

FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS

Desert delights

Laila Neamatallah revolutionizes Siwa's women and the European fashion industry in one stitch

By Nada Abdelnour

CAIRO: A revolution of sorts is happening 700 km away from Cairo in a lush, green oasis at the edge of the Western Desert, near the Libyan border.

Non-violent, it is slowly re-drawing the acceptable lines of demarcation between men and women and redefining their roles in the highly patriarchal society of Siwa.

Inhabited as early as 10,000 BC by an indigenous community of Berbers known as *Amazigh*, the Siwa oasis has been isolated from the rest of Egypt - both geographically and culturally. It was only in 1986 that an asphalted highway which cuts through the Western desert was constructed and even so, Siwa is still eight hours away and remains a relatively sheltered haven with its own distinct language, customs, and traditions.

Known for its breath-taking landscapes, lush palms and olive groves, salt lakes, and natural freshwater springs, it is now also becoming famous for its women and their intricate needle-work. That skill is changing the power-dynamics in this oasis of 22,000 years, which relies on dates for its livelihood. In this patriarchal society, there has traditionally been a very clear division of labor and space between men and women. At age 12 women get veiled, and are usually married at about 16. Married women leave their homes on very rare occasions for weddings and funerals - covered from head to toe, with a black veil covering their faces. Men, on the other hand, rule public life - working the agriculture and running errands.

Although they are rarely seen outside their homes, Siwan women are now the forces behind renegotiating the gender contract - with the help of a visionary, Laila Neamatallah.

"Development is not complete without involving women," says Neamatallah, a partner along with her brother, Mounir, and sister, Mona, of Environmental Quality International, the consultancy firm that has become renowned for consulting and investing in projects in Siwa (and elsewhere) bringing economic and social gains to the local community, while preserving the region's rich natural assets and unique cultural heritage.

Neamatallah sought to empower the women of the oasis by creating employment opportu-

nities through reviving the complex and ornate stitching of ancient geometric motifs - stars, crosses, fish - traditionally used for the women's colorful bridal trousseaus. Very few young women, most of whom have gone to government schools, were able to preserve this tradition, and the quality of the embroidery was declining. The art was preserved by grandmothers, who upon the birth of a baby girl, began to embroider a trousseau for her. "By custom, grandmothers embroider very elaborate wedding dresses with traditional designs for their grandchildren, an endeavor that could take up to a whole year. They also make seven different attires for the first week of marriage," explains Neamatallah.

Commercially embroidered shawls and *galabeyas* (traditional dresses) were sold in Siwa to tourists, but the quality of both the material and the stitches were far inferior to that of the traditional trousseau. "The stitches were bigger and looser so as to save time and produce more. The material was very cheap polyester," Neamatallah elaborates.

Hoping to revive this dying craft, Neamatallah came up with the idea of training and employing young women to embroider with the same quality and intricacy as that of their grandmothers' work. She then marketed the products to up-scale tourists at her brother, Mounir Neamatallah's eco-lodge, Adrere Amellah (White Mountain).

With a grant of £ 20,000 from the British Embassy, Neamatallah started her first training program in 2000. With four trainers, she initially trained 50 women, and displayed all their work the eco-lodge's gallery. The embroidered *abayas*, *galabeyas*, shawls, blouses, bed linen and tablecloths, all made from natural, locally-manufactured fabrics proved a great success with the trendy international clientele of the hotel. Now the workforce has increased to 150 women, most of whom are unmarried between the ages of 15 and 27.

And the revolution begins. The unmarried women leave their homes now to work in Neamatallah's workshop, while the married ones come to the workshop to take material to embroider at home. In addition to their relative mobility, they now earn nearly twice as much as the men who do agricultural work. Last

year alone, the impressive sum of Euro 150,000 (\$200,000) was paid to the women of the Oasis for their stitch-work.

And, indeed, money talks. The status of unmarried women has changed dramatically. Previously unmarried women were treated as the "slaves of the family," having to do grueling household chores for their mothers and sisters-in-law. Now they have become important wage earners and, hence, important decision-makers. They can be more selective when deciding who, and even if, to get married. Indeed the oasis's Cinderellas have turned into forces to reckon with.

Mounir's eco-lodge and Laila's work to empower the Siwan women have made headlines in the most prominent fashion and travel magazines. They have been featured in *L'art de Voyager*, *CNN Traveller*, *BBC*, *Elle*, *Open Skies*, *Fashion*, and even made it onto *Inside Africa* on CNN International. Siwa was on the cover of the September 2001 issue of *Travel & Leisure*, the premier source for adventurous vacationers, with 25 million subscribers. At the time, the eco-lodge boasted a 70 percent occupancy rate - the market Laila depended on for the sale of her products.

But then the tragic events of September 11, 2001 happened, and things drastically changed. How events in New York could affect the economy of the relatively isolated oasis, is a testament to the growing dependence of this green patch in the western desert on international tourism and Siwa's integration (albeit late) into the world economy.

"Everyone cancelled their reservations, even a couple who had planned their wedding there. For three months, we didn't have a living soul in any hotel in Siwa. It was a major crisis," recalls Laila.

A labor force of women was producing beautiful embroidered products of the finest quality, but she could no longer rely on the clientele of the hotel to buy them. Something had to be done.

"I figured if people don't come to us, we have to go to them," she says with her entrepreneurial spirit. Thus she started her tour of Europe's major capitals to display the Siwan embroidery. Her first exhibition was in the Palazzo Massimo in Rome which attracted numerous designers. Her embroidered Siwan products are now available at



Laila Neamatallah and Tony Scervino at the workshop.

many up-scale boutiques in Italy, including The Verde in Rome, So in Torino, and Cheri in Bologna. She then had a house exhibition in London, and the Siwan marvels are now available at the General Trading Company (GTC) on Sloan Square. And she recently had a house-exhibition in Paris, and is still discussing, with a number of designers, the possibility of having her products sold in a number of high-end boutiques and department stores.

It was three years ago, however, that the desert oasis's future, and that of its women, would change irreversibly. When Italian designer Tony Scervino, who owns half of the Ermanno Scervino haute couture establishment, came to the eco-lodge on vacation, he was fascinated by the women's embroidery and Neamatallah's revival of the traditional craft. He wanted the authentic and original Siwan motifs on his fancy fabric - denim, silk, leather, suede, chiffon, and tweed. It was then that Siwan women became an integral part of the multi-billion dollar Italian fashion industry.

"Women who never worked - let alone had a concept of time - began having to work under the stress of deadlines, fashion-shows, production for two seasons per year. It was an earthquake!" exclaims Neamatallah.

Under the direction of Na'eema, the head mistress, women are given exactly one and a half months to painstakingly embroider the material after it is shipped to Cairo from Florence for assembly. Under an Egyptian fiscal incentive known as "draw-

back," the transaction is not taxable since the product is only embellished or finished in Egypt.

The Siwan designs appeared on the catwalk of the biannual Milan Fashion Week in the summer and winter of 2004 and 2005. This past summer, for the fifth season, Sudanese top-model Alek Wek, is among those who sport the chic outfits on the catwalk. At a different end of the supply-chain, each season, the Siwan women work with different fabrics, designs, and colors.

They used to embroider with only five colors symbolizing the different stages of maturity of dates: green, red, orange, yellow, and black. Now they work with a whole gamut of materials and colors. "They have been exposed to a whole new world," marvels Neamatallah.

This year, the women embroidered five different "looks" for the "Scervino Kids" line - all entirely made in Egypt - from the material to the embroidery, because of the prohibitive cost of shipping fabric for children's clothes from Italy. "They are 100 percent Egyptian," Neamatallah says proudly. The success of the seamstresses has encouraged the oasis to look to the outside world to find markets for its main agricultural product: dates.

Neamatallah studied Egyptology, history and Islamic Art, and was greatly inspired at the age of 16 by Anna Boutros Ghali, a woman of 90 at the time, who was famous for the jewelry she designed, drawn from Egyptian history.

Neamatallah's husband, Ikram Nakhla, had started his

own collection of solid-gold jewelry with the finest precious and semi-precious stones, derived from ancient Egyptian designs. Together they turned Nakhla into one of the finest jewelers in Egypt with a diverse international clientele. Recently, Laila Neamatallah has begun to make jewelry out of hand-embroidered leather and Siwan silver.

The Siwan crafts have also recently crossed the Atlantic Ocean. Neamatallah sold her whole collection to a private 19th century Orientalist museum in New York called the Dahesh Museum, on Madison Avenue. The entire Siwa line, including the embroidered clothes and original jewelry, occupy a whole window of the museum. This past June, she had an exhibition at the National Geographic, in Washington D.C. The Siwan clothes and jewelry are now on sale at the International Financial Corporation's store in Washington D.C.

The ethnic-look is very fashionable in Europe, and there is scarcely more original and authentic-looking than the Siwan stitches. Helping to fulfill the growing demand, the International Finance Corporation's (IFC) Private Enterprise Partnership in the Middle East and North Africa (PEP-MENA) has given Neamatallah's project a grant of \$175,000 for technical assistance to train and create employment opportunities for 300 more women over the next 4 years. The World Bank and IFC's Strengthening Grassroots Business Initiative (SGBI) has partnered with EQI to expand its activities in artisanship in Siwa by providing a loan of \$237,000.

While they seem to be simply reviving their grandmothers' dying craft, Siwan women, are pushing the acceptable limits of conduct in their highly conservative milieu. Women abroad are sporting their chic outfits with original Siwan designs. Women in Siwa are proud that their work is penetrating the fashion industry and that they are slowly penetrating the closely protected male-dominated world outside their homes.

Fortunately, you don't have to drive 700 km to go all the way to Siwa to buy the delicately hand-stitched clothes and original silver jewelry that are turning heads abroad. They are sold at Neamatallah's show-room at 17 Ahmed Heshmat St. in Zamalek.