



WEST BANK: MIDDLE EAST PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE EMPOWERS PALESTINIAN WOMEN

Efforts by the U.S. State Department's Community Leadership Empowerment Program are enabling women in the West Bank farming village of Biddu to leave their homes and become citizen activists.

In 2006, Mofida Hmidan, a joyful mother of four, won a seat on the local council in the West Bank village of Biddu. When she arrived in office, she was amazed to learn how much the local council does. Like most people in Biddu, she had never made the connection between the changes in the village's infrastructure and the work of the local council. Mrs. Hmidan was eager to use her new position to improve the quality of life for the women, children and men of Biddu.

Biddu is a village of 8,500 just north of Jerusalem. When the barrier separating the West Bank from Israel cut off local farmlands, unemployment soared, poverty spread and domestic violence became rampant. According to Mayor Ismail Qadan, most women in Biddu never used to leave their homes.

This is changing. In December 2008, seeking to empower leaders, the Biddu Center for Women and Childhood was selected by the U.S. State Department's implementing partner, Creative Associates, for an award through the a Middle East Partnership Initiative's Community Leadership Empowerment Program (CLEP).

"Women need knowledge," says Mrs. Hmidan, explaining why she established the center in the local council building shortly after she took office. "No one takes care of disenfranchised women. They are a financial burden." Some thought the men on the council approved her plan because they didn't think women would actually use the center.

Yet the women of Biddu and surrounding villages came in droves, finding the newly established center a haven from the struggles of everyday life. Without furniture, the women came together at the center and sat on the floor.

In 2008, Mrs. Hmidan secured a grant from USAID to add a third floor onto the local council building and worked with Creative Associates to tailor a \$14,000 CLEP award to furnish it to house the center. The CLEP award included office furniture, meeting tables, computer and audiovisual equipment, an oven, 40 chairs for large training sessions, and electric fans and an air conditioner for sweltering hot days.

In addition to arranging meetings and training on issues ranging from the purpose of political parties to inheritance rights, Mrs. Hmidan organizes classes that address pressing needs, economic and otherwise. Course offerings include needlework, sewing, cooking, hairstyling, an oversubscribed adult literacy course, math,

conversational English and community leadership. A fulltime curriculum prepares mothers to pass the Palestinian high school equivalency test, opening the door for graduates to study at the nearby Al-Quds Open University.

"I want to create a generation of women who will go to school instead of staying in the streets," says Mrs. Hmidan. The privilege of coming together and learning in the newly furnished center has given the women of Biddu a sense of dignity. What's more, it has altered Biddu's political dynamics, raising the profile of women within their own community.

What women who participate in center programs learn far exceeds the content of their classes: they now know what is happening on the local council. The village men have discovered that the information their wives bring home enables them to weigh in effectively on municipal decisions. Consequently, Biddu men have become champions of women's continuing education, many happily paying their wives' tuition.

"Women never used to come to the local council," says Mayor Ismail Qadan sitting on the third floor of Biddu's local council building, which houses the center. "Now women attend open town hall meetings three times a month. [Mrs. Hmidan] is an example. People throughout the village see how active she is. She works non-stop resolving conflicts and raising money for the center. I'm proud of her and commend her activism. I wish Biddu had other women who are as engaging as she is."

Mayor Qadan may not have to wait long. The women of Biddu are carefully watching and learning. After spending time at the Center, several women said they would run for seats on the local council at the next elections.

— Gideon Culman

