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## TATEM Evaluation Seminar: Visit to the Charitable Women Association "El-Khir" in Essaouira

**T**uesday, 7th November: second day of the Evaluation Seminar of TATEM (Training for active trainers in EurMed) in Essaouira, Morocco.

We were supposed to divide into three groups and visit different local NGO committed at different levels in the social field. The first thought which came into my mind was: "Is there any social life in Essaouira?" Since I arrived, I had not noticed, apart from hotels, markets and fishermen, any form of social aggregation which could be the expression of a real local life: schools, cafes with local people, women busy with their daily errands...

When I heard of the possibility to visit a women association I jumped on the opportunity, more out of curiosity, rather than to fulfill a genuine interest.

The president of the association, Ms. Saadia Dibi, arrived punctual to present in plenary the charitable women association "El-Khir" (AFBK). There she was: brown galabiyya with matching scarf, thick lens glasses miles away from feminine vanity, low encouraging submissive eyes: briefly, not exactly the image of a pugnacious person fighting for women's rights. My doubts increased... letting me foresee a useless and misleading meeting, with topics "not to be touched" and accepting the recurring portrait of women with no education and no free choices in life convincingly happy of their situation.

I could not be more wrong and biased!

We followed Ms. Saadia into the real Essaouira, with men chatting in everlasting improvised meeting places, children playing on uneven roads and WOMEN walking, strolling and chattering mainly indifferent to the presence of our odd expedition. As

we were passing into the association centre neighborhood, the walk of our host had slowly turned from being cautious and calm into a confident and resolute one.

After entering the building, her face put on a surprisingly vivid expression revealing relaxed facial features and an ironic and cunning smile.

We were welcomed by three young workers of the association - discreet, intense and veiled - who showed us the rooms of the association, equipped for the different activities. We passed from the computer room (used both for classes addressed to women and for a cyber-café, opened to an external public and thus representing a constant source of self-financing) to a workshop room equipped with sewing machines. This activity as well - seen with the multi-perspective of professional training - supports women economical empo-

werment and it is a source of self-financing for the association, mainly through the revenues of a small handcraft shop in the old market (entirely run by the women of the association).

The Association was created in 1998 by Ms. Saadia, who is "not highly educated", as she put it, but convinced of the necessity of an action to empower disadvantaged women both in the urban and the rural area of Essaouira. She was strongly encouraged and supported by her husband and the idea took slowly the shape of the actual association, with 20 workers (some volunteers and some paid) and more than 2000 beneficiaries in the activities run until today. She exposed the bewildering data regarding the situation of women in Morocco and more precisely in the region of Essaouira: the Human Development Index (HDI) is the lowest of the whole country



*Tatem Essaouira, group picture.*

# ■ Euromed realities



step for the improvement of the family conditions, above all with regard to children. No taboos seem thus to be a concrete obstacle (the treatment of topics such as AIDS or STD, contraception, family law and women's rights) but one: a condition to the free participation of the beneficiaries to the activities – especially the ones dealing with literacy – is their "public apparition": being seen by others, especially men, attending such classes may be a sort of shame for the family and therefore the premises are chosen far away from markets, schools and other meeting places.

The main obstacle (as for most associations worldwide...) is actually fundraising and bureaucracy: the association depends on governmental and private financing, but



(0.439 for rural women) and the per capita income is 27,8 % lower than the national average.

Illiteracy is actually the stumbling block for the development and empowerment of women: in the urban area 61.1% of the population is educated, but the number faces a drastic decrease in the rural area (19.8%) reaching a catastrophic level for rural women (only 7.27%).

The beneficiary of the El-Khir activity is therefore the disadvantaged woman (unmarried, divorced, widowed and/or rural); its actions are meant to guarantee a better integration in her own environment through various activities: fight against illiteracy, raising awareness on health and personal care, providing legal knowledge (especially after the approval of changes to Al-Moudawana, the Family Code), promoting the economical empowerment through income producing activities (such

as the handcraft shop or the confectionery shop, to be opened soon, 'in sha'allah...!') and the direct charitable activities addressed to the people in need (disabled, children, and low income families).

The projects are mainly focused on literacy campaigns, being the first inevitable and necessary step towards other actions. Furthermore women can be involved in several kinds of training activities - handcraft techniques, language and computer classes – a concrete support for the setting up of cooperatives and a wide range of recreational and cultural activities.

We were surprised to discover that men do not thwart the participation of their wives, sisters or daughters to the activities: a fundamental action in this sense, Ms. Saadia explained us, is the initial contact with men and the work of raising their awareness on the importance of the development of the situation of women, meant as a necessary

sometimes notwithstanding available sums the activities are blocked because of the obstructionism of the local municipality, too much disposed to comply with the needs and harsh positions of the privileged classes and gender.

This last fact was neither a surprising discovery nor an unusual reality...



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