

RABHA'S JOURNEY: FROM VOCATIONAL TRAINEE TO CHAMPION OF WOMEN'S INCLUSION

July 2020



Rabha, a member of the Alsaheh Social Peace Partnership (SPP), has become an important role model for local women. Rabha's determination to expand women's participation comes from her understanding and knowledge of the multiple obstacles that vulnerable women face in towns like Tulmaitha.

"We live in a very closed society, where there are a lot of taboos around women."

Tulmaitha is a quiet town along the Eastern coast of Libya and is often overlooked by development projects. The effects of the war are clear to see in Tulmaitha; the devaluation of the dinar and the political crisis have impacted the day-to-day lives of people in the area, both economically and socially. "The lack of opportunities for women led to their marginalisation; they struggle on many levels," Rabha explained.

"I had the opportunity to finish my university studies at Benghazi University in Al-Marj, and this has enriched my life; but I always think of those girls and women who do not have the same opportunities."

The success of the women's literacy project that Rabha implemented through a Social Peace Action grant provided by PCi has led to the Department of Education's decision to fully fund the school and expand the initiative to neighbouring towns, providing paid employment to volunteer teachers and establishing an office for adult education in the Municipality. Rabha's story highlights how better gender representation and participation has enabled the SPP to address the lack of literacy skills among women in the wider community, an issue that is holding many women back and pushing them into further social and economic exclusion. The intervention also highlights that, in a context where conservative social norms represent an obstacle to women's participation in decision-making processes and broader inclusion in public spheres, women's meaningful participation is possible.

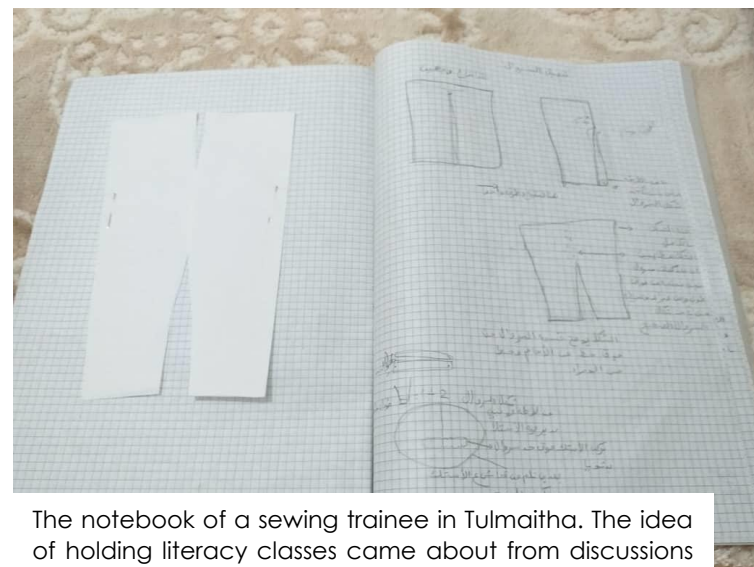
RABHA'S JOURNEY WITH THE SPP

A social sciences graduate from Tulmaitha, Rabha is the youngest of 9 siblings. For the past year, Rabha has been working with the Alsaheh SPP to improve literacy among women in her municipality, an issue that the SPP identified as a priority to support women's social inclusion and access to livelihood opportunities.

"I want people to know that in 2020 there are still illiterate Libyan women with a strong desire to learn how to read and write."

Rabha's journey with PCi began in 2019, when she took part in a vocational sewing and embroidery skills training organised by the Tulmaitha Women's Association and funded through a Social Peace Action grant provided by PCi. The aim of the Action was to increase women's social inclusion and economic independence. In total, 40 women were trained, gaining skills that would help them enter the job market, or secure an income by working independently.

The training focused on making garments that were in high demand from the local community, such as school uniforms and traditional outfits. "Until then, sewing had been a hobby for me, and I wanted to improve my skills," explained Rabha.



The notebook of a sewing trainee in Tulmaitha. The idea of holding literacy classes came about from discussions with the women who attended these sewing classes, many of whom could not read or write.

“This workshop was transformational for me. Being able to see how our lives were changed once we acquired new skills, and how we were able to make an income through it, was so inspiring. You can achieve your dreams through your own hands.”

More than just learning sewing skills, Rabha was inspired by the way in which the training represented an opportunity to involve hard-to-reach women in the SPP's activities, and the impact it had on women's confidence and interest in becoming involved in social projects.

Using education, vocational trainings and livelihoods projects as entry points to reach out to a wider range of women and bring them closer to the work of the SPPs has been key to the success of the SPP's approach. Particularly in areas where more conservative social norms around the role of women in public life impede their participation in the civic activities, an incremental, gender sensitive approach has been successfully creating pathways for women's involvement and inclusion in peacebuilding work.

HOW BETTER GENDER REPRESENTATION HELPED ALSAHEL SPP ADDRESS WOMEN'S NEEDS

SPPs in Libya have applied a wide range of solutions to address the ongoing issue of women's underrepresentation, especially in public and civic spaces. The AlsaHEL SPP was founded in 2015 and initially comprised almost entirely of men. Following an analysis to better understand the barriers to women's participation in SPP activities, technical skills trainings, workshops and mentoring in Gender Equality, Social Inclusion, Gender Analysis, and Gender Sensitivity were provided by PCi. One of the key outcomes of the gender mainstreaming intervention was the creation of the first ever Women's Association in Tulmaitha, which contributed to increasing women's participation and including their voices in consultative processes, as well as making their participation more visible.

As a result of the increased participation of women from different backgrounds in the SPP's activities, Rabha became aware of the illiteracy issues affecting women.

“I will never forget when a woman came to me and told me that her dream was to learn how to read and write.”

Rabha became determined to help women in her community who lacked an education to overcome what she saw as one of the biggest obstacles to achieving their financial independence:

“I wanted to help women by providing them with the tools they need to change their lives.”



A woman takes notes during a literacy class at the Hamza Centre for Adult Education in Tulmaitha.

TACKLING ILLITERACY: SCHOOL OF ADULT EDUCATION

Rabha realised that one of the greatest barriers to women having agency and control over their lives were the high levels of illiteracy, and it was from this realisation that the idea of an adult education school came about. Funded by PCi through a Social Peace Action grant, a fully equipped classroom to provide literacy courses to adult women was set up in Tulmaitha.

The school has so far enrolled 30 women, who have never had access to basic education, especially basic reading and writing skills.

“Of all the projects we have delivered so far, this is the one that I am most proud of,” said Rabha.



Women attending a literacy class at the Hamza Centre for Adult Education in Tulmaitha, the first of its kind in the area, funded and supported by PCi through Al Sahel SPP.

The concept of adult literacy sparked the interest of the governmental Education Department, which decided to formally recognise the school as part of their educational network. This meant that the teachers (all women) who had volunteered were now hired into full time, paid jobs.

In addition, the Education Department decided to open more adult schools across the municipality, in the nearby towns of Batta and Qaser Libya. An office for adult literacy was also set up, and one of the Al Sahel SPP members, Ramadan Mohammed, was appointed to lead it.

“It has been incredible to see how this idea has grown,” explained Ramadan. “It is thanks to the efforts of Rabha, our SPP and the support of PCi that we have been able to come this far, and we hope to go further.”

PROVIDING SAFE TRANSPORTATION FOR WOMEN ATTENDING UNIVERSITY

Rabha remains committed to working on women’s empowerment through education. For women in Tulmaitha, the lack of safe and secure transport is a critical issue that affects their ability to travel safely and attend university. While transportation poses less of a problem in larger Libyan cities, Tulmaitha is poorly served, with some bus services only accessible from nearby towns. The limited safe transportation options mean that female students have to rely on private buses or family members to attend classes.

“The women who make this journey described it as torturous. The private bus fare is very expensive, adding up to 150 LYD per month, when the average salary of a typical household is only 800 LYD per month. Many women have been economically forced to drop out, some in their final year of university, because they could not afford the commute.”

In order to make a case for the project, Rabha conducted a needs assessment, interviewing over 200 female university students. As well as the need for safer, more affordable and accessible transportation options, findings highlighted that many women were failing exams because of their inability to attend evening lectures due to the lack of transportation. Along with other members of the SPP, Rabha is now working on a project proposal to address these broader access and security issues.

YOUTH CAMP: BRIDGING DIVIDES AND CREATING A NATIONAL NETWORK OF YOUNG LEADERS

Rabha was an obvious choice and was unanimously nominated by the SPP to speak at the Youth Camp that PCi held in March 2020 in the western city Zuwara, as part of the wider SPLD programme. The aim of the Youth Camp was to bring together young leaders from SPPs across Libya to facilitate the exchange of peacebuilding and social development

success stories, and to lay the foundations for the creation of a national network of youth leaders. Rabha's success story was a key part of the Youth Camp agenda.

“It was the first time that I spoke in front of more than 100 people. It was a great opportunity to share my story with people who wanted to start their own social projects, as well as to make so many friends and new connections.”

Indeed, the Youth Camp was successful in forging new relationships among youth leaders from different parts of the country, as well as to counter prejudice and rumours fuelling tensions between communities across conflict divides in Libya.

“People in my neighbourhood told me that it was not safe to go to Zuwara, especially since I was the only woman attending from eastern Libya. Up until the day of the trip, I was hesitant about going. But I received such a warm welcome from people in Zuwara; it felt like being among my own family. Of all the trips I have been on, this one was the most special.”

Rabha's experience at the Youth Camp also strengthened her resolve to continue working on women's empowerment.

“Education is the foundation for development in our society. It will create more equality and lead to improvements in social justice, and I believe that this will

lead to peace for Libya. By educating women, we are educating the key drivers of peace. In situations of conflict, women are able to de-escalate tensions and calm down those involved, especially their husbands, brothers or sons. They are level-headed and effective, and can resolve problems from the smallest issue in their neighbourhood to larger problems in the city.”

Rabha's community work has also been a source of enrichment in her life.

“Every time I achieve something, I gain more motivation to keep working. I am very active with the Alsahele SPP because I want it to keep developing. It makes me so happy when people contact me on social media asking how I carried out my projects and if I can help them develop their own ideas. It makes me proud of everything that I have accomplished, and I want to keep achieving more.”

Rabha also feels that her work makes her a role model that can inspire others, young people and women in particular.

“I am always asked how I am able to volunteer my time while still running a household. The answer is that I do not need to choose one or the other; I can do both – fulfil my personal and social life, as well as my civic responsibility.”