

'I Don't Really Like School...But My Father Says I Have to Go'--Candid Testimonies from a Transforming Moroccan Village – Near East Foundation



14-year old Souad Errchidi

"I don't really like school. I'd rather be at home where I'm comfortable, but my father says I have to go to school," says 13-year-old Rkia Angmar, a reluctant student at the Tiguerte Niguernane school, a village in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco, where NEF (Near East Foundation) is making remarkable progress at educational reform--and other community developments.

Rkia's father is a member of the village Parent Teacher Association (PTA) board and that has made all the difference for this daughter's education. In her own words, "He says that if I don't go to school, people will say he isn't a good father. He used to not care very much about school," she continues, "but since he joined the PTA, he feels different."



13-year-old Mohamed Angmar

In this and other nearby villages, NEF is promoting the value of education and encouraging school attendance, particularly for girls. To meet objectives, NEF has organized local PTAs, adult literacy classes, and associated groups of rural women leaders actively encouraged to become community involved.

SURPRISING ACHIEVEMENTS

The support of this father for his daughter's education and the social pressure he evidently feels to do so are big breakthroughs. He lives in a country with 2.5 million girls of primary school age; more than half of them in the countryside like Rkia. Less than half of these girls attend school, and when they do, the drop-out rate between grades one and six, is a shocking 80 percent.



13-year-old Rkia Angmar

Typically families feel little incentive to educate girls often married by the age of 14 and helpful with household chores and child-rearing. Generally there is strong social pressure for girls not to go to school, and when they do, they often encounter a hostile environment and leave in discouragement. So this father has made a considerable turnaround in paternal attitudes and behavior given his milieu.

"It's not that bad," Rkia admits of her school attendance for there have been other changes since NEF started working. "The doors and windows are new and there is heat in the winter. I used to feel that the teachers didn't like to be in our village...it's far away. But now they pay more attention and I like what I am learning," she gains enthusiasm, commenting on school beautification underway.

"One time we even had a chance to help with planting trees around the school and in the village. I'm taking special care of those I planted. Maybe one day they will grow up and I'll remember I planted it," she says. Then moving on to another topic, "One day a doctor came to the school and he gave us all a checkup. I got special medicine for my cold. It was the first time I have seen a doctor," she remembers every detail.

Then Rkia makes a startling comment filled with newborn ambition and possibility: "I want to be a doctor when I grow up." More immediate and mundane, she also would like to have a television--"No one in the village has a television,"

and maybe a playground for her school, where her trees are now growing.

REVERBERATIONS OF EDUCATION

Such is the impact in just one human destiny of this literacy and development project on life in a rocky, deprived Moroccan village, where NEF has renovated school facilities, including access to latrines and potable water; organized PTAs and adult education classes; increased community support for education in a wide range of ways; expanded the role of rural educators and improved teaching/school administration.

"Practically everything has changed," says 13-year-old Mohamed Angmar. "In the past I often stayed home when it was cold...there was no heat at school and the rooms were crowded and dirty. The teacher was often absent. No one seemed to care. There was little for us to do," he summed up.

Then the NEF project started and his mother told him he had to go to school every day. He recalls now how she explained she simply did not want to be embarrassed in front of her friends whose children were attending school. Furthermore, this school was not as before--and soon neither was Mohamed.

"My teacher was there on most days and we had new books and paper to write on," he says, adding, "When I took my work home, my parents were proud of me. I felt like I was doing something and wanted to go back." Then Mohamed expressed new-found resolve and hope for his future, "I want to finish school. Maybe I can even continue on to secondary school in the town nearby."

'I FEEL LIKE MY LIFE HAS CHANGED'

For her part, Souad Errchidi, 14, admits with the characteristic forthrightness of the young: "I never liked school, and besides, I had to stay home to help my mother with the chores. We used to get up early in the morning to collect firewood for heating and cooking. I hated it...by the time we finished, I was exhausted and just wanted to sleep!" she exclaims with vivacity and vehemence at the mere thought of it all.

Then one day a teacher came to her house with a neighbor and asked why she was not in school. Her mother explained she was needed at home and then the visitors asked for Souad, speaking to both of them about the necessity for education and the changes underway. "My mother was a bit afraid to let me go too far from the house without her," she remembers, "but when they explained how important it was for all the kids in the village to go to school, mother finally said 'okay' and I now attend regularly."

She appreciates her new book bag and school supplies, "It makes me feel special," she confesses. "In the winter, the school is warm and I like to be with the other kids. I feel like my life has changed. I want to learn. I like the activities in school. We play games and learn together. It's more fun that it used to be," Souad concludes.

And what about her mother forced to gather firewood alone and do all the other chores? "I try to help when I'm at home," Souad says and adds this touching parental validation of her new life, "She seems happy for me--and that makes me glad."

FROM PERSONAL TO STATISTICAL

There are now about 2,000 students in the 17 schools participating in NEF's program. That includes 693 girls in the first 10 village schools where NEF began this literacy effort; and 402 more in seven new villages. Also, there is a 30 percent increase in primary school graduations (150 more children); and a 40 percent increase in secondary school completions (80 more students).

Plus, there are 1,316 more adults--a 50 percent increase--participating in PTA meetings.

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