



Jabal Moussa UNESCO Biosphere Reserve

Women empowerment and gender-inclusive good practices



1. Context and approach

Jabal Moussa was designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2009. Inspired by the Man and Biosphere (MAB) Programme, the Association for the Protection of Jabal Moussa (APJM) addressed, in addition to research and conservation, local socio-economic development and engagement.

A socio-economic survey conducted in 2009 revealed a challenging local economic context, where 24% of inhabitants did not have any economic activity. APJM therefore initiated programs that provide alternative livelihoods for local residents, particularly for women and youth, focusing on ecotourism, sustainable agriculture, and the promotion of local food and handicraft products.

Since then, Jabal Moussa Biosphere Reserve became a key player in championing local women and youth as well as driving local economic growth, with a focus on ecotourism, agriculture, and the production of local “mouneh” and handicrafts. Jobs and income have been generated for staff, guides, guards and guesthouse owners, as well as through the production and sale of local products.

Beyond economic empowerment, an important part of engagement is ensuring that women’s voices are heard and valued. Particular attention is given to ensuring that women are represented in workshops and interviews and have the space to express their ideas, needs and priorities, and to actively contribute to discussions and decision-making processes.

HOW EMPOWERMENT IS UNDERSTOOD IN JABAL MOUSSA

Empowerment is achieved through giving value to the work and potential of local communities, particularly women and youth. The value in JMBR takes the form of income generation, capacity building, engaging in decision making, respect and celebration of skills and achievements.



APJM Ecotourism Manager conducting an interview with Mrs. Murielle Dimitriades, guesthouse owner

Economic empowerment of women: a needs-based approach

A detailed socioeconomic analysis conducted in 2009 by the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Saint Joseph University revealed an important ecotourism potential and local willingness to contribute to tourism. Two sectors of intervention within tourism were identified as empowering local women: traditional agro-food (“mouneh”) and handicrafts. The survey found that local women represented the large majority of local artisans and agro-food producers, and were not necessarily aware of the potential of activities that had thus far been confined mainly to domestic consumption.

A small-scale study conducted in 2012 found that the majority of women involved in crafts and mouneh did not exercise professional work outside their household. Based on these studies, APJM developed programs targeting particularly women, and a line of food and handicraft products has been sustained since 2012.



Mrs Marcelle Atallah and Mrs Roula Souaid cooking traditional recipes, following food safety guidelines.



Local women proudly showing their “mouneh” products.

2. From traditional skills to income generation

One of the skills identified as important through the socio-economic studies was the traditional preparation of food products by local women, known as “mouneh”. This practice involves processing seasonal fruits and vegetables to preserve them for later use, using recipes passed down through generations.

The traditional knowledge of local women was integrated with new food science technology and hygiene standards, to produce products that respect local traditional recipes and practices, use locally available produce, and can be marketed under the registered “Jabal Moussa” trademark.

GOOD PRACTICE 1 - GIVE ECONOMIC VALUE TO EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

Production of mouneh, a typical feminine rural activity, was previously confined mainly to family consumption and is now perceived as a profit-making occupation.

The “agro-food” program has been sustained since 2011. A central kitchen was established for rural products following local recipes and hygiene standards set by experts, and the registered “Jabal Moussa” brand is used to market them. The program engages 9 agro-food processors, 9 crafts producers, 4 beekeepers and 34 farmers.



Local women filling tomato paste at APJM's central kitchen.

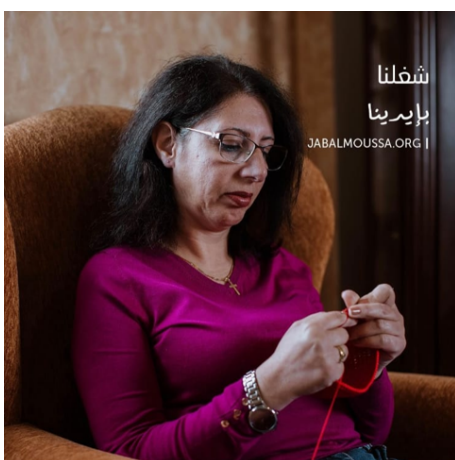


Training on handicrafts techniques

Branding and market access

Tourism supported the promotion of local products under the “Jabal Moussa” brand name. Agro-food products, based on local fruits and herbs, are processed by local women in the central kitchen, while handicrafts are made by local craftswomen inspired by local traditions and heritage. The branding and marketing of local products increased income opportunities for farmers, agro-food processors and crafts producers.

Guesthouse owners, artisans and agro-food producers were identified through large-scale surveys. Their products are promoted by APJM and at reserve entrances, while new ideas are developed mutually with local actors. They benefit from increased economic opportunities from tourism, catering and sales of Jabal Moussa-branded products.



From home to market: local crafts are exhibited at the reserve entrances

3. Capacity building and career growth

Training programs and workshops were designed to build women's capacity and skills. APJM provided continuous sessions on food safety and hygiene in food preservation and preparation, enhancing practices among guesthouse owners, agro-food processors and local households. Training on traditional practices also revived local crafts and enhanced skills to improve income-generation opportunities for women and men.

GOOD PRACTICE 2 - COMBINE TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE WITH PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

Traditional recipes and practices are preserved, while training in food safety, hygiene, production and marketing helps transform them into sustainable economic activities.



Training on agro-food production by food expert Dr Christelle Salameh.

A pathway from participation to employment

Staff follow training sessions and witness career growth and empowerment. Ms Roula Souaid went from being engaged on a daily basis in the agro-food central kitchen to becoming a full-time staff member as field supervisor of the central kitchen and the native tree nurseries. She attended numerous agricultural and food safety workshops and followed an English course, becoming a key staff member within APJM.

CAREER GROWTH EXAMPLE

- Daily engagement in the central kitchen
- Followed agricultural and food-safety workshops
- English course training
- Full-time field supervisor
- Key staff member within APJM



Ms Roula Souaid at the native tree nurseries.

4. Women in community-based ecotourism

Ecotourism has become a cornerstone of the local economy. Hiking trails, cultural tourism experiences, guiding and accommodation services have driven local economic benefits, creating jobs and empowering women and youth.

Local women have been involved and empowered in the tourism sector as guesthouse owners and as guides. Community discussions and surveys praise the economic and social benefits from tourism. The initiative engages guides, guesthouse owners and/or caterers, guards, workers and taxi drivers, and contributes to local women and youth empowerment.

GOOD PRACTICE 3 - RECOGNIZE WOMEN AS TOURISM ACTORS

In the case of guesthouses, while men are often the house owners, the Biosphere Reserve highlights the women as the guesthouse owners. This gives value and visibility to the role women play in hospitality and the tourism experience.



The Nader family: the father was hired as a guard, the mother owns a guesthouse, and the daughter became a guide and later a staff member.



Ms Christelle Lteif, Jabal Moussa guide, organising tours beyond Jabal Moussa.

Women as guides and ambassadors

Local guides transmit information on the natural and cultural heritage of Jabal Moussa, act as ambassadors of the Biosphere Reserve, provide feedback and may develop a main or side career in organising tours.

APJM engages local residents as guides, 56% of whom are women. They receive training in natural and cultural heritage interpretation, act as ambassadors for the Biosphere Reserve, and provide valuable feedback to APJM on the reserve's performance.

5. Participation, representation and decision making

Women have a growing role in JMBR's governance and economic activities. They actively participate in community meetings within the Jabal Moussa Biosphere Reserve, hold key positions in local institutions, and are specifically invited to participate in participatory meetings and surveys.

Ensuring women's voices are heard

APJM's participatory processes seek diverse representation and provide both women and men with the opportunity to express their ideas. During consultation workshops, each attendee is given the opportunity to express their ideas, while the rest of the participants listen.

This approach extends beyond workshops. Socio-economic surveys and targeted interviews are conducted with different members of the community, including women and men.

APJM strives to involve local communities across Biosphere Reserve programs, from planning to feedback. Socio-economic surveys and thematic focus groups document perceptions, aspirations and ideas that are incorporated into action plans.

GOOD PRACTICE 4 - INCLUDE WOMEN IN THE PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

Participation is not limited to economic activities. Women are included in community consultation and decision-making processes, with opportunities to express ideas, discuss priorities and contribute to future actions.

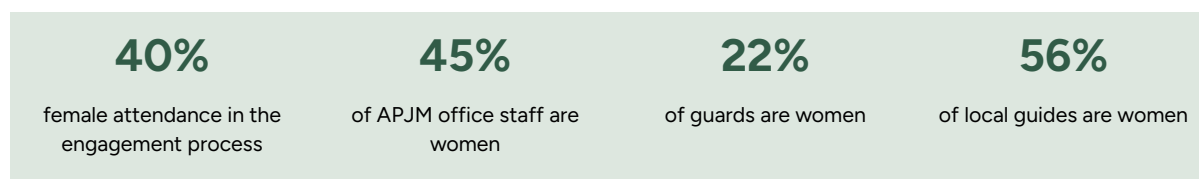


Mrs. Bernadette Fahed, member of the municipality of Ghbaleh, and local activist, presenting the results of Group 3 "Logistic Support"



Ms Rita Azzi providing her insights on local water governance, as resident and farmer

In the engagement process for the Periodic Review and the development of the Management Plan, attendees came from all age groups, backgrounds, educational levels and towns, and from both genders. Male attendance represented 60% and female attendance 40%.



Women were also actively participating in agricultural workshops and activities. Although agricultural initiatives engaged mainly men, women were nevertheless well represented, accounting for around 30% of participants. This shows that women's engagement extended beyond the two sectors initially identified as particularly relevant to them.

6. Inclusive access and transferable good practices

APJM addresses social justice by ensuring that training, grants and employment opportunities are accessible to all community members, including women, youth and marginalized people. This inclusive approach is coupled with initiatives that particularly target women where studies identified specific skills, needs and opportunities.

GOOD PRACTICE 5 - COMBINE TARGETED SUPPORT WITH INCLUSIVE ACCESS

Targeted programs can respond to women's identified skills and needs, while broader training, employment and economic opportunities remain accessible to women across different sectors, including agriculture and guiding.



Capacity building and exchange around local agro-food production.

7. Celebrating “Women in Conservation” - RESMAB

As part of its commitment to recognizing and promoting women’s role in conservation, APJM developed the “Women in Conservation” video series within the framework of the RES-MAB project. Released from the International Women’s Day (8 March) through the end of the month, the series highlighted the inspiring stories of women from local communities and their leadership, resilience, and everyday contributions to environmental protection and sustainable development. By giving visibility and voice to women actively engaged in conservation and local development, the campaign helped reinforce the importance of women’s key role and leadership in conservation efforts.

Watch the “Women in Conservation” video series:



[Bernadette Fahed - activist, municipality member, pioneer in recycling](#)



[Murielle Dimitriades - connecting people to nature through her guesthouse](#)



[Sister Rita - teacher, eco-friendly agriculture](#)



[Lara Atallah - municipality member, responsible tourism](#)

Key practices emerging from the Jabal Moussa experience

- Start with socio-economic studies and direct engagement to identify women's skills, needs and economic potential.
- Build on traditional knowledge and integrate it with new technologies.
- Create a pathway from skills to market: production facilities, training, branding, promotion and sales.
- Link women's products and services to community-based ecotourism.
- Support career growth from participation to formal employment and supervisory responsibilities.
- Include women in community consultations and decision-making
- Keeping training and employment opportunities accessible
- Celebrate local champions: activists, leaders, pioneers.

8. A model based on value, skills and participation

The experience of Jabal Moussa Biosphere Reserve demonstrates how conservation and sustainable development can contribute to women's empowerment when local skills, knowledge and potential are recognised and given value.

It highlights several complementary dimensions of empowerment: income generation, capacity building, professional growth, participation in decision-making, and the respect and celebration of women's skills, traditional knowledge and voices. Rather than treating women only as beneficiaries, the Biosphere Reserve increasingly recognises them as leaders

within their societies, activists, value generators, producers, tourism service providers, guides, staff members, entrepreneurs and active participants in shaping the sustainable development of their communities and the Biosphere Reserve.

CORE MESSAGE

The Jabal Moussa good practice is not a single activity. It is the combination of identifying existing skills, strengthening capacities, creating access to markets and tourism, supporting career growth, and ensuring participation in community processes.

References

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Association for the Protection of Jabal Moussa (APJM) - Jabal Moussa Biosphere Reserve - Periodic Review 2024, Association for the Protection of Jabal Moussa (APJM)

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