

# SEWING HAPPINESS:

## Empowering Yemen's Women Entrepreneurs - The BRAVE Initiative

The humanitarian crisis in Yemen for the past 10 years has significantly affected the living conditions of people.

The situation has resulted in the economy and healthcare system being severely damaged. This was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, making it harder for people to access basic services and opportunities.

The situation has left two-thirds of the entire population, 21.6 million people, in need of humanitarian support as homes and livelihoods have been lost.

As economy and healthcare system nose-dived women entrepreneurs emerged to provide crucial services.

Upending traditional gender roles and cultural expectations Yemen's women have set up businesses to provide medical clothing and equipment, managed bakeries and created teaching centers.



## The BRAVE Program:

In response, the Islamic Development Bank – fueled by a US\$8.8 million grant from The Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative (We-Fi) – set out to empower female-led SMEs in Yemen via its BRAVE program.

Business Resilience Assistance for Value-Adding Enterprises for Women (BRAVE) is tailored to Yemen's needs and will focus on:

1. Building Business Resilience through Training
2. Providing Financial Support for Recovery and Growth
3. Strengthening Value Chains
4. Introducing the BRAVE IT Platform for Enhanced Engagement

Despite Yemen's formidable challenges, BRAVE has made remarkable progress. Over 1,400 women entrepreneurs applied, with 342 receiving grants totaling US\$3.4 million by 2020. Businesses in critical sectors such as health and education were prioritized during the pandemic.

## Impact and Results:

Nadia Ali Aldhara, owner of the Jana'a shop, epitomizes the program's impact.

After previously working in hospitals, Nadia witnessed an acute shortage of protective equipment during the COVID-19 outbreak. So, she adapted her small business producing medical uniforms to manufacture masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE).

"Doctors were dying. Suddenly, face masks were in high demand. We jumped into action and began producing as much PPE as possible," she said.



Nadia, who used BRAVE funding to purchase equipment and hire employees, said: “I took the decision to register in the BRAVE Women project because I had a strong desire to develop my business and to increase my production.

“The best moment for me during the BRAVE Women project was when I received my new sewing machines and the happiness I felt when I saw my dream coming true.”

Other BRAVE beneficiaries include Dr. Lubna Al-Khader, who has expanded the clinic she opened in her village to improve access to pediatric, dental and gynecological services – seeing an 85% increase in the patients she sees.

And Reem Naguib Ahmed Al-Salami, who has operated two schools for more than 20 years, has expanded her staff, her schools’ income and her assets investments have doubled to \$50,000. Furthermore, BRAVE has catalyzed financial institutions to extend lower-rate financing to nearly six percent of participants, alongside providing financial literacy training to 280 women entrepreneurs.

## The Paradigm Shift:

With state institutions faltering, women-led enterprises have emerged as vital lifelines to offer indispensable services.

In the face of countless barriers and obstacles, women like Nadia, Lubna and Reem have shown remarkable strength, bravery and ingenuity to step up at a time of war and during a global pandemic.

This fundamental change in approach not only challenges societal perceptions but also underlines their resilience and resourcefulness amidst adversity.

