

The International Trade Centre: empowering women embroiderers in Ramallah

Background to the International Trade Centre (ITC) and Heritage Touch:

In early 2014, the Women and Trade Programme of the International Trade Centre (ITC) launched a project on “Enhancing women SME development in the state of Palestine” (EWED). Through workshops and a variety of training activities, ITC has worked to improve the capacity of institutions like the Business Women Forum, a Palestinian non-profit association that advocates for women-owned businesses and women’s economic empowerment.

Naima Zeyad is one woman whose business has benefitted from involvement with ITC. Naima started using fabric scraps passed on by a friend to create embroidered jewellery. This was the beginning of what today is Heritage Touch, a company that employs more than 40 women embroiderers in Ramallah. These women put a modern twist on traditional Palestinian patchwork and embroidery, producing 3000 articles per month.

Challenges:

Naima's entrepreneurial career has hardly been smooth sailing. Like many Palestinian businesswomen, Naima faces significant geographical and political constraints on her ability to market her products both inside Palestine and abroad. Barriers include societal restrictions, unequal economic opportunities, and bias in the marketplace. These compound the effects of other challenges such as weak domestic demand, limited connections to market opportunities abroad, and difficulties meeting international health, safety, and other product requirements. Finding investors to finance raw materials and machinery, as well as difficulties importing raw materials exacerbate her limited bargaining power vis-à-vis suppliers, inflating costs. Women-owned Palestinian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) like Heritage Touch often struggle to pick up speed because of limited business networks that make it hard for them to fully realise their potential.

The role of the International Trade Centre and local institutions:

Local institutions, backed by international support, played a critical role in getting Heritage Touch off the ground. In 2013, Naima started attending business development programmes offered by the Business Women Forum). Through the association, Naima also occasionally participated in locally organized exhibitions. Thanks in part to EWED assistance, the Business Women Forum was able to help Naima register Heritage Touch with the national chamber of commerce. Formalization in turn paved the way for Naima to scale up production and attempt to break into international markets.

In addition to its work through the Business Women Forum, ITC provided advisory services directly to 21 selected women-owned businesses, including Naima's, aimed at enabling them to improve their competitiveness. After assessing supply side and training needs, 15 of the 21 received customised advice and capacity support to diversify production, improve product quality and design, and upgrade business and strategy plans to better understand and meet the needs of prospective customers abroad. By facilitating their participation at various international exhibitions and trade fairs, ITC helped the women-owned businesses make trade contacts and connect to potential international buyers.

Results and Social Impact:

Like many of the other beneficiaries of ITC's EWED project, Naima's company was able to overcome several business-related obstacles. *Heritage Touch* now exports to the United States, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

‘Working with international consultants and designers has enhanced my knowledge about international markets, which enabled me to develop a new line of products with a variety of colours and styles that meets the requirements of different buyers,’ Naima explained. Following its work with the EWED project, Heritage Touch was contracted by a leading telecommunications company in the State of Palestine to supply corporate gifts - pendants, earrings and necklaces - for their customers. The increased demand for the company's products has allowed Naima to open a new showroom and workspace in Ramallah where customers can view her collection and women can gather in a safe place to produce her designs.

Despite challenges, Heritage Touch is thriving, and expanding its product line with designs that cater to the tastes of customers around the world. Naima is receiving a steady stream of new orders from regional and international business partners.

Meanwhile, ITC is working with other women-owned businesses in the State of Palestine to enable them to preserve traditional culture and art by turning traditional embroidery techniques into marketable products worldwide.

'We are proud of the results, and we are looking forward to continue working with more women,' said ITC project manager Eman Beseiso. *'Women entrepreneurs are enhancing their capacities and international competitiveness, finding buyers and accessing new markets. We believe this will contribute to the Palestinian government's vision of "Export-Led Prosperity, Made in Palestine."*

Keywords: capacity-building, women, international markets, small enterprise, Palestine

Sector: Retail, consumer goods & lifestyle