

Changing lives through puppetry

November 2011 - In Ein Sultan refugee camp in Jericho a group of boys and girls are sitting in a freshly painted classroom. Some of them are cutting little dresses and pairs of trousers out of cloth; others are braiding long black and yellow threads of wool. They are making puppets.



By developing sketches with puppets, the children in Ein Sultan refugee camp learn how to talk about sensitive subjects such as early marriage and child abuse.

The puppets will star in a sketch they are about to develop, dealing with some of their concerns, such as early marriage and sexual abuse. The workshop is part of a programme to **“Protect adolescents from Gender Based Violence through the promotion of their Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights in Yemen, Lebanon and oPt”**, which was started by Save the Children Sweden (SCS) in 2010.

In the oPt SCS works with Juzoor Foundation for Health and Social Development with the aim of improving the quality of and access to information and services for children and adolescents (aged 10 to 17) at risk or victims of sexual and reproductive health rights. Around 21,500 children aged 10-17, their parents and service providers in five impact areas in oPt (Aqabet Jaber, Arrub, Ayda & Azzah, Ein El Sultan refugee camps, and Dura town) are benefitting from this action.

Groups of parents and children participate in a number of sessions where they learn how to talk about their bodies and their rights. Several tools, like animation movies, educational games and puppetry, are used to create an open and relaxed atmosphere.

“Puppets are a very useful tool to teach children about sensitive topics, such as child abuse”, Rabab, one of the counsellors says. “It encourages participation and children are actively contributing and making suggestions for the dialogue. They choose the topic they want to discuss.”

Not only the children use puppetry; in the past year mothers organized five puppet shows. Each show dealt with a specific topic such as early marriage, child abuse and physical changes during puberty. When asked what the most important problem in their community is, all of the groups interviewed unanimously agree on early marriage. “Accompanied with early marriage comes the risk of early child birth”, one of the girls says, “girls stop going to school, they



“We get family-assignments after each session to discuss the topics we treated during the sessions at home.”

lose touch with society and blame their family for pushing them to marry at such a young age. Only through education can these women regain confidence.” **A couple of months ago the children prepared a puppet sketch about early marriage which they performed in several schools. Each of the puppet characters represented a family member, which makes the audience identify itself with the characters displayed on stage.**

Implementing a programme that deals with sexual and reproductive health can be a tricky issue in conservative societies. “At first we needed to convince the parents of the use of this programme and the need for education on sexual and reproductive health rights,” admits Nida, one of the counsellors. In general, and unexpectedly, parents seem to react quite positively to their children’s newly gained insights. Fatima (16) says, “Sometimes we conduct small opinion polls at home or in the schools. Our parents are generally happy because there are some things they are not able to talk about themselves,

and sometimes we come home and explain things they haven’t even heard about.” Wafa (16) particularly liked the sessions about adolescence and the physical changes that come with puberty. “I even mentioned the topic to my brother and father at home.”



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The mothers agree, “when my children asked me where babies come from, I couldn’t answer, because I didn’t know how to touch this subject and explain to it to them”, one of the mothers says, “now I have gained confidence, I can talk knowingly about these subjects. **I started talking to my children about hygiene; I can explain to my daughters what happens to their body when they get their period. I am not shy anymore.**”

Testimony from women of “Al Um Aldalel”, in Arrub refugee camp:

“It wasn’t easy for women to be liberated from the traditional culture and taboos and to enter the society without fear and restrictions. Women were able to endure fear and hesitation and overcome the obstacles of shame and nightmares that accompany them all the times. There is a big change regarding women’s rights and it helped enable them to make the correct decision which includes a stable and quiet life. Women became more active in society and became ambitious to aspire and shine in their family life and much more. We should pause and reflect on this change because it wasn’t easy to erase the taboos. There was a force that helped women gain patience, endurance and self confidence. Although we are a small group, our actions are big. We have become one united family that strives for advancement and gaining knowledge in a way that suits the abilities of each one of us. All this happened because of three women that were able to win our hearts and change our lives not in one or two days but in five years of communication and perseverance in order to change our as well as our children’s lives for the better.”

Al Um Aldalel = “Mother to Mothers Approach”