



German Development Cooperation - Women Economic Empowerment Success Stories

Background on the gender sensitive value chain approach to promote economic empowerment

EconoWin, also known as “Economic Integration of Women in the MENA Region,” is a regional programme active in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco from 2010 to 2016. It is funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), and implemented by Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). The programme supports women’s integration into the economy through a four-pronged approach that includes: promoting a positive view of women’s roles in the economy, improving working conditions and career opportunities within companies, empowering women through the gender sensitive value chain approach, and supporting the professional orientation of women. The approach was developed through close collaboration between EconoWin and OXFAM Quebec’s Regional Economic Empowerment of Women Project.

Empowerment Story I: Fig production – Chefchaouen/Ouazzane, Morocco

In the Rif Mountains of Northern Morocco, a female-led cooperative produces couscous, dried herbs and fig products. This is one of the more lush regions of the country, where fertile valleys lead into rolling hills of cultivated land. In this predominantly rural area, agricultural production is a major source of economic activity. Major crops in the inland areas include cereals, olives and figs. Indeed the region is particularly known for its fig production, with 85% of Moroccan figs produced in the North, where ancestral techniques for drying figs have been passed down from mother to daughter for generations.

Example Cooperative # 1:

This cooperative was begun in 1999 by ten determined and courageous women who joined forces to produce, market and sell couscous made from locally grown products. Many visitors now pass through its doors and are often greeted with heart-felt welcome by Yasmine M.* This friendly and energetic member of the cooperative is in her early thirties, and unmarried. She lives at home with her mother, grandmother and siblings.

Since its inception, the cooperative had provided a supplemental (albeit minimal) source of income to women in and around the village – women who were otherwise primarily working in subsistence agriculture or small-scale farming. While the cooperative had started diversifying to produce dried local herbs and spiced couscous products in the late 2000s, they only started making and selling fig-based products in 2013, when they were selected as one of the female-led cooperatives to participate in EconoWin’s Gender Sensitive Value Chain project.

Until that time, Yasmine had always wanted for the cooperative to also work in figs because she felt it would bring in additional revenue. However, she had lacked the resources, the technical know-how or the confidence to make it happen. Thanks to the EconoWin project, she received trainings in the fig drying process, fumigation, management and communications, and marketing techniques. The cooperative also received support in officially registering (giving them access to more business services), and was provided with a vacuum packing machine.

Thanks to this support, the cooperative introduced new fig-based products into their offerings, and was able to market and sell them successfully. They now sell two tons of figs per year. This led to the added effect of also improving the market visibility for their couscous and dried herbs, which they started selling in

* All names changed by the author



Production of dry figs,
Chefchaouen/Ouazzane, Morocco

much greater quantities. Indeed, when customers began coming to the cooperative to buy fig products, members would provide free samples of their uniquely spiced couscous. According to Yasmine and her colleagues, profits greatly increased between 2013 and 2015. They have hired seven additional women to help in the cooperative, and also call on another two to four women during the busiest times of the year. Yasmine now earns a higher salary, which she uses to help support her family. With the added income, she saves some earnings for an emergency medical fund, and spends some on travel and clothing.

Beyond the increase in income, Yasmine describes a number of changes that she has experienced in her life since the project has started. The new knowledge that she gained and the trainings that she participated in have given her greater confidence in herself. Participating as a cooperative leader during its time of growth has given Yasmine the opportunity to travel and meet new people. Now, when important financial decisions are made within her household, such as whether or not to invest in a refrigerator, she is the first to be consulted by her family members.

Since her participation in the gender sensitive value chain project, Yasmine spends a lot more time at work each week and work became more complex, as the cooperative must switch back and forth between fig production and couscous production. The increased workload has allowed Yasmine to grow personally and focus on the success of the cooperative.

Part of Yasmine's increased responsibility emanates from a recent shift in her role and visibility in the community, which may be due in part to her newfound knowledge and confidence. Community members ask her for advice, and trust her to advocate for them. Indeed, Yasmine now sees herself fulfilling a more active role in community leadership and aspires to one day serve in public office. She talks about how women's opinions are not valued enough, and how important it is for women to be able to communicate about the reality they know.

Yasmine has also inspired a sense of trust in the families of young women in the community. Parents have allowed their daughters to work once they have met her, and now ask whether she will be present at meetings before agreeing to let their daughters attend. She acknowledges that while many women are now allowed to work, there are still those who are unable to negotiate with their parents or husbands. In her case, her father had always encouraged her to go outside and to work and her sister supports her at home by taking more of the family chores.

Through the increased knowledge, confidence and resources that Yasmine has gained through participating in the gender sensitive value chain project, her role has evolved within the cooperative, within her home, and in her community. Her unique family circumstances likely laid the foundation for the recent changes that she has experienced. Nonetheless, her increased empowerment may further catalyze the opening of economic opportunities for other women in her community.

Example Cooperative # 2:

Fatima Y., who is in her late thirties, lives in this region with her husband and two children. She assumes many roles within her family and community, including working for the local municipal government and in leading a fig cooperative. In 2012 Fatima's cooperative was selected through the competitive process to participate in EconoWin's Gender Sensitive Value Chain initiative, which provided managerial capacity building, technical training and support in accessing new markets. Cooperative members attended trainings on product packaging and marketing, cost reduction, and employee motivation.

Fatima started working after her husband suffered an accident that made it difficult for him to continue working. At that time she became the primary wage earner for the household, and took a position with the municipality. She then started the fig cooperative, as a way to bring in additional income. Currently, her husband runs a small shop in the village, but this represents a minute proportion of their income.

The income that Fatima and her family receive from the cooperative is distributed at the end of each year, and does not represent a set or regular amount. Everything that Fatima earns from the cooperative, she puts aside to invest in larger expenses. Since the gender sensitive value chain support, the cooperative's profits have grown as a result of accessing new markets and building the visibility of their products, regionally and even nationally. The cooperative members have therefore been able to register higher earnings at the end of the year. Thanks to this additional income, Fatima has saved money over the past several years, and invested in an addition to her home.

Since her cooperative's participation in the gender sensitive value chain support, Fatima, who juggles many professional and family responsibilities simultaneously, has experienced changes in the time that she spends each week on different types of work. Thanks to management trainings, she now spends less time on



*Production of dry figs,
Chefchaouen/Ouazzane, Morocco*



NatureTex SEKEM, Belbeis, Egypt

actual production and is able to focus more of her attention on overall business development and leadership. She can also spend less time on household work, thanks to investments made possible by her higher earnings.

Since she started to work, Fatima has been more involved in household decision-making. Before, her husband primarily made decisions about major household expenses, though he would take her opinion into account. Now, for household purchases as well as larger investments, they share the decision equally, or accept each other's opinions when one of them feels very strongly. For example, when they recently discussed whether or not to raise animals, Fatima made 100% of the decision. She was clear that she did not want the added responsibility of caring for livestock.

Fatima is vocal about the variety of challenges that women in the region face when deciding to work. She experienced many negative reactions from her family and neighbors when she started to work for the municipality, and also when she decided to start the fig cooperative. Community members said that she would dirty her family's reputation, or that she would never be able to succeed. However, these perceptions only made her more determined, as she had a strong vision for the cooperative and the benefit that it could bring to herself and other women in the community.

When she first started the cooperative, she had a hard time recruiting women to join her, but norms have slowly begun to change. For many married and unmarried women, it is not socially accepted to travel any distance from the home without a male family member. However, since seeing the financial success of the cooperative, men within the community have begun encouraging their wives to join. Cooperative members who earn an income from their work have, one-by-one, also recruited other women. Fatima feels it is important that as women learn new skills and are encouraged to take on new roles, there is also support and sensitization for men in the community. From her perspective, if men feel left behind, this can increase the risk that women face negative repercussions from family members for wanting to work outside the home.

Fatima has always had confidence in herself. She says about herself that when she decides that she is going to do something, she finds a way to do it. She negotiates, she uses diplomacy, and she ignores those who say she will fail. The GSVIC initiative has

helped her to build on this innate confidence by creating avenues to make new connections that enable her to transform her visions for the cooperative into reality.

Empowerment Story II: NatureTex Factory – Belbeis, Egypt

The NatureTex factory is an organic cotton textiles company located northeast of Cairo, on the edge of the Nile Delta. It is part of Sekem Farm, a social business operating in the area since the late 1970's that produces a wide variety of goods from local agricultural products. Among the many companies housed within Sekem, NatureTex employs the highest numbers of young women from the surrounding communities. One of these women is Amina K., a young married mother of two in her early twenties who has been working for the company in textile production since 2011.

Women in Egypt continue to face multiple social, economic, and cultural hurdles to employment. They generally have limited access to relevant education and training to prepare them for formal employment, and are less connected to networks and markets that allow them to engage productively in local value chains. Women who do work are often in low skilled, low wage positions. Within this context NatureTex has worked to provide female employees with additional support services, and starting in 2012 participated in EconoWin's Gender Sensitive Value Chain programme to further promote women's integration into the labor force (see text box for more information).

Activities at the NatureTex factory have included workshops in a range of technical sewing skills, as well as sessions designed to build communication skills, self-confidence and leadership development. In 2014, EconoWin placed a full-time development advisor on site, who created a leadership team among young women working in the factory to organize social and educational events, while further promoting gender awareness among all employees. Activities have also included screenings of the films "Ana Hunna," or "I Am Here" produced by the EconoWin programme that raise awareness about women's rights as relates to work.

Amina, who has a secondary school technical diploma in clothes production, is one of the young women who have joined the leadership team created at NatureTex as part of the gender sensitive



NatureTex SEKEM, Belbeis, Egypt

value chain initiative. She has participated in a variety of workshops, including on communication skills and women's rights. She also attends the social meetings where she is responsible for representing the wishes of other women in the factory.

She has been recognized as best employee of the month (through one of the initiatives started by the leadership team and the development advisor) and has also been featured in the company newsletter.

When Amina first started working, she faced strong disapproval from her husband's family, who lives in close proximity. However, she was lucky to have support from her husband, and so she was able to continue despite the consternation of her in-laws. Over time, her husband's family began to accept her role outside the home. They saw her responsibilities at NatureTex and the recognition that she received, including having been selected as best worker of the month and having her photograph in the company newspaper. Now, Amina says that her husband's family is amazed to see what she does, and they have a new level of respect for her.

As she sees it, the experience of disapproval from her husband's family is a common challenge faced by many Egyptian women who want to work. Most women aren't just living with their husbands, but also with their husband's families, who expect to have domestic help within the household. This can lead to pressure on the husband to prevent his wife from working outside the home, even if he is not against it.

Amina now works full time at NatureTex, does all of the household work, raises and sells chickens, and sometimes also makes dolls at home which she can sell back to the company. She is able

to manage – as she calls it 'thanks to the grace of God, and thanks to the help that her husband offers in caring for their children.'

When she thinks of an empowered woman, Amina imagines a woman who is capable of doing much more than being at home. She thinks of a woman who others look to as a positive example. According to her, "an empowered woman can do anything and achieve anything, but she also needs to have encouragement and support."

In addition to the changes in gender perceptions within Amina's family, her ability to influence family decisions also changed since her participation in the gender sensitive value chain activities. Her husband had previously been the full decision-maker about large purchases. However, this has now changed. The new communication techniques that Amina learned have enabled her to better voice her opinion and discuss decisions when she disagrees with a purchase.

Before, she would shut down and ignore someone if they did something that she disagreed with. She would also sometimes react angrily and snap. Now, Amina feels that she has learned to express her opinion in a calm and convincing way. Nonetheless, there are still areas within her extended family where she would like to have more of a say. For example, she wishes that she could give more input into the family-wide decisions, such as whether to buy or sell family land.

Amina's confidence has improved since participating in the gender sensitive value chain activities at NatureTex. She has taken on additional responsibilities, learned how to better communicate her opinions, and discovered new personal capabilities.

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