

## Women Leadership Digital Storytelling Project



**Text by Ikram Elaakal , photos provided by the interviewee, Leila Ghandi**

This story is part of the Women Leadership Digital Storytelling led by the Stevens Initiative in collaboration with the Faculty of Letters and Humanities Ben M'sik/ Hassan II University of Casablanca and Kennesaw State University, Atlanta.

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## Leila Ghandi : A Wild Soul



Being the first Moroccan woman to travel around the world on her own, Leila Ghandi has succeeded in making great things happen in her life. The daughter of Ibn Battouta , nicknamed by her fans, Leila was born in 1980 in Casablanca, Morocco, the country where she was raised. In 1990, she joined Lycée Lyautey, the French High school she obtained her Baccalaureate from. She then moved to France in order to study international business. Later on, in 2004 , she got her Master's degree in "Sciences Po Paris" in strategic marketing in politics.

For Leila Ghandi, continuing studies in France has been one of the most intellectually challenging experiences because at that time she had to do two internships. ***"I decided not to look for a company but for a personal journey experience so that I could travel, explore, and learn about other countries' lifestyles,"*** she confessed. However, it wasn't that easy for her to settle down and do something she was long waiting for, as the process of hunting for a job took her months. Eventually, Leila Ghandi made it , and her first job was in the city of Santiago in Chile, South America. She worked there for three months, and invested the money she earned in traveling around Chile, Peru and Argentina. In this respect, she said ***"I was happy , and I understood at that time that traveling had to be part of my life."***

The adventurous Leila Ghandi decided to do the same thing in her second job, heading this time to Beijing, China. It was a new experience for her since she didn't know a lot about the country or even speak the language. For months, she worked there for a European project, using her salary to discover China. Her book titled *Chronicles from China* was released one year after settling in China. The book is a collection of emails she used to send to her family and friends during her stay in China. She lost control of the spread of these emails and ended up being in the hands of a publishing house. The editor contacted her and expressed his interest in her writing style. From that time, Leila started to be a professional traveler, writing papers and capturing photos for art galleries and magazines .



Leila Ghandi came up to a cross road where she had to choose between her mind and heart. At that time, Leila Ghandi was working as a business manager in France with a good salary, and a socially comfortable and appealing position. So she had to make what she considers one of the hardest decisions in her life. She decided not to listen to the conservative society, but to follow her heart and take a big step to the UNKNOWN.

Leila Ghandi's family and friends tried to convince her to commit to her professional career instead, but she decided to stick to her heart and listen to her inner voice. She says that as long as she believes in herself and her goals, and puts a lot of hard work and effort to achieve these goals, the emerging result can only be something great. ***"Today, I have no regret whatsoever of the decisions I made,"*** she admitted. All of the things that have happened in her life have taught her how to overcome her fears of being rejected. She admits that it has been a long process into establishing her strong and wealthy career.

In 2004, she knocked on the door of "*women of Morocco*» magazine, suggesting to create a section named "*Women of the World*" where every month she had to write about a woman from a different cultural background. Leila Ghandi used her traveling experience and had to invest from her own money as the magazine couldn't afford to pay for her expenses.

She exhibited her photos, for the first time, in the cold streets of Paris in winter time. Patiently, she did that for a week. Her photographs caught people's attention, and her photos started selling well. This experience gave her the strength to propose her project about China to an art gallery.

"Don't wait for the perfect moment because you will never have all the stars aligned" she advised, "the best way to succeed is to get started because when you start, your work starts to look concrete, and it's exactly the time when you start to find solutions for the problems and obstacles you face ... it's exactly the time when you meet the right people and start to get the right ideas ..."



By the time she began to grab the media's attention, Leila Ghandi received an email from the director of 2M, a Moroccan channel, in order to produce a documentary titled "*Travels with Leila Ghandi*". Leila Ghandi's program is a great success with thousands of views as it combines knowledge and entertainment. She conducted several interviews with renowned personalities, including Head of States and Prime Ministers, addressing touchy issues such as religion, social harassment in Egypt, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the veil, Islamism in France and gender equity in Norway.

Leila Ghandi advocates for women's rights on digital media and TV. The last season of her program focused mainly on the situation of women; she intended to shed light on women leaders of all kinds in the world, helping them represent themselves and raise their voices. She is a member in several associations, networks and conferences, working to speak for the rights of women inside and outside Morocco.



According to Leila Gnadi, one of the greatest achievements is the fact that she receives dozens of messages every day from people, mostly women, telling her how much she has inspired them and encouraged them to do things they had thought were impossible. ***"These people show me that you can have a concrete impact on people just by being yourself"***, she said smiling.

Today, Leila Ghandi's work environment is super diverse. Besides her work as an entrepreneur, she is a keen speaker and mediator for conferences and global events, and an influencer with thousands of followers on her platforms. She is a wife and a mother of two kids, the thing that adds a spicy touch to her life. ***"You can never be a perfect mother or a perfect worker; you just have to do your best"***, adding that ***"sometimes I feel I sacrifice something, but life is about sacrifice ... at least let's do it for a good reason, right?"***



Currently, Leila Ghandi works on many projects, including the project of '*One woman Show*', which has emerged from her experience in the past few years, giving speeches in meet-ups and conferences to students in her free time in Morocco. Because she noticed how much Moroccan students are eager to be motivated and inspired by experienced people, she has decided to make it as a professional project that can reach more people and make them benefit from it.





Traveling for the globetrotter Leila is a life school full of experiences and lessons. She claims that traveling has shaped her opinion based on real life situations, showing her what the freedom of mind feels like. It has taught her photography, film making and writing. Through her story, Leila Ghandi wants to convey the message she expressed in the following sentence: ***“do not care about what people say because it prevents us from doing a lot, and try to go out of your comfort zone because nothing big would happen inside it”***.