Doing something useful for the community: handicrafts and women’s empowerment in Ghor el Safi

Self-confident, motivated and hardworking, Nofeh is the President of the *Ghor el Safi Women’s Association for Social Development*. For many people, establishing a women’s cooperative in Ghor el Safi, a little village south of the Dead Sea, represents an arduous task. But not for Nofeh! She has dared to challenge the status quo and has succeeded in creating one of the most successful women’s associations in the region.

Nofeh recalls her challenges in settling the women’s association, “In 1996, I wanted to join a men’s cooperative but my application was rejected. Thus, I decided to register my own cooperative together with twenty-one other women. In 1999, I began *Safi Crafts*, a project specifically focused on the production of handicrafts”.

At that time, the cooperative was involved in a broad range of activities such as dyeing, embroidery and handicrafts, but the scale of their production was small and their situation precarious. Nofeh continues, “For about one year, we worked in my kitchen. Afterwards, we were given a space in a small building but the place was cramped and there were many other associations sharing the same venue.”

“At a certain point, I was told to leave but I refused because I knew I was doing something useful for the community”, says Nofeh explaining her motivation in pursuing the production of handicrafts.

It was not always easy, explains Nofeh, “With the outbreak of the Syria crisis in 2011 and other major conflicts in the region, our business was terribly affected. We used to sell our products to tourists but then the flow of visitors dramatically dropped.”

Since 2013, UNESCO has been supporting the Women’s Association to improve its production and promotion of handicrafts through the project funded by Drosos “Empowering Women in the Jordan Valley”.
“UNESCO promotes culture as an integral part of sustainable development, and believes that culture can be a very powerful source of resilience to break the cycle of poverty” adds Costanza Farina, UNESCO Representative in Jordan. Within this strategic approach, the project is contributing to women’s empowerment in the Jordan Valley by creating job opportunities in the culture sector. “I thought it was very fruitful and eye-opening to see what we could do and how we could improve our activities”, Nofeh expresses very enthusiastically as she reflects on her reaction following the first meetings with UNESCO to discuss possible project initiatives.

As part of this project, the capacities of the women of the association have been developed in various key areas, like production, design, marketing, finance and management. The training sessions were implemented by UNESCO’s partner organization Al-Hima. “We now have a better financial system and a clear distribution of roles. Most importantly, the women have increased their income and have acquired new skills”, Nofeh emphasizes the achievements of this project. These skills are not just beneficial for the production itself, they have been helpful also as a means of social development as these are practical life skills easily applicable in the everyday lives of the women. As a final test for one of the trainings, the Ghor el Safi Association participated in a Christmas Bazaar in December 2014 where the women had the chance to sell their products to a wider public and to network with other cooperatives. “The Bazaar was very successful and we have considerably increased our revenue. This has been a crucial achievement of this project and we are very happy about the results”, says Nofeh, thrilled about the opportunities that this project has opened for the cooperative. She asserts, “UNESCO gave much more visibility to our project, which is now well-known in Jordan even beyond the boundaries of our municipality”. Thanks to one of the networking opportunities provided by this project, the association made a deal with the well-known shop Jo Bedu to sell some of their products in Amman.

Following the initial year and a half that the project has been running, Nofeh summarizes the achievements: more women have joined the association, more synergies have been established among us and the income of the women has finally increased. When asked about the relevance of this project for the community, she explains “For us, it is not just about doing artistic activities together; it is more about doing something to improve the conditions of our community, something which could really have an impact.”

UNESCO is committed to continue its support to these extraordinary women and plans to expand the geographical scope of the project, so that more and more rural women can be given the same opportunities.