



# Advancing Women Advancing the Economy

Young Women's Success Stories from the Middle East





The Women's Leadership for Greater Economic Participation program, conducted in 2009 by the Centre for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA) in partnership with Seeds of Peace, brought together 15 young women from Egypt, Israel, Jordan and Palestine in a pilot program to advance women's economic participation in their communities. The program was generously funded by the ExxonMobil Foundation's Women's Economic Opportunity Initiative.

The young women were brought together for a workshop in Amman, Jordan in the program's initial phase, to increase their knowledge about barriers and opportunities for women in the economy and provide hands-on training in managing women's economic empowerment programs. Sessions included economic content, leadership, program management, community mobilization and advocacy. Participants left the workshop with ideas for empowerment projects that could expand economic opportunity for a wider circle of women in their home communities.

In the second phase, the young women worked in teams to implement their action plans over a period of seven months. Participants identified local partners, refined their ideas and implemented their projects, aided by limited coaching and a

modest \$500 seed-grant for transportation and small expenses. At the end of the year, the young women came back together in CEDPA's Washington, D.C. headquarters for eight days to share their successes and challenges while implementing their plans.

As a result, these young women implemented seven projects targeting a diverse range of women within their communities to participate in the formal economy and work towards economic independence. They reached more than 100 women and girls, including immigrant, student, refugee, and other populations. Several of the projects are now self-sustaining, including one that has successfully marketed embroidery projects from Palestinian women to the Starbucks coffee chain.

Read on to learn more about their work.

*Study after study shows that investing in women is one of the quickest paths to economic development. Yet, women remain an undervalued resource. There are 61 million women of working age in the Middle East, for example, but only 17 million are employed. Women make up less than 24 percent of the paid workforce in Egypt and Jordan. For Palestinian women, the percentage is as low as 13.*

*Locking women out of the labor force limits their opportunity, reduces family income, and stifles economic growth throughout the region, according to institutions such as the World Bank and the International Labor Organization. Without role models, young women in the workforce face greater barriers to achieving professional growth and assuming leadership positions.*

*To promote women's economic participation, CEDPA's approach goes beyond providing skills training in areas such as management, entrepreneurship and microcredit. Our approach to building economic competencies is grounded in advancing women's leadership, so that increasing numbers of empowered women can change the social norms, policy barriers and legal restrictions that impede their full participation in the formal economy.*



# Nour Moghrabi Jordan



Nour Moghrabi believes that, working together, the women of Jordan can change their society's attitude against their working outside of the home.

Within the Middle East, Jordan has one of the highest percentages of women with university educations but one of the lowest percentages of women in the work force. Studies have shown that social attitudes towards working women are the main factor restraining thousands of women from entering the workplace. Women who work are stigmatized as bad wives and mothers.

"This is something that Jordan needs to change in order to give women the ability to move around and do things without fear of being stigmatized," Nour says.

*Nour is empowering refugee women to get into the formal job market.*

Feeling strongly about the empowerment of women in Jordan, Nour joined the Women's Leadership for Greater Economic Participation program in 2009.

"When I heard about the program and its reputation, I immediately signed up," she said. "It made sense to me to enroll in the training because it tackled important issues of empowering women to become agents of change in their communities, especially through economic participation."

After their initial training with CEDPA, Nour and a fellow workshop participant from Jordan chose to target underprivileged women from refugee camps in and around Amman for their community project. Though currently working, Nour says the women thought of their jobs as a temporary method for survival, expecting to marry and leave the workforce. She and her project partner wanted to change the way these women looked at themselves and their role in the economy.

Nour and her teammate partnered with Tkiyet Um Ali, a non-governmental organization in Amman, which was instrumental in reaching women to participate in their project. Then, they organized a free training in October 2009 on workplace skills and job preparation to empower women for greater economic participation.

The pair encountered some unexpected roadblocks at the beginning of the project that opened their eyes to the kind of economic hardships these women really faced. "We arranged transportation and waited for three hours for the women to show up at our first training," Nour says. But, the women never came. Nour later discovered that the women took a temporary job that paid \$1 a day instead of coming to the training.

But, Nour and her partner were determined not to give up and to use what they had learned from the CEDPA training to empower these women and improve their opportunities.

Ultimately, after consultations on scheduling, the training took place two weeks later. The workshop was such a success that the ten women who attended returned for a second workshop, bringing more women with them. Their attendance was especially touching to Nour because of the resistance each woman faced to return.

As the main caregivers for spouses, parents and children, the women struggled to fight stereotypes that frowned upon them for leaving their homes, or leaving kids in someone else's care. "But each made it because she really wanted to," Nour says.

She is pleased with their progress. "We expect the long-term impact of the project to be a pool of women in their underprivileged communities who are aware of their capabilities as working women, aware of their rights in labor law, aware of the importance of education and training to be able to get what they want and aware of available opportunities to get into the formal job market," Nour says.

## Orit Shahar Israel



Roughly 25 percent of Israel's population consists of immigrants, mostly from other countries in the Middle East, Russia, Africa and North America. Many enter the country with little money or resources—especially those from Russia and Ethiopia. Seventy-two percent of new immigrants from Ethiopia live below the poverty line. Women are among the most adversely affected of this group, as they are more likely to be unskilled and uneducated, and have the additional responsibility of caring for children and aging relatives.

Through her participation in the Women's Leadership for Greater Economic Participation program, Orit Shahar discovered that she could empower these women to move up the economic ladder and change their lives.

*Orit is challenging the “view” that women are not good mothers if they work outside the home.*

Following her initial training with CEDPA in Jordan, Orit and her project partner decided to create a support group to give single mothers tools to seek employment. They chose to focus on single mothers because of a recent Israeli policy that had taken away child allowances, creating greater economic hardship for this population. And, they knew that many single mothers faced discrimination when seeking employment.

“In Israel, especially in orthodox belief, there is still an acceptance that men are better employees because women have responsibilities for children. Environmental and societal norms reinforce the view that a woman is not a good mother if she works outside the home,” Orit says.

What Orit soon found out was that many struggling single mothers in Jerusalem were immigrants. She says she learned these immigrants often lack the information needed to navigate the system, and the confidence needed to ask for assistance. Instead,

she says, they are left feeling isolated from the rest of society.

Orit and her partner partnered with the Women's International Zionist Organization to establish a support group for 10 immigrant women from Ethiopia, Iran and Russia, meeting weekly from September to November 2009. The meetings provided a safe and supportive environment for the women, and Orit and her partner facilitated the sessions to ensure that everyone had the opportunity to share their experiences and difficulties in finding employment.

Using skills they learned during the CEDPA workshop, the team evaluated and adapted their project design to meet the women's needs. They added a computer training when participants admitted that they lacked basic skills. After the first few meetings, they revised their budget to include a child care provider during the sessions, giving mothers the freedom to speak openly knowing that their children were safe in the next room.

In addition to providing personal support, the project provided the women with skills-building sessions to develop strong resumes and prepare for job interviews.

“We did interview simulations with some women four or five times,” Orit says, “and we worked with them on language and how they presented themselves.”

Since the project began, at least three of the participants have found jobs, one increased her work hours, and three went on to take further courses in office management. Even more impressive, the project became the catalyst for a larger women's employment network in their municipality called On Your Own Merit. This network of single mothers is now an independent group that provides ongoing emotional support and job placement skills to its members.

“I felt that the CEDPA training gave us the background in how to approach this project, how to do it, and how to start it,” Orit says. “Sometimes supplying a place that people can talk, share and get enthusiastic, that space gives them an opportunity to improve themselves.”

## Rasha Jawabri Palestine



About one thousand Palestinians live in and around the ancient village of At-Tuwani, which sits in the South Hebron Hills of the West Bank. For years, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has made life a struggle. The traditional agricultural sector has suffered because of the ongoing violence, and movement restrictions result in few economic alternatives for residents. The added cultural norms against women's employment further limit their participation in the formal economy.

For Rasha Jawabri, accepting the status quo is not an option. She sees opportunity for peace and prosperity through an untapped resource in the area: women.

*Rasha is refusing to accept the status quo for women in the West Bank.*

Now in her mid-twenties, Rasha grew up in the area and said she understands the feeling of anger and helplessness that many feel. But, she says that as a teenager she was privileged to have participated in a summer program to bridge the divide between young Palestinians and Israelis, sponsored by Seeds of Peace. That experience broadened her perspective and was a stepping stone that led Rasha to join the Women's Leadership for Greater Economic Participation program.

"The CEDPA program gave me confidence and made me realize how amazing it is to work with women's empowerment," Rasha says. She admits that the training also taught her that, when you talk about the problem, you have to propose a solution.

Rasha's solution was to join with fellow Palestinian participants in the program to start the Empowerment through an Eye of a Needle project, an embroidery cooperative in At-Tuwani. Rasha's team decided to capitalize on a long-standing

village tradition of embroidery and train women to make products that were more attractive to foreign markets.

Rasha's team organized and held trainings for 40 women in and around At-Tuwani. They recruited three local organizations—the Center for Emerging Futures, the Hope Flowers School, and the Dalia Association—to help implement their plan, including making critical connections at the village level and assisting with logistics and transportation. They recruited a handicraft specialist who was willing to do pro-bono work. She helped the women of At-Tuwani learn how to finish and design embroidery for new markets, including embroidered jeans, wallets and other products for everyday use. Their best seller was an embroidered coffee sleeve, which is now being sold in the U.S. by the Starbucks coffee chain.

"At the beginning of the project, we were overwhelmed by the needs of these women, and by their lives as survivors," Rasha says. She admits that they thought about stopping the project after seeing all of the daily conflicts that they faced. "We carried on because we felt that we had an obligation to these women."

Rasha's team included a peacebuilding component in their project as well. They brought together both Palestinian and Israeli women who embroider to discuss joint products. "We wanted these women to focus on the project versus just the conflict...to show them that the enemy has a face," Rasha says. "Women understand each other's challenges."

The confidence and ability to come up with solutions was the biggest lesson Rasha took away from the CEDPA workshop. It was element missing in her personal and professional life, she says. She now applies this principle to her own life and encourages other women to do the same.

"These women are great role models for others who need to trust and believe that their economic engagement can really change the quality of their lives," Rasha says. "We need to put more focus on women and what they are doing in the country to solve problems."

