

Women make the future:

Over the period of six months full of enthusiasm and dedicated work, Woman Empowerment Project, for the economic, social and health empowerment of women and girls ended its activities in the villages of Sohag Governorate. This project was implemented by MAIS Association, in cooperation with Productive Cooperative Association for handcrafts in Shandaweel Island and funded by Central Europe Initiative – Charity Intervention Committee of Third World in Rome – Italy, in the period from November 2010 till May 2011. All participants believe that they have carried out positive progress that pushed them forward with the same enthusiasm which they started with. In figures, a language which expresses the facts more practically, the project has achieved the following:

86 awareness seminars regarding woman civil, political, and religious rights, attended by 1770 persons, males and females, in the village within the geographical scope of the project.

The project has also provided technical support to the participants in the activities and the cadres influencing community. This support came in the form of training courses to develop personal and practical skills, which reached 35 trainings per day attended by 80 trainees, males and females.

As for the support of handcrafts, to empower women economically, the project provided support to almost 5 handcrafts workshops such as colorful embroidery, crochet, embroidery, Serma and Itamin works and handloom of Akhmim, which benefited 125 woman and girl.

The project also provided healthcare and legal services villages for free to the women in villages, through doctors and lawyers who participated in the project. Over 100 women received legal support including legal consultations, or filing lawsuits in courts amounted to 34 cases presented in the Egyptian courts.

As for healthcare services, doctors who participated in the projects provided medical check-ups through their fields visits for 651 women treating them from the violence effects on them.

As for official documents, the project helped 200 women to have IDs to enable them benefit from their civil and political rights.

The project concluded its achievements by declaring the specific union for handcrafts under the name of "**Specific Union to revive handicrafts and heritage in Sohag**" founded under no. 660, year 2011, which included 12 non-governmental associations that cared about reviving handcrafts heritage in Sohag.

Through the booklet "This is my experience", we review the experiences of women and case studies that interacted with the project and gave positive examples to give hope for many people that woman can make the future.

1- Keep going after for your rights:

Late marriage is a form of discrimination against woman in our society. Community unfairly judges unmarried girls whose marriage proposals are being delayed, which the girl and her family too might suffer from. On the other hand, this fact is not experienced by the other party; man. In many villages and cities, the girl who completes her third decade of life without being married, always suffer from psychological pressure caused by all those who surround her. This is what “S”, from Maragha faced as she suffered as well as her peers who missed marriage boat. This was which the society considered a shame on her and her family. This might force the family to agree on any marriage proposal, where the girl who is or about 30 has no right to decide whether the groom is suitable for her or not. In such case, the approval is a must and obligatory. This forced “S” to agree on a man who was 10 years older than her, and who had no resources to provide her with a private house. This is only because she was 28 years old. And this was what she feared as he offered her to live in a common house with his family, so she asked her family to wait and think it over before accepting this marriage. The accommodation was one room in the house of the husband’s family with his mother, brothers and sisters, who considered her a servant costing them nothing but food and clothes. When life got hard in this house where she never felt safe, she asked her husband to find a private house for her own small family, as this is the simplest right she realized when she attended the awareness campaigns in the village, organized by Woman Empowerment Project, through the Comprehensive Development Association in the village. The husband absolutely refused and replied to her frequent requests to provide safe life for her and her daughter, by hard beating, continuous humiliation and mistreatment by all his family members. As life became impossible between the couple, she asked her husband for a divorce more than once. After procrastination, he divorced her and kicked her and her daughter out of the house, so she returned back again to her family house. There, she found no support from their side to advocate her rights claiming that they wanted to reconcile between her and her husband and protect the marriage which had lasted for 7 years, although she never felt happy over that period. That was because her family primary concern was to keep her with her husband regardless the consequences. Now, as she was no longer a mere piece of furniture that has no opinion, she went to the lawyer of Woman Empowerment Project, who met with ladies in the Association to raise their awareness of their legal rights. After the seminar, she sat with the lawyer to explain her case hoping that she might find the support which she hadn’t received from her family. Indeed, her conversation with the lawyer was very promising and as soon as she gave him the required papers to claim for the divorce and alimony, he started legal action and she got a court judgment of divorce and restoring the alimony and dowry. Now she is waiting to enforce the judgment, which is considered as a victory for her dedication on claiming her rights.

2- Give people their rights back

Women in our society got used to be deprived from their right in rightful inheritance for the benefit of their brothers. All what they might sometimes get is a compromise to compensate her symbolically for her inheritance even if it was agriculture land or real estate. Those who commit this crime justify it in many ways which are all false pretenses made out of customs and traditions and have nothing to do with religion. Mrs. "H" was married from a simple person. She had been living hard life with him for years, as he is a day-laborer and hardly covered his family basic needs. Yet, he was kind and treated her well so she never complained because she knew there was nothing more he could do. As the rural society is small and every family knows about the others, the members Mrs. "H" family advised her brothers not to deprive her from her inheritance as she was their only sister and she faced hard conditions specially after her husband's death. She went to her brothers when she knew that they started to distribute the inheritance and ignored her as if she never existed or even had a right by religion and law. Relatives and friends interfered between the woman and her brothers. Their efforts led to brothers' agreement to compensate her with a sum of money, although it was not equivalent to the actual value of her inheritance. This increased her suffering, as her brothers did not appreciate her difficult conditions and her efforts to raise her living standards according to God's law. She was obliged to seek legal help when she knew from the facilitator of Woman Empowerment Project who was her neighbor and fully aware of her conditions, that she can meet the project's lawyer and explain her case. The lawyer told her that she had to take one step to have her full inheritance which was to file a lawsuit in the court. He explained to her the steps he already started with as soon as he collected the papers that confirmed the soundness of her complaint. Now she is waiting for the judgment after the lawyer completed all the procedures.

3- Big family means responsibility and confusion

There is no doubt that parity is one of the challenges that face our society and negatively affect the economy and living standards of a large segment of the society. Like many others, Mrs. "A" got married, when she was young, to a simple farmer. The husband was only interested in having babies to be his support in the future. So, he did not think in his living conditions or how he would raise them. The poor young lady had given birth to 9 children when she was only 35. She had no chance to catch her breath. She spent her best life years suffering from exhaustion due to pregnancy, giving birth and breastfeeding all over her marriage life. She was impressed by what she heard in a medical seminar organized by MAIS in the village. She felt as if the doctor was speaking about her personally. She left the seminar with irrevocable decision to use birth control method. It took her a long time to convince her husband to give up his dream of making his empire. But due to her persistence and his fear to destroy his marital life, especially after he noticed the deterioration of his wife's health and that she couldn't afford to have the 10th child. Mrs. "A" problem was not only a health problem due to exhaustion of frequent pregnancy, but she was in bad need for psychological rehabilitation due to her feeling that her only importance in life is to give birth and raise children alone with no help from her husband, who only worked to earn their living to meet the needs of this big family. Psychological sessions with MAIS psychiatrist were very helpful in this case. Psychiatrist gave her scientific advice to help her in dealing with her kids and to try to involve the husband in this tough mission. Now she has a comfortable life "as per her own words".

4- I will not be passive again

Most girls in the rural communities, especially in Upper Egypt, live very bored life. Daily schedule does not change; nothing new to do nor a hobby to overcome boredom. This was what "H" said when she spoke about the positive aspects of her participation in handcrafts training workshops in Beni Helal village. She, like many others, was only watching TV to kill her time after she got her diploma in Commerce. She had no chance to acquire new skills to qualify her to take part in working life and earn her living. Despite her family duties were increased after her mother's death and her life with her father and brothers became dark, as everyone lives in his own world and no chance to share conversations. Yet, she found a hope outlet when she accidentally met her school mate, who worked as a facilitator in Woman Empowerment Project of the Italian MAIS. The facilitator visited through her working field, the Integrated Development Association in Beni Helal, which introduced handcrafts training workshop, including knitting and many other forms of needlework. The products amazed "H" and she wished if she could have an opportunity to learn such skills which might change her life. Her father's approval to allow her to participate in the training workshops was a lifeline to rescue her from her boring life, especially after her mother's death. She was surprised that the association has trainings in Sohag. She was very happy that she, for the first time, shall participate in such activities that changed her life – as she said. "Training on feasibility studies and marketing enabled me to agree with my colleagues to form a group for knitting. We started, with the help of the trainer, to design a budget of small project, in which every group member participated with certain share. We have already started work and now we buy raw materials and work hard to finish the first order of our product", she said. "H" confirms that she will not give up this positive energy she has gained and she will not surrender again to conditions set by the society and the nature of the life in rural areas. She frankly declared: "I will not be passive again".

5- No for Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

FGM is still an open issue in our rural and urban communities and still raises a lot of arguments among different community segments. There are "advocates", "opponents" or "neutrals who haven't decided yet, leaving the matter for conditions". This was what Mrs. "E" faced when her husband decided to put the name of his daughter in the list of the girls of relatives and neighbors who are due to have FGM. As Mrs. E was among those who attended the awareness seminars, which clarified with evidence that this habit is not supported by religion or medicine and it only came as a result of community pressures imposed by negative customs and traditions. Therefore, the wife insisted to save her daughter from this harmful habit, which shall harm her daughter psychologically as well as physically, especially that the one who will operate the girls is the "mid" who obviously does not know how to deal with the human body. Mrs.H's suffering began as she tried to convince her dominating husband to give up this habit. She found out that he would not listen to her as usual and that the only way to convince him is to let him listen to well educated and experienced people. And it was the breakthrough when her husband listened to a religious lesson organized by Woman Empowerment Project after the prayer from the Imam of the mosque. He realized that FGM was not a religious obligation and that there was no evidence in Quran or Sunnah (Prophet's deeds and speeches) to make it obligatory for Muslims. The speech of the Sheikh made him suspicious towards this matter, so he began to investigate the truth and study the subject from its different sides. He became more convinced that FGM is not important when he attended a medical seminar organized by the project's doctor, who answered all the questions which were in this man's mind and other men as well. When the husband of Mrs. "H" put all pieces together, he realized the secret of his wife insistence on avoiding FGM for her daughter. Now he is among those who are anti-FGM. He not only deleted his daughter's name from FGM list, but he also attempted to convince other girls' fathers to save their daughters from this fate.

6- All my fault was that I gave birth to a girl

Preferring males to females is a rooted misbehavior in many men and women, especially in rural areas, due to many considerations, none of which has to do with religion. Allah created both males and females and did not differentiate between them in rights or duties. The only guilt of Mrs. "M" that she delivered her second baby who was a female, which shocked her "Lion" husband, who wanted no females among his offspring. He found no solution to this disaster but to send his wife back to her family's house along with her daughter as if it was a sin he wanted to repent. All the attempts of relatives to resettle things failed as if his wife made an unforgettable sin. He started, as he believed, to repair what his wife spoiled. So, he got married again in order to have the boy. Not only this, but he refused absolutely to divorce her in order to deprive her from her legitimate rights and he kept her in her family house without any alimony. He was sure that the situation shall remain the same and the affected person, even if have access to courts, will not cause him any harm. Against this bullying and stubbornness, the wife's family found no alternative but to go to court and file lawsuit for divorce and claim for dissipation of marital assets. Despite that the husband was sentenced 4 months in jail, yet the wife did not have any tangible rights. After he went out of jail, he reconsidered his treatment to Mrs. "M" who was divorced by a court judgment. As courts' procedures are too long, her family found that they have no alternative but to accept the attempts of reconciliation and accept that she would return to him again and live with his second wife, who stayed in the first wife's home to increase her pains and sorrows. Then she realized that her husband brought her back to humiliate her and to revenge for the month he spent in jail. He threw her and her daughters in the stairwell. Moreover, he forced her to serve his second wife and gave her and her daughters little food. She was fed up and ran away to her father's home again but did not take her daughters with her. This was the chance the cruel husband was waiting for, so he prevented her from seeing her daughters and used them to terrify her if she dared to think about claiming for her rights. Facing all these circumstances, Mrs. "M" went to the lawyer of the Woman Empowerment Project to save her. Her priority was to regain custody of her girls and to get alimony to pay for their living expenses. This is exactly what are we waiting for after we filed a lawsuit of "Gaining custody and alimony for kids".

7- Misfortunes never come single

When one faces a problem, they see themselves as if they are the only afflicted on earth, but when they read or hear about others' misfortunes, they then realize that they are in a great blessing.

She was a woman who challenged customs and traditions and broke all chains, to marry the man whom her heart had chosen. She had not dated anyone else, had not felt comfortable but only with him. Although he was strongly refused by the family, yet her heart's will was stronger and she managed to marry him, who was a simple day-laborer.

After life burdens became heavier as they had their first baby, he decided to travel to Cairo for work and left his wife and son behind, aiming at increasing his income to meet his family basic needs. But something happened which broke the poor wife's heart who was loyal to her love to this man despite his treachery. After long time of no-news, he replied telling her that he had started a new life in Cairo with a new wife and he no longer cared about her, she who sacrificed her family for him.

Now, to whom would she resort after she abandoned her family for his sake and after she brought shame on them after she disobeyed them? He refused to send her any money or even pay the rent of their house. She found no refuge but to go to her neighbor to stay with her after she was deserted by family and husband. After all what happened to her, Mrs. "M" went to Community Development Association, social affairs department hoping that she might find help. But the association was not able but to find her a job in the kindergarten of the Association. Although that solution did hurt her, yet she had no other alternative. When she met the lawyer of the Woman Empowerment Project in a seminar and told him her story, he advised her to file a lawsuit for divorce and alimony. But despite what her husband did to her, she still loved him and she did not have the nerve to do so. She still hoped that her husband might have pity on her and her boy, who had a brain disease, in addition to her suffering from cancer. This situation made her desperate and she only think about her only son, as she wasn't hoping to live anymore. She filed a lawsuit asking for alimony for her son and that his father might take care of him even if it were after her death. Now, she is attending psychological sessions to support her to go on her way at work and deal with all these misfortunes. Psychotherapy helped her to continue working after she had lost her desire to go to work and preferred to surrender wait for death due to her serious disease. The lawyer gave her hope that she can have fixed income for her son after he filed a lawsuit for her in the court.

8- Blessing in disguise

As per the habit of parents in Upper Egypt or rural communities when girls reach puberty and men start proposing, parents agree immediately without considering the psychological or social consequences of such marriage.

"H" is a child who was only 16 , when her parents decided to approve her marriage to her cousin . Although the marriage officiant (Ma'azon) refused to register the marriage contract ,as per law. But the father did not care about the law or his daughter's rights which were violated due to this informal marriage which was performed without any official documents and only declared it as a common – law marriage. Moreover, the girl did not have a personal ID to prove that she exists. Her life went on that way in her husband's house with no marriage contract nor personal ID. She did not have enough time to think it over or reconsider the matter until she had her first baby when the health clerk refused to issue the baby birth certificate, as there was no formal marriage contract nor personal ID for her. Mrs “H” was in real trouble and could not solve it until she met the facilitator of Woman Empowerment Project, who introduced her to the lawyer working with MAIS. The lawyer explained to her the legal steps to solve her problem. She started with issuing ID through the project, as she could not do it alone. This was followed by long procedures to document her marriage, which eventually enabled her to issue a birth certificate for her baby. From this experience, Mrs.“H” learned the importance of having formal papers to guarantee her rights and the rights of her children.

9- I knew my rights, so conditions were improved

No one can deny the difficult economic life which the majority of Egyptian society segments are experiencing these days. Despite this fact, still all can survive with such conditions and enroll in different education stages. This how it was with Mr. "S" who was living a simple life with his parents and four brothers and sisters, where all family members struggle so the days pass in peace. Yet, the situation changed completely after the family lost its breadwinner, who left them with no fixed income; and how could he while he was only a day-laborer. Despite the difficult conditions, the mother was a reliable person and was able , with her patience and dedication , to take over the father's responsibility and helped her kids to complete their education . But it was only until her son "S" enrolled in university education as she mother died to join the father in the other life. So , things became complicated for the elder son, who decided to abandon education to take care of the family and financially support his younger brothers and sisters to enable them to complete their education. When "S" left the college, he did not know that there was something that could help him to carry out his new mission and at the same time enable him complete his education. It was the turning point when he listened on his way home to the local radio broadcast and knew about a seminar held by the official responsible for the social solidarity of the “ Sons of One Homeland Association “ in Akhmim in cooperation with MAIS. Mr. "S" was encouraged to attend the seminar as he was eager to know who were to receive the pension of social solidarity. Actually, he heard from the official of social solidarity what gave him hope to improve his living standards namely that the law guaranteed him and his brothers rights that ensure him to complete his education and help his younger brothers and sisters. He spoke directly with the official of the social solidarity who empathized with his hard conditions and requested him to prepare some documents to submit them to the social solidarity department in the village. The official had not left Mr. "S" until he finished all the procedures that enabled him to obtain orphans' pension and a date was settled to disburse a fixed income for him and his brothers to protect them from life hard conditions. Thus, the seminar, which he attended by chance, was his lifeline that eventually enabled him and his brothers and sisters to complete their education.

10- Personal ID comes first

Difficult economic and social conditions, which many people experience, led to ignoring the importance of official documents. Some people lost their confidence in any method they use to deal with the governmental agencies. This was told by Mrs. "K", who was seeking to earn her living through working as day-worker whenever possible to help her mother and her four sisters, whom she was responsible for. When she met the facilitator who was working in Woman Empowerment Project, she offered "K" to get her personal ID for free through the project activities, but she absolutely refused to take this step, as she believed that her ID was useless as it wouldn't do her any good and her daily work never needed one. Then one day "K" heard that there was a job opportunity in a factory hiring girls on short-term contracts. She went with her neighbors to apply for the job, but she faced unexpected situation; the factory would accept only the female applicants who had IDs and she was among those who were rejected because they didn't have IDs. When she started to cry because she lost the opportunity she had wanted for a long time, the factory owner promised her to keep her chance if she brought him her ID. She was happy and went immediately to the project facilitator and asked her to help her in issuing ID. The facilitator promised to help her and indeed she accompanied her during all the steps required to issue the ID, which eventually enabled her to have the job she wanted. Thus her conditions got better, and her opinion about official documents changed as well.

11- I earn my living by my own efforts

Fates hide many pains and difficulties. This is what happened with "L" when she lost her parents in short time to be left to the bitterness of being an orphan. Despite the containment of her elder brother to her and her young brothers and sisters, she was worried and afraid from the future. And although she received her father's pension, she was always expecting an unpleasant surprise. And what she feared came true when her elder brother got married to a woman who planted cruelty in his heart towards his brothers and sisters, which made him treat them in a bad way. He started to get away from them and got engaged completely in his new life. He also started to annoy them and take their share in the pension for himself and his new family, claiming that he provided them with their needs, which was untrue. He gave them little money, so they suffered the bitterness of deprivation and felt the pain of losing their parents. "L" found no way but to resort to her other elder brother who was working in an Arab Country. He did not hesitate to allocate a sum of money and send them a monthly allowance. But it seemed that he knew nothing about raising prices and life's basic needs. "L" realized that there was no way for her and her young sisters and brothers to buy what they needed but to have her own money, which she could control, and thus would not wait for the charity of anybody even if it was her elder brothers.

Her dream to have a small project started when she joined the training workshops of handcrafts, which were organized by Woman Empowerment Project and Woman Association for Community Development in the village. There, she learnt many forms of needlework, which enabled her to produce kids' clothes, mattresses and other products, which were sold in the village for many people. The project idea became crystal clear when she participated in training on marketing and feasibility study in MAIS headquarters in Sohag. She decided at that day to carry out a feasibility study for her dream which would enable her to meet her needs. But she faced a problem which was the insufficient money for the project to enable her to work. As she was serious in her dream and showed promising standards during the training, the trainer offered her to complete the required amount to start her business. Indeed, her dream became true and she started her small project, which helped her not only to make the money she needed, but also to invest her time she used to spend alone grieving the loss of her parents. So , her project was a good start for her and her young brother.

12- Treat women right

Engagement period is among the most beautiful times in the life of both man and woman. When it comes to an end, the shocks of daily life between wife and husband begin. This is what happened to Mrs. "C" who faced this shock when she started her marriage life with a different person from the one she had been engaged to. Despite that she started her life with him early when she was only 18 , and although the first years of their marriage predicted happy marriage for them, as he was encouraging her to complete her study and he did not deny her right to work. Yet, on the other hand, his behavior changed once she went out for working life, although she did it with his approval. He not only insulted her for no reason, but he also stopped financially supporting his family, depending on her salary, which she did not save any part of for herself , but she spent it all on the needs of home and the kids. Despite this clear change in the way he treated her, she did not resort to any member of her or his family in order to keep his good image within the family. On the contrary, she attempted many times to talk with him to cool things down, clear problems and restore their marriage life. Mrs. "C" used to watch a lot of religious programs that called men to treat their wives right and to adopt Islam principles in treating their spouses. She wished that her husband would listen to such programs or to talk directly with a religious man (cleric) in order to urge his good ethics and behaviors. Her wish became true when she attended a religious seminar organized by Woman Empowerment Project in cooperation with Women Association for Woman Development. In that seminar, the Sheikh spoke about women rights in Islam and the ethics of Prophet Mohamed in treating his wives. She knew from the association that there are seminars organized by the project for men. So ,she asked the Sheikh to deliver a lecture on this subject for men and also to do the same in Friday Prayers. She asked the association to organize similar seminars for men. Indeed, the association promised her to do so. And what she wished for came true when her husband attended the religious awareness seminar, in which the Sheikh spoke about community problems and it was as if his speech was directed to that man and his wife. The seminar had quick and positive impact as The husband started spontaneously to go back to his previous behaviors and started to treat her right and to financially support the family again. That religious seminar restored happiness to the heart of this woman and the religious man had a positive role, as he spoke a lot about this subject in Fridays Prayers and the religious lessons to remind men of what Allah and his Prophet ordered them to do.

13- Among the effective groups that have crucial role in conveying the message of the awareness program and correct wrong concepts about woman rights and the violence phenomena against women, are the religious figures that have credibility among the villages and cities. When Sheikh "H" spoke about the project impact on the surrounding community, he said that he found a clear change in the topics of the questions he received from both men and women. Questions started to deal with

sensitive issues that were not permitted before in the village community. Seminars raised good debates about topics like: FGM, early marriage, Endogamy (marriage among relatives), inheritance, deserted wives, physical and psychological abuse and other topics related to human daily life. The matching between the project objectives and the religious principles had great impact on the Sheikh, which encouraged him to convey awareness enthusiastically in the villages within the geographical scope of the project and in the areas which he visited. Also, taking part in the project inspired him to search for the topics on which he would lecture people about, either through seminars or Friday Prayers. People's gathering around the Sheikh, their interest to check the information and their personal questions, all represented important indicators on the success of such activities that sought to raise the awareness of men, women, and youth in the community.

14- The activities of the Woman Empowerment Project in the villages are implemented by women and girls who were called facilitators as they facilitate communication between project administration and the targeted groups in the communities of the project scope. The facilitator considers the project as a great opportunity for her self-assertion and to achieve benefits for the people of her village, and to change their conditions to the better. Facilitator "S" told us her experience with the project saying that the project had an undeniable impact on the community in which she lives. Project activities had positive impacts on all community groups, children, men, girls, and women; either educated or uneducated. People in villages and rural areas, who benefited from awareness seminars, legal and health services, free official documents, and training on handcrafts, realized the importance of the project and confirmed that the project had met their needs and helped them to solve many problems that they would not be able to solve without the interference of the project working team. Facilitator "S" further said that she had worked before in many development projects that had not introduced such variety of activities similar to the activities of Woman Empowerment Project. She also affirmed that the project had great impact on her personal life where she received much training that helped her to carry out her job accurately, in addition to some trainings, which developed her personality on dealing with problems and communicating with others and this was very clear in her dealing with her family.

15- Handcrafts' trainings are among the important activities of the project that left great impact on all participated parties, including members of Associations' Boards of Directors who confirmed that this activity had promoted the association's name and its role in the community. Female trainers who participated in the project added that the time allocated for training on handcrafts was enjoyable for both trainers and trainees. Trainers were happy to see trainees happy when they learned new knitting work and repeat it frequently until they became good in it. Girls surprised trainers by their serious will to learn handcrafts and different types of needlework to improve their life conditions and help their families in marriage costs. This happened already with many girls who came to the project headquarters in Sohag and received training on

marketing, feasibility studies and team work that paved the road for them to start projects of handcrafts according to each village distinguished production such as decoration, needle works, and handloom. Trainers helped the girls who already started to purchase raw materials and finish production to sell it and distribute the profit on the members of each group.