Volunteering with Abaad

A few weeks ago, I volunteered for two days with a project called Jina Al-Dar run by the organisation Abaad. They aim is to provide services in order to prevent and reduce all forms of violence against women and girls in marginalised areas of Lebanon. Practically, this meant driving a big orange school bus to Syrian refugee camps in Beqaa Valley northeast of Beirut, and assisting Abaad staff in conducting educational sessions related to gender equality for women and men living in the camps.

Before coming I had wondered if going to Syrian camps as a white, Westerner in the pursuit of “helping out” might actually do more harm than good. One of the first thing our Abaad contact person asked me and my fellow white, Western volunteer, was: “Are you familiar with the term ‘white saviour’?”. While it felt unavoidably uncomfortable, I was also relieved to find out that this trip was not meant to cater to the white volunteers, as is sometimes the risk with these volunteer projects. This question shows the necessary critical approach that Abaad takes to the work they do, including dealing with volunteers. The visit was structured entirely on the premise of the camp-members and Abaad staff. Everything was (of course) in Arabic, all paid staff were either Lebanese or Syrian, and my responsibility was reduced to manual tasks such as distributing juice and riding the bus with kids while the Abaad case-workers were talking to the refugees about Gender Based Violence (GBV) and other gender related topics. My role was essentially to keep practical things in order, while the Abaad staff was doing the important work.

The first sign of the camps was the big blue UNHCR letters printed on everything. We were greeted by all the camp children, running towards us excited by the look of the big orange bus. One of the tents in the camp had a few chairs and drawings hung up, and was apparently the school. While the Abaad staff had a women-only session in the school tent, I took the kids for a ride on the bus. “Where are we going?” one boy asked me, and I told him “around”. They didn’t immediately get the concept of ‘recreational activities’ as the Abaad worker had explained was the point of the round-drive.
After a while the kids turned up the dabke music so loud that the smallest girls stuck their fingers in their ears, and I resisted the urge to do the same. The girls next to me whispered to each other, and looked at me laughing. The oldest of the girls, maybe 13, introduced herself and stuck her hand out to shake mine. I looked down and saw that the top part of both her index fingers were missing. That didn’t stop her from snapping her fingers fiercely to the music, encouraging all the other children to dance as well. They clapped and hopped, and tried to make me stand up as well, but I banged my head on the roof of the bus, which resulted in a wave of laughter throughout the bus.

Later I got to sit in on one of the sessions. Around 30 women and girls gathered in a tent with carpets on the walls, and a gas heater in the middle of the room. A caseworker, with an Abaad vest, took the names and ages of the women to keep track of their outreach. One woman, in a green and gold dress and green hijab said that she was 18 years old. I thought I had got the number wrong in Arabic, and looked down at the paper to check. The woman, apparently only 18 years old, had the face of a 35 year old, clearly marked by the hardships of the life in the refugee camp. She was also a mom she said. Child marriage was a large theme in the sessions we attended. Research show that rates of girls being married off before they reach the age of 18 increases during armed conflict, as has also been the case among Syrian refugees. This is explained mainly by economic needs and concerns over young girls’ safety and future. In these sessions a woman Abaad staff will talk to the girls/women about the consequences of early marriage, such as health of the minor wife, increased number of divorces, and early pregnancy and delivery. She won’t tell them directly not to marry early, but highlight the negative outcomes. Early marriage in these conversations were be put in a context of domestic violence. One girl, 16 years old, looked confused when told these things. She fell in love with her husband she said, and is happy in her marriage. As a response the Abaad worker looked at me. “Are you married Clara? How old are you?”. I answered that I’m 23 and not married. No babies. The women looked at me strangely, and I felt uncomfortable in this situation. Comparing us like this made no sense, even though the Abaad worker merely tried to highlight that other options besides marrying early exists. Our realities are just so drastically different.
GBV and child marriage are sensitive topics. One Abaad case-worker told me that they would not get the women to discuss this without approaching it quite indirectly to begin with. They sometimes used actors who would act out the topics discussed by the women, to mirror the themes and make the women reflect on them. In one session the women got quite emotional to see their daily struggles being played out, especially when talking about getting paid, as it is not abnormal that these vulnerable women are further exploited by employers. Maybe what was most significant about the plays, was that the women seemed to have a really good time. While many of their kids were on the bus, their husbands not allowed, they had a space without their day-to-day responsibilities to just laugh at the theatre that was sometimes light and humorous, while based on the women’s lived experiences. Another way to approach these sensitive topics was to start out with ‘first aid and female hygiene’, and slowly move into GBV-injuries and legal rights. In the end they give the Abaad hotline number for the women to use if assaulted. According to Abaad, a significant amount of women from the camps actually uses this number, showing the impact that the sessions have in these areas.

However, apart from supporting women who have already been assaulted, Abaad also does preventive work. An example is a Gender Based Violence (GBV) programme targeting men, which surprisingly isn’t something that many NGOs working on gender related issues prioritise. In the men sessions, an Abaad employee starts out by explaining the basics of sexuality and gender identity, and goes on to talk about masculinities. He asks the men how they normally resolve conflicts in their households, and give them tools to solving conflicts without using violence. The case-worker being from the Beqaa himself, had a unique standing with these men and he told me that he often have experienced men reaching out after sessions, telling him they feel guilty and need help. But this work is not without problems. For one thing, not all men (especially the elder) are receptive to this knowledge. Further, I was told that the men sometimes say what the NGO wants to hear, or downplays the gender related issues in the camp. Regardless of the complications it entails, volunteering with Abaad made me realize that it is necessary to target men on gender-related issues. This is especially evident in the numbers of men actually showing up to get support on breaking patterns of violence. While it might be most intuitive for NGOs to spend budgets related to gender specific issues on women’s
empowerment and independence, working with Abaad convinced me that such efforts need to be combined with engagement of men in order to combat the root causes of GBV.

Volunteering with Abaad was rewarding, at least for me. But I had to stop and wonder what contribution I was actually making to the people in the camp, besides distributing juices and playing around with the kids, which, it seemed, could have been managed by the Abaad staff. I asked the Abaad contact person about this, and he assured me that these people were excited just to see foreigners. “It’s much more fun than seeing me, the standard Lebanese NGO worker that they have met a thousands times. You are like a new kind of toy”. This made sense thinking back on banging my head on the roof of the bus, releasing a tsunami of laughter among the kids. I thought about it for a while, and remembered a trip to a different refugee camp a few weeks back. Here, a mother invited me and a few other volunteers into her tent, where her 9-year-old son was dying from a fever as a result of the cold. I felt like an intruder, since there was nothing for us to do except sit and wait with the boy and her mother. All we could do was to be there. We asked the mother again if she was sure that she wanted us there, and she answered: “I want you here. It makes me feel almost as if the world hasn’t forgotten about us”.