

Income Generating Activities for Displaced Lebanese Women

A Project Implemented by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World.

Recent literature on development 'questions' the efficacy of past and present income generating projects with respect to women. The main argument centers around the definition of the term «Income generating activities» which usually «connotes small activities irrelevant to the stream of national economic development» (ISIS, 1983; p. 95). Literature also abounds in examples on how income generating activities projects can exploit women's labor and increase their isolation and marginalization, specially if they are home based (ISIS 1983; pp. 97-101). Findings also suggest that many home based handicrafts and food processing projects do not find the necessary markets to become economically viable.

In spite of the above mentioned shortcomings, income generating projects are considered as one of the most fruitful approaches for integrating women into social and economic development. However, such projects should be conceived not only in terms of empowering the individual woman economically but rather offer potentials, and possibility for social and economic benefit to women and their community as a whole. Therefore, income generating projects should aim at achieving self-reliance through the action of women's solidarity groups. Collective action of women will not only promote self-reliance, but also strengthen their income earnings, accentuate consciousness raising, reduce exploitation, insure collective financing and marketing and promote organizational and supportive services by informal arrangements between women themselves.

In Lebanon today, earning money is both necessary and desirable for women in general and displaced women in particular.

Over the last ten years the situation of women in Lebanon has deteriorated in general and more particularly among displaced families. Over 700,000 Lebanese were forced to move away from their towns and villages

of origin (Iskander and Baroudi, 1984) and settle haphazardly in the capital, its suburbs and Mount Lebanon.

Actually most displaced women lost their traditional source of income and other means of subsistence in their villages of origin, while many city and sub-urban dwellers lost their jobs in the industrial and services sectors. The mothers were faced with unsurmountable economic problems and were eager to get help in increasing their income and opted for activities in their homes. However, their main and immediate concern was how to get money for their subsistence.

In view of the everlasting conflict, the growing inflation and unemployment rates and the precarious living conditions of most displaced people, the Institute for women's Studies in the Arab World at Beirut University College, felt it is imperative that income generating projects be initiated to help displaced Lebanese women earn an income and achieve self-reliance.

A feasibility study was conducted over a period of six months to determine the social, technical, commercial and financial aspects of the project and to examine the possibility of its implementation. Of the three pilot studies made knitting was found to be the most viable for the following reasons: knitting can be done at home, thus enabling the women to care for their families while still earning money; most of the women interviewed (150 in East Beirut and 150 in West Beirut) possessed skills in knitting. Market survey revealed hand knitted items to be in demand and several outlets for sales both in Lebanon and abroad were found.

Several modern and attractive models for children aged two and under were selected from foreign magazines. Wool was purchased and given to women skilled in knitting who could read instruction in a foreign language. They were asked to indicate what kind of wool suited each model, what size of needles were appropriate for certain items, the length of time it takes to complete an item and the amount of wool needed for each model.

NANET

The next step was to translate the knitting instructions into Arabic and give it to the women to start knitting. Quantities of wool was purchased with the assistance of Save the Children Federation and the Catholic Relief Service. Instructions for each model were translated into Arabic. Several hours were spent with individual women to ensure the quality of work. Upon perfecting the model each woman was given enough wool to make two items per week.

A catchy name for marketing the product was chosen-NANET. Tags were printed on material to be sewen on the item. Buttons for each model and color were chosen. Every model was given a reference number and size number. The finished product was then encased in a nylon bag.

As soon as these were ready, photographs were taken of the different models and sent to Sweden, the United States, some Arab countries and to retail shops in Lebanon. Together with the photographs a leaflet stating the objectives of the project were included.

A number of sales have already been made. The money will go back into the project to enable us to purchase material and pay credit to an increasing number of working women. Our aim is to have as many displaced women working and earning their living and to find a steady and dependable market for the products thus attaining our goal of achieving self - reliance for needy displaced women and their families.

The Institute not only feels satisfaction at the progress made but also gratification at the eagerness and willingness of the women who have been able to earn money by their own work and who seem to have acquired a new lease on life by earning their living with dignity and self respect.

We would like to conclude this article with a comment made by one of the women in this project - a grandmother - who said that she had never in her life earned money from her own work and was thrilled to be able to contribute to her family's economic needs.



NANET is hand knitted woolen baby cloths.

NANET is made by displaced Lebanese women who have lost their homes.

NANET reaches women in their settlements to help them generate an income to support them and their families.

NANET is knitted by 120 women thus helping to support 720 persons (average of 6 persons per family).

NANET produces the latest models in baby cloths from ages 3 months to two years.

NANET is always ready to produce new models.

NANET also produces baby blankets for cribs and cots.