



AN INTERVIEW WITH **ROLA EL CHAMI**

by **TUGCE AKSOY**

INTRODUCTION

Rola El Chami is a woman that radiates inspiration. A blend of East and West, a blend of many cultures, a blend of her dreams and realities she saw in the world; Rola is a dreamer. Rola is a realist. Rola is a believer. And most importantly she is a doer. A doer that doesn't shy away from touching the issues she talks about. And that's what makes her so special.

Although she doesn't believe there is one superhero that impacts everyone's life, I believe she is one that for sure touched many lives with her SuperPowers. Rola is a human rights activist who is currently Global Partnership Manager at Saïd Business school, Oxford University. She helps organizations build measurable impact programs. She is a strong woman who walks the talk and has hit the ground in refugee camps multiple times. And thanks to her experience on the ground which opened her eyes to the vulnerability of women in those challenging situations, she is also the founder of **Survive for Women**, an organization that fights domestic abuse and empowers women with opportunities to stand up for themselves. She is also a survivor of domestic abuse herself, who one day had to live the story she used to listen to from others. Finally, she is a public speaker who in her own words, took the courage to be vulnerable and started talking about her personal experience, all to bring courage, faith, belief to other women.

Talking about what shaped the amazing woman Rola today, she says **“it was a collective of people that have made a difference in her life giving her the courage, the belief & the opportunities that carved her path.”** That's also why she is so eager to pass it forward to other women and make them believe **“they're capable.”**

Here is our conversation with Rola, once a young girl who aimed to “change the world” and all she wants to do now is to “help make a change in one person's life, one at a time”.

☸ Rola, the woman in front of me today is a superwoman! A human activist. A women's rights advocate. Founder of the very meaningful "Survive for Women" organization supporting women subjected to any form of domestic abuse in the Middle East through a social enterprise charity model. But let's go back a bit, who was Rola; the little girl? What were her background and dreams? And was there anything indicative of this path from early ages?

I was born and raised in Norway and ethnically my parents are from the Middle East. We travelled at least once a year, visiting family from the Middle East who were scattered in different places around the world, but then always came back to our core of living in Norway. My life was very diverse, and **my parents balanced the positive points of west and east in the household.**

As a little girl in my teens, I used to find myself very different from everyone. I wasn't someone who would follow trends. And sometimes people would find me very strange, for not for liking what everyone else likes. It did put a toll on me

because socially you start feeling like you need to be like others.

But as much as that was a challenge in my younger years, as I grew older, it became more of a unique aspect to me that I never let go of. **I never really fell into following. I lead my own way the way I found to be right.** I'm very good at listening and getting advice but I will end up taking the advice only if I think it suits me. I was always quite opinionated in my family as well, known to be the one who has an opinion and would talk about it.

☸ So, from a very early age, you had the instinct to not follow, question everything and search for your truth. How did this impact your journey as you grow up?

As I grew older, I channeled this energy into studying human rights and media in university. However, until university, my personality even sharpened more. When I was 15, my parents decided to move to Dubai and I had a really big culture shock there. As you can see Dubai is still a very nicely painted picture, but for someone who comes from Norway, that was a very big shock; things like suddenly having a driver taking me to

school instead of walking to school or wearing a uniform unlike in Norway. ***Despite challenges, one thing I took away from my experience in high school in Dubai was growing much thicker skin. In Dubai, I felt like I needed to stick up for myself and say no to certain things more. So, it started developing part of my personality.***

☸ What was it in Dubai that led you to stick up more for yourself?

It was the students' behavior. They were very opinionated and loud with their voices. I would like to compare it to a very typical high school American movie where if you do not stand your ground, you will be pushed over.

In Norway, I haven't felt any division or need to fight. In Dubai, I experienced incredible racial discrimination that I had never felt before. I had never been asked where I was from until I went to Dubai. In Dubai, it mattered.

There was one time and I remember this is probably where I became either very popular

or very unpopular. We had a gentleman in my class who was from India and who was incredibly smart. One day, a Lebanese guy asked me why I was talking to this Indian boy. Honestly, I was shocked and couldn't understand why he was asking this question. Later, I understood it was because Indian people were stereotyped as construction labor workers in Dubai and labelled with a certain class. I told him that I don't care where he is from and no matter where he is from he might graduate much better and more successful than you because you're sitting here and judging him.

He just went quiet and never brought it up with me again. *I thought to myself “Why did I have to fight for this when it’s such an obvious thing”. But apparently, it wasn’t an obvious thing to some people. So, these types of situations fed my instinct to fight when I see unfairness.*

So, you didn’t only stand up for yourself but also stood up for people. I guess that’s the instinct that led you to study human rights in London. And London is such a great place to do that being a blend of many cultures. What was London’s role in your life?

After Dubai, we went back to Norway and I eventually knew that I wanted to go to London to study human rights and media.

I think it was as soon as I landed in London, I decided I’m not going to hide behind my shyness anymore. I was moving on on my own. It was a new country. Everything was new for me. I was going to decide how I want to print my identity now because I’ve always had this identity issue of feeling “always in-between”: I didn’t look Arabic whilst being Arabic but raised in Norway.

London was perfect to do this because I had such a diverse group of friends around me. I had a flatmate from Kenya, but he was brought up in Saudi Arabia. I met people who don’t belong to one place just like me. People from Greece, Turkey, the Middle East, Southeast Asia... and I

saw everyone had a story to tell.

That diversity and acceptance encouraged me for the first time in my life to ask people to say my name the correct way. In Norway for example, they say “Rola” and in Arabic, it sounds like “Rula” (so, you roll your tongue a little bit when you say it). As people started to pronounce it correctly, I learned from some Greek friends that my name originates from the Greek language 700 years before BC, which was very interesting to me because that made me more intrigued to learn more about where I came from.

It empowered me in such a strong way. It was nice to kind of put my foot down. That was where my identity became me, and I felt my voice was being heard.

So, London as an amazing mixture of cultures, helped you to embrace your name and identity truly. A very big step that I think many of the readers who live abroad can understand. For me, not a day goes by without someone calling me “taxi” (for Tugce). Can you tell us a little bit about the journey after? After university studying human rights, how did you go from theory to practice?

Throughout my whole university time during any holidays, I would pick up any job I could get my hands on, wherever it took me in the world whether it was an internship or unpaid job just to get more experience. As I was quite active in the human rights field, I got a job for example in the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Jordan where I got to do reports, turning theory to practice through

a lens of the human rights situation in the region. I visited refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan, and I also got to go to Brussels to visit the EU. *I just followed all sorts of things that I was excited about and finally, my experience got me one of my dream jobs with Oxfam based in Jerusalem.*

What particularly led you to work on the ground and especially in the Middle East?

One of our biggest projects in the International Baccalaureate School was doing 50 hours of service for a fundraiser in an orphanage in Kaliningrad (a little region; part of Russia situated between Poland and Latvia where there was still a lot of immigration). I spent a whole year fundraising and 10 days in the orphanage evaluating where the money should go, by talking with the school staff. I felt like I knew I was doing something good and I was happy, which led me to want to do more for my roots as well.

However, getting into my roots wasn't so easy.

I was really into history. In my International Baccalaureate, I did my major in history and I was so fed up by only learning about the First World War, the Second World War, the Vikings, Napoleon, the typical European history that we would. We knew it by heart. Now I wanted to learn more about Middle Eastern history but my voice was not heard in school, unfortunately. ***So I decided I would learn it by myself. And seeing all the injustices and stories, it started hitting me. I wanted to do more service in the Middle East.***

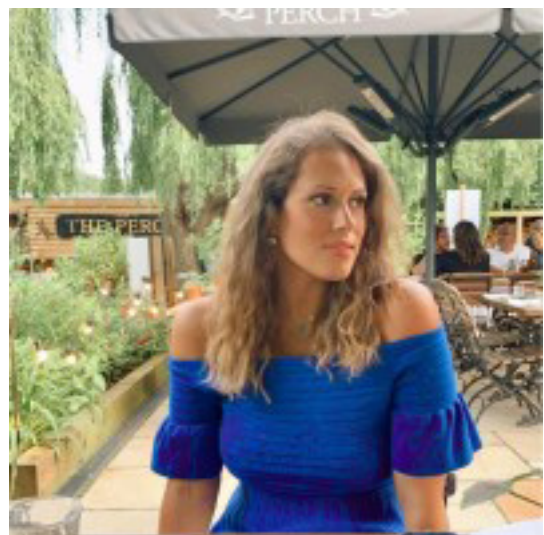
And that finally brought you to the land of Jerusalem, Palestine with OXFAM...

When I got my job with Oxfam I was over the moon. Happy because I was going to go to Jerusalem and Palestine. The land that I've been dreaming to see and work in.

In very many ways, my parents were not happy about me being in the warzone. But eventually, I managed. It was very challenging at the time (2012) because the Syrian revolution broke out. So things weren't going well in the Middle East. I was interrogated for two hours after reaching the borders although I went with a diplomat. Long story short, I entered Palestine and I was over the moon. Happy to see this land that I've seen pictures of on TV.

While I was there, ***my core objective was to work and report on enabling women to be more empowered to sustain themselves.*** Instead of getting the funding and spending the money on what we thought was necessary, we followed a different approach. We asked the people what they want the money to be used for, bringing in their voices. We created a committee within the Community with both young men and women, which was never heard of before because, in Palestine, men make the decisions. ***So, by creating those gender mixed committees we helped more women to vocalize their voices.***

It was just so interesting yet hard to meet refugees within a country of war, which was a very different experience compared to other refugee camps I had visited before. After spending some time in Palestine, I even got used to hearing the bombs or being pointed by a gun by the Israeli army. ***I realized how bad it was that this mindset became normal for me and more importantly to all these people.***





That's terrifying. However, in a way by normalizing the fear, you became more fearless. How did this experience on the ground trigger you to start "Survive for Women"?

A big part of my work on the ground was to see how vulnerable women were. Getting married young, having and taking care of children & the husband, cooking cleaning. And all in very challenging conditions. I never really liked that. ***And especially after we managed to create this sustainable model for some women in villages I thought and confirmed, change is possible.***

We could help these women and we could help others. So when we had to evacuate, I went to Jordan and visited the first refugee camp that was for the Syrians fleeing the civil war that broke out in 2012. I sat down with a lot of women and talked to them. ***The gender gap there was just so bad, even for the children.***

Even for simple things... There were tents set up by different local and international organisations and one organisation, in particular, had three tents; one set up for boys, one for girls, and one for families (women and babies). The boys had footballs, the girls didn't, and the girls were so upset about it. They were questioning "Why don't we have any footballs?" ***So the gender gap in the region amid a crisis was there.***

At some point, I had to go back to Dubai for a while to financially sustain myself. However, I was struggling a lot to cope with the stress of what I left behind. I had to find a distraction for my mental health. I discovered a little place called ***Dragonmart in Dubai.*** This place had loads of accessory beads to make your own accessories. I bought a massive chunk and started creating bracelets. ***It helped me cope with the difference of mindset from literally guns, war, and refugees back to this very well polished city.*** Soon some of my friends started offering to buy bracelets from me and even pushed me to turn it into a business. In the beginning, I didn't want to start a business, as the whole point of making bracelets was to calm me down. But then I decided to do it, in order for the full profit to go to women across the Middle East.

Those were the days when I got more interested in reading more about women subjected to Domestic Abuse in the region. I noticed that there were not enough statistics and research to support solutions. And through my work with women in refugee camps and villages, I was



able to do more ground research by asking them directly about what they knew about domestic abuse in general. The responses were shocking. ***So in the end combining my research and knowledge with my motivation to sell bracelets, I started "Survive For Women" to enable women to get a more financially stable ground.***

My sister helped me with the name, and I started selling across UK and Dubai. I had to learn how to create my own website with a friend's advice. Then I registered as a charity in the UK and managed to get support from a wonderful young woman volunteer who believed in the cause to make a change. Then I had another light bulb moment. I leveraged the PR experience I gained in Dubai and the wide network of journalists and editors I accumulated, to raise awareness on the cause and mission of ***"Survive For Women"***. This helped me eventually to make the platform even bigger.



So, although you were no longer on the ground, your heart was there, and you continued supporting the women in the warzone for empowerment. Then you went one step further to become a public speaker who is vocal about her personal story too. How did this happen and what was that personal realization?

It was around the beginning of COVID. ***COVID was even a more important time for “Survive For Women” because it was hitting people at home. As most domestic abusers prey on their victims at home, it meant that domestic abuse survivors were stuck at home with their abusers during lockdowns with no escapes.***

I later discovered that I too was a survivor of domestic abuse.

It's interesting because when you hear about people with a mission to make a change in the world, they usually start with a personal story or pain point. For example, through the women of the future network, I met a woman who had lost her sister to honour killing. This led her to start her charity with the mission of advocating for those women.

My own story didn't start that way. I always wanted to make a change since I was 15, to advocate for women who were physically and mentally abused, even though I had no personal experience. I had already founded my charity before meeting my then-husband.

My personal story started, after my mission and Survive for Women did. I fell in love and got married. It was 2018 when I realised that I was also a survivor of mental abuse. This realisation changed me a lot. It was hard to accept. However, through this, I had a story of my own to tell and this made my message to all the incredible survivors out there much stronger.

When I came to that acceptance, I was like, it's fine, I'm here, I'm breathing, I have a lovely son who's the reason I'm alive. I have a roof over my head and I have a job. What else do I need? Despite years of the healing process (that continues), I'm okay. ***It is now time to voice that message and make it loud and clear – that there is hope and light at the end of the painful tunnel we had to go through.***

So, from that moment onwards in 2018, I talked at global events including being a guest speaker at the Oxford Impact Measurement Programme for executives at the Said Business School University of Oxford, Women in Business Summit. I've had roles as an Ambassador to speak to the next generation of female leaders about confidence and the importance of self-awareness.

Through these years, I realized it may be very vulnerable to talk about your personal experience because you feel like you're opening a part of yourself. However, the one thing that makes me do it is that I know it can bring people together. When we share something so personal, we allow the spectator to open up and talk too, and communication is such a powerful tool that can help us heal. So, for me, it is worth it as long as I can voice the importance of courage, faith & belief.



What was the biggest change or realization you had after you experienced domestic abuse?

I realized the importance of awareness. I discovered a lot of times women didn't know that they were being abused. It's as simple as that. Or the women justified it, which was even worse. "He's tired, he's had a long day..." But NO it's not okay. Right now it's taboo but we need to talk about it.

So, I made it my mission to make them aware and be the voice of the voiceless.

Since then, I have been sitting on the Women in Business Summit Advisory Board, the Women in Leadership Advisory Board. I've taught 2 MBA classes at the University of Oxford on impact and purpose. I sharpened my purpose.

✚ In a way, your survival of divorce abuse even gave you more of a voice and purpose. How do you articulate your purpose today?

I was born to make a difference.
It's in my veins.
And for me, I'm not driven by money.
I work very, very hard to make ends meet, as a single mom. I make sure that I come in every day to work, do my job, get my bills paid.
But it's not what drives me. It's my purpose that drives me, knowing that I'm making a change in

someone's life. *When I was young, I wanted to change the world, but now, I want to change one life at a time.* And my divorce only made me feel stronger about it.

✚ Such a nice evolution from “changing the world” to “changing one person at a time”. And so inspiring to hear your mission on empowering these women one by one. If you were to inject one belief into women today, what would it be?

I would try to make them see what they are capable of.

I think a lot of times women undermine themselves and that's a shame. I undermined myself when I was in an abusive relationship. I questioned a lot of things and I think despite the hardship I went through, I still went back to think I was one of the lucky ones because obviously, I know this area. I've just never experienced it. And then when I experienced it, I started identifying it. Not the fact that it was mental abuse. But that something was wrong. So, I knew that the right decision was to leave and go away from it. However, it took me nearly a year to start discovering I was being mentally abused. I didn't know it before and a lot of women don't know too.

When they're being mentally abused they think “He's being only verbally abusive, mentally abusive, he didn't hit me, it's OK.” It's not. There is plenty of research that shows women who leave

abusive relationships go back to the abuser a couple of times before they have had enough or it's too late. It is truly a vicious cycle. They fear the unknown and don't know how to build their life from scratch alone.

In the Eastern context, a lot of women feel desperate. They say “How am I going to leave? What am I going to live on? He's the one who supports the house financially. He's the one who has a roof over my head. What about my children? If I leave, the children will remain with him because I can't financially support myself” Hence why I aim to help these women economically with “*Survive For Women*”.

I try to tell them that if they have the courage they can do it. *I try to enable that inner lioness in them to say “No, enough is enough and I'm going away from this and I can do this”.* *Women are much stronger than they think they are.*



Enabling the inner lioness... That's such a nice way of putting it. We talked a lot about your personal story of enabling that inner lioness yourself but was there anyone in your life that also helped you arrive at your purpose by giving you OPPORTUNITIES or BELIEF?

It was a collection of people.

First, it was my mom. Being brought up in an Arabic household we used to watch the news on Arabic channels, and there's always some bad news. There is always war and injustice. So when we were kids, every time we asked my mom if we can get a rabbit pet, she would look at us and say "Rabbits are cute and lovely animals. **I get it but would you rather spend that money on a rabbit, while that money could be sent to children who are in very much need where we come from?"**

That always made me go quiet as you can't say no to that. Every time my mom would put some food for us, she would say "Put some on your plate, finish it and then if you still want more eat more. But always, always finish the food on your plate because we don't want to throw away the food knowing there are people around the world desperate for one rice grain" To this day, I cannot leave one rice grain on my plate.

My mother was the one who carved into my mind to always think about others who are less fortunate and that you always have something you can do about the issue you care about.

The second was the act of kindness that was embedded in us in school in Norway. In Norway back when I was in school when you start grade 1 you were being adopted by someone who's in grade 4. And that 10 year old in grade 4 had the responsibility for a full year to pick you up from your door and drop you off at home every day as well as to play with you during break time at school. **That injected in me the habit of being kind and mindful to those who are younger and more vulnerable.**

The third was my English teacher. She was a big reason I got into human rights. My English was really bad at that time and one day she asked me what books I was interested in reading. I told her: anything that's based on a true story. It intrigued me to learn something true and not fiction, so she gave me my first book "**Behind Closed Doors.**" That book talked about an English girl who was physically harassed, raped, and abused by her household

in England. This book and story sat with me for years, thinking how on Earth can someone be put in such a situation and then grow out of it, only to be with someone who's doing the same thing to her. Above all, the broken social service system that overlooked these issues hit me the most. The social system was there to eliminate such issues and protect children and yet it continuously failed.

That book led to so many other books. So once I learned that there are books like this, I started reading more and more and this is also what led me then to Kaliningrad, and also doing my human rights degree. **So one book she gave me led me to discover my fighter spirit to care about an issue and do something about it.**

Needless to say, it didn't stop with these three people only. I believe the universe has a wonderful way of bringing incredible people into your life and I continue to have amazing old or new friends and family that keep having an impact on my life.

To learn more about Survive For Women, Domestic Abuse, and what you can do to get involved, you can visit: www.surviveforwomen.com

By buying one of their hand-made bracelets, you automatically help supporting these women by empowering them and offering them financial support across the region.





That's so lovely. It is indeed a collection of people and events that nudge us into certain directions and looking back it is so great to recognize who these were. Final question. If today you were to give any advice to all the other wonderful people and women reading this, what would it be?

Be kind to each other. You never know what the person in front of you is battling in silence.

I think we see a world where women can be so mean. A world where sometimes women feel the need to push each other down out of jealousy. ***Instead, we must elevate each other for success, be united and go up together.***

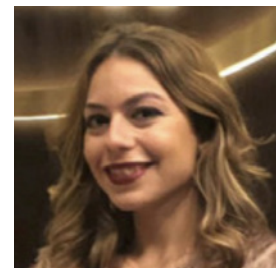
It's enough that we live in a man's world where

we are fighting battles of equality, inclusion, and justice.

We should stop that and applaud the other women around us until we get our time to be applauded for.

That's definitely my message.

Thank you, Rola. It is a pleasure to hear your story and I hope it inspires many women to enable their inner lioness.



Tugce Aksoy
Senior Global Brand Manager Magnum
Ice cream Unilever

SUPERPOWERS INTERVIEW SERIES



As LEAD Network, we have a mission to turn our individual or company skills and behaviors into SuperPowers to eliminate gender inequality – now. We believe that we each have the power within ourselves to make gender equality and inclusion a reality by taking actions, every day, however small we may think they are.

This interview series is all about shining a light on the multiple amazing people who have done and still do their fair share in activating those SuperPowers. We'll be witnessing their own stories of how they have been enabled and empowered throughout their life and how they now pass it forward to provide opportunities, set expectations, enforce habits, inspire beliefs and courage for others. Join us in the journey to meet with a new inspirational figure that believes in SuperPowers every month and let's make change together, now.