

WOMEN TO WATCH

Contrary to popular belief, the Middle East and North Africa region is home to millions of highly educated, driven and successful women who stand shoulder to shoulder with men. Here are some of those inventors, change agents, business leaders, educators, innovators, entrepreneurs, and investors are no longer okay with the status quo

By **CHRISTINE GROVÉ & HANA EL MOURAD**

HIND HOBEIKA
Founder at Instabeat

SWIM SMART

Move over Snapchat Spectacles, you have nothing on these goggles



HIND HOBEIKA always loved swimming. She has been swimming since she was five. But what she loved more though was getting better at it. She wasn't in it just for fun. She wanted to be competitive at it. When she reached university (studying engineering at the American University of Beirut), she wasted no time getting on the swim team.

Once on the team though, she found that the traditional way of measuring performance by percentages that her coaches used was out of sync with the modern performance training. To explain that method—a training race could be 200 meters at 50% of a swimmer's heart rate. While the traditional approach also improved performance, Hobeika felt that there had to be a better way to measure swimmers' heart rate in real-time.

"There are many heart rate monitors in the market, but none of them has a design that is compatible with the aerodynamics and the techniques of swimming."

This led her to form the wearable tech company Instabeat, a startup that is developing the first device that allows swimmers to monitor their heart rate and other metrics through a real-time display.

Photograph by ROLAND RAGI

In 2010, the young Lebanese engineer decided to take her idea and present it at the Stars of Science competition run by the Qatar foundation, where she developed the first prototype and won the third prize.

During the incubation period, she developed a casing that can be mounted on any kind of swimming goggles, where the swimmer can measure her heart rate through the temporal artery and have a visual feedback directly projected into the lens of her goggles. It also measures calories, number of laps and flip turns, and syncs with a personal online dashboard to track progress.

In 2011, Hobeika was approached by Berytech Technology Pole, which offers access to venture capital funds geared at financing startups and SMEs. She received a \$100,000 which allowed her to start up and work on further developing the prototype.

After two years, and endless hours in the lab looking for components, reworking the design, reducing the size, and improving the layers, Hobeika was able to make a final prototype almost perfect for performance swimmers.


In 2012, Instabeat won first prize at the MIT Enterprise Forum Pan Arab Business Plan competition. That same year, Hobeika was selected as a Global Shaper by the World Economic Forum. In between the product development, Hobeika has also indulged in further fundraising, crowdfunding over \$50,000

But most of her time today is spent in San Francisco, where

she's working on developing the second version of the product along with a team of 12 people for a Spring 2017 launch of Instabeat's final go-to-market product.

She is now itching to prove her detractors wrong.

As a swimmer, she has developed a thick skin. "Swimming is such a particular sport that prepares you to be very tough. It shapes your personality," she says. "Your head is in the water. You have a specific objective that you are swimming towards. You need to be super focused. Showing up to practice every day...being part of a team. That reflects a lot obviously on the way I do business and the way I work."


Most of her time today is spent in San Francisco, where she's working on developing the market version of Instabeat for a Spring 2017 launch.



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With over 100 highly skilled trainers all over Jordan, Khalifeh claims to have trained over 10,000 women in self-defense.



LINA KHALIFEH

📍 Founder at SheFighter

HIT LIKE A GIRL!

In Jordan, one woman is standing up and punching her way to a safer world for Arab women



A FIRE RAGED through Lina Khalifeh when she first saw her best friend with bruises on her body, a result of her father and brother beating her up almost daily. She'd had enough of being surrounded by stories of domestic violence—an occurrence far too common in Jordan and the region.

There was no way that Khalifeh, trained in Taekwondo since the age of five, was not going to do something about it. She was not going to stand by idle as women around her would keep falling prey to gender-based violence in the country.

It was in her parents' basement that Khalifeh first started self-defense lessons. Little did she know that once news of her classes spread, a stream of women would gradually land at her parents' doors, asking to be trained to defend themselves. By 2012, she'd opened her own studio, SheFighter. And much like the name, Khalifeh had to fight for it to stay up in those early years.

"That first year was the worst year of my life," Khalifeh says. "When I established SheFighter, nobody wanted to work in a startup business [like this]. In the Arab world, unfortunately we don't have that volunteer mentality. So it was just me, alone with my vision, trying to sustain the business as best as I could."

Khalifeh tried hiring women from the Federation of Boxing and Taekwondo schools, and get them on board her vision of women empowerment. However, this turned out to be a real challenge, as many of them simply saw it as just another job, and did not identify with Khalifeh's greater goal.

"It was horrible," Khalifeh says, "I learned a lot during my first two years of business. I learned that I had to establish my own system...my own team from scratch."

Things eventually turned. Khalifeh was able to set up her own team, get the business on a stable financial footing, and gradually start outreach programs. With a system unique to SheFighter, Khalifeh now has over 100 highly skilled trainers all over Jordan, and claims to have trained over 10,000 women. "I had to create leaders like me," she says.

SheFighter got an even bigger boost when Khalifeh was endorsed by US President Barack Obama at the Global Entrepreneurs Event in 2015. "Thank you Lina. We want to help women live with dignity and safety," Obama said, singling her out in his opening address at the event.

Since then, more recognition has come her way. Only recently, Khalifeh trained actress Emma Watson after meeting her at the One Young World Summit in Canada. Having said that, Khalifeh is not forgetting the land she comes from and the problems there in the considerable global spotlight.

She has, for example, partnered with various NGOs to help train Syrian refugees in Jordan. "We have trained about two thousand Syrian refugees so far and we are, in 2017, going to sign up another contract with an NGO to train more and more women... maybe another two thousand."

Using franchising as her business model, Khalifeh hopes to expand SheFighter to the rest of the Middle East, and then beyond, for which she is firming up plans and funds.

Khalifeh stresses that SheFighter isn't only about self-defense training.

It's about changing mindsets and helping the women, the men around them and the communities they inhabit. Workshops go beyond self-defense training, and offer pointers, for example, on who to turn to when you're being sexually harassed.

"I've been working on awareness for so many years, I've also been speaking to men for so many years," she says. "I can see the change starting to happen, because whenever we get men in our workshops, they are so upset about the situation, and they tell women, 'why are you not standing up for yourself? You shouldn't be harassed. You have to report this!'"

Khalifeh believes that change starts with education. "We have to stop telling girls that their only purpose in life is to be a wife and to obey," she says. "Changing a culture takes so much time. And it needs so much. You have to start with kids...but go up all the way up to the parents."

📷 Photograph by HUSSAM DA'NA



"As an entrepreneur you have to be a survivor, you have to adapt and be flexible and change your model during times of crisis!"

HODA ABOU JAMRA

Founding Partner at TVM Capital Healthcare

LIKE A PHOENIX

Rising from hard knocks and falls, Hoda Abou Jamra has built a formidable private equity business in the region's healthcare space



HODA ABOU JAMRA'S life has been a whirlwind of different ventures. Going from growing up in Lebanon, to going to school in France, to becoming a political activist for John Kerry in Boston in the 90s, Abou Jamra never thought that she'd ever return to the Middle East one day. Or be in private equity.

After graduating from Bouve College of Health Sciences, Northeastern University, Boston, with a degree in pharmacy, Abou Jamra started her first business in natural pharmaceuticals. "But I realized it was too soon...that I was too inexperienced in business." So she went on to turn her idea into a consulting business and entered the corporate world, but this didn't last very long.

"My mentality is a little different. You know, when you're in a big corporation, you do your job and that's it. When I got in I did my job, but I wanted to do more, because I had the skills to do more. But it wasn't welcome," she reminisces.

"I'm a pharmacist by trade. But while living in the US, I really learnt that I could be anything. I was very active in many different fields. The US is far more entrepreneurial."

"People encourage you and take you seriously, and they congratulate you when you fail. In Europe and the Middle East, my friends and family would say; 'Why don't you get a job in a hospital? You spent so much money on your degree.'"

These attitudes were too conservative for her, and she credits her growth a lot to the 23 years she spent in the US.

After a few years of consulting for small biotech startups in the US, Abou Jamra found that she was really good at fundraising and decided to start a biotech accelerator. The idea morphed into a non-profit think tank called The BioExec Institute, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which is still flourishing today.

In 2005, she took a giant leap of faith and moved to Dubai to start another fundraising business. Despite several warnings from colleagues and mentors, she took it as a challenge and did it anyway.

"I'm a risk taker. I built something. I took my skills and surrounded myself with the right people," she says

Abou Jamra started Boston BioCapital in Dubai in 2006, which focused solely on biotech. But two years in, she

changed her business model to incorporate healthcare.

"I realized that there is so much that needs to be done in the region surrounding healthcare," she says. "But I didn't know healthcare from the inside. So I decided to bring on a partner."

She partnered with Germany-based TVM Capital. But soon after, the 2008 crisis tore through the UAE and TVM Capital pulled out. Unwilling to give up, Abou Jamra and her partner bought the firm out, kept the name, and tried to stay afloat.

"We needed to do something completely different. Everybody with money here goes straight to the hospitals, because it's a model they know and trust. But we wanted to do something that no one else was doing. As an entrepreneur you have to be a survivor, you have to adapt and be flexible and change your model during times of crisis!"

Today, TVM Capital is still the only global fund that specializes in healthcare in the Middle East and India—it is now expanding into Southeast Asia.

TVM's current portfolio includes a long-term care and rehabilitation center and the largest homecare company in the UAE, a medical devices manufacturer in Egypt, and IVF centers operating in the Middle East and India. Its investment into ProVita International Medical Center was successfully exited in 2015.

On being a woman in the workplace, the relentless Abou Jamra says: "Gender discrimination exists, but it's also your attitude. If you go in expecting it, you will constantly be preoccupied with it. If you go in and do a good job, and rise above it, you will succeed."

Photograph by GABRIELA MAJ



"Fitness and health is such an overlooked aspect of Saudi women's lives. And this has to change."



FATIMA BATOOK

Founder at Studio 55 and Tima

SPIN ME SOME SPORT

Social change through sports in Saudi Arabia



AS A TEENAGER, Fatima Batook was an emotional eater, she tells us. Trying helplessly to fit in, she turned to food to find comfort. At the age of 18, she had reached an unhealthy weight of 130 kgs.

Things, however, took a turn when she tragically lost her father due to obesity-related health complications. "I felt that I needed to do something. I started making changes in my life. It took me a lot of soul searching to understand my problem."

After years of trying different fad diets and workout plans, Batook stumbled upon an experience that was about her life and the lives of many other Saudi women.

"I met a spinning trainer. I never thought that I would be sitting there on a stationed bicycle feeling like I am climbing the highest mountains. Working out became more than a weight loss tool...it became my venting space where I could feel free and liberated."

Her interest in spinning turned to something more than just trying to lose weight. Batook started traveling around the world attending workshops and taking fitness courses, eventually becoming a qualified spinning instructor and Piloxing trainer.

But her spinning dreams came crashing down not too long after. Batook suddenly found herself stranded when the gym she used to go to was shut down by the Saudi government, which didn't offer legal licenses for women-only sports centers.

This led the marketing professional to respond by setting up an unlicensed mini-gym on a squash court in her compound, where she started offering spinning classes to her former gym mates.

She also boldly took to social media where she was very vocal about her frustration with the status quo.

Predictably, she was faced with a lot of opposition. "I started receiving hate mail. At some point, all I wanted to do was give up. I was pressured by family and close circles to back down. But just when I was ready to give up, a friend of mine jokingly said that the best way to respond is by wearing T-shirts carrying my name."

Little did the friend know that her joke would be Batook's eureka moment, who thought that starting a homegrown women's active wear brand would be exactly what the situation needed. "I wasn't interested in the business side of it. By creating a Saudi sports brand by a Saudi woman, I knew I will get their attention."

In 2012, Batook quit her marketing job and embarked on a journey to launch Tima, named after her childhood nickname. She traveled around China, Vietnam and the US looking for a production factory. "It wasn't until I visited Brazil that I found what I was looking for in terms of design, fabric, and production. The body shape of Brazilian women is very similar of the women in the Middle East."

Today, Tima is made in two factories in Brazil that are run by women, who further employ women in need. "These women are the sole providers for their families. They are divorced or widowed. It is just a perfect fit for me."

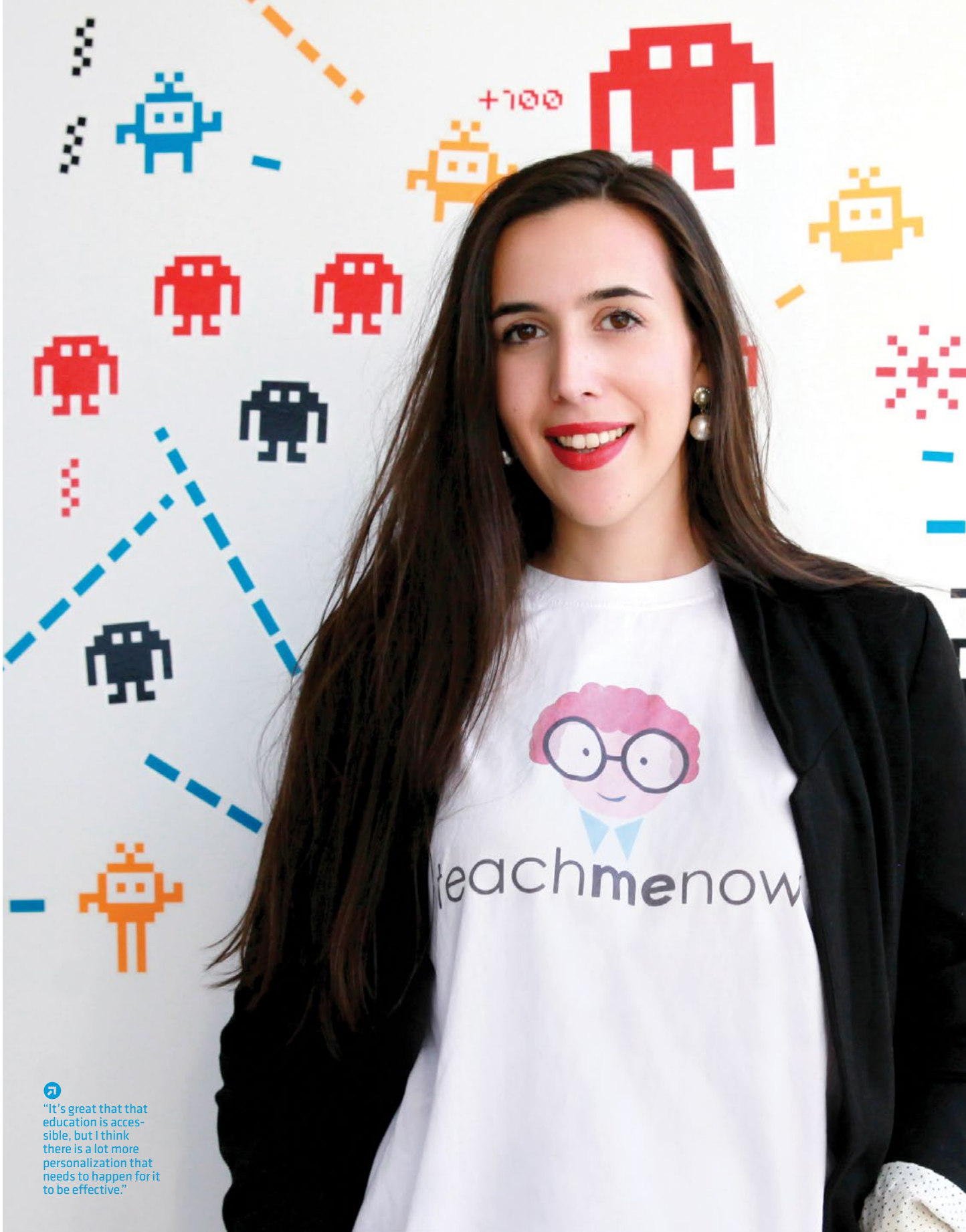
While developing her brand, Batook was also still busy lobbying for laws that offer licenses for women's health clubs. Eventually, her regional government took notice and invited her to join the province's Young Saudi Business Women association.

She then used her position as a member of the association to raise the matter with the General President of Youth Welfare Prince Abdullah bin Musa'ed bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, under whose remit it was to issue licenses for men's health clubs. "We went there with all the supporting documents and made our case. To our surprise, he instantly granted our proposal his approval."

A month later, she opened her first female-only studio, Studio55 in Al Khobar. Batook now envisions opening 20 additional studios over the next three to five years.

"Fitness and health is such an overlooked aspect of Saudi women's lives. And this has to change. Women don't drive cars in Saudi, but they drive everything else. They are phenomenal and they need to be healthy in order to be able to manage their homes, their families, and their jobs."

Photograph by GABRIELA MAJ



"It's great that that education is accessible, but I think there is a lot more personalization that needs to happen for it to be effective."



THEA MYHRVOLD
❖ Founder & CEO at TeachMeNow

TECH THAT TUTOR!

Connecting students in Saudi Arabia to teachers in Venezuela and more



AS THE DAUGHTER of an Iraqi-Syrian mother and a Norwegian father, growing up in Saudi Arabia, as well as being schooled in Greece, Norway and Switzerland, you could say that Thea Myhrvold knew a thing or two about international relations from a very young age.

It was therefore not unlikely for someone like her to think of a life in the United Nations (UN), where she interned early on in her career. But as with most of us, life had a pretty different plan for her.

“As a young person, I didn’t feel like I could make the kind of impact that I wanted to make [working for the UN]. I was very frustrated by the limitations that I had and as an unpaid intern for six months it wasn’t as fulfilling as you’d hoped,” she says. “Especially when you are mostly just getting people their coffee.”

Myhrvold didn’t push for a more permanent and fulfilling role at the UN and instead decided to fast-track her career in a different direction. While studying herself, she tutored high school students part-time.

Two of her students had severe dyslexia and were failing

all of their courses. With final exams coming up, Myhrvold decided to take a different approach to get them through. Using visual flashcards and other props, Myhrvold created games to get the information across to them.

And it worked. After graduating, one girl went on to study economics and the other, education. “That was my aha moment. I was only 19 at the time, and I’m not a trained teacher, so I didn’t have it all figured out, but I knew I wanted to pursue new forms of education,” she says.

After graduating and finishing her internship at the UN, Myhrvold took a year off and taught herself everything she could about building apps. It was in 2011, when apps for education were still a relatively new phenomenon, that Myhrvold started building a gamified app for students, based on what she’d learnt tutoring. In 2012 her tutoring app, IB Smart, was released and she got a cascade of requests for more tutoring.

“I had students from all over the world. Korea, Japan, Australia, the US, you name it. I had students everywhere. At the time, I had Skype...I had email...I had PayPal...I had a million things to coordinate,” she says. “And in parallel you have this rise of other plat-

forms like Uber and Airbnb, utilizing the sharing economy, but nothing that really worked for learning.”

Enter TeachMeNow, an online tutoring platform. Different from other learning platforms like Udemy and Coursera, TeachMeNow aims for personalization and accountability.

“It’s great that that education is accessible, but I think there is a lot more personalization that needs to happen for it to be effective. We do everything live,” she says.

So if someone is looking to learn Arabic, at TeachMeNow, he can find a list of different options and teachers, different prices, different kinds of methodology and he can then choose the tutor that he wants to work with.

The platform is open to everyone—from stay-at-home moms wanting to teach languages all the way to tutors from universities like Oxford, Cambridge and Ivy League schools in the US.

For Myhrvold, this is a small step towards changing how learning takes place. Today, through the use of technology, a professor sitting in Venezuela can teach a student in Saudi Arabia. “That was one of our first live classes. Without the platform, they would have never been connected. What was really interesting is that he [the professor] charged \$20 an hour for a native Spanish qualified certified class, and for the student in Saudi Arabia that was a fantastic deal. Because finding a native Spanish speakers in the kingdom is a real challenge.”

According to Myhrvold, higher education has traditionally been about getting a solid degree to have a career path. But it will now be more about all-round skills and adaptability rather than just one specific degree that lasts them a lifetime. “Employers need to be more open to where that evolution is going.”

❖ Photograph by GABRIELA MAJ

TAKE THAT CANCER!

This engineer is fighting to make early breast cancer detection accessible to all in Saudi Arabia



WHEN JORDAN-BORN Nermin Sa'd first moved to Saudi Arabia with her husband, there was little to no chance of her getting a job as a female mechanical engineer. Her options were limited to either changing her career to become a teacher or to sit at home and do nothing.

Neither of these options appealed to her, and so her husband, also an engineer, convinced the men in his field to outsource work to her on a freelance basis. This lasted for ten years, and as she worked on, her freelance business grew to a point where she needed more people.

This prompted her to start her business, Handasiyat.net, a very successful online engineering platform employing only Arab women engineers serving in Saudi Arabia.

This, however, took a big turn one day, when she got some devastating news. Sa'd's best friend had advanced breast cancer, and after having to undergo a double mastectomy, her husband chose to divorce her, leaving her with the broken memory of a 20-year marriage and four children.

Deeply affected by this situation, and overwhelmed by a feeling of helplessness, Sa'd decided to put her engineering firm in the hands of her co-founder, and take a significantly different route.

She launched her second company, Smart Detection Bra, and spent \$15,000 developing the prototype of a bra that could detect changes in breast tissue across five different criteria. Working together with oncologists and other medical and engineering professionals, Sa'd spends all her time now researching and developing her invention.



Sa'd spent \$15,000 in developing a prototype of a bra that could detect changes in breast tissue across five different criteria—thus scanning for any likelihood of early stage breast cancer.

The final product is a bra, which would be worn once a month and would send various information about temperature, shape, weight and density to the woman's mobile phone. This, in the hands of the public, could see an end to uncomfortable mammograms and limit embarrassing visits to the doctor, especially in a deeply conservative country like Saudi Arabia.

It does not help that there is a worrying void in research and statistics surrounding breast cancer in the Arab world. In February this year, the World Health Organization warned that by 2020, cases of breast cancer would double unless governmental authorities took action.

According to Sa'd, one of the biggest problems is that breast cancer—which is easily treatable if it's detected early—goes undiagnosed until it's too late.

"Because life in Saudi Arabia is so incredibly conservative, women, and many men also, are too shy to go to the doctor," says Sa'd.

Sa'd is currently in the process of raising funding to the value of \$3 million to develop the product. In the future, she plans to take her research and invention much further.

"If I'm able to perfect the technology and take the product to the marketplace, the same technology can be used for many other things, like detecting prostate cancer in men."

She is hopeful, adding that technology has made it easier and cheaper to launch companies, which in turn has made it easier for Saudi women to earn money or have a career.

"There is still a lot of work to be done," she says, "but I am seeing a lot of change happening."

Sa'd is of the opinion that the onus to change the status quo doesn't only lie in the hands of Saudi men to empower women, but also the women.

"Culture and tradition are very strong in Arab families, so it's easy for modern women to just go along with how their mothers and grandmothers did things," she says. "There needs to be more awareness for women to see that they now have more options than ever."

☞ Photograph by STUDIO BANAT

ESRA'A AL SHAFEI
Founder at Mideast Tunes

THIS IS A REBEL SONG

Using music and tech to break through barriers



FOR MOST of us, the internet is a tool to do business, connect, or shop online. For Esra'a Al Shafei, it is a tool to help stop censorship and promote freedom of speech. "Growing up in Bahrain, I witnessed a lot of injustices," says Al Shafei. "The rights of migrant workers, ethnic and religious minorities, and the LGBT community are what made me delve into the challenges of human rights advocacy. I felt responsible for protecting the people who are building our societies."

In 2006, the political science graduate launched Mideast Youth as a simple

group-blogging platform in an attempt to bring different factions from the region to one platform, which promotes freedom of speech and social justice.

"There were a lot of borders and barriers that didn't allow us as people to communicate and learn from each other. But then when I started using the internet, I knew right away that it was going to be the gateway to freedom of speech."

For the first four years, Mideast Youth was a one-woman-show where Al Shafei had to work several odd freelance jobs to sustain the business.

Over time, Mideast Youth morphed into an ecosystem of platforms that include CrowdVoice, Ahwaa, Migrants Rights, Kurdish Rights, and Mideast Tunes, which aim to make the under-reported and marginalized voices across the Middle East and North Africa heard. The open-source platform uses a broad spectrum of social media tools, ranging from written blogs, podcasts, vlogs, comics, video animation and pictures to live broadcasting through radio.

Of these projects, Al Shafei is most passionate about Mideast Tunes, an application featuring underground musicians from across the MENA region.

"We have amazing artists that are pushing out very daring, courageous, inspiring music that no one knows about. So, we wanted to create a place where we can showcase that kind of music. This is the music that speaks to our identity."

For Al Shafei, preserving and promoting such music is to keep the many distinct cultures and their forms of

music alive as well as to support these artists and ensure that they continue creating in their art forms.

In 2010, Mideast Tunes started as a web app with 10 bands from the Gulf. Today, it has transformed into a mobile application available on Android and iOS with over 350,000 app users listening to more than 10,000 original tracks from 1,700 bands across the region.

The service also has an offline listening capability, allowing users in conflict areas such as Palestine, Iraq and Syria to connect with the music without needing ongoing access to internet.

"We think it has huge potential to grow. We see the kind of people it invites and the dialogue it creates. People are talking about gender identity because of female rappers in Egypt, and social justice because of metal musicians in Saudi Arabia. We also see a lot of Syrian refugees turning to music instead of journalism or documentaries to express themselves and express their identities to the world."

Through her work, Al Shafei won several civil society accolades. She is the recipient of the "Berkman Award" from the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School, and the Monaco Media Prize, which acknowledges innovative uses of media for the betterment of humanity.

In 2014, Mideast Tunes received a grant from the Beirut-based Arab Fund for Arts and Culture that funds individuals and organizations in the fields of cinema, performing arts, literature, music and visual arts across the Arab world.

"Over the years, we have sustained ourselves through several crowdfunding campaigns and grants from the artists and the users. Yet, financing is a constant struggle. That is why we are trying to work our way towards financial sustainability."

Al Shafei believes that Mideast Tunes has a bright future given that music in the region has underestimated when it comes to how much power it has. "We talk about the power of journalism and blogging. What about the power of music? It is something that can move millions of people at a time...people who don't speak the same language or belong to the same movement."

Editor's note: Due to the controversial nature of her work, Esra'a al Shafei prefers physical anonymity



"People are talking about gender identity because of female rappers in Egypt, and social justice because of metal musicians in Saudi Arabia."

COURTESY: ESRA'A AL SHAFEI



"The purpose of education is not about being able to read and write and receiving a certificate...it is for the individual to realize what he is good at...to make choices that maximize his potential."



YASMIN HELAL

Founding Partner at Educate-Me

PAY IT FORWARD

Upending the way education is approached in Egypt



YASMIN HELAL will be first to admit that she has had a very privileged life. She grew up in a middle-class family in one of Cairo's best neighborhoods and attended a private school. At a young age, she took to basketball and eventually went professional.

Over the next 19 years, Helal would become one of Egypt's most prominent female basketball players. Along her journey, she collected 38 medals, captained a club team for several years and played for the Egyptian National Team. On the other side, she also majored in engineering and worked in telecom with Alactel-Lucent, becoming one of their star young employees. Things were good, and life was a breeze.

One day, while stepping out for lunch, she was stopped by a man on the street who would change her life. The man didn't want an autograph from the decorated athlete—he wanted \$20 so that he could pay for his three daughters to go to school.

Not believing the man, taking him to be another street side scammer, she asked him to take her to the school to make sure that he was telling the truth.

He was and Helal was overcome with a surging sense of guilt.

"The money the man needed to send his children to school was equivalent to a fast food meal. I couldn't wrap my head around it. So I offered to sponsor his kids," she recollects. But that guilt was surging inside her, pushing her to do more than what she had. "More needed to be done."

In 2011, along with two co-founders, Helal quit her high-paying engineering job to work full time on setting up Educate-Me, a non-profit organization designed to run fund-raising campaigns to help reinstate underprivileged children back to school.

"I couldn't find any fulfillment doing my corporate job. But it wasn't easy to abandon my career and my years of higher education to set up a non-profit organization. I was faced with a lot of skepticism. But I knew I had to do something."

Starting up Educate-Me, Helal recognized that money was not the real challenge—it was the educational system she was sending the students back to that was failing.

"I realized that it's not a matter of throwing money at people. It's not a matter of sending students to buildings. It is a matter of quality," she says. "The purpose of education is not about being able to read and write and receiving a certificate...it is for the individual to be able to put himself on the way to self-actualization, to help him realize what he is...what he is good at, to allow him to make choices that maximize his potential and that of others."

Helal started shifting her focus from offering financial support to students to setting up a fully functioning supplemental education center that serves around 200 students annually. Nestled in Cairo's low-income neighborhood of El Konayessa, Educate-Me's center looks to provide innovative educational opportunities to the area's underprivileged children.

"We are pushing students toward developing 21st century skills such as critical thinking, creativity and empathy through disciplines as wide-ranging as math, language and sports," she explains.

In contrast to the public education system in Egypt that focuses on memorization and standardized tests, the program uses a learner-focused approach or "democratic learning", where students are encouraged to decide what they want to learn and thus teaching them to be far more independent and resourceful.

In order to keep her social enterprise growing, Helal is working towards achieving financial stability. To that effect, the organization has already also started working with private school students on a paid basis, helping that stream subsidize the free services to marginalized communities.

"Helping 200 students a year is not enough but it is a step in the right direction. You have start somewhere," says Helal. "We want to expand the program outside Cairo to help in other parts of the country and reach as many students as possible. But, going nationwide is the bare minimum vision. We truly hope that one day we will be able to take our model global."

Photograph by SABRY KHALED



In 2015, Fetchr raised \$11 million, claimed to be the biggest amount in Series A funding raised by any firm in the region.

JOY AJLOUNY

Co-founder & Creative Director at Fetchr

SHAKING UP SHIPPING

If Fetchr has its way, shipping stuff will never be the same in the region



IF THERE IS one word you could use to describe Joy Ajlouny, it would have to be 'firecracker'. The Palestinian-American businesswoman is outspoken, a feminist, and also on a mission to disrupt the old guard that currently dominates the regional shipping industry.

And she is super confident of that last bit. After making an exit with her e-commerce platform, Bonfaire, in Silicon Valley three years ago, Ajlouny has the experience and the risk-taking appetite to take Fetchr, her Dubai-based on-demand shipping startup, into a market dominated by the likes of Aramex right now.

The idea for Fetchr, as it is for many entrepreneurs, came to her when she was out and about shopping for herself after moving to Dubai.

"I remember the first week I got here, I went to go buy a pair of Nike sneakers but they didn't have my size," she says. "So I said, 'I'll get it online.' And the guy looked at me and said, 'We are not online.' And I was like...What?"

While the MENA region has many e-commerce companies sprouting up, not many have jumped into the area of last

mile fulfillment—delivering the package to the doorstep. Along with her co-founder Idriss Al Rifai, Ajlouny started Fetchr to target this segment of the e-commerce game—in the simplest, most tech-driven way possible—via an app.

Many of us are familiar with the five phone calls in a row, trying to establish your location with your delivery guy, giving directions, and fighting through language barriers to finally find that the package was delivered to another office or is happily sitting back at the firm's warehouse.

Fetchr uses the GPS technology from mobile phones to allow almost pin-point accurate deliveries to customers from local retailers and e-commerce firms as well as from other individual customers aka peer-to-peer packages. "Our drivers don't need to call you. Just press the button [on the app] and we know where you are," explains Ajlouny.

Although it's keeping a firm eye on the e-commerce sector, with the size of the pie there being huge, Ajlouny is also seeing a growing place for Fetchr in the peer-to-peer shipping space, almost like a concierge service. "If you've forgotten your sunglasses at your friend's place...if you need

to go and have some documents signed and delivered...if you need to have concert tickets picked up...we want Fetchr to do that for you," she says.

Still in its initial days, Fetchr is making rapid strides towards growth. To build a team to achieve that goal, Ajlouny says that she has surrounded herself with driven people who understand what it's like to work for a startup. "I think that's really the hardest thing. The number one most challenging thing for a startup in Dubai is definitely the red tape and the costs. But the second most difficult thing is hiring good people. Because people don't understand that a startup is ownership," she says.

Predictably, for that team, Ajlouny is an advocate for hiring smart and driven women from around the world, as well as getting more women into the workplace.

For her, it's more than about creating jobs. It is but about creating self-worth.

"I think that there is a culture here that, you get married, you look pretty, put on the fake eyelashes, learn how to line your lips, so you can look beautiful to attract a man, because your success story is that you got married," she says. And if those marriages don't work, such women "don't have anything to show for themselves, because they've relied their entire life on a man for their future."

"That needs to change—for there to be more women in the workforce. When men get divorced their lives go on, because their entire identity was not wrapped around you. It's wrapped around accomplishing things at their jobs and I can tell you, there is a great feeling that you get about accomplishment and self-worth when you are creating something."

Photograph by GRABRIELA MAJ



"Film and art have a huge impact in altering our perspective towards not only gender issues but many other social concerns."

NAYLA AL KHAJA

📍 Founder at D-Seven Motion Pictures

THROUGH MY EYES

Breaking stereotypes,
70 mm at a time



NAYLA AL KHAJA'S fascination with film started at a very young age. She remembers spending endless hours watching Bollywood movies that her father had collected. That she was going to do something in the world of films was a no-brainer to her.

And while people around her went towards more conventional career choices, Al Khaja ventured into the world of film—by first majoring in Fine Arts and Mass communication at Dubai Women's college and then studying film at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada.

Fresh out of college, and back in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Al Khaja set up her own production house, D-Seven Motion Pictures, in 2003. Her first project, she recounts for us, was a documentary, *Unveiling Dubai*, which premiered at the Dubai International Film Festival.

Not that it was easy as it sounds.

"It was difficult because the film industry in the UAE was almost non-existent at the time. Major components were missing. The big question was how do you begin when you have nothing to work with. I was clueless," she admits. "But I knew in my gut that I had to just start. So I raised money for a social awareness film through UNICEF and different government and private units."

However, the underdeveloped film industry wasn't Al Khaja's only or the biggest challenge. It was the fierce and vocal opposition that she received from her closest circles.

"It wasn't very easy for me. I had to work really hard to prove myself. I had to make some truly difficult decisions within my personal life to pursue my dreams. My parents were absolutely against my career choice. I went through a very tough time, trying to study film."

In 2006, she produced and directed *Arabana*, a six-minute film on child abuse, a subject considered taboo in the Middle East region, for which she won an award. Her next film, *Once*, was about the secret dating lives of Emirati women.

In 2010, Al Khaja produced another controversial movie that took a look at the issues that arise out of arranged marriages. In *Malal*, a young Emirati couple visits Kerala on their honeymoon that is soured by the wife's boredom with her new husband.

Her choice of taboo topics was not to garner attention around herself, she stresses, but to spark dialogue in her country.

"I want to push the boundaries by addressing controversial topics so that we can address important issues that surround our society."

In 2007, Al Khaja launched The Scene Club in Dubai, which is the UAE's first official film club. The club, which began with just 52 members has over 9,000 today and is fully subscribed every single month. "I think I am bringing so much to the table by introducing independent cinema to my country and bringing the community together to engage in dialogue," she explains.

Today, Al Khaja is busy working on her lifelong dream—her first feature. It tells the story of a young Arab girl and a British traveler's chance meeting in the deserts near Hatta, in the UAE, in the 1960s.

It is no surprise that most of Al Khaja's work has the woman in focus. As the UAE's first ever female filmmaker, she is a staunch believer in the role that film and art play in advancing gender equality.

"I think film is a very sublimary way of addressing a message. It speaks to you directly. It can change a preconceived idea or even an ideology that you have been so clingy about. Film and art have a huge impact in altering our perspective towards not only gender issues but many other social concerns."

📍 Photograph by GABRIELA MAJ