

# The European Commission Supports Mediterranean Women: Three Tales about Making a Difference

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What do Argan oil (a typical Southern Moroccan oil famous for its nutritional and cosmetic properties), a film called *Maid in Lebanon* (a tale of abuse of domestic servants) and a Syrian woman trying to open a small business have in common?

The answer is that all the women involved have participated actively in European Commission-financed programmes aimed at strengthening the role of women in the Mediterranean. The Commission supports a large variety of programmes empowering women in the region; out of these, this article has chosen three different examples illustrating the varying approaches chosen. The cases presented portray three successful “tales” of women in the Mediterranean.

For thousands of families in the Souss-Massa region in south-west Morocco, Argan oil production is providing a substantial income in what is otherwise a fairly precarious socioeconomic context. The Members of the cooperatives producing this oil benefit from programmes aimed at modernisation and improving working conditions. These include lessons in reading and writing and basic man-

agement, as well as improvements to infrastructure and equipment. Through technical assistance, the programmes seek to reduce the difficulties inherent in the oil extraction process and to improve the quantity and quality of the oils, marketing, and so on. The programme also supports the implementation of a regulatory framework protecting and preserving this valuable natural resource.

This project has helped to improve the working conditions of rural women and ensure long-term management of the Argan forest, has assisted in keeping the exploitation of Argan oil at a local and regional level and has also ensured that its added value comes back to its traditional beneficiaries. All this has enabled women to gain greater independence and to become more integrated participants in the economic life of their region.

*Maid in Lebanon* is addressed to the tens of thousands of young women from South East Asia who, driven by extreme poverty in their own countries, have migrated to work as domestic servants in Lebanon, and specifically to those working in degrading living conditions and in some cases as virtual “contract

slavery". Awareness of their plight provoked the project *Maid in Lebanon*, aimed at protecting the rights of migrant workers. Through the project, more than 3,000 migrant workers have benefited from legal assistance and legal counselling. The project also co-produced a film entitled *Maid in Lebanon*.

*Maid in Lebanon is addressed to the young women from South East Asia who have migrated to work as domestic servants in Lebanon, in some cases as virtual "contract slavery"*

The film opens on a hopeful note, when Sureika, a 16 year old Sri Lankan girl, is preparing to leave for Lebanon, where her €100 monthly wage will support her family back home, pay for her dowry, and may even put her sister through school. Sureika has taken a 12-day course in English, Arabic and local cooking, and has acquainted herself with electrical appliances such as a vacuum cleaner and a blender. She has never used them before – her village has no electricity. The story of Sureika and thousands like her soon becomes a shocking tale of exile, occasional abuse and even death. The narrator explains how, in certain cases, upon signing their contracts, workers effectively become the *property* of their employers who keep their passports and force them to work for years without a single day off. Other women tell about being seriously maltreated and even raped. One significant result of the film has been the decision by Lebanon's Ministry of Labour to draw up a standard contract for domestic workers, to draft new labour legislation and to write and publish a booklet on the rights and responsibilities for household migrant workers.

The Village Business Incubator project in Syria offers advice, training and technical assistance for women and encourages them to establish small enterprises. Many women in Syria are disadvantaged due to poverty, illiteracy, poor nutrition and health care and a lack of economic opportunities. Their economic position is weakened even further in areas where, in order to prevent land fragmentation, it is customary for women to surrender their inheritance rights to their brothers, for which they are compensated in cash or animals. This creates a further dilemma when such women wish to apply for a bank loan since they are automatically rejected if they cannot offer land as collateral. A project targeting rural women recently showed that 97% of those surveyed did not benefit from any co-operative services or technical assistance.

At the heart of the project is the drive to empower women through small-scale entrepreneurial activity. Operating in rural areas of the Latakia Governorate, the project seeks to promote women's participation in the labour market by helping them establish micro and small enterprises. It aims to develop the institutional networks necessary to establish a service centre for training and technical assistance for the creation of such enterprises and to support the start up of such enterprises by individual women or women's cooperatives.

In the future, the European Commission will intensify its efforts for women's empowerment in the region. The future strategy will be outlined in an Action Plan for 2007-2011 that will be adopted by the first ever Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on Gender Equality, taking place in Istanbul on 14th-15th November 2006.<sup>1</sup> The Action Plan will provide the framework for common efforts to fight discrimination against women

1. More information is to be found in the European Commission's web site Euromed and Women: [http://ec.europa.eu/comm/external\\_relations/euromed/women/index.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/comm/external_relations/euromed/women/index.htm).

and strengthen their role in political, social, economic, educational and cultural spheres.

On the basis of the Action Plan, the European Commission will elaborate a regional programme on equal rights for women. But joint efforts are needed to make women's empowerment a reality in the region, and the Action Plan will also concern and commit the governments and the civil society organisations of the 35 Euro-Mediterranean partners nota-

bly to mobilise financial resources and to support its implementation.

The great British novelist Virginia Woolf wrote once: "The history of men's opposition to women's emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself." It is the common responsibility of all of us, women and men of Europe and the Mediterranean alike, to turn the page and make a real difference for a better future.

