

## Lockdown opens new avenues for female entrepreneurs

## Pandemic restrictions a business boon for some Iraqi women

BAGHDAD, Jan 13, (AP): Fatima Ali was in her final year studying to become a medical analysis specialist when Iraq imposed a full lockdown in March. Forced by a raging pandemic to stay home, she spent her days on social media, looking for something to do with her time.

Then an idea came to her: Six years ago, visiting America on a young leaders exchange program, she and other students toured a Vermont cheese factory where aged cheese platters were displayed on wooden boards so inviting they looked like paintings.

"I liked it ... I said to myself, why not be the first to do it in Baghdad?" She took a free online business course and researched cheeses and wooden plates available in the Iraqi capital.

Months later, 22-year-old Ali is successfully marketing her cheese boards, making a small but steady income and garnering over 2,000 Instagram followers.

A growing number of Iraqi women are using pandemic restrictions to establish home-based businesses. It's a way to bypass discrimination and harassment that often come with working in Iraq's male-dominated,

conservative society - and bring in extra income as the economy worsens.

On a recent day in her kitchen, Ali cut up and arranged cheeses, dried fruit and nuts as she talked about her further dreams. She wants to go to culinary school abroad and one day open a school in Iraq for those "who have passion for cooking, like me."

"This is just the beginning. I'm still developing myself," she said. The slogan on her purple T-shirt declared, "You Have to Love Yourself."

## Start-ups

Rawan Al-Zubaidi, a business partner at an Iraqi NGO that supports start-ups and young entrepreneurs, said there's been a noticeable increase in home-based businesses since the pandemic's start, including women making food deliveries, sweets, accessories, crocheting and embroidering.

"It represents a solution to obstacles that Iraqi women face when trying to find a job," she said, citing women whose husbands or fathers won't let them work, unsupportive male colleagues, discrimination and lack of career growth opportunities.



Fatima Ali prepares cheese-plate takeaways at her home kitchen in Baghdad, Iraq, Nov 28, 2020. After Iraq imposed a coronavirus lockdown in March, Fatima is among a growing number of Iraqi women who are finding some good under the movement restrictions imposed because of the coronavirus pandemic: They're starting their own businesses from home. (AP)

"Some Iraqi women can't find a job because conservative families or husbands consider that women talking directly with other men on the job will bring shame on them," Rawan said.

Women's labor force participa-

tion in Iraq is particularly low. As of 2018, only 12.3% of women of working age were employed or looking for work, according to the United Nations.

Tamara Amir, who manages a Facebook page to educate Iraqi

women about their rights, said she receives dozens of calls each day from women facing sexual harassment at work. Often, they report feeling they have to give their male boss "something in return" to get a job or advancement.

Ali's parents have been supportive of her home-based business, which she says is more secure and means she does not have to go outside and mix with people. Her mother helps her prepare her products, and Ali teamed up with a popular delivery app.

At first, she received two orders a week maximum. Now she can barely keep up with the multiple orders she gets every day.

Mariam Khzarjian, a 31-year-old Iraqi-Armenian, worked as an executive assistant in an engineering company for seven years. She quit in late 2018, feeling her career was going nowhere, and started her own home business selling handmade accessories inspired by her ancestors, who used to work as carpenters.

She called her business Khzar - Armenian for the art of cutting metals and woods - with the slogan "wear a story," since Khzar designs

are based on telling stories and building emotional communication with the clients.

She got off to a slow start. Distractions got in the way. But the pandemic forced her to focus, working on new designs and techniques during curfews.

The move toward online shopping helped her business take off in a way she could not have imagined.

"Online became the only way to reach clients, and they in turn became more loyal and more confident about my art, because they are buying something without trying it," Khzarjian said.

"Corona is terrible, but for those able to take advantage of the internet and build connections with customers, it had its positive side," she said.

Sara al-Nedawi, 23, studied business administration and has tried to find a job for months.

"One day I sent my CV to a company, and they texted me to ask if I was pretty and whether I wear the hijab or not," she said, referring to the headscarf worn by some Muslim women. Someone from another company she applied to called her to get more information, then told her she has a lovely voice and asked for a photo.

## 'Unfulfilled ones'

## COVID lessons for 'wiser resolutions'

By Melissa Rayworth

She'd wanted to frame and hang them — just three printed pictures that had been sitting in Lucy O'Donoghue's suburban Atlanta house since the year began. That's all. Yet with a full-time job and two small kids, she hadn't found the time.

But when COVID-19 slowed life to a quarantine-induced crawl, she began working remotely. It seemed like the perfect time to get this — and a slew of other small projects — done.

Eight months later, O'Donoghue finally walked the two short blocks to a store near her house and bought a trio of ready-made frames.

"I put the pieces of art up in my house, and that made me so happy," she says. "How is it that something that only took me 45 minutes has taken me over a year to get around to doing?"

The answer, as it has been with so much, is this: Because 2020.

Ten months ago, Americans waded into unfamiliar waters. For many who were not plunged immediately into economic or medical emergency, it was as though some strange, protracted, fragmented snow day had begun. Plans and promises bloomed on social media like spring flowers. Bread was baked. Projects were launched.

"With the greatest of intentions, in the first few weeks people had rearranged their shoe closets and made their spice racks alphabetical," says psychologist Deborah Serani, an adjunct professor at Adelphi University in New York.

But when life is difficult, sustaining even a small amount of momentum can be tough.

**Psychological labor**  
The pandemic requires new levels of vigilance and decision-making, and it has disrupted millions of families. The presidential election required deft calibration to get along peacefully with relatives or friends with differing views. This year saw an escalation in crises social, racial and environmental.

All of this has required tremendous psychological labor. That work is invisible, but it takes its toll, says Catherine Sanderson, chair of the psychology department at Amherst College.

For much of the nation, the sense in the early days of quarantine that the disruption would be brief soon melted into an amorphous uncertainty.

"Uncertainty," Sanderson says, "is extraordinarily psychologically taxing."

The normal guardrails that govern the days — getting dressed and out the door on time, driving kids to sports practices and dance classes on a tight schedule in the evenings — disappeared for many. So while having extra time might have seemed like a bright spot, it was also disorienting.

With too much unstructured time, "I feel this aimlessness," says Steph Auteri, a writer who lives in Verona, New Jersey. "The busier I am, the better I operate. The more time I have, I start to get down in the dumps."

That's a common experience, says Serani: In the United States, "it's a really high-octane life. And it was slammed. We hit the brakes and everybody had to stop, and it was hard for many people."

This year has required us to create new structures. That takes time and energy.

Pre-pandemic, "on a Saturday, you wouldn't wake up in your office. There's a distinction. And now, you have to actually think about, 'What am I doing?'" Sanderson says. "It requires a level of planning that you're not used to and that we don't have practice with."

Yet amid all this uncertainty and psychological labor, people are looking back and realizing they did discover a quiet productivity. (AP)

## Lifestyle

## Changes, challenges

## Prepare pets for a post-pandemic life

By Dan Sewell

Olivia Hinerfeld's dog Lincoln and Kate Hilts' cat Potato have something in common: They both like to interrupt Zoom calls as their owners work from home.

"Sometimes it's better to preemptively put him on your lap so he can fall asleep," says Hilts, a digital consultant in the Washington, D.C., area.

Jealous of the attention that Hinerfeld is paying to her video conference call, Lincoln, a golden retriever, will fetch "the most disgusting" tennis ball he can find from his toy crate to drop into the lap of the Georgetown University Law School student.

For many dogs, this is life as it was meant to be: humans around 24/7, walks and treats on demand, sneaking onto beds at night without resistance. Cats — many of whom, let's be honest, were already socially distancing before humans knew what that was — are more affectionate than ever, some now even acting hungry for attention.

Ten months into quarantines and working from home because of the pandemic, household pets' lives and relationships with humans have in many cases changed, and not always for the better. With this month's US rollout of vaccinations offering hope for normalcy in 2021, long-term impacts aren't known.

"If we think how much time most of our pets prior to the pandemic typically would spend without people, being around us now 24 hours a day, seven days a week, it's quite a lot," Candace Crony, a Purdue University professor who teaches about animal behavior.

While estimates vary on how many pets there are in the United States, there's general agreement that the majority of U.S. households have at least one pet, with dogs, and then cats, far outnumbering other pets such as birds and fish. There also was a surge in pet adoptions this year as stay-at-home restrictions took effect.

For all those tens of millions of dogs and cats, it's been an opportunity to teach humans a thing or two about themselves.

Crony has enjoyed watching her long-hair cat Bernie and Havanese-mix dog Des play together. She finds herself getting "bookended" by the pair in bed at night.

"I've been learning things that I probably had been missing about how these two interact with each other and have found out that I need to take my cues from them," Crony says. "Which is funny, because I do this for a living and this is the kind of thing we tell other people to do and clearly, I was missing some of it myself."

In the Washington area, Emily Benavides, a US Senate staffer, is learning her cat's language. Humito (Spanish for Smoky), the 3-year-old rescue cat she has had for much of his life, has different-sounding meows to communicate that he wants to eat, wants to nap or has knocked his toy under the refrigerator.

"I think the more time you spend with them, the more you can see them eye to eye," she says. "The pandemic has brought us closer together."

Devika Ranjan, a theater director in Chicago, wanted pandemic company and got a rescue cat she named Aloo during the summer. The formerly feral cat is believed to be around 3 and seems to be very comfortable with a slow-paced, high-attention pandemic life.

"My working from home, I think he loves it," she says. "I think he is just ready to settle down in life. If he were human, he'd probably sit on the couch with a PBR and watch TV all day."

The pandemic hasn't been positive for all pets, though, such as those with owners who are struggling financially. (AP)



In this photo provided by Lebanese painter Yolande Labaki, Labaki, 93, holds dolls at her house in Beirut, Lebanon, Nov 16, 2020, that she made to be distributed to children who might have lost their toys amid the destruction or who had otherwise had their lives touched by the Beirut seaport blast in August 2020. (AP)

'It's a gift for me more so than it is for the children'

## Woman's salve for Beirut blast devastation: 100 dolls

BEIRUT, Lebanon, Jan 13, (AP): In the wake of a massive explosion that devastated Beirut, 93-year-old Yolande Labaki sought a way to help bring healing to the Lebanese capital.

The internationally recognized painter's solution was to make dolls - 100 of them, distributed to children traumatized or otherwise affected by the destruction.

Her inspiration was another Lebanese tragedy, etched in her memory: the look on the face of one of her grandchildren, then about 3, when his home was damaged during the

country's 1975-1990 civil war.

"He saw all his toys on the ground amid the rubble and asked me: 'Who broke my toys?' His eyes were filled with tears," she said.

So when a huge stockpile of ammonium nitrate stored at the Beirut port ignited and blew up on Aug. 4 - killing more than 200 people, injuring thousands and leaving a swath of the city in ruins - Labaki thought of the children, and how "they, too, must be asking who broke their toys."

Labaki gave herself a challenge, and a deadline.

"I said: 'God, if you give me the

power, I will make 100 of these by Christmas,'" she recalled.

And thus began a monthslong labor of love.

Getting the doll's face just right - she wanted to make sure it wouldn't scare the children - was difficult. The great-grandmother painstakingly embroidered features using a sewing machine, stuffed fabric with cotton and tailored tiny dresses. And then non-governmental organizations helped distribute the dolls.

Two went to the daughters of Beirut resident Georges Chlawuit. The blast blew out windows at the family

home, he said.

"At least she thought of these poor kids after what has happened in the explosion," he said. "May God keep her and give her good health. If it weren't for how the Lebanese people came together, we wouldn't have been able to stand back on our feet again."

His daughters, he said, have been sleeping with their new dolls. Labaki's reward: photos with the beaming faces of girls who received her dolls.

"It's a gift for me more so than it is for the children," she said.