



# HARNESSING THE POWER OF THE COLLECTIVE

The Women's Handicrafts Production Cooperative  
in Aswan, Egypt

The Women’s Handicrafts Production Cooperative is a success story that has transformed the lives of its members, who had been finding it hard to obtain employment. They are now focused on creating their own enterprise. Started in 2018, today the cooperative’s membership has expanded tenfold and created employment opportunities by using the principles of social solidarity economy and collective business models. The Youth Participation and Employment (YPE) project in Egypt, developed in partnership with the Better Life Association for Community Development (BLACD), provided technical training to the cooperative in handicrafts production, as well as life skills training, to empower the workers to continue despite all the societal pressure for them to give up. Assistance from BLACD came in when it was needed. Particularly during the COVID-19 crisis, with the tourism market shut down, BLACD has provided crucial technical advice and support, supporting the cooperative to brainstorm and identify several parallel income-generating activities. This case study contains some testimonies from members of the cooperative on how their collective strength was harnessed to create employment and income.

© Oxfam International August 2021.

This case study was written by Yasmine Ahmed AlGarf, an external consultant appointed by the Youth Participation and Employment (YPE) programme. Oxfam acknowledges the assistance of the YPE Programme Management Unit (PMU) and the Programme Team in Jordan in its production. It is part of a series of case studies written to inform public debate on youth participation and employment issues in the MENA region. The YPE programme is part of the Arab Danish Partnership Programme (DAPP) and funded by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email Shekhar Anand [sha@oxfamibis.dk](mailto:sha@oxfamibis.dk) and Ahmed El Assal [a.elassal@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:a.elassal@oxfam.org.uk).

The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under  
ISBN 978-1-78748-785-7 in August 2021.

DOI: 10.21201/2021.7857

Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

Cover photo: Women cooperative members selling their products at a trade fair in Cairo. Credit: Women’s Handicrafts Production Cooperative.

In early 2018, an inspiring group of women from Minya went on a field visit to a handicrafts factory in Aswan. Starting from nothing, they had recently launched home-based businesses which were performing exceptionally well. The visit was organized by the Better Life Association for Comprehensive Development (BLACD), a YPE partner, which had been working to promote women's economic empowerment in Minya. BLACD wanted some of the people they worked with to share their stories with other women across upper Egypt, to show that this sort of change was possible for them too.

*'We would have never thought of establishing the cooperative if not for the field visits and training BLACD provided during our time at the factory.'*

Within the context of BLACD's women's economic empowerment programme in upper Egypt, the Aswan women – still in their previous jobs – attended professional development training sessions and listened to the stories of many women who had been able to create meaningful employment opportunities for themselves. Believing in the power of cooperatives to bring about systemic changes in societies, the BLACD training included education on the concept of the 'social solidarity economy', different collective business models, the legal framework governing cooperatives in Egypt and the steps needed to establish one. Steered by this knowledge and faced with the lack of employment opportunities in Aswan, Shereen Haggag, one of the nine women laid off, suggested establishing a cooperative, through which they could capitalize on handcraft skills passed on from generation to generation, build a business entirely theirs, and provide means for other women in Aswan to join.

Shereen Haggag,  
founding member

Inspired, the nine women who had been desperately looking for jobs now focused on creating their own enterprise. They organized themselves and approached BLACD for help. Through its partnership with the Youth Participation and Employment Programme (YPE), BLACD supported the group to create the first all-women registered cooperative in Egypt, and the third in the entire MENA region, in December 2018. Due to opposition within their families, financial and bureaucratic challenges, and restrictive social norms, the road to set up the cooperative legally was extremely hard. The nine women had to convince an additional 12 to join them as founding members, to reach the minimum requirement under Egyptian law. They also had to raise capital, submit paperwork and win family support.

*'The journey to set up the cooperative was not easy, but it was so worth it and without the support BLACD showed, we would never be where we are today.'*

Rasha Gamal, founding  
member

The fact that there were many women involved was crucial, because each one was able to convince her family by saying that others were doing it too. The women helped one another collect the money needed to start the cooperative, with several lending to others, then divided the work to submit the paperwork in Cairo, depending on each woman's family situation. During this process, BLACD was always present to give procedural advice and support and provide stipends for the women who had to travel to Cairo to complete the paperwork.

*'BLACD support did not stop with the establishment of the cooperative, but was reinforced over the years, and has been key to our sustainability and growth.'*

In December 2018, the Women's Handicrafts Production Cooperative finally came into formal existence. While the founding members were extremely proud to have come this far, they realised the journey ahead might be even harder. BLACD and YPE recognized that the women needed specific

Shereen Haggag,  
founding member

management and operational training, as functions such as production, marketing and recruitment of new members were completely foreign to them.

YPE and BLACD organized training for both the cooperative's management board and its regular members. The management training included the principles of internal management to guide the board's development of the cooperative's internal regulations. It also covered business planning, including value propositions, customer relations and feasibility studies. The women chose a shared participatory management system, in which they are all entitled to one vote in important decisions.

Members of the cooperative received technical training in handicraft production to improve the quality of the goods produced, including new designs unique to Aswan and for training in-house trainers who would train future new members. BLACD and YPE also provided marketing support to help the cooperative sell its products and generate profits. Assistance included the organization and financing of marketing visits, preparation of a catalogue of the cooperative's products, arranging participation in several bazaars and exhibitions in Cairo, and providing financial support for travel to exhibitions.

Driven by the understanding of the local context, BLACD and YPE realized that the women also needed life skills training, to empower them to continue with the cooperative, despite all the societal pressure for them to give up. They provided gender training to raise members' awareness about equal rights, promote their self-esteem, and highlight the importance of what they were doing in enabling female labour participation and fighting gender stereotyping. The gender training produced highly positive results, with some attendees even deciding to become members of their local council, while others chose to not carry out female genital mutilation (FGM) on their daughters.

Assistance from BLACD during the COVID-19 crisis has been essential to its survival. Without the tourism market, the cooperative's management had to find alternative ways to generate income. BLACD provided crucial technical advice and support, helping the cooperative to brainstorm and identify several parallel income-generating activities. These included preparing cooked meals and sewing linen for sale to the local community. With BLACD and YPE financial support, the cooperative also started sewing facemasks and distributing them for free in remote villages of Aswan.

BLACD believes in the power of grassroots action to effectively drive change. A key feature of its approach has always been to work with collective structures. The success story of the Women's Handicrafts Production Cooperative – which has grown almost tenfold since its establishment – has been a true testament to the power of the collective and a validation of the BLACD approach.

*'Due to the BLACD and YPE Egypt Programme partnership, we were able to travel to Cairo and take part in the Turathna Exhibition, where we made our largest sales to date.'*

Sahar El Sheikh, Head of the Cooperative Management Board

*'The support BLACD and YPE showed us during the COVID-19 crisis not only helped us sustain operations and continue providing for our members, but also instated the cooperative as a key member of the community who is actively present and takes part to help in times of crises... This image has played a big role in the membership expansion of the cooperative. It is really hard to measure the impact of BLACD assistance, because it is so fundamentally rooted in everything that we have achieved so far.'*

Sahar El Sheikh, Head of the Cooperative Management Board



## OXFAM

Oxfam is an international confederation of 21 organizations, working with its partners and allies, reaching out to millions of people around the world. Together, we tackle inequalities to end poverty and injustice, now and in the long term – for an equal future. Please write to any of the agencies for further information or visit [www.oxfam.org](http://www.oxfam.org).

[www.oxfam.org](http://www.oxfam.org)



**OXFAM**