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‘I’m Very Proud Because Now I’m A Powerful Woman’: How The High Atlas Foundation Is Transforming The Lives Of Moroccan Women

By [Jane Hanson](#), Contributor.  I write about how good...



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Mar 27, 2025, 08:00am EDT

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JANE HANSON AND THE HIGH ATLAS FOUNDATION

“I’m very proud because now I’m a powerful woman.”

That simple statement, made by Samira—a 33-year-old Moroccan woman who was married at 15, never had a job and was once too shy to show her face in public—captures the heart of what the [High Atlas Foundation](#) is achieving in Morocco. She shared these words with me during my recent volunteer trip to Morocco, and in that moment, her confidence and pride embodied the Foundation’s mission: transforming and empowering not only communities, but women.

Founded in 2000 by Dr. Yossef Ben-Meir, a former Peace Corps volunteer turned development leader, the High Atlas Foundation is a nonprofit headquartered in Morocco. Its mission is to improve the lives of Morocco’s most underserved

populations by enabling them to identify their own development priorities—and then working together to make them a reality.

While its agricultural projects have led to the planting of over five million fruit and nut trees across the country and its clean water initiatives have improved public health, the cornerstone of the High Atlas Foundation’s work is women’s empowerment.

Addressing Urgent Needs in Rural Morocco

Many Moroccan communities—especially in rural areas—grapple with poverty, limited access to water and education and gender inequality. In some of these areas, the average household income is just \$1,000 per year. Women are often denied independence, education and the legal knowledge to defend their rights.

The earthquake in September of 2023 exacerbated these conditions, leaving parts of the land decimated and stripping many of their livelihoods. “The key to all of it,” says Ben-Meir, “is to pursue the projects that the people of Morocco say they need the most.” For many Moroccan women, that means independence—financial, personal and emotional.

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Building Confidence and Opportunity for Women

I had the chance to meet many of these women during my recent visit, and I was struck by how happy and proud they were to be working, earning money and creating products. What stood out most was the deep sense of community—they were not only gaining independence, but doing it alongside other women and across generations. Some women worked with their daughters, passing down skills and confidence. In one especially moving moment, the women—who were fasting for Ramadan—cooked us a meal, welcoming us with warmth, laughter and generosity.

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A meal prepared for us by the women of the High Atlas Foundation Collective.
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The demand for the Foundation’s services is increasing, but scaling the operation takes time. “We found that if we’d like to involve local women, they need to be free in their minds,” said Fatima Zahra Laaribi, a Lead Empowerment Trainer at the Foundation.

“Most of them couldn’t leave their villages without their husband’s permission. After participating in our workshops, we help them turn their visions into reality.”

Since 2016, nearly 3,000 Moroccan women have participated in these “**IMAGINE**” workshops. They are transformative spaces where women are encouraged to explore their goals, confront limiting beliefs and build confidence. Many participants go on to launch cooperatives producing beautiful handwoven rugs and baskets and contribute to the High Atlas Foundation’s sustainable agriculture initiatives by sewing biodegradable tree sacks.



A Moroccan woman weaving a rug at the High Atlas Foundation collective.
JANE HANSON & THE HIGH ATLAS FOUNDATION

Witnessing the tree sack initiative was a highlight of my visit. The Foundation received \$160,000 in funding to help three women-led cooperatives produce 1.4 million biodegradable sacks—used to nurture saplings in their nurseries. For many of the women and girls sewing these sacks, it’s the first time they’ve ever earned money.

“They now make \$150 a month,” says Ben-Meir. And for families earning \$1,000 a year, that’s transformational.

“Many of the women say it has improved their relationships with their husbands as they are able to contribute financially to their families,” adds Laaribi. “For example, the women are now paying electricity bills and sending their children to school.”



The High Atlas Foundation employee, Fatima, sewing tree sacks.
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Key Strategies Behind the Foundation’s Success

While many NGOs struggle to create lasting impact, the High Atlas Foundation continues to thrive. Ben-Meir offers some important tips:

1. Really understand the community you’re serving.

The High Atlas Foundation doesn’t dictate solutions—it listens. “Helping people define their most sincere needs” is, according to Ben-Meir, the most important step.

2. Create jobs, not just charity.

From the tree nurseries to the cooperatives, the Foundation invests in projects that generate long-term income and ownership.

3. Tell your story.

“We are always encouraging our staff and volunteers to write about their experiences,” Ben-Meir explains. Sharing these stories helps raise awareness and attract support.

4. Be relentless.

Success doesn’t come overnight. “Nothing can replace the non-stop, year-after-year effort—we’re all giving more than we ever imagined we could,” he says.

5. Position yourself for success.

Morocco, says Ben-Meir, is uniquely positioned for this kind of grassroots change. “Morocco wants this! Morocco wants women’s liberation. Morocco wants multiculturalism.” While Ben-Meir says this sort of effort wouldn’t be successful in certain other Middle Eastern countries, he says, “Morocco sets us free to do this work.”

A Scalable Approach to Community Empowerment

While recent USAID funding cuts have impacted development programs around the world, the High Atlas Foundation remains resilient. Their model offers a powerful example for nonprofits everywhere.

“I’m a new Samira,” said the woman who once couldn’t speak without covering her face. Today, she leads girls who have dropped out of school, teaching them to weave, sew and contribute economically. “Now my kids and my husband see me differently. I’m proud of my achievements.”

In the hills of the Atlas Mountains, transformation is happening. And for those of us lucky enough to witness it firsthand, it’s deeply moving to see what empowerment really looks like.

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Yoseff Ben-Meir, founder of the High Atlas Foundation
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