



## **A FREE WOMAN**

*Maya Nassar Talks Fitness  
from the Middle East*

Certified sports nutritionist, personal trainer and Bikini competitor/fitness personality Maya Nassar might seem like any one of a thousand female bodybuilders who have also made a career out of fitness.

Granted, she might be a little more successful than most—she has a show on an MTV affiliate and her own (popular) fitness app—but one of the most unique things about Maya is the home base from where she accomplishes all of this.

The Middle East.

From her beautiful home near the mountains outside Beirut, Maya sat down with us (via Skype), to chat about getting fit, accepting yourself, and embracing your freedom.

Born in New York to a Dutch mother and Lebanese father, Maya grew up in Nigeria, Africa (the family business is stationed there), and then moved to England for a while before returning to Lebanon as a young adult.

Her global growing up hasn't dimmed her love for her native country, however.



Citing the diverse population and varied topography—great climate, beautiful scenery—Maya also points to the fact that as far as Middle Eastern countries go, Lebanon has a little bit better atmosphere in terms of gender equality.

“I’d say we’re one of the more liberal Middle Eastern countries,” Maya says, “In the sense that women here are quite free—we lead normal, modern lifestyles. We still have political problems—we haven’t had a president for the last two years—so we do have troubles, but all in all it’s a great country. Great culture, great restaurants, great night life.”

That isn’t to say that Maya doesn’t regularly feel the weight of opinion from those who don’t appreciate her efforts to share her love of fitness and its potential as a source of empowerment with fellow women in the Middle East and the rest of the world.

When instances are mentioned of women bearing the brunt of many Middle Easterners’ beliefs that women should not make spectacles of themselves—the July 2016 “honor killing” of Instagram celebrity Fauzia Azeem, for one example—Maya acknowledges that making yourself



visible, especially onstage in a bikini, is a big deal...but it's her choice.

“I definitely deal with that in this part of the world, and I hope I can inspire others to not care what people think and to follow their gut, to be bold and to do things they're passionate about,” Maya says.

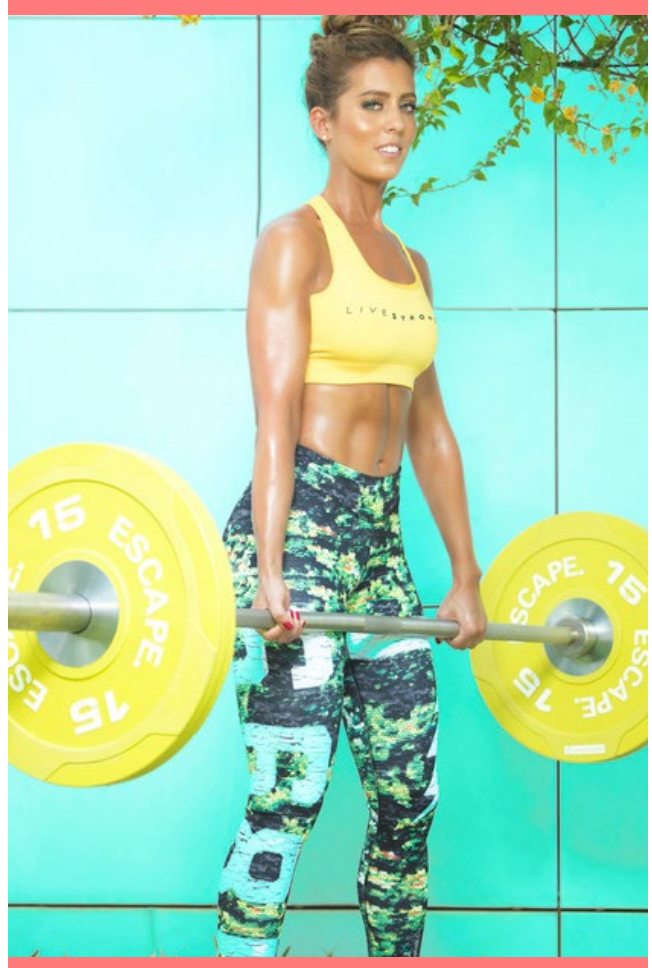


“I certainly get criticized for what I do. Lots of people don't accept these competitions, and don't accept a woman in a bikini onstage. I've received lots of hateful messages, on social media and I do lots of interviews in the Middle East—television shows, magazines, newspapers—and lots of times I get comments, if the magazine shares on social media.”

Instead, Maya chooses to direct her attention to the positive reactions she elicits, from the women she wants to reach...and there are plenty of those.

“When it was announced that I would be the new fitness representative on MTV Lebanon, I had thousands of hateful comments from Muslim and other religious extremists. But I don't focus on that, I focus on the positive messages I get from people saying I inspire them, from women saying that I empower them, and I use this to become stronger, to do better, and to show that women are modern, we are independent, and we are free.”

The statement that women are already free—no matter what their circumstance or their geographical location—and that they simply need to act on that knowledge might be a paradigm shift for many. Maya believes that acting on that belief no matter what the fallout is the antidote for the fear that feeds oppression, and also believes that embracing that mindset of freedom can also be revolutionary for the woman who might not be facing tyranny from the outside world, but has an inner bully to conquer.



Her philosophy is one that directs towards finding passion, and facing fear.

“I don’t care what people say; I say live your life, do what makes you passionate. Many people are scared to act on it, they’re scared they’ll get judged, or criticized.”

“Don’t think twice. Don’t think about it too much because you can hold yourself back. Face your fears—that’s really what empowers you. Put yourself out there.”

Maya’s training style is one that focuses on building strength, and while she acknowledges that aesthetics might be a goal for some—or



most—women, her intent is to point people towards strength for strength’s sake.

“I always say that women should train to be strong, not skinny, that you should do it for your own pleasure and wellbeing. When you train, your life changes for the better. Also I say don’t compare yourself to other people; when you do that, you’re going to feel insecure. I know lots of women do this with the media—they see other women or celebrities who look a certain way and then they feel insecure about themselves, so I always say you should strive to be the best version of yourself. No one’s perfect—perfection doesn’t exist—this is what I write about on my website, always loving yourself. Never comparing yourself. Don’t look at the media for that—half the time the women in the photos don’t look like that, themselves! They’re Photoshopped, airbrushed..”

Sending a message of self-acceptance to women hopefully builds a base of strength to stand on when certain segments of society step in to try and tear apart a woman’s image of herself. Whether it’s one end of the spectrum castigating—and sometimes killing—women for “going



too far” in exposing skin in person or on social media, or another end’s bullying for not fitting into the ideal standard of beauty that they believe is “worthy” of showing, the fact is that women have to learn to defend themselves against those who believe they’re less than...and they also need to learn to stand up to fear.

“Specifically in this part of the world I would tell women; expect criticism,” Maya says. “It’s going to happen. But do it anyway. What you gain will be so much more rewarding. I’d like to think I can inspire women—I’ve had emails from women telling me I’ve changed their lives—this is what keeps me going, thinking that I can be a role model and encourage women.”

**“Nothing is going to stop me. Criticism won’t stop me,  
I’m still going to be me.”**

**“I’m free, and I choose to be free.”**

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