

# A Story of Women from Agricultural Cooperatives who went Global

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**Agricultural cooperatives have long been a haven for women in rural villages to work closer to home and not far from their domestic duties. However, the ingenuity of some women made them a leading example in their surroundings enabling them to reach worldwide. From cooking and the popular Saj, two women have turned into fighters for the traditional Lebanese cuisine and contributors to its dissemination as a message of peace at home and abroad.**

## Ambassador of «Frakeh and Freekeh»

When asked to introduce herself, Zainab Qashmar (54 years old) replies with full confidence that she is the ambassador of «the Southern *Frakeh* and *Freekeh* with distinction». A title she has strived and worked hard to achieve from 2008 until today. The housewife, who quit school in third grade, never imagined that joining the cooperative of her southern village of Halousiyah (Tyre district) would lead her to tour the world with her «tasty food and prowess in marketing the traditional Lebanese mouneh products.» The Story of Zainab began after devoting many years of her youth to raise her three sons. When they grew up, she decided to be socially engaged in her town, so she joined the Halousiyah agricultural cooperative, which introduced her to the Souk el Tayeb where she marketed the products of five southern villages. And thanks to her talent she managed to sell all the products, and earned the trust of the organizers to showcase their distinctive product throughout the whole month. During the said month she gained the experience of «advertising and marketing» without any prior knowledge, «given that my sweet tongue is as good as my food.» From marketing Halousiyah olive oil, olives, thyme and southern Freekeh, Zainab then rose to the throne of southern cooking, which turned her life upside down, transforming her into a productive, socially and economically effective woman, offering food and culinary art for those who wish to learn.

Her main concern is to preserve the ancient Lebanese cuisine heritage and prevent «the invasion of the cities and their fast food of the Lebanese villages, whether in the South, the Bekaa, Mount Lebanon or the North.» Zainab considers food a tale rooted in the land, which is why she decided to make global the stories of South Lebanon cuisine. Therefore, she toured the southern regions seeking the elders to learn the old traditional dishes, their origin and story, and exclusively displayed them at



the Souk el Tayeb. As soon as she became famous, she visited many countries around the world such as France, India, Singapore, Belgium and Switzerland, to present the «South Lebanese Freekeh». Thereby, she challenged many obstacles, such as language and communication, but «her smile and the taste of good food were like her introductory label.» Zainab is proud to have conveyed to the world a different image of South Lebanon, which is associated with wars, displacement, deaths and injuries, by introducing them to the true story of the land and its riches from which she compiles her dishes, which she confirms to be unquestionably healthy.

Although Zainab moved to Beirut to work at the Souk el Tayeb and the «Tawlet» restaurant and joined the «Atayeb Al Rif» Cooperative, she did not forget to upgrade the situation of the

southern women who were part of the agricultural cooperative in Halousiyah. She relies on their agricultural products and energy to help prepare large quantities of the Freekeh recipe, contributing to their financial and moral support. «These women safeguard the southern dishes from extinction, and they linger in their land against all odds.» Qashmar is concerned about preserving the old things and the danger of the foreign food patterns spread in the local community, which is a threat to cultural identity, especially that the actual situation in Lebanon is not reassuring, and the cultural and food heritage is currently in danger. According to Zainab, today's generation knows nothing about traditional food and is only interested in speediness, and for that reason she offers cooking classes in Lebanon and abroad, for those who wish

to learn. «My goal is to protect my country's heritage, so how can I not pass it on to others?»

## Massoud: she broke traditions

Qashmar does not forget to introduce us to her work colleague Rima Massoud (52 years old), from the village of Ramlieh in the Aley district, who has another story of self-development and overcoming her social reality. Rima is skilled in baking the Saj bread and serves it in her village, to economically assist her husband who works in the agricultural sector. Rima was a member the «Association for Forests, Development and Conservation» which paved the way for her to participate in a training program with René Moawad Foundation for the development of the Lebanese women capacities, and she underwent training courses in economics, marketing, production and