

design

sarah's bag

sewing seeds of hope

Sarah Baydoun is one of the region's leading social entrepreneurs. With an eye for business and a passion for design, she has created a phenomenon that has changed the lives of Lebanon's female prisoners.



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Sarah Baydoun

The warm Mediterranean sun cascades through the Art Deco windows of the Sarah’s Bag boutique. On a large wooden desk, Her Majesty Queen Rania Al-Abdullah of Jordan waves from a framed photograph bearing the royal seal. In her left hand, she holds a beige, sequined clutch bag; a perfect match with her evening dress and dazzling tiara. The afternoon rays also fall upon a magazine clipping of Catherine Deneuve in a show-stopping black strapless gown, sporting another evening bag embroidered with Arabic poetry. The glitz and glamour of Hollywood is certainly a far cry from the streets of Beirut. Yet the manicured hands of film stars and royalty grasp more than just fashionable accessories. They hold candles of hope for the female prisoners of Lebanon; an initiative born from the world of academia.

The Social Scholar

Sarah Baydoun chose the subject of female prostitution and imprisonment in Lebanon as the thesis of her Master’s degree in Sociology at St Joseph University, Beirut. “I was curious. I really wanted to know about the whole system and how it functions,” she says. “I wanted to know the causes that push women into prostitution.” A mandatory component of her research was to interview inmates at Lebanon’s Baabda Prison and at Dar El-Amal, a rehabilitation centre that seeks to provide job opportunities for underprivileged women. Baydoun’s chosen topic required an enormous amount of strength, patience and emotional detachment. “In the first week of work, I realised the enormity of the women’s problems. To me, they seemed tortured. During all my visits, I was afraid that the wardens

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would forget and lock me in by mistake! My professor told me to go beyond mere observation. He said that I would feel better if I could benefit them in some way.”

Even armed with a degree, Baydoun had little chance of establishing a career in the limited field of social work, so she joined her brother’s retail business but continued to carry the indelible memory of the women she had met. Baydoun was dead-set on improving their lives, even though she had not yet fully defined an action plan. Passionate about fashion, she decided to recruit some of them to create bracelets that could be sold. Encouraged by the prison’s governor, Baydoun’s initiative was a process of trial-and-error. “I started with five women and a week later, came to see what they had produced. The bracelets were nice, but looked like they were made in China!” laughs Baydoun. Assuming the role of a supportive parent, Baydoun persisted and eventually her patience paid off. By combining a love for fashion and her newly found quest to rebuild the lives of these women (both psychologically

and economically), Baydoun revived the Lebanese tradition of decorative embroidery through her line of handbags. After weeks of practice to perfect the necessary skills, Baydoun returned to Baabda Prison with canvases, beads and materials for the women. “A week later, they had completed 12 bags which I thought were good enough. I went to Beirut’s antique shopping district, Souk Barghout, to sell them,” she recalls.

Bagging Success

The bags quickly sold out and word spread like wildfire across the Lebanese capital. “Suddenly, people started placing orders!” says Baydoun, who had to take over her parents’ garage in order to meet the growing demand. By the time her friend Sarah Nahhouli had joined her, the rapidly growing social enterprise was in need of some serious branding. “When we called it ‘Sarah’s Bag’, it was a very personal choice. I never imagined that I would still be doing it seven years later,” says Baydoun.



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Juliana Srour

In December 2000, Sarah's Bag was invited to hold an exhibition at Aloha, one of Beirut's premier florists. "When I went to get our logo printed on labels to sew into the bags, I was told I wasn't allowed to order less than 1000," says Baydoun. "I couldn't believe it! I only started with 12!" Having sold 90 percent of their stock at Aloha, the team's workload increased as production rocketed. Fortunately for them, enthusiasm for the project had spread through Baabda Prison and the original team of seamstresses inside had started to stage workshops to pass on their skills. "The governor told me that with something to work on the women had become more patient and calm. We started doing more research and creating additional designs. It became a regular 9-till-5 job and with the prison authority's

permission, we were able to regularly drop off local materials and pick up finished bags," says Baydoun.

Sarah's Bag had finally carved a niche for itself. "At the time, there weren't enough craftspeople in Lebanon. We wanted to revive old skills and give them a new twist. The custom of embroidering pillow covers was transformed into clutches and handbags," says Baydoun. Public opinion was incredibly positive and encouraging. Sarah's Bag not only hit the right notes with the Beirut fashionistas but it also struck a worthy and patriotic chord. "People were impressed that we were socially conscientious. We have always promoted Sarah's Bag as a brand made in Lebanon that uses local materials. We are very proud of that," says Baydoun.

Changing Lives

With its garage now transformed into a full-blown boutique and corporate headquarters, Sarah's Bag began participating in international exhibitions across the Levant, Gulf and Europe. Having positioned itself as an employment cooperative, more and more underprivileged women contacted Baydoun to enlist. "We have a file containing a copious amount of names and contact information. I can't hire everyone and I'm not a charity organisation. We have quality standards and my priority is towards the women who started with me because we made it together," says Baydoun. One of those women is Juliana Srour, who has been working with Sarah's Bag for the last seven years. "My life changed drastically," says Srour, who originally studied Arabic literature and had dreams of pursuing a career in that field. "When I first picked up the needle and began to embroider, I had a tough time, but slowly, with Sarah's encouragement and with time, I realised I was talented and began to offer suggestions. I felt that it gave something back to me." Srour was able to combine her passion for literature and her aptitude for handbags by embroidering them with Arabic poetry; something that has become a favourite among Sarah's Bags clientele. A highlight of Srour's day is when she is asked to explain the embroidered poetry or phrase. "This is not a job that involves waiting for a pay cheque at the end of the month," says Srour. "I feel productive, I am giving. I feel like I have strength now - a form of power which will enable me to continue my life."

Baydoun stands by the women even after they finish their prison sentences. Once out in the big wide world, social rejection and the threat of unemployment looms. Baydoun has a simple yet effective solution; to work from home. "Not all the women were prostitutes but there is still a stigma that is difficult to avoid. By working, their outlook on life changes completely. Even the community has begun to perceive them differently."



New Horizons

By 2003, Sarah's Bag moved to Beirut's Gemmayzeh district. Its product line grew and through its newly-founded design studio, Sarah's Bag was able to experiment with new graphic designs such as the Pop-art Umm Kulthum collection and, at one point, employed 150 women. "We were selling like crazy in 2003 and 2004," says Baydoun. "I had to ask clients not to buy more than three bags at once!"

Sadly, the political turbulence that followed the assassination of the former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri meant that the Sarah's Bag workforce was downsized. "The situation in Lebanon is not optimistic," says Baydoun, who is currently working on launching a store in Dubai.

So what keeps Baydoun going? "This is a meeting point between two extremes. We help the women who want to match their outfits with a handbag and the women who need money. We're in the middle of two contradictory worlds," she says. In a world where class is everything, everyone - from those existing on its margins to those living the high life - can carry a Sarah's Bag with pride. 📍

Sarah's Bag is available in Amman, Beirut, Cairo, Dubai, Jeddah and Riyadh. For more information, please visit www.sarahsbag.com or call +961 1575585.