

Last month, Zahra, a 40-year-old woman stood up in front of a microphone to read a speech she had written herself. "Parents just don't send their kids to school." With her few skills, Zahra had trouble finding employment and eventually left for the big city to work in a textile factory. Zahra credited the literacy circle with helping her gain the communication and managerial skills that enabled her to participate actively in her community. She has become a symbol and an example of literacy success among organisations and ministry officials; they usually ask her to give speeches on her experience to encourage others to learn, study and participate in community life. The newly-literate woman began her speech: "My name is Fatima Zahra, but people call me Zahra. I am from a small isolated village in the mountains." Zahra's life changed when her husband encouraged her to join a literacy circle run by an organisation that works in partnership with the ministry of education. An example to follow Zahra's success has encouraged other members of her family to start learning too. She smiles when describing one of her proudest accomplishments – a letter that her circle wrote to a health association asking for medical help for local children. But poverty wasn't the only factor keeping Zahra and her sisters from school. Zahra was briefly enrolled in school but never learned to read or write.