

# A PROGRAM THAT MADE A DIFFERENCE

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‘When tough times prevail, outstanding tenacity arises’. This ancient Arabic proverb highlights the attitude of many Lebanese who suffered the miseries of war, poverty, and displacement. I am referring to a majority of Lebanese women who were deprived, displaced, widowed, divorced, or who lost one or more of their family members during the war. Yet, these women displayed outstanding courage, determination, and resourcefulness, and they came through at the end and managed to extract their families from impoverished and devastated circumstances.

Nevertheless, one hand cannot clap alone, and a helping hand in tough times is vital. In 1985, the Institute for Women Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) reached out a hand to these women by means of an Income Generating Program\*. The program was basically intended for those who were willing to invest the time, effort, and devotion needed to overcome self-defeating attitudes and to become entrepreneurs and supporters of their families. This program was complemented by the Basic Living Skills Program (BLSP), which teaches the basic skills needed to sustain and handle the demands of a healthy family in all its practical and theoretical aspects, such as family planning, health-care, child-care, home management, civic education, nutrition, environmental awareness, and legal rights.

After years of determination and hard work, the Income Generating Program can now be assessed as a program that made a difference through some success stories. Nine hundred and sixteen women participated and seven of them gladly opened their hearts and talked about how this program changed their lives.

M.J. is 22. She is a single and displaced woman, the eldest in a family of ten. They were all living in a single room in one of the semi-demolished hotels of downtown Beirut. Because her father was handicapped and her mother was illiterate, M.J. found herself as the sole supporter of the entire family. When she joined the Program we were astounded by her determination and energy to absorb the available information, although we kept in mind that she knew that the chances of her running a business from her domicile were very slim. Nevertheless, M.J. continued in the professional sewing program and earned her certificate. After graduation, she set up her business at home, performing minor sewing tasks in a corner in the single room she and her family lived in. As time passed, her clientele grew, and she adjusted her working conditions to suit her growing needs. She bought a sewing machine, which she paid for as her income accu-

mulated. Soon, she was able to afford to move her entire family into better accommodations and place all her younger sisters and brothers in school.

M.D., a mother of six, joined the professional sewing training - program to help out her husband who was then an unemployed construction worker. Although M.D. was illiterate, she developed her own system to take measurements and work accordingly. In a short time she grasped the numerical sequence and became proficient in taking proper measurements. Her labor rather than her husband's day-by-day work soon became the sustenance of her family and she became the sole financial pillar of her family.

B.S. was one of the few candidates who, in addition to her family problems, was suffering from emotional and depressive disorders. At the age of 21, B.S. was a single woman taking care of her physically handicapped father and her terminally ill mother with no source of income whatsoever. She joined the “industrial sewing” training program in the hope of a better chance to support them. And that is exactly what B.S. achieved. She currently works as an assistant to an established fashion designer and earns a relatively good salary sufficient to support her mother's treatment and to meet all her father's needs.

Z.S. is 17 and suffers from Thalassemia; she is the eldest of six children. Not only was Z.S. facing a devastating economical and social crisis, she also was suffering from her mother's crushing attitude towards her fatal disease. Instead of psychologically helping her, Z.'s mother set out to deliberately destroy her daughter's self-confidence by overemphasizing her health conditions and calling her useless. However, when Z.S. joined the sequin-embroidery training program, she discovered through the health-awareness section of the BLSP that her disease is treatable through lifetime medication. As a result, she regained self-confidence and determination, which allowed her to establish her own business at home using the skills she learned. Moreover, she started earning enough money to cover her medical treatment.

J.H., a 22 year-old displaced woman, excelled in the professional sewing training-program. Upon her graduation, she immediately found a job and was employed in a factory. Throughout her training period, J.H. acquainted herself with her legal rights. She was able to acquire the social security benefits of which most of her co-workers

were unaware. During her basic training, she implemented the awareness and prevention measures that she had been taught. Consequently, she was able to diagnose early breast cancer and, with the help of the social security services, she received treatment and recovered fully. Here we have a perfect example of a person who in fact shifted her life's track from that of a dead-end to one of hope.

C.F. is 45 and suffered from one of life's disasters: she lost one of her six children during the war. In addition, the Lebanese war deprived her husband of his job as a skilled laborer and also dislocated the whole family. Upon her initial introduction to the sequin-embroidery program, C.F. was diagnosed as suffering from severe psychological disorders. It was up to the trainers to help her overcome her trauma by integrating her into a group suffering similar problems. She then realized that her miseries were comparable to those of others trying to cope with life's demands. Consequently, she picked up her strength and finally made her way through. She now works at a factory and earns a decent income that provides for her family.

A.D., a 34 year-old married woman with three children, has been displaced no less than three times. Her husband is unemployed but is fully responsible for his brother who is suffering from cancer. Faced with these conditions, A.D. joined the upholstery-sewing training program. A.D. showed great potential, which led to her employment as an assistant to her trainer who owns an upholstery-sewing factory. A.D. is now the sole financial supporter of her family.

Considering the achievements of these women, it is essential to reveal the results of two different surveys conducted by the IWSAW to assess the impact of the Income Generating Program.

In 1993, IWSAW conducted a survey on a sample of 154 women who had been trained in different skills. The purpose was to discover the number of women who are earning a decent income as a result of their training. Table 1 shows that 99 candidates were employed and 45 were self-employed (working from within their own homes or having established their own business). Thus, a 93.5% employment rate had been achieved.

A second survey (table 2), was conducted in 1995 on 137 women to reveal the efficacy of the program as a whole. The first segment aimed at finding out whether the duration of their training had been sufficient for acquiring their chosen skill and their employment eligibility. The second part sought to reveal the employment percentage among the candidates. The purpose of the third part was to find out whether a productive working woman had also become an active decision-maker. And the fourth part deals with the effect of the BLSP on their development as individuals.



*Jacqueline Maalouf: A trainee is now a trainer*

**Table 1**

Kind of skills	No. of Candidates interviewed	No. of Candidates employed	Self-employed	Percentage employed
Hair Dresser Technician	11	6	5	100%
Knitting	16	11	2	81.25%
Sewing-Factory	55	35	15	90.9%
Sequin Embroidery	72	47	23	97.22%
Total	154	99	45	93.5%

**average age: 22.5**

**common condition: they are all displaced;**

**average # of children/family: 7**

**Table 2**

Participant's answers	No. of participants	Percentage
Training Duration Sufficient	116	84.67%
Training Duration not Sufficient	21	15.33%
Employed by others	67	48.9%
Unemployed	9	6.57%
Self-employed	58	42.33%
Decision-maker	69	50.36%
Not a decision-maker	17	12.41%
No answer	51	37.23%
Change in daily habits	135	98.54%
No change in daily habits	2	1.46%

**total number of interviewees: 137**

In conclusion, we can say that this program went far beyond its original aim of providing skills to its shattered, displaced candidates; in fact, it fully reconstructed their lives and turned them into self-sufficient family-leaders and responsible citizens. Thus, this program has positively contributed to the development of the Lebanese family.

**\* Al-Raida Volume VIII Nb. 72, 1996 for full details of the project**