



EGYPTIAN WOMEN EMBRACE CURVES

By Charlene Gubash, NBC News Producer

CAIRO, Egypt — A young woman in a pink scoop neck shirt with her hair neatly tied back in a ponytail pumped each hydraulic exercise machine single-mindedly as she moved through the circuit, focused on her workout.

She could have been a young mother taking a break from her day at any one of the thousands of Curves women's exercise franchises throughout the United States, but she was at a Curves branch in a quiet Cairo suburb.

And when Sherin Ismail emerged from her workout, her ponytail was gone from sight — she was carefully veiled and dressed in a long-sleeved shirt and pants, despite the warm spring temperatures.

For Ismail, Curves, is more than just a place to work out, it is a chance for the 37-year-old mother to have fun. "I come here [and] I am happy. I spend very good times here," Ismail said.

Ismail explained that she originally came to Curves to get into shape and have "a good body," but she said she also found a support system that cares about her well-being.

For Debra Alcalá, the Curves branch owner, her business is all about providing a space to make customers healthy and happy — especially in a usually male-dominated society.

"Women on the streets [here] are so sober. They don't seem to have a sense of joy," said Alcalá. "When they walk in here, they are fun people. They love to dance, laugh and be silly, but I never see that outside."

Alcalá explained how she has two members who always enter the health club wearing the all-enveloping black hijab (veil) that reveals only their eyes — making them appear somber and serious. But she said that once they change into their t-shirts and start their workout, "They are laughing and carrying on like everyone else."

Men welcome concept

Only a few gyms in Cairo, a metropolis of 18 million, offer facilities for women.

But many women, veiled or not, are uncomfortable working out in a co-ed environment. So in many ways, Curves trademark "women-only" policy is tailor-made for the Arab world. In some cultures, women are even forbidden from exercising with men.

Alcala said the Curves gym allows women to feel comfortable, "From the decoration to color, this is a place designed for women. They know it is especially for them."

When Ismail talked to her husband about joining Curves, his first question was "Is it just women?" She explained that if it was a co-ed gym, he would not have let her join.

For the most part, men in Cairo have welcomed the Curves concept. One concern was security for the women, but cautious fathers and husbands have been comforted by the fact that a security guard is stationed outside the door of the gym to prevent male visitors.

For many women, the sheer comfort of being able to shed the veil and body-concealing clothes while working out is a huge plus. "It is more comfortable not wearing the hijab," said Neamat Fahmy, a 50-year-old housewife who hopes the exercise will help lower her blood pressure.

In May 2007, Alcala opened the first Curves in Egypt, but four more franchises have already opened and another three will open soon. In fact, the exercise-franchise giant is expanding throughout the Arab world and has already launched three branches in body-conscious Beirut, Lebanon, three in Kuwait and one in Bahrain.

A long journey

Alcala's Curves franchise now has 281 members. She hopes to double that number by the end of her second year. But since few here have heard of Curves, the most effective advertisement is also one of the slowest: word of mouth. One family member often brings others. About 30 mother/daughter pairs exercise together.

Alcala's own journey to small business ownership began in Phoenix, Ariz. She had just recently joined Curves, and was well on her way to losing 70 pounds, when she lost her job and decided to purchase a franchise with her severance package.

With most of the new U.S. franchises taken, she looked further afield. Brainstorming with her sister, Valora Abdelaziz, who is married to an Egyptian and had visited Egypt before, they decided that Curves made sense in the context of Egyptian society.

Alcala explained that she knew she was "putting all my eggs in one basket," but that she was willing to take the risk. "I didn't come here looking to make my fortune; I was looking for something to do that makes me feel fulfilled, something worthwhile."

"I am happy that I came," she said. "It has taken a lot more money to get to where it is self-sustaining... but I am getting great feedback and women are getting good results."

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