



# THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD

In a ramshackle outdoor gym in a run-down neighbourhood of Alexandria, Egyptian girls are leading their own quiet revolution.

In a run-down suburban neighbourhood of Alexandria, Egypt, 12-year-old Asma empties a sack of medals onto the floor. They belong to her 25-year-old sister, Nahla, and testify to her success at weightlifting contests across the world – Canada, Greece, China, Russia, Holland, Poland and South Africa.

For Asma and Nahla's father, Ramadan Mohamed Abdel el Nasser, known simply as Captain Ramadan, the statuette his daughter received for participating in the 2012 London Olympic Games, where she placed fifth, is a particular source of pride – as is the fact that Nahla has followed in his footsteps.

Ramadan started lifting weights in 1964 during his military service. But the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel put an end to his fledgling sports career and Olympic ambitions.

So, in 1980, he opened an outdoor weightlifting gym for children.

Located beside Alexandria harbour, that gym has become the site of true revolution for some of the girls who practice there. For Heba Saleh, Amal Mohamed, Esraa Mohamed Fahmy and Samar Said it is an island separated from the rest of society, a place where they can remove their hijabs and lift weights alongside other girls and boys, free from the judgements of their communities.



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“Sport is a way of life. [It allows me to be] with my friends ... [and] provides me with rules to observe and different perspectives,” explains 20-year-old Esraa, who is considered a promising young prospect on Egypt’s weightlifting scene.

“We owe a lot to our coach,” she adds, indicating a nearby parking lot where other youths gather to take drugs while Ramadan’s charges train nearby.

Captain Ramadan has become a legend in the neighbourhood. When he first opened the gym, curious neighbours came to watch. Today, it remains the only gym for kilometres and offers the youngsters an alternative to the street life they see around them.

For 18-year-old Samar Said, a silver medallist at the International Female Islamic Games in Indonesia and a gold medallist at the Junior African Championship in Tunisia, weightlifting helps her to fulfil another passion – poetry. Every time she looks at the weights, she says her mind fills with rhymes. In moments of intense concentration, as she lifts a 115kg weight high above her head, her gaze fixed beyond the road ahead and the friends who have gathered to watch her, her face etched with determination, her poems come to life in her mind.

For a few seconds the iron disks seem to float above her head before she throws them down on the shabby wooden platform to the applause of the other girls.

Samar has even dedicated one of her poems to Captain Ramadan, turning it, with the help of Esraa, into a song.

Both girls intend to study Physical Education at college and hope to follow in Ramadan’s footsteps, coaching local children.

All of the girls look at Nahla Ramadan and Esmat Mansour, a gold medallist at the 2013 Mediterranean Games in Turkey, as examples to follow. And Asma in particular is eager to emulate her older sister's success. But, for now, she will have to wait. By law, international competitors must be at least 15 years old.

For those who are old enough, international competitions offer an opportunity to travel, make new friends and experience different cultures. When they aren't competing, they are here in their outdoor gym come rain or shine, pursuing a quiet revolution of fulfilled hopes and ambitious dreams alongside their Captain Ramadan.



**OPEN GALLERY**



Samar Said [Manu Brabo]



**Amal Mohamed** [Manu Brabo]



Esraa Mohamed Fahmy

[Manu Brabo]



**Amal Mohamed** [Manu Brabo]



[Manu Brabo]



Samar Said, Amal  
Mohamed and Esraa  
Mohamed Fahmy

[Manu Brabo]



Captain Ramadan  
shows his daughter's  
medals [Manu Brabo]



[Manu Brabo]



Samar Said [Manu Brabo]



[Manu Brabo]



## Captain Ramadan

[Manu Brabo]