



## OMAYYA HAKIM

### PROFESSION

Biology teacher at Mattariya Secondary School for Girls and School's rooftop garden leader

"I'm a biology teacher who is in love with plants. Since 2014, our school has been actively working on gardening activities. As a teacher, I have tried to put a lot of effort into connecting the girls with the school. The girls need some engaging activities that they can discover for themselves in order to love the school, as this is their second home. I always take care of the plants in the school and try to engage students in different gardening activities, such as taking care of the plants with me."

When we started working on the roof, the Mattariya community didn't understand what we were going to do with a rooftop garden on a school. Some community members were irresponsible. [They were] throwing waste down onto the school roof, and we suffered from this behavior for a long time until we planted a garden on our roof. The responsible school teachers who attended the training with the American University in Cairo (AUC) team started talking to the community members to ask them not to throw anything down onto the school roof, as we were going to use it to build a garden. This also helped spread awareness about the idea of rooftop gardening among the community. At the beginning it was not easy, until we started working on the roof. Then the community, especially the school's neighbors, became interested in the rooftop garden's progress.

During the implementation process, we faced some problems, such as electricity and water cuts. The neighbors used to watch us while we were working on the roof. When they saw that the school's water supply was cut, a lady from the neighboring building told us that she could help us by giving us access to her water source. She threw us a hose and we took water from her house all day until we completed our day's work. Another day, when the electricity cut, another neighbor gave us access to electricity from his house so that we could complete our work. The community became very supportive, until the garden was completed. When we asked why they helped us, they replied, "simply because you are beautifying the area and changing the view right in front of us!" They started to love the idea of a rooftop garden, and due to the garden, the waste-throwing diminished.

When AUC came to introduce the idea to our school's principal, I was asked to attend the meeting, as the principal knows that I am always interested in different gardening activities. So, I volunteered to take the lead in rooftop gardening implementation at our school. I learned about the new systems and was trained so that I could manage the rooftop garden together with the agriculture teacher. Whenever I need any support or technical assistance, Abdallah Tawfic helps me as much as he can. The school either shares the garden's produce among teachers and students, or we sell it. The girls are always interested in taking from the garden's produce since they had put much effort into taking care of it.

Our rooftop garden also has had a direct impact on me. The plants give me positive vibes and good energy. The plants are not objects; they have a soul and they feel everything around them. That's why I talk to them, and I know the plants understand me very well. I can't stay away from the roof for a long time. Due to the current situation of COVID-19 restrictions, I go to the school every other day to check on the plants and to water them if needed. Even my daughter has started to come with me, and she has gotten addicted to the roof and the plants. My daughter has discovered a new passion for taking care of plants, and she has started to grow a small pot at home. Unfortunately, though, we don't have a roof [to plant on], and our balcony is very small.

**I know that, until I die, I will always take care of plants.**

