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<https://www.bizjournals.com/sanjose/news/2017/07/26/masooma-ibrihimi-afghan-filmmaker.html>

For this Afghan filmmaker, Silicon Valley business training is a way to change old ways back home

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It's hard being a businesswoman in Silicon Valley. It's even harder in a place where society hasn't made up its mind yet about whether girls should go to school.

Masooma Ibrihimi, 33, was born in Iran to Afghan parents who had fled the Soviet-Afghan war in the 1980s. They moved back when she was prevented from going to college because of her nationality. In her parents' homeland, where many girls were forbidden to go to school under the Taliban, she was allowed to go to college and study film making.

Last week she was visiting tech companies up and down the Peninsula as part of a mentorship program at Akraya, sponsored by the Institute for



Afghan film maker Masooma Ibrahim, who founded the documentary film making company Arastoo, points out her country during a mentorship for women executives in Silicon Valley

Economic Empowerment of Women, learning how she might turn Arastoo, Afghanistan's first woman-owned film-making company, into a profitable business.

"Most of the Afghan people think that filming is a hobby, not an industry," Ibrahimimi said. "But film documentaries or short films or feature films have a lot of effect on the lifestyle of the area. Afghanistan is a backward country. We have a lot of problems. We have very, very, very bad customs in our country and film can change your mind. Film can change your life, also."

Changing lives in Afghanistan has always been what she's about, Ibrahimimi said.

She has written thousands of television and radio scripts in Afghanistan, daily dramas broadcast into remote villages where sometimes the only outside communication is a battery-powered radio, telling stories about how the ongoing war has stifled societal development and about how women try to survive despite oppression born of custom.

"I have written programs especially for teenagers," she said. "Each season has been 75 episodes for four years. After this I have written a lot of short serials to change Afghan families' minds, because in far provinces there is not television and electricity and most people listen to radio. I have started writing a daily serial in radio from 2012 for four years."

But the grind was exhausting. It finally cost her her job and cost viewers and listeners an important perspective.

"In Afghanistan, families have to know about problems of women in Afghanistan," she said of the audience for her stories. "For example, when a girl becomes teen-age and becomes — you know, (starts her) period — she couldn't tell about her situation to her mother or father. If her mother and father know about this, (it's) 'OK, you have to marry.' Why? For example, she is 13. She is 12. I want to change it."

Now she has moved into writing and producing short films and documentaries that have won prizes at small film festivals in Switzerland, India, Iran, Ireland and the United States. During her week in Silicon Valley she learned about business plans and marketing to make Arastoo a going concern in which she and her film-maker husband can make a go of it.

“I went to many different companies, for example,” she said. “We went to Facebook, Google, for example. It was great, you know? It was dream. It’s not real. And I was so sad. Why is my country so backward? Too backward. Why do we not have this company in my country? I shake and the hair on my body rose.

“Now I think I wake up from a very long sleep. I have to stand. I have to go back. I have to change. I have to make some change in my personal life, in my career, in my society. I want to share all of the things I learned here with my family, my relatives and my colleagues. It is very important because here is very, very advanced country. We will learn many things within it.”

Not everyone home in Kabul wants to see things change. Monday, after getting back home, she reported on on her Facebook page about an explosion in the city that killed 20 people.

She had said before leaving the United States that such violence has driven many of her fellow filmmakers out of the country.

“When you are walking in the street, an explosion takes place,” she said. “Just in one second, two seconds, many people will be injured and killed. Our people are so tired. We don’t need war. We don’t need terrorists or radical persons. We want to have a very relaxed life. We want to be happy. We want to improve our country. But there are some people who don’t want this change because they like to control the people for themselves, control the minds of people.”

— *This story is the second in a three-part series of stories in the Silicon Valley Business Journal about the Institute for the Economic Empowerment of Women. You can read about Rwandan business executive Celine*

Uwineza here. Akraya co-founder Sonu Ratra will be profiled in the Social Capital section online on Thursday and in Friday's print edition.

Jody Meacham

Reporter

Silicon Valley Business Journal

