



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

**PAKISTAN**

## NOTE FROM THE FIELD

# From Behind the Veil

### **USAID provides market access for homebound women embroiderers**



Photo courtesy of MEDA

*Pakistani women receive business development services.*

*“The goal of our program is to empower poor, homebound women embroiderers in conservative areas of rural Pakistan by helping them access high-value markets in the embroidered garment subsector”.*

*—Linda Jones, Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA).*

Linda Jones of Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA) submitted this week’s Note on a program funded by the USAID Microenterprise Development office through its Business Development Services Implementation Grant Program.

The majority of women in rural Pakistan are marginalized by poverty, home confinement, and geographic isolation. Although talented embroiderers, they face significant logistical and societal constraints to reaching high-value urban markets. MEDA and its Pakistani partner, the Entrepreneurship and Career Development Institute (ECDI), are assisting these women to improve their economic and social situations through sustainable assistance that targets all parts of the embroidered garments value chain. Jones continues:

“The ‘From Behind the Veil’ program operates in three rural areas in Pakistan: Multan District in Punjab; Thatta, Badin and Hyderabad (Hala) Districts of interior Sindh; and three killies—Ismail, Siriki Kalan and Qambrani—adjacent to Quetta in Balochistan. Home confinement ranges from 50 to 95 percent in these areas, with Multan being the most and Quetta the least liberal. Poverty is extreme and the majority of women are illiterate.

“The quality of the embroidery of rural women is excellent, but products are generally sold into low-value traditional markets. At the same time, there is a growing middle class of Pakistani women in urban centers who seek quality, hand-embroidered garments in contemporary styles, and are willing to pay a premium for them.

“Why, then, are rural women’s products not reaching high-value, urban markets? The reasons are numerous. Unfortunately, the embroidered products of these women are rarely of a suitable design or made with inputs of the quality demanded by high-value markets. For example, contemporary Pakistani women favor border designs, tone on tone colors, and westernized motifs. Rural women usually embroider all over the fabric in bright colors and with traditional motifs.

“In addition, rural embroiderers lack mobility and most transactions are conducted by male family members who are not conversant in embroidery. Therefore, women do not get information regarding more profitable designs which they could easily produce. Although all players recognize the need for designs, no mechanism has been developed to purchase and disseminate designs through the subsector.

“Market access tends to be monopolized by local sales agents who purchase embroidered handicrafts and fabric for clothing on order from male relatives and sell to shopkeepers in low-value, local markets. There are a limited number of women sales agents who deal directly with rural women embroiderers. Women who would be interested in acting as sales agents do not have the necessary contacts in the villages to set up commercial relationships. Garment makers are therefore limited in reaching retailers, exporters, and exhibitions.

“With support from the USAID Microenterprise Development office, MEDA and ECDI determined to address these constraints and help rural, homebound women to reach profitable business opportunities. Building on the model established by a few women sales agents, MEDA and ECDI’s project is developing the capacity of women sales agents to access markets and to provide business services to women embroiderers. As a result, the embroiderers are learning about the materials, designs, and quality demands of affluent urban consumers, and both embroiderers and sales agents are increasing sales and profits.

“Working with all parts of the embroidered garment value chain, in 3 years the project aims to: directly reach 6,000 women embroiderers by raising revenues two to three times; recruit and develop 60 women sales agent entrepreneurs; facilitate market access for 180 urban garment makers who make clothing from the embroidered fabrics; and involve nine commercial designers in the subsector.

“Through face-to-face, woman-to-woman business transactions, the position of poor women in Pakistani society is being adjusted in a culturally sensitive manner, enabling them to earn more for their labor and become economically empowered within the household. The program is developing commercial business service markets that will overcome social barriers and limitations in the value chain, enabling rural embroiderers to reach affluent consumers and realize a higher return on their labor.

“Program activities focus on information sharing, creation and strengthening of linkages, and training or mentoring, with no direct subsidies to the embroidered garment subsector or business development services (BDS) markets. The result will be sustainable, commercial BDS service markets within a viable and growing subsector, enabling MEDA and ECDI to exit the market at the end of the program.”