

Speech: Dormitories of hope

It was raining by the time we got to Marrakesh. The long-threatened storm had held off as we had forged our way across the flat desert that forms the northern hinterland boundary to the magical city. But the rain teemed down as we wound our way slowly through the traffic and out beyond the city towards the dimly-seen Atlas Mountains beyond.

As the rain fell, so did the temperature. In Rabat that morning, it had been a balmy 21 degrees. Now, in the shadow of the Mountains, the temperature was a chilly 8 degrees and the stiff breeze that accompanied the rain made it feel a lot colder.

Fouad parked the car outside the first dormitory. The rain fell in solid slats across the car's windscreen. Pulling my jacket on, I walked down the mud bank towards the door of the dormitory, my feet splashing in the puddles as I slid towards the door.

Inside, a large fire gave a semblance of warmth, but the fact that no one removed their jackets even inside told the real story. The girls were doing their homework, quietly, conscientiously. They looked up and greeted me "Ahlan wa Sahlan".

But I have got ahead of myself...

Ten years ago, a British man set up Education for All in Imlil. A charity whose sole purpose is to try and help girls from poor and isolated rural communities have the opportunity to continue their education beyond 12. Many secondary schools in rural communities are heavily over-subscribed, so the timetable is run on a 'shift' system. Although classes start at 0830, pupils often have periods during the day without classes. Parents, worried about what their daughters would do during those 'down' periods, would frequently prevent their daughters from attending secondary school as a result. EFA builds dormitories near to rural secondary schools, giving the girls a secure, safe environment in which they can live, work and study and to which they can 'retire' during the periods of the day when they do not have lessons at the schools. The girls arrive on a Monday morning and go home on a Friday afternoon. The success rate is phenomenal: 83% of girls who go through the EFA dormitories go on to university. The first year of the dormitories, EFA practically had to beg parents to let their daughters stay in the dormitories. Now demand significantly outstrips supply.

And it was to those dormitories that I had come on that cold, wet December afternoon. The dormitories are well-built and solid, with good kitchens and places for the girls to study, eat, sleep and chat. But they are not luxurious. As I was shown round the buildings, it dawned on me why the success rate is so high. The girls in the dormitories came from the poorest families in the poorest villages. I saw pictures of some of their houses – whole families living, eating, cooking and sleeping in one room. No one in their families had had an education. These girls were being offered a huge

chance and they were seizing it firmly with both hands – it made me embarrassed to think how easily we take a formal education for granted in the UK and how often we waste that opportunity.

And I realised again how vitally important education is. Without it the odds are stacked against you – it is harder for a person to reach their potential; harder to develop as an individual; harder to imagine that they will grow up to make a useful contribution to society. And if girls and women do not receive a full education, then a country immediately loses at least 50% of its potential, with a consequent economic and political loss.

The rain stopped half way through my tour of the dormitories and we went up onto the roof – a roof which was flooded by the downpour. The clouds had lifted and a glorious evening was in prospect. The view was spectacular: freshly-fallen snow was visible on the shoulders of Mount Toubkal who stood like a giant at the end of the valley. The wind was biting.

Back inside, we had a look at the bedrooms. The bunk-beds, originally built for four girls to sleep in each room, had been adapted in response to demand for places and now stood three high – each room sleeping six girls. I could see my breath as we talked. There is no heating in the rooms – and again I thought of shame at the electric heaters at home and how we take such luxuries for granted – so the girls huddle down under blankets every night.

As I walked along the bitterly cold road to visit one of the other dormitories, hugging my down jacket closer around my ears, I thought how truly inspirational those girls are – so grateful for what EFA has offered them; so aware of the chance that they have been given; so determined to make the most of the opportunity they have been offered; so diligent, polite and hard-working. At once an example to us all and a pointed reminder to take nothing in life for granted.

And I reflected how only sustained access to education will enable these girls (and thousands of others like them across the country) to realise their dreams to be the Doctors, Teachers, Lawyers and Leaders of tomorrow: such a future would indeed be a bright one for Morocco.