

Group finds women in Jordan coping with familiar problems, Spark took money, advice to villages near Amman

Phil Sands, Chronicle Foreign Service
Monday, November 13, 2006

(11-13) 04:00 PDT Amman, Jordan -- Jordan and California are separated by 10 time zones, thousands of miles and vastly different languages and cultures. But, for Maya Garcia, there is something linking high-tech Silicon Valley with the poor villages surrounding Amman.

"It's amazing to see that the challenges faced by women in Jordan are similar in so many ways to those we face in America," she told The Chronicle. "In the West, there is this idea that women in the Middle East are downtrodden compared to us, but it's not the case."



Spark / Marianna Nobre

Garcia is president of Spark, a 2-year-old San Francisco-based organization dedicated to empowering the world's women. A delegation from the group has just concluded a 10-day fact-finding trip to Jordan, where it provided money and advice to small business projects.

"It's striking to see women talking about a work-life balance, and problems of getting maternity leave and equality of pay," the 30-year-old UC Berkeley political science graduate said. "It takes apart any preconceptions you might have about women's lives here."

For many Westerners, the Middle East is seen as a region of long-running conflicts, oil and oppression -- particularly for women -- as symbolized by the hijab, the traditional Muslim head-covering. Garcia, who lives in Pacific Heights, says those assumptions do not hold up to scrutiny.

"In America when we see a woman wearing hijab, it scares people," she said. "We take it to mean someone is close-minded, badly educated or under pressure to dress a certain way."

"Speaking to women (in Jordan), it's obvious that's a dangerous oversimplification. We found women of all kinds -- from highly educated government officials to poor women from rural backgrounds -- pushing for their rights, seizing opportunities and making the most of them," she added. "The veil is something they wear as a matter of individual religious choice -- it's not a symbol of being oppressed."

Fairuz Taqi-Eddin, 31, Spark's coordinator for grassroots women's organizations, grew up in the Jordanian capital and in Saudi Arabia, and moved to San Francisco in 1998. Since then, she has worked on various international development projects with charities and the British government. She returned to Amman as part of the Spark group.

"What we've seen here is that equality and power are about access to education, access to employment and justice. These are concrete things and, for the women we've met, have nothing to do with how you dress. We've seen really dynamic, positive and effective women here, working to improve their communities and their lives, and they've all worn head scarves. In the West, we've got to get over the mental block that this an obstacle to overcome."

The Sparks team gave a \$5,000 grant to a secondhand clothing business in the Jordan Valley community of Kaferin. Called Aweaeena, meaning "Our Clothes," the shop will sell new and used clothing to women without much money. It will also rent dresses for formal occasions, such as weddings, that are considered essential but are extremely expensive to buy. In addition to giving customers alternatives for their wardrobes, the effort also teaches the all-volunteer staff how to run a business.

Jordan, a key U.S. ally in the Middle East, is ruled by a monarchy, and has come under fire from international rights groups for its lack of democratic political reforms and its human rights record. The Sparks delegation hopes that by helping women in modest projects like the clothes shop, they would feel empowered to take on wider issues affecting them.

One such issue is so-called honor crimes -- the slaying by male relatives of female family members accused of bringing shame on their clans, often after being accused of infidelity. Killers are usually let off with a jail sentence of a few months.

"This is still a conservative society, it's a more conservative culture," Taqi-Eddin said. "We're certainly not here to say that everything is perfect, because it's not. And I won't say we've come here and found equality because we haven't.

"There are a lot of problems, but we've seen women here working for themselves to overcome them, and they are making progress. They're not sitting here doing nothing and staying quiet."

The American women were adamant that Western solutions could not be successfully imposed on local problems.

"When we asked about honor killings and domestic violence, the women here working on these things told us it had to be dealt with in a way suitable to the culture," said Garcia, an ex-political consultant who now works as an advocacy coordinator at United Way of the Bay Area and Silicon Valley. "When they tried to confront it in a very direct, head-on manner, (the strategy) ran into resistance. So they take a more subtle approach."

The Bay Area women visited a sewage project in Madaba, where Garcia said village women spent three years working to improve sanitation and, as a result, won respect of the community. "Because they've visibly improved their environment and made things better for everyone, they have leverage. And they grow in confidence, they stick together and they grow in power."

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*This article appeared on page **A - 14** of the San Francisco Chronicle*