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LIFE

Hijabs and helmets cycling group empowers women

By **Vivien Fellegi** Special to the Star

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When Hazar Najjar arrived in Toronto from Syria as a refugee in 2016, her sponsor family gave her a bike to run errands and go on adventures.

She quickly discovered that cycling was an efficient and inexpensive way to navigate Toronto's streets.

Once Najjar ventured away from the pollution and into nature, she found a new purpose for cycling — peace. As she whirled past the greenery, warmed by sunshine and cleansed by the fresh air, her stress evaporated. "I feel like I'm free," she says.

Najjar was a recent convert to the sport. Back in Syria, her culture generally did not encourage females to ride, she says. Modesty was one of the main sticking points. Riding requires shorter and more comfortable clothes than the usual, more conservative garb many women wear. "Women... know if they do this they're inviting a lot of gossip," she says.

She wanted her headscarf-wearing (or hijabi) friends to reap the same rewards. But most were reluctant.

Here they faced a different barrier to cycling — the headscarf. It already made these women stand out. Najjar attracted curious stares and remarks like "Go back to your country," wearing her headscarf in public. Her friends feared the increased visibility that comes with cycling could generate more negative attention.

But earlier this year, Najjar, 26, found a solution.

She was at a bike repair workshop in Scarborough, offered by Scarborough Cycles, a program of Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services, where she met Fei Tang, a social innovator, who proposed Najjar partner with Access Alliance to start a recreational cycling program for hijabi women.

Tang suggested that cycling as a group would help the women feel more secure in the face of unwelcome reactions. "A public presence of hijabi women on bikes... defies bigotry," she says.

Scarborough Cycles would provide orientation, escorts, bikes and helmets. Najjar's job was to recruit the female riders via Facebook.

The Hijabs and Helmets cycling group, which started in May, has more than 60 members, 30 of them active participants. While most riders are hijabi women, anyone is welcome to ride with them. The group meets roughly every two weeks at different

locations in the east end and covers on average 18 kms each outing. The plan is to continue into November.

So far it's been smooth riding.

The community has become accustomed to seeing local women biking. In fact, Najjar's parents have tried to steer her 20-year-old sister into the sport.



On a recent outing, a boisterous group of 10 cyclists — dull grey helmets snugly fastened on top of the colourful headscarves — careened down a steep bike trail leading into Scarborough's Morningside Park.

"It's beautiful!" one of the women yells out as they speed past a blaze of purple and yellow wildflowers in the warm autumn air.

The cyclists are met with friendly nods as they wind their way along Highland Creek. Volunteer Mustafa Fadel, the only man on this outing, keeps his eye on the map as he leads the others. He jumps off his bike from time to time to point out muddy patches and other potential pitfalls.

When Najjar asked Fadel, a friend and an experienced rider, to help organize group rides, he jumped at the chance to support the women in their endeavour.

Fadel, a software developer originally from Syria, has cycled all his life. Males, unlike females, would ride unhindered in Syria, and Fadel used his bike to transport himself everywhere.

After arriving in Toronto in 2016, the refugee relied on sports, including cycling, to stay fit and foster new friendships. He doesn't want his female counterparts to miss out on these benefits of bicycling. "Everyone can ride a bike, even with a hijab," he says.

Fadel acts as guide and expert cyclist, helping the women get comfortable on bicycles. While some of the women struggled initially, many now are confident enough to ride on their own, outside the shelter of the Hijabs and Helmets.

Heba Diab, a 21-year-old student, is grateful for the support that comes with riding in a group — especially when she sees a sign warning cyclists about coyotes. “Do they attack humans?” she asks. She’s reassured that there’s safety in numbers.

Diab learned to ride a bike as a child in Syria, but stopped as she got older. “It (was) not popular..(for) girls,” she says. But nowadays it’s becoming more accepted in her country of origin.

When Diab arrived in Toronto in 2015, and saw that women riding bikes was common, she was encouraged to take it up.

“If they can do it, I can do it,” she thought.

Diab bought a bike and shortly afterwards joined Hijabs and Helmets.

Her first excursion was tough. But her new friends cheered her on. “We are like a family — we don’t leave anyone behind,” she says.

Now Diab is on a mission to correct stereotypes about Islam and cycling, held by some Canadians.

“Some people think that as a Muslim female we can’t do those activities because of our religion,” says Diab. But that’s a misconception, she says. “It’s allowed...we can have fun.”

The cyclists reach Lake Ontario and perch on the jagged rocks on the shore. A stiff breeze blows off the water, and Diab and two friends break into an Arabic folk song about the wind. They clap and sway together.

On the way home they keep singing to energize their weary limbs. Diab and Najjar greet all the passersby on the trail. Every one of them smiles and says “Hi.”

“It gave positive energy,” says Najjar.

Most in the group get off to push their bikes up the final hill.

Back at the Lawrence-Orton Bicycle Repair Hub, the women celebrate with cookies.

“I don’t get tired as easily (now),” says Diab. “I feel like I made an accomplishment.”

“That’s awesome,” says Najjar. “I’m proud.”

Najjar is pleased with herself, too.

“This experience made me feel like I made a difference, which gave me huge confidence ... to try doing other things.”

Her latest project? Creating a public speaking workshop for newcomers at Access Alliance.

Vivien Fellegi is a freelance contributor for the Star.

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