



SUPPORTING WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN TUNISIA

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Mabrouka Hdaya is a craftswoman who has been producing bags and baskets for 20 years. Support from the Youth Participation and Employment (YPE) project helped her overcome the technical and financial obstacles that she has faced since 2018 when she started her entrepreneurial journey. YPE, in partnership with the Local Initiative and Development Forum (FIDEL), selected Mabrouka for training to improve her weaving and business management skills. As a result, she has become more confident and developed working relationships with other people in her trade. Her business was doing well until the COVID-19 pandemic affected markets. She is hopeful she will recover as soon as the markets re-open and national fairs re-start. In the meantime, she sells small quantities through social media platforms and the FIDEL shop. This is the story of an entrepreneur who knows her way forward and is ready to fight uncertainties.

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Cover photo: Mabrouka at work on her crafts. Credit: Lotte Ærsøe/Oxfam IBIS.

1 INTRODUCTION

Mabrouka Hdaya, a 39-year-old Tunisian craftswoman from El Métouia in the Gabès region of Tunisia, has been making craft products such as bags and baskets for 20 years – but only recently has she been able to create her own business. She encountered both technical and financial obstacles, but with support from the Youth Participation and Employment (YPE) project, has developed her economic activity, and is an inspiring example to other young entrepreneurs.

2 OVERCOMING INITIAL HURDLES

Mabrouka lives with her parents on a farm 35km from El Métouia. Her family has always faced financial difficulties, and she had to leave school because her parents could no longer afford the expense. Although she was able to make some money from her craft skills, she was forced into tiring and low-paid work on neighbouring farms, collecting olives and henna leaves. She never got married and so had no choice other than to focus on her profession of craftwork.

Her entrepreneurial journey began in 2018 when she was encouraged by colleagues to apply to the Local Initiative and Development Forum (FIDEL), a local NGO and partner to the YPE project, for support in starting her own craft project. She had sought support before, but without success. This time, her profile matched the selection criteria.

FIDEL staff members immediately spotted in her a future entrepreneur, as she was highly motivated and had strong potential for development. Nizar Hamed, project coordinator at FIDEL, noted, 'Mabrouka has a fantastic personality, she has the profile of a 100 per cent entrepreneur.'

Craftswomen's professional careers often have a rocky start. The first obstacle Mabrouka encountered came from those around her. She comes from a conservative rural region, and her family did not want her to launch into economic activity. But she showed perseverance and courage, freeing herself from family pressure and choosing to continue participating in the project, with the aim of changing the mentality of those around her.

'I managed to convince them little by little, through hard work and accomplishments. The fact that I have access to a source of funding has also helped me', she says. Risk-taking is a quality shared by all entrepreneurs, and Mabrouka was rewarded.

3 SUPPORT AND FUNDING: KEYS TO SUCCESS

After being selected by FIDEL, Mabrouka began courses on how to start and manage the project. She received practical training to improve her weaving, and learned to calculate expenses, set selling prices and market products. 'Mabrouka showed great motivation from the start', says Nizar. 'She was present at all the training sessions.'

FIDEL helped Mabrouka access funding for her project. The technical and financial support provided within the YPE framework were instrumental in her success. 2019 was a particularly good year for her. On a personal level, she acquired valuable confidence. During the first training session, she appeared shy and dared not speak in public or even chat with other participants. In response, FIDEL focused on personal development to help Mabrouka's communication and public speaking abilities. These courses have helped her overcome her fears and allowed her to forge links and develop social skills. 'In a short time, the situation was reversed', explains Nizar. 'From the shyest of the group, Mabrouka became the centre of attention and discussions.'

On a professional level, Mabrouka became an independent entrepreneur, able not only to produce quality crafts, but also to negotiate with suppliers for the best prices and with clients to market her products. These skills developed her economic activity. Thanks to new outlets at the national level, she was able to participate in various local, regional and national fairs, with support from FIDEL through the YPE project covering her transport and accommodation costs. This enabled her to sell products and forge links with other associations and craftspeople.

'My professional situation has improved tremendously. Before I started my project, I was unknown. Today I have made a name, gained skills and built relationships', says Mabrouka. With FIDEL's support, she has seen her revenues increase by six-fold compared with 2018.

But she did not stop there. The support provided by FIDEL and YPE opened doors to technical training opportunities with other organizations and institutions, and other sources of funding to expand the scale of her activity. Mabrouka is hugely grateful for this change. Previously, she had been disappointed by what life had to offer. Today, thanks to the creation of her company, new perspectives are opening up to her.

'I felt very lonely before starting the training', she says. 'But when I attended and exchanged with other people and the trainers, I was invaded by the good energy that emerged from the group. I have support and am encouraged to believe in myself. I think I can succeed, that I can become a full and independent citizen.'

4 AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has hindered the development of Mabrouka's business. She had big plans for 2020, such as opening a workshop in town as well as recruiting two craftswomen to help in her work. Instead, she hardly worked during the year, due to the drop in demand and the cancellation of the fairs, and her plans did not materialize. She was obliged to return to farm work to cover her expenses.

But Mabrouka has not given up hope that she can resume work once the pandemic has improved, and even wishes to expand her clientele. She continues to manufacture products in small quantities, which she sells on her Facebook page or through the FIDEL store, bringing in additional income during the crisis. Curious to learn and keen to perfect her art, Mabrouka is still pursuing training with FIDEL and other local organizations.

Optimistic by nature, she is as motivated as when she started. 'I am extremely proud to have launched my project', she says. 'I only regret not having done it sooner.'



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