

How the ILO supports change in the Arab world

The world has been transfixed in admiration at the courage of the women and men who have taken to the streets across the Arab States over the past year. Farah Dakhllallah, ILO Regional Outreach and Advocacy Officer in Beirut, reports from Yemen and Lebanon where the ILO assists in preparing a better future for workers in the region.

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Yemen: Building capacities against the odds

SANAA, Yemen (ILO Online) – Abdullah's job as a data analyst at the Central Statistics Office of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour has never been so dangerous. Ever since the popular Arab uprisings made their way to Yemen, his 20-minute drive to work has turned into a two-hour ordeal beset by checkpoints, roadblocks and diverted traffic.

But today he is upbeat, making his way through the traffic to a training course he has been looking forward to for weeks.

"I have worked at the Central Statistics Office for ten years but this is the first time we have received training on advanced data collection and analysis methods," he says. "I signed up for this course several months ago, before the unrest, and I wasn't going to miss this opportunity".

Due to security considerations, the course was relocated from the Central Statistics Office to a local training institute to facilitate participant attendance.

Part of the ILO project "Support to Labour Market Information Analysis", the course trains Labour Ministry staff, including employees of the Central Statistics Office on the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and its use in the analysis of survey data.

It aims to build local capacities and is considered a first step towards conducting a labour force survey and producing a study examining labour market conditions and trends, including unemployment rates and levels of productivity in the country.

Yemen's last labour force survey was completed over a decade ago, in 1999.

Decent work deficit is key factor in current instability

"The labour force survey is crucial for the elaboration of an effective national employment strategy that meets the needs and aspirations of the people of Yemen," says ILO Regional Director for Arab States Nada al-Nashif. "The ILO recognizes decent work deficits as a key factor in the current instability in Yemen and has long advocated for an inclusive social dialogue to enable more and better jobs."

At 16.3 per cent, Yemen's unemployment rate is among the highest in the world (2004 Population Census) and young people are twice as likely to be out of work as adults; in 2003 the youth unemployment rate was estimated at 29 per cent. The lack of employment opportunities is particularly noticeable among educated women, a third of whom are unemployed.

According to the UNDP's Human Development Report 2007–2008, more than 45 per cent of the Yemeni population lives below the income poverty line of US\$2 per day and 15 per cent live in 'abject poverty' surviving on a meagre \$1 per day.

The ILO is adapting its decent work country strategy to the evolving situation in Yemen and continues to work with its tripartite partners to promote employment creation and enterprise development, social protection, standards and rights at work and social dialogue.

Palestinian refugee women GET Ahead in Lebanon's camps

BEIRUT, Lebanon (ILO Online) – Manal was born and raised in Lebanon's Nahr al-Bared refugee camp into a family of veteran entrepreneurs.

Her grandfather – like his father before him – was a renowned grain and olive merchant in his native village of Ghabisiya near the Palestinian port city of Acre before the family was displaced after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

When they arrived in the refugee camp situated on the outskirts of the Lebanese city of Tripoli, her grandmother helped support their impoverished family by tending to a small farm near the camp and selling its produce in the local market.

Manal's grandfather took on a new trade, shoemaking, and set up a shop inside the camp with the help of his son. Her father and mother soon took over the shop, but the family business was destroyed during the 2008 clashes in Nahr al-Bared and they were once again displaced, this time to the nearby al-Baddawi Camp.

Now 42 – with a family of her own – Manal helps to make ends meet by putting to use her sewing skills, designing and tailoring clothes for other camp residents.

Manal is also on the board of a local organization which provides micro-loans to other entrepreneurs based in the camp. She makes daily decisions on applications for micro-loans to help set up local businesses and support existing businesses that contribute to local economic development.

She is one of many Palestinian women selected by the ILO to partake in a series of Training of Trainers workshops on the Gender and Entrepreneurship Together (GET Ahead) package.

In addition to providing participants with essential business, finance and marketing skills, the workshops equip participants with skills to deliver the training to other low-income women who are already running small-scale business activities through individual, family or group-based enterprises.

Promoting business skills for women

The GET Ahead package differs from conventional business training materials as it highlights essential entrepreneurial skills from a gender perspective, whether applied to starting or improving an individual, family or group business.

"I really enjoyed the workshop's engaging and accessible approach," says Manal. "It has made me aware of opportunities in my local community that I simply had not thought of before. I also feel more confident about designing and assessing business plans."

Part of the Palestinian Women's Economic Empowerment Initiative, the workshops aim to build the capacity of institutions that are engaged in entrepreneurship development in selected Palestinian camps in Lebanon (Nahr el-Bared and Ain el-Helweh). It assists the ILO's partner organizations in promoting enterprise development among poor women who want to start or are already engaged in small-scale business.

Musa Nimr has been a specialist on micro-loans and grants with the UNRWA since the mid-1990s. "This is the first time that supporters of small businesses in Palestinian camps have come together and I hope it will lead to greater cooperation in the field. The workshop presents a great opportunity to explore innovative ways to support Palestinian women entrepreneurs," he says.

The ILO project "Palestinian Women's Economic Empowerment Initiative in Lebanon" focuses on promoting economic recovery and decent work conditions for women in refugee camps. The two-year project consists of three stages: conducting an initial baseline study; training in enterprise development and business group formation; and supporting the establishment and strengthening of business groups for cooperation and the pooling of resources.