

Egyptian upcycling startup creates fashionable accessories from trash

By [Jamie Matroos](#)

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While studying in Europe, Egyptian entrepreneurs Rana Rafie and Yara Yassin were inspired by the recycling and upcycling boom taking place around them. Hailing from Cairo, one of the most polluted cities in the world, the two decided to take their new passion home. There they founded UpFuse, an upcycling initiative that turns plastic bags into fashionable accessories.



Image credit: Colin Gwesu

Founded in 2013, the company has recycled 50,000 plastic bags. Each [UpFuse](#) tote bag is made using 30 plastic bags. The company also creates wallets, laptop cases and camera straps using the trash. But, according to the company's senior product designer Lama Khawanky, the toughest part is changing people's perceptions.

"One challenge is, how to sell a plastic bag. It is a fashionable bag made of upcycled plastic bags but Egyptians see it as a trash bag," she said.

When we visited the UpFuse studio, nestled in the basement of a large, mansion-like home in the picturesque New Cairo City, it was difficult to picture the widespread pollution Cairo has become known for. But, just under one hour's drive away is the garbage district Manshiet Nasser, the home of Egypt's garbage collectors. Known as the Zabaleen (Arabic for garbage collectors), the people of Manshiet Nasser have made a living sorting through the 15,000 tonnes of waste generated by Egyptians every day.

The waste is sorted and turned into quilts, rugs, pots, paper, livestock food, compost, recycled plastic products such as clothes hangers. With the help of an NGO called Roh al-Shabab (Youth Soul), UpFuse gets the plastic sheets to make their signature bags from the garbage collectors.

"The colours and patterns are designed by our plastic upcyclers," said Yassin. "They have perfectly managed to put their creativity and soul in every piece you see."

There's also a strong educational component to their work. "To develop and prosper, communities have to be educated," says Yassin. "This is why we in UpFuse, doesn't only want to provide job opportunities, but also create leaders and help save our communities from illiteracy (sic)".

The startup recently won [the 2017 WeMena competition](#), a business competition that is designed to engage female entrepreneurs in the MENA (The Middle East and North Africa) region and encourage their participation in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. According to Yassin, the award and the continued success of the business is a testament that Egypt's economic and political challenges can be overcome.

"The economical and political situation in Cairo is always challenging because it is not designed to be creative," she said. "In UpFuse we have separated ourselves from all the news and the rules that could affect our growth. Definitely, we suffer sometimes. Especially because our Egyptian customer is really financially challenged. However, with every issue, there is a creative solution."

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