

Young women of Egypt prepare to change the world

by Andrew Thompson

Last year, [Ashoka Arab World](#) in Cairo found itself dealing with a problem. Ashoka describes itself as the largest platform for social entrepreneurs in the world, with a membership of over 3,600 Ashoka fellows, over 100 of them based in the Arab region. The organisation needed to recruit people for its Young Changemakers programme. The idea of the programme was to find and support people under the age of 20, who have already started social projects and who have created impact in their communities. But it was proving difficult to find them. Was there anyone out there? Some believed that for a variety of reasons including the nature of the education system which tends not to promote creativity and critical thinking, there simply weren't that many young trailblazers to be found.



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Uday Thakkar, managing director of [Red Ochre](#), a UK-based social enterprise consultancy, was looking to get involved in projects in Egypt. Uday says “we work with a lot of people at an early stage of their journey, people who want to do something to save the world or change the world; we help them to get started”. Uday made contact with Ashoka in Egypt and eventually met Ioanna Moriatis, a partnership and communication officer based in Cairo. Ioanna had attended the launch of the British Council's DICE Fund in 2018 and was



interested by its emphasis on the creative economy, on social entrepreneurship, on addressing unemployment and on empowering young women. At the same time Ashoka was also launching a global Women's Initiative for Social Enterprise (WISE). Ioanna says that as a result of all these separate things, everything aligned and came together well. "The idea emerged that rather than search for young people who have already done things, let's take them through an entire journey, let's get people who are passionate about social change, but don't yet know how to turn their ideas into reality."

What emerged was a year-long programme for young women called 'Young Changemakers Training and Competition', funded by the British Council. An initial group of 60 young women with some creative community projects and leadership experience were selected, and then filtered down to 30 and then to 15 innovators. The final six would receive financial assistance to move their projects forward. It was hoped in any case that all participants would gain skills and experience to prepare them to become the social entrepreneurs of the future.

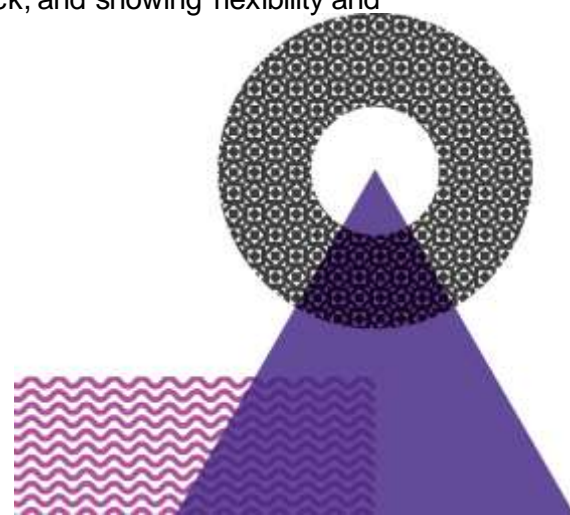
Uday and Ioanna describe a very demanding process. Over 150 young women applied to take part in the programme. The 60 who were selected took part in an intense programme involving team play, creative exercises, critical thinking, pitching and presentation skills, even understanding body language. "This was really to start building them up as people who would use these skills for whatever activities they want to undertake in the future," says Uday.

The next stage was to discuss and rigorously test their ideas for social projects. Could the ideas work in the real world? The participants were encouraged to think about competition, resources, and whether they would need to draw on other skills and abilities available in their communities.

The initial group was reduced to 30 who went on to receive more detailed training in budgeting, marketing, product development, and business planning. They had one-to-one training sessions where they were intensely questioned about their projects. A final group of 15 then had to pitch their ideas to a panel of judges, on the basis of which six were selected for a financial award to help them begin their projects. Ioanna points out that "the goal throughout the process was to equip them all with the skills that would be necessary for their projects, even if they didn't get the financial reward at the end."

What was quickly evident was that the young women embraced the challenge in a remarkably positive way. The organisers say they occasionally got frustrated with the participants – in a way that they might do with 25-30 years olds, forgetting for a moment that they were actually dealing with teenagers. Uday comments "We had to keep saying, 'remember their age, remember their experience' - these girls are just amazing. The journey they've made, what they want to do, how they want to do it, is just outstanding." Two young women in particular started out shy, quiet, and not wanting to make eye contact. By the second session however, they were inquisitive, challenging, ready to stand up and express an opinion. Ioanna says it was fascinating to see a collective transformation in progress with the participants practicing pitching to each other, giving feedback, and showing flexibility and maturity, adapting their ideas in the light of suggestions and feedback from others.

The participants wanted to test out and launch a wide range of projects and ideas. A 17-year-old wanted to run workshops encouraging women to get involved in computer programming and technology. Her idea was to get young women writing code for websites and mobiles. She had already organised a pilot workshop and made contact with major companies like



Vodafone to investigate sponsorship. Another participant wants to create employment for single mothers by producing and selling natural up-cycled cosmetic products.

Another young woman based in Alexandria was concerned about discrimination against the children of Sudanese refugees in Egypt. She decided to build links between local and refugee children, through artistic and creative activities based in a local Coptic Church. The project has been successful so far, with children learning, playing and forming friendships together. It has attracted the attention and support of Save the Children and other charities which are providing funds to scale up the initiative.

Another young woman has tackled the lack of first aid awareness and expertise in Egypt, having discovered that emergency first aid kit boxes at her university were empty and forgotten. She has attracted the support of the Red Crescent to hold first aid workshops in the University. The organisers say they have a “huge amount of confidence” that the young women will be able to take these, or other projects forward with confidence and skill.

