The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) was established in 1949 to provide temporary humanitarian relief and work to the refugees of the 1948 Nakba, the ‘catastrophe’ when 750,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from Palestine. Many of these were former peasants, now made landless and stateless refugees in crowded, makeshift refugee camps in the region, outside the new state of Israel. The map of UNRWA’s area of operations gives an idea of the territorial presence of the blue and white flag today, more than half a century later. More than 4.4 million Palestinian refugees are registered with the agency, and about one third of these live in the fifty-eight recognised camps in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.¹ UNRWA is a UN elephant, and one of the largest service providers in the region with its education, health, and social services and relief programmes. The underlying question of this essay is how UNRWA’s refugee relief, its services and policies may have gendered the refugee population, and how this in turn is linked to complex notions of development, modernisation, and humanitarianism in a highly political fashion. The question of how and why some approaches or concepts have changed, others remained the same, while others have changed in name but not in content are also addressed.

¹ http://www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/camp-profiles.html. This number does not include refugees outside UNRWA’s area of operations, and other groups. See note no. 41.
“Educated girls will soon become enlightened wives and mothers”

The UNRWA newsletter Palestine Refugees Today was issued between 1960 and 1996 to inform readers and donors about the living conditions of the refugees, UNRWA projects, and to mobilise for funding. In 1962 an entire newsletter was assigned to girls and education, and the tone was optimistic: Refugee girls were members of a “new generation in the Middle East” and had opportunities “undreamed” of by their mothers and grandmothers: opportunities of education, of training, and of careers. With the help of UNRWA, refugee girls were now able to “grasp” this new opportunity. The new opportunity the newsletter is referring to is the Ramallah Women’s Training Centre which was inaugurated by King Hussein of Jordan on United Nations Day in 1962. The Centre was the largest, and according to the newsletter, the only institution of its scope in the Middle East. The training Centre was residential, which meant that the girls moved out of the refugee camps to study. When in full operation, the residential Centre would accommodate 300 girls in the teacher training section, and 333 vocational trainees. The vocational section offered eleven regular courses: clerk/typist, secretary, home management, institutional management, infants and children’s clothing, lingerie making, hairdressing, infant leadership, preparatory nursing, dressmaking, and fine needlework.

The life story of a seventeen-year-old girl, Suad, is presented to the readers of Palestine Refugees Today as a typical example of the 15,000 young refugee girls who reach “womanhood each year with a head full of dreams and hopes and ambitions.” Suad was more fortunate than most; her dreams and ambitions were coming true. She grew up as refugee in the Irbid region where her refugee father would find it impossible to feed, house, clothe, and care for his five sons and four daughters without help from UNRWA. Now she and the other girls who entered the Ramallah Centre had the opportunity of their lives almost “within their grasps . . . the opportunity of building a productive life away from the misery and despair of the refugee camps which have been their homes ever since they can remember.” To make her dream come true, Suad needed to be “adopted.” UNRWA launched an “adoption” scheme under which a donor could pay for a year’s training for a girl by providing a scholarship. In

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2 The exact year and date of the founding of the newsletter is not known by this author, and may well have been earlier. The year 1960 is chosen based on the samples found at the Library of Congress, Washington.

3 Palestine Refugees Today, no. 17, June 1962, UNRWA.