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Near East Foundation Moroccan Country Director Abdelkhalk Aandam wants you to meet two women he has come to know during this year's continuing work in the education of women and girls in the remote villages of the High Atlas Mountains. He writes:

"Her name is Aicha Youss, a woman nearing 60, more marked by life than by her age. She has traveled a road of suffering, humiliation, and sacrifice. Because of her unlucky destiny, she was widowed and responsible for educating her eight children. However, living in a heartless society for widowed or divorced women only succeeded in making Aicha stronger, more ambitious and thirsty to learn. She succeeded in raising her children into the men and women she always wished for, and even more important, in forging her own iron personality and becoming a leader in the development of her community. This year her village has had the opportunity to make a leap and take the first step toward a better life because of the NEF project in rural primary education. It was also an opportunity to escape from her life's sad destiny and reach the peak of her powers. Because of her unlimited ambition, her boundless enthusiasm and her irreversible will, she was named the leader of the local women. This new role opened up yet further horizons, Aicha traveled here and there, encountering many people and their differences, expanding her sophistication and experiences, and making her progressively deeper and more questioning.

"Then there is Fanna Aamamou, a 58-year-old woman taking NEF literacy training. Her life has hardly been served on a golden platter, so the powerful liberation of her personality and charm of her conversation so full of wisdom comes as a surprise. At the same time she is so different, yet also a consummate woman of Morocco and the Grand Atlas. We have had the pleasure to recruit her as president of the women's association in the Asseghmou area of Ouarzazate Province. Fifty-five years old and the mother of seven children, Fanna never went to



school because at that time education of girls was given no importance. She excelled in meeting her domestic responsibilities and with seven children to care for and without any resources, Fanne found refuge in the warmth of the home she created and where her family never went lacking. But because of her husband's advancing age, he was no longer able to take care of the farming and the burden fell upon Fanna, who typically rose to the occasion.

"The idea of creating a women's association emerged from within the ranks of the village women and what they saw happening around them. Motivated and convinced, their association first saw the light of day in April 2001 and revived again in April 2005. After identifying the needs of the women, local projects were launched, particularly literacy. Also, contacts were made with a number of organizations to obtain funding and French Heifer agreed to provide the means for a goat raising project for the sale of milk and cheese. Obstacles surely were not lacking, but they were managed, overcome by female initiative, and never discouraging Fanna. It took a lot of time and there were occasions when the credibility of the association was in question.

"This long process had its impact upon the personality and life of Fanna, allowing her to fulfill her innate potential and to excel at advancing the best interests of her sisterhood. This journey and the solidarity of others increased Fanna's confidence in her abilities, and as a result, Fanna's life as a village woman has been transformed and she has become a militant for the rights of women and the well being of her community."

The mountains of the High Atlas east of Ouarzazate are breathtakingly beautiful--cool and relaxing in summer, rugged and isolated in winter. In the warm months, fruits and nuts are plentiful; shepherds traverse the hills with sheep and goats. These provide villagers with cash crops for sale in distant urban markets. Where water is available, villagers cultivate small plots of grain, some few vegetables, and crops for animal fodder. In a good year, there may be a surplus for sale in local markets.



In winter, snow-covered mountains, narrow unpaved roads, over-flowing rivers, and periodic landslides block access for weeks at a time. Small, isolated villages are cut off from one another and from the surrounding area, relying on the rewards of a summer harvest to survive the harsh winter. Electricity, water, and sanitation facilities are absent.

For the vast majority of people in the High Atlas, education is a luxury they can ill afford. In many villages virtually all adults, both men and women, are illiterate; and there is a total absence of programs for adult literacy. In one village the local school had to be constructed alongside the village cemetery, reflecting the utter lack of social acceptance of education in or within proximity to the village. Further, teachers are outsiders, speaking and teaching in Arabic rather than the local Berber dialect.

Where schools have been introduced, attendance is limited and largely restricted to boys. In some areas women and girls are not even allowed to pass by the school, symptomatic of the longstanding culture and traditions working against the education of girls and preventing the full integration of women in society. There are an estimated 2.5 million girls of primary school age in Morocco; and more than half of them live in the countryside, where again, less than half of girls attend school, and when they do, the drop-out rate between grades one and six, is a shocking 80 percent.

WHY?

Families feel little incentive to educate girls who are generally married by the age of 14 and are helpful with household chores like gathering water and firewood as well as child-rearing. Consequently, there is strong social pressure for girls not to attend school, and when they do, they often encounter a hostile environment and leave in discouragement. When NEF first began the project, some communities even refused to participate. They simply could not understand that education was important. Young men completing primary

school were unable to go on to the secondary level since it all too often meant a costly commitment to boarding and education in a distant town.

Besides, local schools with their classes through sixth grade were all too often simply uninviting bare shells with little warmth and nothing to encourage a child's attendance. Many consisted of a single or perhaps two classrooms. They lacked space, had leaky roofs, broken windows, missing doors, insufficient and often broken furniture, no heating so were absolutely freezing in winter, and typically had inadequate or often absent water and sanitation facilities. School books and supplies were extremely limited and beyond the means of the majority of families.

Students, age six and up, had to walk many miles through rugged country in the cold of winter to attend class. Those beyond sixth grade have to travel 50 miles or more across the mountains to reach the nearest school at that level. Here they had to board with relatives or in unfamiliar hostels, and at a cost they could ill afford. Clearly such conditions discouraged school enrollment and encouraged frequent absenteeism.



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According to Abdelkhalk Andam, NEF's Moroccan project director: "It's hard for people to realize just how much has to be done. For instance, it's not just about registering girls for school, but about keeping them there. This means that we have to deal not only with how these communities perceive education, but also how they look at the role of women at home and in the broader community, and also the role of young girls in the household economy. It's about long-standing traditions and cultural issues," he continued, adding, "Many people would prefer to see it more simplistically, but that's just not possible."

COLLABORATION

Near East Foundation is working in the High Atlas Mountains in partnership with the US State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) and the Moroccan Department of Education, to bring learning to the High Atlas, promote the education of girls, provide continuing education, and encourage the involvement of local parents and teachers in activities that promote education and further development in local communities.

The initiative was launched early in the year with much fanfare at the area Chamber of Commerce, including attendance by the General Director of the Moroccan Ministry of Education. Even the inauguration of the program was a learning experience—a workshop where all participants, including village representatives, exchanged ideas and NEF's project manager outlined plans for the year.

While initially difficult to gain community acceptance, the project has in nine months of intense activity produced a virtual revolution in the perception of education among villagers



in the eight participating communities.

Villages that had refused to participate in the project are fast becoming models of educational reform. Virtually empty classrooms are now full. Those who enroll tend to remain for the term. Over 300 adults, an extraordinary more than 60 percent of them women, are enrolled in adult literacy classes--and their numbers are increasing.

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Newly-formed Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), joined by women leaders from the villages, are collaborating with NEF to encourage education for all and to mobilize the resources needed to improve schools and allow local graduates to continue their education in secondary schools located in nearby towns and cities. Some PTAs are nearly autonomous and have proven their ability to organize and manage their affairs; some others will need additional support before reaching that plateau.

NEF's Project Director Andam reported with evident satisfaction: "A majority of both PTA members and local teaching staff and administrators are now much more aware of the role of the PTA in relation to the school, as well as their role in relation to the

PTA. There is also much greater support and participation by local religious leaders, the Imams-fkihs."

THE PTA STORY

While PTAs had been tried in some communities, they had met with little success in isolated areas such as the High Atlas. People simply did not understand what they were for, and if they did, they needed a great deal of help to make them function. So this became NEF's starting point to encourage education—make the PTAs work for the community, and in turn, help the community understand how to work for the PTA. And to do this, help the teachers and administrators assigned to the schools understand how they could help and how the school would benefit from their greater involvement.

This often meant breaking down barriers between insiders and outsiders since administrators and teachers are assigned for short terms to the rural areas, generally a few years at most. All the more reason for parents to take more responsibility for assuring that children attend school and that the education they receive is what they need. That challenge was further complicated by the gender issue. When NEF began its work there were almost no girls enrolled in village schools and the idea of having women participate on the boards of local PTAs absolutely unheard of, given that some communities even prohibited women and girls from venturing near schoolyards.



Confronting gender head on and as a condition for participation, the project began by identifying and organizing women leaders from each village. Their role was to support the PTA in its efforts to encourage education and discourage dropouts. These women received training and were encouraged to participate in PTA activities and board meetings; and PTA boards were prompted to seek their advice and assistance. The strategy worked and gradually they became *ad hoc* members of the PTA boards.

In addition, adult literacy classes were established in most communities and the majority of attendees were women. In class women were able to discuss their problems, needs, and aspirations. They were now outside of their homes, in school, and involved in the larger community--participating in educational awareness campaigns, making home visits to investigate school absences and dropouts, and encouraging parents to send their children to school. Not only moving about more freely in their own communities, they also traveled beyond and met with other women in other villages. For most, it was for the first time. For

some, it was their first time in an automobile.



For their part, school administrators and teachers helped plan and participated in project activities, assisting new PTA board members in fulfilling their unfamiliar responsibilities, and in organizing and follow-up of project events. Many served as instructors for adult literacy classes with NEF providing vital training and support for their new role. Clearly evident, the educators came to better understand the problems rural people face; the role they can play in addressing these issues; and the critical importance of the teacher in encouraging and maintaining an interest in education by children and adults alike.

To support all this, NEF encouraged the emerging PTAs to take an interest in improving school facilities. Working together, NEF, local communities, and local schools are transforming rundown facilities into adequate school rooms and providing pupils with basic school supplies and teachers with teaching materials. Over the coming two years, NEF hopes to continue to support the eight participating schools and to expand the project to include a total of 15 villages in the surrounding area together with their satellite school.

This is only the beginning. Education is the core of development, but sustainable only through promotion and support for local economies. People expect education to produce results, for both men and women, improving their everyday quality of life. So NEF is working with government authorities and community residents on the development of complimentary activities that help identify and benefit from previously underutilized or neglected local resources.

These include expansion and diversification of crops, introduction of quality seeds and plant materials, rebuilding and improving herds devastated by recent droughts, quality control and marketing of rural crafts, improving processing and packaging of goods, developing local markets and transport facilities. Much of this depends on putting in place simple, cost-efficient forms of water harvesting, reforestation, alternative sources of fuel, and greater fuel efficiency. Required too is increasing community participation and encouragement of individual entrepreneurs of all ages, male and female. Developing local economies provides incentives for continuing education and feeds the process of continuing and sustainable development for all.



There is indeed a revolution brewing in the High Atlas, one that is fueling development and making it possible for local people to build the future they envision for themselves—the Near East Foundation mission. “I have to say that the work being done in the High Atlas by the NEF team is some of the best that I have seen in my career. They really are promoting a revolution in education and laying the base for economic recovery...I truly believe that,” emphatically commented NEF Regional Director Roger Hardister.