Changing lives through education

As an Arab female photographer, I have always found ample inspiration for my projects in personal experiences. The passion I developed for knowledge, which allowed me to break barriers towards a better life, was the motivation for my project 'I read I write'.

Pushed by my own experience, as I was not allowed initially to pursue my higher education, I decided to explore and document stories of other women who changed their lives through education, while exposing and questioning the barriers they face.

I covered a range of topics that concern women's education, keeping in mind the differences among Arab countries due to economic and social factors. These issues include female illiteracy, which is quite high in the region; educational reforms; programmes for dropout students; and political activism among university students.

As I started this work, it was not always easy to convince the women to participate. Only after explaining to them how their stories might influence other women's lives, how they would become role models for their own community, did some agree.

Seeking a collaborative and reflexive approach, I asked them to write their own words and ideas on prints of their own images. Those images were then shared in some of the classrooms, and worked to inspire and motivate other women going through similar educations and situations. Aisha, a teacher from Yemen, wrote 'I sought education in order to be independent and to not count on men with everything.'

One of my first subjects was Umm El-Saad from Egypt. When we first met, she was barely able to write her name. She was attending a nine-month literacy programme run by a local NGO in the Cairo suburbs. Months later, she was joking that her husband had threatened to pull her out of the classes, as he found out that his now literate wife was going through his phone text messages. Naughty Umm El-Saad! Of course, that's not why Umm El-Saad joined the programme. I saw how she was longing to gain control over her simple daily routines, small details that we take for granted, from counting money at the market to helping her kids in homework. Despite her poverty and her community's mindset, which belittles women's education, Umm El-Saad, along with her Egyptian classmates, was eager to learn how to read and write.

In Tunisia, I met Asma, one of the four activist women I interviewed. The secular bioengineering student is quite active on social media. Regarding her country, which treasured what has been called the Arab Spring, she said 'I've always dreamt of discovering a new bacteria. Now, after the revolution, we have a new one every single day.' Asma was referring to the rise of religious fundamentalism in the region, which is another obstacle to women in particular.

Out of all the women I met, Fayza from Yemen affected me the most. Fayza was forced to drop out of school at the age of eight when she was married. That marriage lasted for a year. At 14, she became the third wife of a 60-year-old man, and by the time she was 18, she was a divorced mother of three. Despite her poverty, despite her social status as a divorcée in an ultra-conservative society and despite the opposition of her parents to her going back to school, Fayza knew that her only way to control her life was through education. She is now 26. She received a

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grant from a local NGO to fund her business studies at the university. Her goal is to find a job, rent a place to live in, and bring her kids back with her.

The Arab states are going through tremendous change, and the struggles women face are overwhelming. Just like the women I photographed, I had to overcome many barriers to becoming the photographer I am today, many people along the way telling me what I can and cannot do.

Umm El-Saad, Asma and Fayza, and many women across the Arab world, show that it is possible to overcome barriers to education, which they know is the best means to a better future. And here I would like to end with a quote by Yasmine, one of the four activist women I interviewed in Tunisia. Yasmine wrote 'Question your convictions. Be who you want to be, not who they want you to be. Don't accept their enslavement, for your mother birthed you free.'

Thank you.

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