

Published: 16 december 2015

Country: Egypt



Hanaa Abu El-Ezz is 28-year old journalist from Egypt who broke a story on salt fraud and its bad impact on people’s health. Hanaa, who was a trainee of the Media Diversity Institute (MDI), proved that salt distributed in villages around Alexandria contains impurities, dust and heavy metals. It has been distributed to people who were not aware of the risk.

Hanaa wrote this story as a result of a joint NGO-Media cooperation project organised by MDI. Not only that her story got a great publicity, but Hanaa has won an award of excellence in health issue from Alexandria's Press Syndicate.

““I was surprised that my superiors admired my report about salt fraud to the extent that they dedicated two thirds of the page for it. Many people commented on online version of my article while my friends and family asked me how I could differentiate the hygienic salt from the bad one. No one knew about this matter at all. Even my mother had bought different types of salts to make me choose the safe one,” says Hanaa.

Talking to MDI after the publication of her article, Hanaa explained how difficult it was to

investigate all aspects of the story: “First I had a problem concerning the way of getting a sample of salt, yet through some of my contacts I was eventually able to get a sample from the warehouse of supplies’ investigations. Then analyzing the sample was problematic. I needed a laboratory to perform that so I sought the help of Alexandria’s Science Faculty Dean, professor of Environment, Department in the Faculty and the Head of Bourg Al Arab City for Scientific Researches, to analyze the sample, but all of them refused. All of them were afraid that their names would be made public. Finally, I resorted to one of the officials working in the Ministry of Health’s laboratories who revealed that he has already analyzed salt samples and I could get the results from the laboratory.”



The story about the salt fraud in Egypt is not the only one Hanaa wrote as a result of joint work between journalists and NGOs organized by MDI. She has produced a story about fishing boats docked in Maghazel, Kafr El-Sheikh (Northern Egypt), which were carrying drugs and trafficking humans instead of fish. That wasn't an easy task either. She was tricked by people pretending to help, and actually trying to prevent her investigation. And she was also worried about her safety in Maghazel, being a village well-known for arms dealing and shootings.

However, her determination paid off. With the help of Beshr for Development Association, a local NGO, Hanaa met the leader of the fishermen. She then visited several places where trafficked people were held and met the family members of those who had disappeared at sea, while looking for a better life on the other shore of the Mediterranean Sea. The article, which revealed the names of the traffickers and the cost of crossing by nationality (Egyptians \$2000, and Palestinians and Syrians between \$3000 to \$4000, in accordance with the humanitarian

situation) was published in [El-Youm7](#) newspaper. Its impact went way beyond what was expected.

Many other journalists and NGO activists have been working together to give voice to the stories of marginalised groups in the country, as part of the innovative project designed by MDI, to overcome the barriers and problems between media and civil society and help them benefit from each other's expertise.

Besides Hanaa's article, another 34 stories have so far been published in local and national newspapers in Egypt, with many more to come as the project continues. They have aimed at raising issues overlooked by the Egyptian media, and also at revealing a different and deeper perspective on them.



In the article "[The people of Fayroiuz Land are searching for missing security](#)", Heba El-Kassas, a 27-year-old reporter at El-Shorouk newspaper in Sharquia governorate, told the stories of the people in the Sinai region, countering the negative image of them as Israeli spies or drug dealers. Oppressed by terrorist attacks on one side and by security raids on the other, many of them have been forced to flee their land.

Insan Association of Development, one of NGOs involved, contributed to the realisation of the article, by providing sources and some of the information she needed, as well as assisting her in moving around safely. Despite the deterioration of the security situation in the Sinai, Heba was the first of the group of reporters to travel and report from Sinai. That encouraged some of the others to travel to Sinai to write stories.

As well as having to deal with the security forces, who stopped her and held her at checkpoints, she also had to overcome the mistrust of the Sinai's people. Many refused to speak to her, fearing she was a security informer. Others sceptically responded "What can you do to us? We die a thousand times a day. Where were you when our homes were demolished and our sons arrested?" After strenuous efforts and persuasion by the local NGO, however, some cooperated and the result was published on El-Shorouk's website.

"My story was focused on the normal citizens in Sinai. It gave them an opportunity to speak out about their daily sufferings," Heba commented, adding that her editor congratulated her for the achievement. Not many stories represent ordinary people's lives and views in Egypt - and even for Heba this was something completely new. "I wanted to prove myself and to my colleagues that I have good journalistic skills to report on these issues," she said.

The networking opportunity offered by the project workshops has laid the foundations for long term cooperation between the NGO activists and journalists who attended, and has also encouraged them to seek a more collaborative approach beyond just the project participants.

Dismayed by the infringement of Pygmies' rights in Egypt, Mohamed Abdel Meged decided to pursue this story. Among the MDI-trained NGOs, none had experience with this issue. He then decided to get in contact with the Egyptian Association for Pygmies' Rights, external to the project.

Mohamed travelled to Alexandria, where the NGO is based, and spent a whole day in their office, talking with the activists and discovering their strategies and plans regarding Pygmies' political participation in the coming parliamentary elections.

His [article](#), published on Al-Raa'y website, reveals the sufferings of Pygmies, who are rejected and mocked by society, and completely neglected by the government, but also expresses their demands and dreams.

Mohammed and all the other journalists who are involved in the project, as well as the NGOs, had been previously trained by MDI. At the end of this project, a jury of experts will judge their

work and award the best stories and efforts at collaboration. Among the other stories produced there are features about child labour in brick factories in El-Fayoum, the rights of people with disabilities in Cairo, the problems of underage marriage, the dropout of girls from school in Qena, Salt fraud and its harm on citizens in Alexandria, child abuse in Assuit, leprosy in Alexandria, pollution of Manzla Lake in Port Said, and people living with AIDS.

The joint NGO-media work is part of a larger project “ [Inclusive Parliament: Building citizens’ participation in the political process in Egypt through better media, parliamentary and civil society interaction](#) ”, funded by the UK Embassy in Cairo.

For more information contact info@media-diversity.org.