



AL-HASANIYA
Moroccan Women's Centre

الحسنية
مركز النساء المغربيات

DARDASHA – Heritage Lottery Evaluation

“If I could read and write, I would have written my story long ago.”

“If I could write, I would have written several novels from the story of my life and made several films.”

These women felt invisible, both here in the UK and back home in Morocco. The Moroccan community in London is relatively small and therefore does not have a strong presence here. This is particularly true for the women, who for cultural/religious reasons often live out their lives behind closed doors. Some also felt the efforts they had made for their families back home had gone unnoticed or been taken for granted.

Those who arrived in the 1960s and 1970s came here knowing nothing of what awaited them. This was in the days before satellite television and the internet. We will never know this again – even in small rural or desert villages there is satellite television these days - so we needed these women to record their experience before it passed away with them.

Storytelling is at the very heart of Moroccan culture. It thus has a further resonance when a Moroccan woman tells her life story, as it is a connection with the culture she left behind. To tell her story to a British audience is a bringing together of and sharing between the two cultures within which she lives her life.

Many of these women thought they were only going to be in the UK temporarily. They came here thinking that they would work for a few years to save up some money and then return home to Morocco. But of course with time they grew used to the culture here and were shaped by it. When they returned home to Morocco they found that they felt differently about the culture there and missed things about London. Which is why they are still living here in the UK many years later. However this often does not translate into a conscious decision to settle here: some of these women are still thinking they are going to return ‘home’, despite having lived here for four decades....

The immense courage of these women is humbling: journeying into a complete unknown, coming here without knowing the language, having to find work and somewhere to live, the responsibility of sending money back home - which often means having to work more than one job at a time - bringing up children, (domestic violence in marriage)...

There is a psychological need for each of us to have our voice heard, in order to feel valued which in turn enables us to value ourselves. Many of these women have not before had this experience in their lives and as a result have gone on to suffer depression and related physical and mental health problems. Sharing a story and/or hearing someone else’s story, in any situation, is healing for all involved. Hearing your own story told back to you – more precisely, yourself telling your own story in your own words – can be a powerful release.

It is therefore very important that we let these women tell their stories in their own words, with as little interference from us or commentary on what they have said. We were not here to judge or tell the reader/audience what to think. Our role was to facilitate those who could not tell their story without some help.

We encountered some problems regarding women not wanting to be identified from their written story or recognised by their voice on a recording. This was a particular problem when there were delicate issues in their story, such as prostitution or working here illegally. One woman was told in no uncertain terms by her daughter that she could not share her story with the wider public. We therefore were not able to tell the stories of some women. With others we had to work together with the women to find how to disguise their identity without changing the nature of their story.

The women who shared their stories found the whole process very moving. Many have never had the opportunity or invitation to talk like this before. Once trust was gained, they slowly remembered more and felt comfortable enough to reveal more. They would often at the end of a session say that they had nothing more to say; then they would go home and find themselves thinking and remembering and find memories coming back. Many of the women cried when I read their completed story back to them. They were so grateful to have such a record; even if they can't read it themselves, it means something to them to hold a copy of their story, to know it lives in the world. They would tell their friends to share their story, because it was such a good thing to do.

"You've told my story perfectly, with not a word too little or a word too much."

The future for Dardasha:

It is on the Al Hasaniya website, with a downloadable PDF of the book, a link to watch the documentary film and a slideshow from the exhibition of photographs and documents:

www.al-hasaniya.org.uk/projects-dardasha.html

Dardasha photos are also included in the Museum of Migration/Guardian newspaper's competition and exhibition '100 images of migration':

www.migrationmuseum.org/competition/

The project has been archived with the British Library, Kensington and Chelsea Library, the Council for the Moroccan Community Abroad (CCME) and the Oral History Society. We have also approached the Women's Library to archive the book. The proposed Museum of Migration will house it, if they are successful in their bid to establish the museum. There will be an exhibition of all works produced in Rabat, Morocco in September 2011 (organised by the British Embassy in Morocco) and it will tour in Morocco and mainland Europe during 2012 (organised by the Council for the Moroccan Community Abroad).

We hope the work can now encourage discussion and debate, particularly among the younger generations. Many young Moroccans born and brought up in London – as is true of youth from any culture - do not know much about the realities of the lives which their parents and grandparents have lived. In Dardasha they can read or hear an individual story, which stands alone as a unique testimony of one life lived, and taken together they can witness a collective story.

Samantha Herron

Dardasha Project Leader June 2011