

LEVERAGING GOOD AT DINNER

Over 400 chapters gather each month to fund women's empowerment

By Peggy Smith

Ask any Returned Peace Corps Volunteers about their experience and they will tell you, "It changed my life." Yes, we come home to clean water and sanitation, hot showers, comfortable beds, and nice dwellings, but with a passion that does not dissipate. We have to get involved, to continue to serve a need. So, we volunteer in soup kitchens, teach English to the newly-arrived from developing countries, and for many, we join Dining for Women.

Dining for Women is the world's largest educational giving circle dedicated to transforming lives and eradicating poverty among women and girls in the developing world. From its humble beginnings in Greenville, South Carolina in 2003, Dining for Women has grown to more than 400 chapters in 45 states as well as several international affiliates. Through member education and engagement, as well as the power of collective giving, Dining for Women

We get together monthly to dine in, catch up with friends, expand our knowledge of the world, and donate to reduce poverty and promote gender equity

finances grassroots projects that empower women and girls and promote gender equity.

I first heard about Dining for Women from another RPCV at a Peace Corps reunion more than seven years ago. When I discovered there were no chapters in Delaware, I gathered six friends and we organized our first chapter meeting. It was so easy, and it has been an incredible journey since then.

Dining for Women's success is our simple, but impactful model. Most Dining for Women chapters are small groups of friends, neighbors, or co-workers – anyone who wants to make a difference and share a sense of community. We get together monthly to dine in, catch up with friends, expand our knowledge of the

world, and donate to projects that reduce poverty and promote gender equity.

Members give what they can, usually what they would have spent dining out. Our individual gifts are combined with those of thousands of other DFW members. Together, we are empowering women and girls, while also fostering global citizens and powerful agents of change here in the U.S.

Each month at chapter meetings, we feature a grassroots project, selected through a highly competitive grants process. With education materials provided by Dining for Women, we learn about the country, the challenge, the project details and budget. DFW also provides info on local culture and recipes; many chapters enjoy sharing traditional meals from the featured country.

The same passion we felt as PCVs—the foods, customs, speaking in a different tongue, the joy of becoming part of a family so different from in the United States—it is all there as we view the Dining for Women grant videos and learn about the featured project. We are there, and we know that small amounts of money and women who care can make a difference.

In 14 years of gathering for dinners like ours, Dining for Women has invested about \$6 million in grassroots projects in more than 40 countries. Hope Through Health in Togo is one of several projects launched by RPCVs in development NGOs with strong Peace Corps ties that have received funds through our network of monthly lunches.

Our national giving circle has also collaborated with the Peace Corps on



Peggy Smith (in white jacket, center rear) and her Dining for Women chapter have been meeting each month for seven years and has led to eight more chapters in Delaware. The total raised each month among more than 400 chapters is sent to a development project. One beneficiary was Togo's Hope Through Health, founded by RPCVs Jennifer Schechter and Kevin Fiori.

UNEQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Can women overcome Middle East and North African law and custom?

By *Maria A. Longi*

girls' education and empowerment. Last year we awarded a \$100,000 partnership grant to their Let Girls Learn Program, which funded 39 Peace Corps projects in 23 countries. That gift helped more than 65,000 individuals directly and indirectly. DFW invested an additional \$70,000 in the Peace Corps' Partnership Program in 2017.

Our synergies with Peace Corps extend further to our advocacy efforts and our shared support for the U.S. international affairs budget. Collectively, we can influence our government to ensure consistent funding for the issues we all care about.

Dining for Women feeds my passion and I am not alone. Many RPCVs have found a like-minded community in their DFW chapters. Nancy (Johnson) Rich, who served in Colombia, says Dining for Women supports the Peace Corps mission "by supporting women as they learn how to better their lives and the lives of their families." Katie Rosch Hegedus served in Mali and says whenever someone describes a DFW project at a gathering, "I can see my Malian friends, hear them laugh and feel their love."

It re-engages us all to learn, to have empathy, to teach another, and to contribute to the grassroots projects where we can make a difference. I encourage you to gather a few friends or some Peace Corps colleagues to join up with or start your local NPCA affiliate group and Dining for Women chapter and collaborate on programming, advocacy and bringing the world home.

Peggy Smith served in Colombia from 1965 to 1967 and trained Nepal volunteers from 1973 to 1976. Stay tuned to peacecorpsconnect.org and diningforwomen.org for news on an upcoming partnership!

I recently had a chance to meet three generations of women in Irbid, Jordan's second largest city. We were sitting in the family's newly opened bakery, iCupcake, tucked away on a street just off the busy city center.

The owner, Milana Al Mushasha, had been making and selling deserts from her home—sometimes with the help of her mother and her daughter—for more than five years. But the hurdles she described in moving from a home-based informal business to a proper commercial shop would have caused less determined small business owners to give up.

"I could have easily stopped after the municipality shut down my shop the first time, but my dream was far too big to give up," Al Mushasha says. "It's never easy, especially when you have a family to look after, but I feel very hopeful about the future."

Now her shop is full of female university students who find it a safe place to study and chat, and she is providing job opportunities for other young women.

Milana Al Mushasha had financial and other support from the American people through the U.S. Agency for International Development, under our local enterprise support project, when she expanded and formalized her business. But the challenges she told me about are widespread in the region.

Barriers to economic opportunities

Women in the Middle East and North Africa are better educated and more highly skilled than ever, and there is wide agreement among development experts

that women can help boost regional economies.

But many of those economies are missing out, in part because of gender-based legal restraints on full economic and political participation. The World Bank's *Woman, Business and the Law* report says women are cut off from entrepreneurship and formal employment by laws that prohibit married women from becoming heads of households, applying for a passport, or getting a job without permission from their husbands.

That report also says this region is home to 11 of the world's most restrictive economies in terms of women's ability to work or establish a business. Another World Bank report says, "The MENA region loses more economic potential due to low female economic participation than any other region of the world."

More broadly speaking, overall job creation in the private sector has been too slow to absorb the large and growing number of young jobseekers, men and women alike. And within this already limited sphere, women are unable to compete on an equal footing. Young women face unemployment rates as high as 40 percent in some parts of the region.

At USAID, we are working with our local partners to boost inclusive economic and political participation across MENA and around the world. These efforts must be specific to each country's context, and a systematic focus on the integration of gender equality and women's empowerment is integrated into all our programming. Our focus is on the economic and political challenge to society, rather than on one gender, with a critical policy challenge being the