



# The Right Livelihood Award

*for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people*

## Arna Mer-Khamis (Israel)†

(1993)



*...for passionate commitment to the defence and education of the children of Palestine.*

Arna Mer-Khamis

Arna Mer-Khamis was born in 1929 to Jewish parents in what was then called Palestine. Soon after the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, she began a lifetime of campaigning for peace, justice and human rights in her homeland - which most often meant acting and speaking out uncompromisingly for the rights of the Palestinian people. She became Arna Mer-Khamis when she married a Palestinian who was the secretary of Israel's Communist Party. After the six-day Arab-Israeli war of 1967, she was imprisoned several times for protests and demonstrations against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank.

It was at the time of the Palestinian uprising, or Intifada, in 1987 that Mer-Khamis saw the need to establish centres for children affected by the violence around them. Therefore she founded the organisation Care and Learning to respond to their needs.

Care and Learning's first target were the prisons where hundreds of Palestinian children were held in overcrowded and insanitary conditions. Mer-Khamis mobilised Israeli lawyers to intercede on the children's behalf, and, together with volunteers, regularly visited prisons, talked with parents outside the gates and provided support.

All schools in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) were closed from 1988 to 1990 by the Israeli authorities. To supplement the informal, home-based 'popular learning' developed by Palestinian women's committees in this period, Care and Learning sent volunteers to the Jenin area regularly at weekends, armed with paper, crayons and paints, to give the children a chance to express themselves creatively. These sessions were organised in the streets, with as many as 200-300 children taking part. Herself a teacher with a degree in Special Education and Art Therapy, Arna Mer-Khamis developed a graded series of booklets designed to stimulate learning in creative, non-conventional ways. Being fluent in Arabic she could teach Palestinian women who were not teachers how to use her materials.

After the schools reopened, many children aged 8-10 were illiterate and a survey by Care and Learning of 1,000 children in the Jenin area revealed that 47 per cent had been involved in physical clashes with soldiers, which included shootings, beatings and gassing.

In response to this situation, Care and Learning opened four Children's Houses in Jenin and the neighbouring refugee camp - educational/cultural centres designed to give the children an oasis of quietness, learning and creativity to offset the frightening and confusing influences of life under military occupation. By 1993, the Children's Houses had over 1,500 children enrolled in their activities and staff consisting of 15 paid para-professionals and 25 volunteers. Asked about the woman who had established these Houses, and who was there with the children as often as she

could be, a 15-year-old boy at one of the centres said: "She's like my mother. She helps us. She saved us from the streets."

Arna Mer-Khamis died in February 1995 after a lengthy struggle against cancer.

### Quotation

*"The child under military occupation is affected psychologically, emotionally and academically. So if one wants to support and strengthen these children, one has to consider them from all these aspects. The socialisation of the child is the most basic thing in its life; if you see children only as individuals, in fact you can be indirectly deepening their problems... Our principle is to serve the child: to turn the pyramid [of education and authority] upside down."*

Arna Mer-Khamis

---

RIGHT LIVELIHOOD  
AWARD FOUNDATION