Women Reborn* is an exemplary model.

*Women Reborn* is also exploring the possibility of replication in other Arab towns and villages in Israel and in Gaza and the West Bank.

## The Women

The following biographical narratives were developed from group interviews held in June and November, 2008. The women were asked to talk about themselves, to comment on how participating in the program had affected their lives, and to describe challenges they had faced during the year, both as individuals and as a group. Most spoke in Arabic, a few in Hebrew. Translation was provided for the interviewers, who took notes. Four women were unable to attend the interviews: Sana Marai, Abeer Hamid, Enas Zahra, and Imtiaz Jamous.



**NIHAN MAHAMEED**

I married at 17 and moved to Fureidis with my husband. It was very difficult for me to leave my family. Now I am 38 years old and I have 6 children, all teen-agers. The oldest is at University. As soon as the oldest three were in high school, I realized I needed to do something more with my life beyond being a housewife and mother. My dream is to finish my matriculation exams [high school graduation], then go on to study at the University.

I want to contribute to my community. I live for this class. I find the group very exciting and I hope we are able to continue. It helps me break out of the routine I was in. As a woman I didn't have any framework or activities for myself. These two hours every week improved my concept of myself. The group has given me inner peace and relief. It has made my relationship with my husband and my children calmer. I'm more assertive at home, but in peaceful ways. I believe that conditions are worse for women in Fureidis than in other Arab villages because we are in the middle of Jewish land, not close to other Arab villages, and there are very few job opportunities here—it is isolated both culturally and economically. My children have no extra-curricular activities, and I would like to find things for them to do. I am pleased that the issues of human rights and women's rights are on our course of study.

I am 33 years old. I have been married for 16 years and I have four children, two boys and two girls. I had had enough of the daily routine at home of serving my husband and children. I felt like I didn't exist. I wanted something for myself. I came to this course and it has made me feel like I can do something with my life now. I want to study and work with people. I like to talk and I'm a good listener. I



**MAGDALENE BAREA**

would like to start a coffee house for women. I would like to do public speaking. I want to improve my children's life. The kids in the village have nothing to do except watch TV or play—their minds aren't stimulated.



**ASWAN BAREA**

When I was in my twenties, I worked and saved money for my education. When I was 29 I started studying social work and received my degree last year, without a full matriculation exam. I am not married, and I want to make a career of social work. When I began studying I was uncertain about what to do with my degree, what to specialize in. Now I realize that I want to focus on women, and I would like to work here in the village. I would like to be a group leader for women in Fureidis in programs like this one. I also want to work in the Women's Division [a local government department devoted to women's issues that the new mayor of Fureidis is planning]. I also want to continue my studies. I heard about this group from Jamilah's brother. I thought at first "I'll give it a chance." I was very surprised. I was shocked to find that the group has a vision and wants to improve the village. It's not just women getting together and talking about their families. Before, they were just living. Now they have a purpose in their life.

I am 36 years old and I am a single mother raising two children alone. My husband was abusive. He would hit me and the children. I left him and now I am divorcing him, which is a very hard thing to do in Arab culture. Most of the community was against me for doing this. Now I am the only provider in the family. I have no money from anyone. I had to leave my husband's family home [where the bride/wife traditionally lives] and now I rent the place where I live with my children, which is very unusual in the village and doesn't offer any stability. As a woman initiating a divorce, I was shut out of community support and social services. No one helped me, even in the village. Not even the employment office would help me. My husband is from over the Green Line so I don't get child support or any other kind of social services—I have no rights at all. I feel that the State of Israel is punishing me for marrying someone from the PA [Palestinian Authority].



**KHIRAM ARDJA**

My financial situation is very difficult. I work long hours as a caregiver for Jewish families [in the nearby Jewish town of Zikron Yaakov] but I wish I could stay home and take care of my own children. Right now I have to work to support them, but I hope that when they get older, they will be able to help me reach my dreams.

Ibtisam helped my sister when she wanted to become a nurse. I saw Ibtisam at the beautician's and she asked me if I wanted to be in the course. I joined immediately. I thought the program might help me with my situation. I thought I knew all the women already, but I discovered that I didn't really know them at all. I love the group and the process we are going through. I felt immediately connected to the others, and I never miss a meeting. Abeer showed us how we are each unique. We went through a big change. We want to have more than we have now. We want to have a center of our own where we can study together and organize projects. One problem is that there is nowhere to leave the kids. I sometimes bring them to class if there is no one I can leave them with. I love coming to the group. I used to be afraid. I used to feel bad about myself. But now I feel courageous and strong.



**AMEERA BAREA**

I am 43 years old and I have three children—23, 19, and 13. I didn't finish elementary school. I don't work. As soon as I heard about this group, I wanted to join. I had no hesitation. Whenever I meet anyone in the village, I tell them about it. Before the group, I felt like dry land. I was all the time at home cooking, doing laundry, taking care of the kids. It was very boring. I wanted to work but my husband wouldn't let me. But since I started talking about the group to my husband, he has changed his mind. I convinced him. Now I have a job prospect—to be a cook at the Girls Center here in Fureidis. The Center is for girls over 30 who are not married and have nothing to do, and also for high school girls with problems at home to come after school for snacks and activities. I will cook for the younger girls twice a week and help talk to them about their future. I've already met with the program people three times and they were very impressed with me because I worked very hard cleaning the place even before they hired me.

I started the Hebrew class for the group this year and I'm very happy to be learning the language. I want to work, and I want to do something to help the women in the village. I would like to see a women's center here so that this kind of program could be available to anyone who wanted it.



**JEMILAH BAREA**

I am 29 years old. I'm married and I have a daughter and I just had a baby boy. I studied at the University of Haifa and I graduated with a degree in Arabic. I have a good income from my job as a school teacher. Even though I'm a teacher and I also have to take care of my house and my family, I love coming here, especially because the group helps women and children. I helped Ibtisam recruit and advise the women in the program, and I'd like to recruit more women and keep working with Ibtisam and keep making changes in the village. The women are so far back. I want to help them advance and be more independent. They need much support and back-up to be stronger and more independent. I hope that in the future the group will grow and there will be more courses for personal enrichment, career advancement, and community improvement. I would like to help create daycare programs in Fureidis so the women won't have to bring their children to class. I would like to be the coordinator or facilitator of the women's center.

I am 37 years old and I have been married for 20 years. I married immediately as soon as I finished high school. I wanted to study at the University, but my financial situation prevented it. Now I have five children. The two oldest are going to the University. I worked five months as a librarian, but then I got pregnant again and quit work to take care of the children. I did everything for my kids, but once they were growing up, there was nothing to do at home and I was bored. I wanted to work, but I had no education. I only passed my matriculation exams, nothing more.



**SANA DAUD**

I found out about the course from my neighbor Ibtisam. I have never taken a course like this before, but since I started, many of my thoughts have changed. Before the course, I was afraid all the time and I didn't dare do anything by myself. When I started the course, I realized that my life and my family didn't fall apart if I took three hours a week for myself. This started to change my thinking. I was drawn to the idea of a group of women who could talk and share their dreams. I've had perfect attendance in the class—after each class, I can't wait for the next one.

I have a gifted 16-year-old son who has been offered a full scholarship to the University. My dream is to go to the University and study a profession. I want to work with women, and to help the women in Fureidis. I hope that this course will help me strengthen my daughters so that they will never give up—so that they will know that they can work and study at the same time. They don't have to give anything up, like I did.

I am a Palestinian from Jenin [in the West Bank]. I'm 20 years old. I married very young and came to live in Fureidis with my husband, who is from here. I have had a hard time finding something worthwhile to do with my time, and I was very bored. I don't speak Hebrew, and it's very important to learn Hebrew. I want to find a job to help my husband and my mother-in-law. I live with my mother-in-law [traditional Arab arrangement] in one room. I would like to build a house. I heard about the group and immediately wanted to participate. My goal is to study cosmetics and work as a beautician, but I have no money for training. I want to do something for myself and others until I can reach my goal. My dream is to open a big center for women, to learn and to teach, and to change myself and my surroundings.



**SAMOUD DARWISH**



**AFAFF HOSSEIN**

I am 47 years old. I am married and I have five kids. Four have finished high school, and the youngest is in primary school. My husband has a disability and can't work, so the seven of us live on 2,000 shekels a month [approximately \$500] that he receives for workmen's compensation. It's very hard. My daughter was studying, but she has had to take a break from school to earn some money to help. I was getting fed up with my boring life just when Ibtisam told me about the course.

After the first half of the course, I wanted a job and I found a job. Then I realized the person I worked for was not treating me right—not paying me enough—so I quit. This group helped me realize that I had rights, and now I am negotiating for a higher salary. I was the supervisor of cleaning for the supermarket and also for cleaning offices and shops.

As a mother, I worry that there is no place in Fureidis for children to go and do healthy things. I want to help teenagers so they won't get involved in drugs and violence.

Teenagers need a lot of help. My dream is that I can continue working in this group, and that we will be able to do something for the children of Fureidis.



**AMNA MARANI**

I am 43 years old and I have been married 20 years. I have five kids, four boys and a girl. I am a housewife. I never went to school after elementary school—at that time girls didn't go to high school. I had had enough of my life—only doing the house and the kids. I didn't do anything else. Jemilah invited me to join the course, and it changed my life. I was astounded—nothing like this had ever happened in Fureidis before. I have a great husband, and great kids. I have everything. But I still feel something is missing in my life. I want to study. I am hungry to learn. I would like to be able to take a job outside the home. I want to see projects here run by women. There's nothing for women in Fureidis, and nothing for kids, for example, no sports teams or fields. When I first came to the group I was very quiet and wouldn't complain about anything. Now I am always complaining—I speak up about what's wrong.

I am Ibtisam's daughter, and I'm 29 years old. I'm single and I teach in the primary school in the village. I owe a lot to the group and to my mom, and I help the group as my mom's secretary. My dream is to have a center for women here, independent of the town and the mayor. Ever since the beginning of the course, there have been many problems with the officials. The place was messy, they didn't give us the keys in time, they didn't want us.

There would be no chairs when we came, they took the blackboard away, they locked the doors before we came—they didn't want the women to progress. Once when we arrived and the door was locked, we broke the door and came in anyway. We had a fighting spirit—"that's enough, we're not taking this any more!" It bonded the group together strongly.

We want more village women to join. In the next group there will be 50 women—they're standing in line—we won't have to go looking. We have had enough of being



**FATIN MAHAMEED**

dependent on men, and controlled by them. We want to be independent. I want to have a coffee house here that's just for women.



***KHITAM HASSADIA***

I am 34 years old and I am married with three children. Before I came to this course, I was bored at home. I rarely went out except to visit my sisters. Money was a constant worry. At first I thought the group was only going to be chit-chat, that it wouldn't be about anything serious. But then everything changed—I changed a lot. I learned something from each of the women here. I decided I wanted a job, and to study too. I have

a job in the supermarket now. My husband didn't want me to take the job and he told me I wouldn't succeed because I am too shy to be a checkout clerk. It's true that I am very shy so I got a job stocking the shelves so I wouldn't have to talk with people. I was afraid to speak Hebrew in public because my Hebrew isn't "academic" and people might not accept it. I want very much to study at Beit Berl [the largest academic college in Israel] but I have no money for tuition. I want to study and work but I can't do both, especially with my small children. But I don't want to give up my dream of studying.

This course has made a big difference in my life and in the village. Now people ask us about the program all the time, and we talk to them. In the program, we are like a family. It strengthens us. If I didn't show up, someone would call and check on me. Even my husband sees the difference it has made, and he supports and encourages my coming here.

## The Staff and Teachers

Ibtisam Mahameed is 49 years old and is married with three grown children. She is the second of nine children. Even as a child Ibtisam knew she wanted to study and learn. She wanted to be a lawyer, but her father was not supportive, so he arranged her marriage when she was 13. She married at 17 and, according to tradition, went to live with her husband's family to help his mother. At that time, her mother-in-law had 17 children, including an infant. Her mother-in-law did not like her to go out, but when a course in assertiveness was offered for women in Fureidis, Ibtisam went despite her.

Though she finished high school and completed her matriculation exams, she was not able to fulfill her strong desire to go to college to study for a career. Instead, with the support of her husband, Subkhi, she read widely in both Arabic and Hebrew. She took secretarial and marketing courses. She ran unsuccessfully for a seat on the village council; this experience showed her how hard it is for a woman to succeed in a nontraditional role. When a Jewish women's group contacted her to cook for them during a workshop, she took the position and saw what a course in women's empowerment could teach. This was the spark of her inspiration to bring such a course to Fureidis.



IBTISAM AT INTERFAITH EVENT

Her interfaith work and her commitment to women's empowerment are entwined in a single path of working to create conditions in which peace can flourish.



**IBTISAM MAHAMEED, PROGRAM DIRECTOR**

Ibtisam became involved with interfaith peacework in Israel in the late 1990s. Before this, she had always thought that Islam was "the answer." She became known as a Muslim woman involved in interfaith work. She knew about Judaism and Christianity, but when she was studying Buddhism, her inner world suddenly shifted. After that, she came to understand that the world's religions are different manifestations of

Alongside her commitment to women's empowerment and to interfaith dialogue, Ibtisam remains a devout Muslim. In 2008 she traveled to Mecca on an "Omra" (a religious pilgrimage similar to a Haaj, but taking place at a different time of year). She demonstrates in her day-to-day life that there is no inherent contradiction between being religious and being a feminist.

Ibtisam has been highly active and visible in interfaith peace work all over Israel and in Palestine, and indeed internationally. She has traveled to the United States, Turkey, India, and several countries in Europe and the Middle East to participate in and speak at conferences having to do with peace, interfaith work, and the role of women. She often speaks publicly in Israel, which is exceedingly rare for an observant Muslim woman, and has been asked to run for Knesset. In April 2009, Ibtisam will travel to San Francisco to receive an award and a special blessing as an *Unsung Hero of Compassion* from His Holiness the Dalai Lama.



**ABEER ANAI**

Abeer Anai is a professional teacher and facilitator who works with Givat Haviva. She has taught women's empowerment courses for several years. Abeer designed the first module of the training program for *Women Reborn* to help the women strengthen their personal sense of self, work with their immediate and extended families, and begin to function as a group. She emphasized communication, the change process, assertiveness, taking the initiative, management styles, the Koranic basis for women's empowerment, human rights, and working in the community.

Iman Alimi is a teacher of economics, a facilitator and a coach for business concerns. She designed Module #2 to help the women learn about household budgets so they can work with their husbands, manage their family affairs and begin building business skills. Some of the women want to run their own businesses, but they need time to get ready, to assimilate what

they've learned. This group is especially interested in changing their village and using their economic power cooperatively



**IMAN ALIMI**