

COMMUNICATION Impact!



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Aisha fulfilled her dream of becoming a teacher after participating in AWSO training.



Jacqueline supports her family by training other women in income generating activities.



Zohra expanded her agricultural ventures to include bee keeping and rug weaving.

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AWSO Program Helps Arab Women Redirect Their Lives

Aisha, a young, unskilled Yemeni woman from a disadvantaged background, had few job prospects when she began to work as a school janitor. Yet, as she cleaned the school's corridors and classrooms, Aisha held onto her dream that she would continue her education and become a teacher. The inspiration Aisha needed to change her life circumstances came from her participation in the women's empowerment training program, *Arab Women Speak Out* (AWSO). After participating in the program, Aisha enrolled as a first-year student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Yemen in Sanaa.

More than 60,000 women like Aisha in five Arab countries – Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Yemen and also Palestine – have participated in the AWSO project since it was launched in the winter of 1999. Designed to promote women's empowerment in the Near East, the AWSO project was developed and implemented by the Johns Hopkins University/Center for Communication Programs (JHU/CCP) in collaboration with The Center of Arab Women for Training and Research and supported by the US Agency for International Development. The project goal is to provide role models of achievement and self-esteem for women throughout the region and to encourage

acceptance of these roles by men and women, opinion leaders, religious groups, policy makers, and national organizations. The project ultimately seeks to increase demand for women's rights and encourage local initiatives that can empower women in their chosen fields of endeavor.

The project comprises a series of:

- 10 documentary video profiles,
- training and discussion materials,
- case histories of 30 women, and
- a tool for monitoring the image of women in the media.

It provides role models and information on the resources and strategies that these women have used to achieve personal and professional goals in such diverse areas as women's health, economic and social development, governance, public policy, women's rights, literacy and education.

AWSO is designed to be integrated into ongoing community-based programs in the region and implemented by NGOs and governmental or international agencies. More than 25 agencies from 10 Arab countries incorporate the project into their community interventions. The Ministry of Health and Population, CEDPA, and Caritas in Egypt; Nour Al Hussein Foundation, Princess Basma Women Resource Center, and the Jordanian

Figure 1. Impact of AWSO training on women's participation in social and economic activities

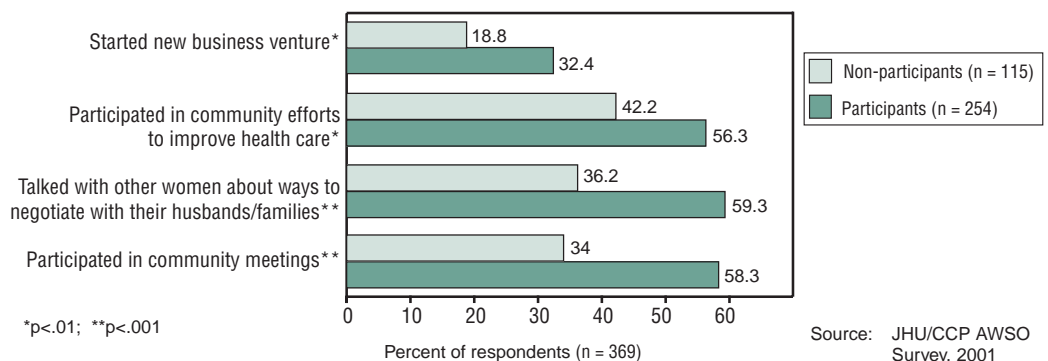


Table 1. Percentage of participants and non-participants who report that others have sought their advice regarding specific matters during the past 12 months

Have you been asked for advice regarding:	Non-participants (n = 115)	AWSO participants (n = 254)
National politics**	14.1	46.0
Community politics**	22.5	50.0
Economic decisions**	50.7	76.6
Family problems**	76.1	99.0
Religious matters*	51.9	70.5
How to resolve disagreements**	74.5	91.0

All differences are statistically significant, *p<.05; **p<.01 (n = 369)
Source: JHU/CCP AWSO Survey, 2001

Hashemite Fund for Human Development in Jordan; the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Mouvement Sociale in Lebanon; and Al Sada Association in Yemen have proven particularly effective in conducting AWSO training workshops in their countries. The diversity of these organizations shows the ease with which AWSO partners have replicated the project throughout communities and it attests to the project's relevance and adaptability.

The program is based on life histories of women who have achieved their goals by overcoming social, economic or political obstacles. In many towns and villages in the Near East, women are discovering that they can reorient their lives by sharing common concerns and exchanging solutions to problems of everyday life. Many women come to the AWSO training resigned to their fates and accepting their situations, then leave with a new resolve to take a pro-active role in their own lives and in that of their families and communities.

During her training Aisha, along with 19 other women, met for 8 sessions to analyze and discuss potential opportunities and obstacles that might affect their future plans. The AWSO training, which incorporates videos, a manual, a tool for monitoring the image of women in the media, and discussion groups guided by a moderator, enabled Aisha and the other women in her group to learn how to network and secure support for social and economic improvement. Watching the compelling videos of lower- and middle-class women who have become respected agents of social change in their communities motivated Aisha and the others to transform their lives.

One woman in the group found that her decision to seek gainful employment after participating in the program earned her new respect: "I used to be completely dependent on my husband. Now I work and earn a living as he does, and we are equal. He respects me now, before he did not...do that. Now I can make decisions." Another woman recalled: "I used to feel very sorry for myself, but when I saw the video and discussed what a woman can do, I thought that I too can start a business...and I did."

IMPACT

Local NGOs reported that AWSO has had considerable impact on their organizational structure and stature. They observed that there was improved institutional and personnel capacity, greater credibility for NGOs within communities and among donor agencies, an enhanced advocacy role in the promotion of women's rights, and an increased ability to secure funding for local activities.

To evaluate the impact of the project at the individual level, 369 women in Egypt, Jordan and Yemen were interviewed using a quasi-experimental, separate sample design with regression analysis. A total of 254 AWSO participants were randomly selected for face-to-face interviews. The control group comprised 115 women who were randomly selected for interviews immediately prior to their participation in AWSO workshops. Experimental and control groups were equivalent with respect to nationality, age distribution, educational attainment, marital status, number of children, and work status (p>.05 for all aforementioned variables).

The findings are encouraging: women who participated in the training were significantly more likely than non-participants to know where to find information regarding health, community participation and economic opportunities. Moreover, participants were more likely than non-participants to express high levels of self-efficacy as well as to believe they can make a difference in community affairs. For example, 83 percent

of participants versus 60 percent of non-participants report that they make decisions for the family. At the community level, 70 percent of participants compared to 40 percent of non-participants report that they are able to participate in local affairs (data not shown).

Participants are more likely than non-participants to engage in entrepreneurship, to advise other women in techniques of negotiation, and to participate in activities that further community welfare (Figure 1). The findings also demonstrate that AWSO participation not only enhances a woman's self-perception but also increases the likelihood that others will perceive her as someone to whom they can turn for advice. As shown in Table 1, participants report they have been asked for advice regarding a wide range of issues—from family problems to religious matters, from economic concerns to community politics—at a significantly higher level than is true of non-participants.

These findings show how the AWSO project responds to women's needs and concerns by providing a venue in which they can explore new options and opportunities. Viewing the videos and participating in the group discussions allows women, like Aisha, to redirect their personal lives and participate in activities that improve their communities. As a result of her training, Aisha was able to pursue her personal goals while also becoming an AWSO facilitator. In this role, she demonstrates to other women in her community the importance of informal networks to broaden their horizons so that they may identify and reach their goals. AWSO empowers women by conveying the important message that lasting social and economic change often begins with small, incremental steps.

COMMUNICATION *Impact!*

Summarizes key research and programmatic findings from the Johns Hopkins University Center for Communication Programs (JHU/CCP).



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