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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“INTRODUCTION TO CONNECTHER” BY LILA IGRAM

CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.



I love listening to my mom talk about growing up in a small village in Lebanon. By the time she was 18, she met my dad, a Lebanese American who brought her to the USA where I was born. My mom only made it to second grade back in the tiny Lebanese village which turned her into a big advocate for my sister and I to graduate from college. I am the second person in our family to get a college degree. My mom even sold some of her jewelry to my aunt once to pay for my sister’s tuition (a preferred family joke as she bought it all back later in life).

I grew up in Iowa, a friendly, Midwestern state, but not the most diverse place around. Although my parents did well financially, they despised the entitled and exclusive "country club mentality" prevalent in our community, so we've never lived among wealthy people. At my school, located in a working-class neighborhood, there were a handful of people of color even though the school was by no means small. So, like many women from minority groups, I grew up without representation, nobody was interested in rendering an authentic and multidimensional understanding of who we are. The American media always depicted us as oppressed and needing to be saved, but at home, all I saw were strong Muslim women, it's a perplexing feeling when what you are seeing in the media is so far removed from your reality.

I founded the ConnectHER Film Festival*, partially, after seeing too many Western organizations and mission groups going into countries and trying to generate change from the outside in. I believed in the power of films for change and I wanted to invest in local female leaders. Women like Hazera Begum, a former sex worker who opened her home to 30 children of sex workers (watch *Superhero Without a Cape*, a submission to ConnectHER's annual film festival). Through its crowdfunding platform, ConnectHER has helped Hazera and "her children" move from a two-bedroom apartment to a nine-bedroom residence in Dhaka. They now have a library, and the boys and girls can now sleep in separate rooms. The children are all in school and receiving proper daily nutrition. Several girls have transferred to one of the best boarding schools in the country. Women leaders like Hazera have a vested interest in making sure their communities prosper and thrive.

And most importantly, they understand and respect the people they are serving because they are one of them. Putting cameras in girls and women's hands allows us to listen, feel and learn in the most authentic way.