

Women Reborn: Social Empowerment for Israeli Palestinian Women

Summary. A new social empowerment program for Muslim women is having a profound impact on a Palestinian village in northern Israel. It began with 17 women walking two miles twice a week to meet together without their husbands. One year later, the participants have discovered that they can have goals of their own without rejecting their traditional culture or their religious beliefs. Many have been



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helped to find jobs or to go back to school. They have become involved in local politics, helping to elect a new mayor - who has since established a municipal office for women. The program has expanded to include Hebrew, English and computer courses, job training, and a small business component. A new project to begin healing relationships with Jewish Israeli women from a nearby town is about to begin. The program has been recognized as an effective model and at least one nearby village is considering replication.

Program Overview. The original *Women Reborn* program had 3 objectives: 1) to assist participants to

become more independent and to increase economic self-sufficiency; 2) to develop a support network of Palestinian women; and 3) to train a group of women leaders. The program began in January, 2008, in Fureidis, an Arab village of about 11,000 residents. *Women Reborn* was the inspiration of a local Muslim woman who serves as project director, overseeing all activities, with administrative assistance from *Shin*, an Israeli feminist organization; financial support from the *Clark Charitable Trust*; and technical support from the *Center for Religious Tolerance*. Participants in the first class ranged in age from early 20's to mid-50's. Most were married with children; one was divorced, raising two children alone; several were single. Most had limited education (elementary or some high school); two had completed some college. The women participated in classroom instruction, group discussion, community service projects, and field trips; they also received coaching in job skills and job placement. The curriculum moved from the individual, to the family, and then to the community. The first six months focused on empowerment, communication, and family dynamics; the second six months focused on rights, group process and community building. All teachers were local Arab women.

The First Six Months. Initially, the program director had to recruit participants through extensive outreach efforts, reassuring families that the program was not anti-Islamic and would not put the women at risk. Many of the women worried that people would gossip about them, leading to a discussion about trust and betrayal, taking personal responsibility, and what it feels like to act outside community norms. It took time for the women to understand that they could have goals of their own: As one woman commented, they



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had been trained to “make themselves small, to stay in the background.” However, by the end of three months, each woman was able to state that she *herself* was worthy of having a goal, and was able to set a goal for her own life. Significant attention was paid to communication skills, both for developing the women’s own potential and for handling relationships with family and community. The women requested instruction in Hebrew – essential for getting along in Israeli society – and an instructor was found. All of the participants were observant Muslims, and many wondered how their newfound “empowerment” comported with Islam. Guest speakers were brought in to help them understand what the Qu’ran actually says about women, and participants began an ongoing process of renegotiating their religious identity. As their confidence grew, the women also began to explore options for working outside the home or continuing their education.

The Second Six Months. In the beginning, the women were uncomfortable in public situations, but as the program proceeded, they became increasingly involved in the public sphere. In the fall, when a local mayoral election was scheduled, the women hosted a “candidates forum” and three hundred women turned out. The women organized a grassroots campaign for the candidate with the most progressive



position on women’s issues, put up posters and went door to door encouraging women to vote. Against significant odds (the 25-year incumbent had been heavily favored) the “women’s candidate” won. For virtually all of the women, this was the first time they had been involved in political activities. The new mayor has made education and women his two top priorities; in March, 2009, at the graduation ceremony of the first *Women Reborn* class, he announced plans to establish a Women’s Division within the municipal government - the first such division to be established in an Arab municipality in Israel.

Outcomes. Women Reborn was started with a small amount of money and with the support

of a team of dedicated women, including Muslims, Christians, and Jews. In one year, a whole village has been affected. The women in the first class of *Women Reborn* have been profoundly affected by the project. Five have achieved full or part time employment, three are studying for their matriculation exams (high school equivalency), and others are pursuing other educational options. One woman has begun planning a daycare center, and several want to set up small businesses. All of the women in the Hebrew class have improved their language skills considerably, and several now feel comfortable enough to speak Hebrew in public. In addition, the women have formed strong friendships. They continue to meet regularly as a group and often socialize with women they met in the program. For many, this is the first time they have had women friends from outside their extended family.

In February, 2009, a second empowerment class began, as well as a second year of Hebrew, English and computer classes. A number of the women are learning a glass painting technique they hope will result in a profitable business that can be run from their homes, and a catering business is being developed and used to teach business skills. Several members of the first class are assisting with the new group of students, in preparation for taking on expanded leadership roles. A total of 120 women are currently involved in some aspect of *Women Reborn*, with many more are on a waiting list. *Women Reborn* has become a source of inspiration for women of all faiths across Israel.

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