

When Mrs. Riggs, Mrs. Baker, and Coach Sullivan did what they did, they were not thinking of leadership. They were simply being extraordinary educators who knew that learning, problem-solving, and relying on grit were fundamental to the human condition. However, because their surroundings brought them into the presence of children, every move they made had impact upon students such as that little girl who is now the grown woman writing this article.

Guess what? Not one of them was a seasoned teacher with decades of experience! They were all in the beginning phase of their careers. Yet they led by example, initiative, and intense belief that they could equip their students with skills that would take them far. We cannot discount that kind of teacher leadership. In fact, it's upon such foundations that the traditional scaffolds of teacher leaders are laid.

## *We Love Reading - A Women's Literacy Program in the Arab World*

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### **Abstract**

Around the world, women have been marginalized. Advances in their lives and status have been slow and difficult. Poverty, politics, culture and conflict have stood in the way of empowerment and opportunities for women. While many programs in today's world address women's issues in an effort to empower women and improve their livelihoods, an area that has not been fully explored, and that will have a tremendous impact on the lives and well-being of women, is the importance of reading among women. We Love Reading, a Jordanian based initiative constitutes training local women to hold readaloud sessions in public spaces in their neighbourhoods where books are routinely read aloud to children in an effort to encourage reading for pleasure. The training is highly interactive including debates, public speaking, and visual and physical exercises revolving around the leadership role of the woman in the community through her library. The training

covers a wide range of aspects from leadership and entrepreneurship to communication and building confidence. The impact of the program on women readers in the longer term will be empowering women as leaders in their community to instigate change, and play a prominent role in decision making within the community because of the increased knowledge and wisdom gained from reading and their leadership role.

**Keywords:** Arab World, Women, Literacy, Reading, Empowerment, informal learning

### **Introduction**

Around the world, women have been marginalized. Advances in their lives and status have been slow and difficult. Poverty, politics, culture and conflict have stood in the way of empowerment and opportunities for women (Arab human development report, 2006 ).

While many programs in today's world address women's issues in an effort to empower women and improve their livelihoods, an area that has not been fully explored, and that will have a tremendous impact on the lives and well-being of women, is the importance of reading among women. Lack of reading for pleasure results in no stimulation of creativity, limited skill and an inability to tap into the widespread knowledge of the society to which women belong. Thus, the status quo is preserved. Reading is essential to the development of an individual's personality, imagination, intellect and communication skills. Individuals must learn to love and enjoy reading to reap its benefits (Bamberger 2007; Stanovich 2000).

### **The importance of reading**

A recent survey from Arabia News estimated that the number of pages read for pleasure in the Middle East is half a page a year, while for the USA this figure is 11 books a year. Estimates based on the UNESCO reports of 1991 and 2005 and on the US Working Paper for the G8 Summit in 2004, state that an Arab reader on average reads 6 minutes per year and that the output of books in Arab countries represents just 1.1% of the world total, a sobering statistics if one considers that the Arab population represents around 5% of the world's population (Arab World Regional Report 2003; Daniel 2005; Swift 2005; Hammoud 2001; The NEA report 2007, A Pan-Arab Survey on Readership 2010).

Too often girls grow up in an environment that is poor in ideas, stunted in creativity, narrow in skills; this results in a limited worldview and lack of ability to tap into knowledge-based resources. These are contributing factors to a lack of empowerment that perpetuates poverty, injustice, abuse and

inequity, whose victims are - in most cases- women and girls. A literate society is essential for economic development and social integration (Bamberger 2005; Stanovich 2000).

If today, one asks adults why don't they read the answers are multiple such as lack of books and absence of role models. In general TV and Internet are the main sources of information which do not always give a fair representation of all world views (A Pan-Arab Survey on Readership 2010). However, research has pointed to the major reason as being the lack of being read to, i.e. lack of the experience of reading (Kalb and van Ours 2013). The practice of reading and writing enables a culture to identify its past while envisioning its future. The information society places a premium on the generation and dissemination of knowledge and information. The ability to use texts in all their diverse formats is essential. Local customs, local wisdom and oral traditions must remain valued, of course. But, individuals and communities that do not value and practice high levels of reading and writing on a wide scale are inevitably at risk of becoming the victims rather than the masters of the global knowledge society (Bamberger 2005; Stanovich 2000).

The so-called Arab Spring - a revolutionarily spirit, which for better or worse has largely reconfigured the political landscape in the Middle East - has opened up new possibilities with which to approach the issue of literacy in the region. A new generation of young men and women are realizing that structural forces retain the status quo, and that greater education is necessary to alter it. The increased awareness brought about by the Arab spring during the past three years has allowed us to intervene with new structural changes in how literacy might be increased. Such changes, importantly, must plan for the long-term, in

order to guarantee a generational transformation rather than a momentary improvement (Dajani 2011). Reading for pleasure leads to empowerment because it brings about a greater exposure and a heightened awareness of life possibilities for women.

### **The We Love Reading Program**

Research has shown that reading for pleasure can be achieved if adults read aloud to the young child (Kalb and van Ours 2013). Being read to at a young age engenders a sense of excitement and enthusiasm for reading, which is subsequently retained in adulthood and deployed in relation to all sorts of texts. Being read to was just as important, if not more primary, than the availability of books for endorsing reading. In the West, this task is fulfilled by parents, teachers or librarians. Although these individuals are present in developing countries, the culture hasn't embedded a sense of enthusiasm for reading aloud, and many are illiterate or lack reading skills and habits. There are few public libraries in Jordan and even those that exist are not actively engaged with readaloud activities.

In 2006, WLR began as a bimonthly read aloud session in a neighborhood mosque. The mosque administrators allowed the building to be used for this purpose on Saturday mornings, and advertised the read aloud session during Friday prayers, the weekly Muslim congregation attended by a majority of the neighborhood. Every other week, a number of children's book were chosen and read aloud to the children in attendance. Twenty-five children attended the first session. Two weeks afterward, the number of children doubled. A month later, WLR complemented the read aloud sessions with the basic functions of a library. The nascent organization prepared three dozen children's

books, some of which were previously read aloud, and created a lending system through which children can check out books immediately after each session. The children met the lending system with enthusiasm, and, in between sessions, the books were read aloud by the children themselves and by members of their family.

The success of the first library allowed the founder Rana Dajani to conceive a general model to be replicated, "in every neighborhood." The model has two components: a regular read aloud session and a lending system. The most convenient location for the read aloud sessions is usually a mosque, as nearly every neighborhood has one, but in some cases, the read aloud sessions take place in a church, home, or community center. The books to be read aloud and lent were selected on the basis of whether they included themes of empathy, responsibility, and respect; whether their illustrations were attractive and age-appropriate; and whether they were written Arabic (the local language). With a small grant from the neighborhood mosque, as well as with the help of some personal savings, Rana Dajani bought the first collection of books and used them as the base for two more libraries. The We Love reading initiative was born and developed into an innovative model that provides a practical, cost efficient, sustainable, grassroots approach that involves women and the community to increase reading levels among children 4-10 by focusing on the read aloud experience to instill the love of reading. The We Love Reading (WLR) program constitutes training local women to hold read aloud sessions in public spaces in their neighbourhoods where women routinely read aloud to children. This is the "library". WLR chooses books that are age-appropriate, attractive, not biased towards any religion or

political entity in content and in the native language of the child (Leadbeater, 2012).

The women are recruited through word of mouth, youth organizations, women organizations, website, social media, public events etc. The volunteers recruited do not have to be highly educated, they just have to fulfill simple requirements, which is to love children and reading and to be willing and motivated to volunteer, which implies to maintain a responsible, passionate and dedicated attitude towards their work. But they also have to be part of the same neighbourhood as the families, so that they are trusted and welcome.

A multiplier effect is secured through the peer to peer training as leadership women, who received a training already, are asked to pass on their knowledge and teach other women, which is also how new volunteers were approached. Through this fairly efficient process at the end only few resources are needed and in total more librarians can be trained.

The women who read in their neighbourhoods do so on a volunteer basis. WLR provides them with a seed library of 30 books. Later they are responsible to fund raise from the local neighbourhood to buy more books. The objective is to build ownership in the community itself to sustain the library on the long run. The woman chooses a central location in her neighbourhood which could be the mosque or community center and approach the authorities in charge and explains to them the concept of the WLR library. It is up to her creativity to devise a way to recruit the children most of the time it is by word of mouth because of the inherent cohesion of the neighbourhood

The WLR training results in promoting the importance of reading among women trainees. This results in the women becoming advocates

of reading in their community. The advocacy is mainly through the actual reading aloud act to the children in the library. The woman reader advocates for reading in other ways in her community such as spreading the model of WLR by training other women and word of mouth. She becomes a role model for other women in her community and for her children by reading aloud in her community. The training also promotes the experience of reading for pleasure among adults. Reading has traditionally been considered boring or a waste of time outside of academic or religious contexts. WLR is changing attitudes and letting people know that reading is fun. When children enjoy reading they let down their barriers and are more open to receiving the subtle messages in the stories. Adults when enjoying reading find inspiration and draw courage to be empowered themselves. Furthermore, literature, as opposed to textbooks used for school, is primarily a humanistic product, encouraging empathy, ambivalence, tolerance, and self-reflection (Bal et al. 2013; Djikic et al. 2013). Developing a relationship with literature at a young age encourages a generation to deploy such qualities in their everyday life afterwards. WLR empowers women readers to become leaders in their communities, because they are in charge of the libraries. The community starts to respect women and supports their roles as leaders and future change agents even within mosques. The philosophy behind WLR training is capacity building at the level of the individual. The current lack of focus on individual capacities, as opposed to material provision, is a trend in many Arab developing countries, where money and effort is directed towards achieving easily calculable and quantifiable products or images, such as tall buildings, facilities, and equipment.

## The We Love Reading Training

A self-developed curriculum and manual are used as guidelines for the facilitators for the training. The volunteers are trained by the programme initiator, together with a professional trainer, specialised in reading aloud training. The training is highly interactive including debates, presentations, and visual and breathing exercises dealing with the leadership role of the woman in the community through the library. The participants practice reading aloud in front of each other. This is supported by the training of public speaking skills, eye contact, controlling of the voice and body language. Moreover the women are invited to work in teams with the help of a case study, share perspectives, opinions and needs to work together to find solutions to challenges. Empathy, respect and acceptance are core values, transmitted in the training. They shall enable the women to teach approaches such as if a person disagrees with somebody, he or she can at least appreciate the background of the counterpart and respect different opinions. This attitude fosters inclusion and acceptance among the trainees who in turn become role models for others.

The WLR training focuses on capacity building in multiple areas including education and information, communication and soft skills. Raising awareness on issues that matter to the women and their community is brought about by the interactive nature of the training where women are invited to share perspectives, opinions and needs to work together to find solutions to challenges. This leads women to realize the full capacity of their own potential and to discover new roles for themselves and redefine their roles in the community. The training encourages openness to other perspectives and outlooks on life and builds

confidence and self esteem at the level of the individual and at the level of the culture by adopting a local initiative not a Western model. Removing the concept of victimized to instill instead the concept of “I am the change”. The women are trained to assume leadership roles within a culturally acceptable model, allowing them to gingerly widen their circle without raising alarm bells. Thus fostering a gradual and natural development of leadership within her community. Empathy, acceptance and respect is emphasized in every activity carried out in the training. Most importantly, in how reading allows us to understand others by living their lives through reading their stories. The point emphasized is that even if we disagree we can at least appreciate where a person is coming from and respect that she has a different opinion. This attitude fosters inclusion and acceptance among our trainees who in turn become role models for others.

Although community service in most developed countries is encouraged and well-organized, the idea of community involvement and volunteerism is a new concept in Jordan - especially for women. Through WLR initiative, women who have never experienced their importance or value outside of their homes are being empowered to become active and productive members of their communities leading to social entrepreneurship. As a result of the training each woman essentially becomes an entrepreneur, establishing a library in her neighborhood. The library is sustainable through the ownership of the women for their libraries and the involvement of the community which aids indirectly to spreading the culture of loving to read. All the credit goes to her not to WLR. This ensures sustainability because the library is volunteerism. The model is very flexible. Every woman who adopts it tailors it to fit her community, schedule, culture and

needs. This aids in building her ownership to the project and therefore its sustainability, because she becomes a partner in the development of the model. The training includes debates on various issues that are either introduced by the trainer or the women themselves as contributors to the training experience. For example; in one training the question was brought up by the trainees “Is too much reading bad?” And a debate of the various aspects of negative effects of reading led to asking what is bad reading? What is harmful? Who defines what? This leads women to think deeply about how they look at things and how to formulate their argument to defend their perspective and how to internalize criticism positively and ultimately how to respect others even while disagreeing. The debates also train the women in the art of persuasion.

Parts of the training are on how to start your own library. The women are trained in the art of persuasion of their families and communities to implement their library, time management, planning and financing. Women actually practice reading aloud in front of each other this results in boosting confidence to stand in front of a group and present leading to improved public speaking skills, eye contact, voice manipulation and body language. The practice also develops critical thinking because the women are asked to criticize each other and to accept criticism. They are trained not to take things personally and how to criticize without hurting and to distinguish between constructive criticism and destructive criticism, this is very important in building relationships and in communication.

### **Innovation**

The WLR model is innovative at multiple levels:

1. WLR addresses the root cause of lack of reading among children.
2. The idea of children being read to in "storytime" fashion is a new concept. Reading has traditionally been considered boring or a waste of time outside of academic or religious contexts. Now, we are trying to change attitudes and let people know that reading can be done "just for fun".
3. The model provides a practical, cost efficient way to address the challenge of planting the love for reading in children, by reading aloud to them on a regular basis.
4. Storytelling sessions take place in local mosques. Traditionally, mosques in the region have been reserved for men and only utilized for prayers and a few religious lectures throughout the week. By implementing our initiative in mosques, we are essentially turning them into community centers and opening the doors for everyone in the community - including women and children.
5. The venue (the mosque) is present in every neighborhood regardless of social and economical status, and therefore it is accessible to every child.
6. The model uses and leverages local resources (volunteers, venues, books) instead of relying on foreign resources and ideas.
7. Although community service in most developed countries is encouraged and well-organized, the idea of community involvement and volunteerism is a new concept in Arab counties - especially for women! Through WLR, women who have never experienced their importance or value outside of their homes are being empowered to become active and

productive members of their communities.

8. The model is inherently sustainable because it is established and run by an individual from the neighborhood.
9. The model also serves as a platform for dissemination of awareness programs including hygiene, conservation of energy, water, etc. It has been shown through research that it is the mother that plants these good habits at an early age in her child. Stories that she reads to the child can instill good habits on health and conserving the environment. The biggest problem facing most projects working on raising awareness in developing countries is accessing the grass roots. Our model does that. The second problem is trust, which our model provides by virtue of the local administered library. Similarly, children gain independence and ownership because they are coming of their own accord to these sessions.
10. The woman who reads aloud does not have to be highly educated nor trained
11. The model is also unique in that it is sustainable through the ownership of the women for these libraries and the involvement of the community which aids indirectly to spreading the culture of loving to read. The women own their libraries. All the credit goes to her not to We Love Reading. This ensures sustainability because the library is volunteerism
12. The model is also cost efficient in the sense that the same books are used again and again because children love to hear the same story over and over.
13. The model also focuses on building in children a feeling of independence

coming on their own to the read aloud sessions because it is accessible.

14. The model is also creative in empowering women to become leaders in their neighborhoods by taking charge of these libraries and breaking the dominance of men in the mosques by taking these leadership roles in the mosque for the libraries.
15. The model is very flexible. Every woman who adopts it tailors it to fit her community, schedule, culture and needs. This aids in building her ownership to the project and therefore its sustainability, because she becomes a partner in the development of the model.

### **Challenges**

The biggest problem facing most projects working on raising awareness in developing countries is accessing the grass roots. Clearly it is not possible to train all the parents to read aloud and show passion for reading, but We Love Reading uses the grass roots approach to build capacities in one person of each neighbourhood who reads to children so that they in the long run secure the passion for reading within the next generation. Reading is used as means to achieve that children are capable to become independent thinkers and make them aware that people can learn from others while maintaining their pride in their culture and heritage.

Another major challenge within this programme is raising funds and finding appropriate books for the children. The books are bought through grants or donated by organisations. All books are previously screened by WLR to make sure they are age appropriate and of high quality.

At the beginning it was hard to make the community believe in the positive impact of the programme in a longer term. Before the sessions started children hesitated, because they recognized WLR as another educational programme. After listening to the stories and having fun they attended the sessions more often and brought all their friends and relatives with them.

As the number of children in the community attending the sessions is increasing WLR needs continuously new volunteers, but it is hard to recruit them. Besides before the training starts many of the participants lacked proficient reading skills. WLR supports these learners a lot in improving their reading skills. The volunteers had to show high commitment in practicing to read children's books before the read aloud sessions with family or friends. As minor challenge there may still be a slightly negative stigma towards illiteracy.

### **Impact of We Love Reading**

Older women who are readers feel a sense of fulfillment that they are serving their communities, and have something to offer. They become wise advisors in the leadership role they assume in the neighborhood. Youth have come up with innovative projects for literacy and reading, such as libraries on buses and reading clubs in villages. The WLR model has been adopted by ACEV the Mother Child Education Foundation in Turkey within their program of women literacy. They are using reading stories as a way of educating illiterate mothers. In Mexico, the model has been adopted by indigenous populations as a way to preserve the oral heritage and pride of the local communities, as well as increase school enrollment. The model has been implemented by more developed countries to encourage

literacy among immigrant communities and by refugee communities allowing for a constructive outlet to conditions of impoverishment. The model spread through word of mouth, social media and lectures.

The women who have been involved in WLR have developed into empowered women who have gained respect of their community members, not only among females but, importantly, among the males in their community. Trained women from refugee camps reported that the men of the neighborhood encourage them in their role as leaders of the libraries. Mosques clerics open their doors to women to manage and administer the read-aloud sessions with joy and pride and donate funds to buy books.

Alone in Jordan WLR has trained 2000 women, created 1200 libraries and directly impacted 15,000 children (of which 60% are girls) and indirectly reached another 50,000 individuals (January 2016). The overall impact on the development of society is immeasurable.

One of the women who trained with WLR is a grandmother. She does not have a high school diploma. She left school and got married at 17. She was not very social. She had cancer. Her husband wanted to find help for her and he asked around and was told about WLR. He drove her to the training session. WLR changed her life. She became social, successful, productive, happy and a leader. She tried to go to the mosque it was too complicated so she said "I will start reading in my house". She talked to the neighbours and the children came to listen to the read aloud sessions. The children increased in numbers up to forty in her house. The mothers were curious and came to attend the sessions. They begged her to keep reading to

their children. She started reading in other neighbourhoods even in other towns.

She would practice reading the stories to her husband and he would be her audience and comment on what sound good, how should she change her voice to fit the character etc.

At first she was hesitant and not confident. Then with her husbands encourgment and the training she became a reader and a leader. She broke the wall and became happier, more social and a leader.

She made her own personal library in her bedroom which she opened to the children to use. Allowing them in to her bedroom something that is sacred. But for the sake of the children she allowed them in to use the library and borrow books.

The women started meeting in her house and talk about reading, and problems in their communities. They started brain storming looking for solutions. For example they talked about the environment water and energy conservation. They came up with an idea to make organic compost to sell and recycle. This is an example of teamwork, social entrepreneurship. The catalysis being the lady that WLR trained. The neighbourhood does not know about WLR. They only know that this lady (Nabelah) started a library in her neighbourhood. She became a leader and role model for the other women, the children and the husbands.

In an evaluation done by the Hashemite University, The WLR program showed an 84% increase in leadership skills among the volunteers (unpublished data).

## Conclusion

WLR has succeeded because it is a simple grassroots model. WLR depends on networks of women who are similar to a movement to bring about social change through reading. This movement is especially relevant in the context of the Arab spring. The model is easily replicable, particularly in rural areas, as the only requirements are a trained reader, a collection of children's books, a comfortable location, and some enthusiastic young participants. Even in areas in which there is high illiteracy among women, it is sufficient to have one woman who can read children's books, which usually use simple language. Sustainability is built into our model through capacity building at the level of the local citizen. By providing program development training to local women and girls we are instilling in them the confidence and skills they need to successfully expand WLR into their neighborhoods with minimal guidance and resources WLR aims to develop long term cultural change. WLR isn't delivering services which need support systems, it creates capabilities in hundreds of local women enabling them to be creative for themselves. The model is formulated in a way that each person can tailor the model to fit their culture, their needs while maintaining the essence of the model, aiding in building ownership to the project and sustainability. It is imperative that WLR measures qualitatively the impact of the program on the women readers, children and community. These studies are essential to analyse strengths and weaknesses to continue developing the model to serve better the beneficiaries especially in the changing context of the Arab world. Nevertheless, the impact of the WLR program on women readers in the long term will be empowering women as leaders in their community to instigate change, and play a prominent role in decision making within the

community because of the increased knowledge and wisdom gained from reading and their leadership role. The women's role will be instrumental in the coming years after the Arab spring to help steer a better course for the future of the Arab world. WLR has celebrated World Read aloud day on March 8, 2014 for the first time in Jordan. Women and youth made efforts to read aloud in refugee camps, schools, malls to raise awareness toward the importance of reading anywhere anytime.

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