

A while back I received an email seeking volunteers for a program called Jina Aldar organized by ABAAD. Volunteers and professionals ride on a bus touring marginalized areas in Lebanon aiming at providing women and girls in those areas with tools to reduce violence against them. Videos online made me intrigued and I signed my name for a trip to Marjaayoun with the ABAAD crew.

I didn't know what to expect, as I paced to the huge bus stripped in red and white, decorated with childlike drawings and an ABAAD logo. The driver seemed acquainted with the volunteering process and was extremely helpful and friendly. We waited for a few minutes for Hani, the person I've been in touch with regarding this trip. And then when he climbed on the bus he introduced himself and we took off. He informed me that I was the only volunteer on this trip, which I didn't mind but made me a bit anxious. He also introduced me to the nature of my work there, which was mainly with the children of the women involved in the project.

The trip was long but involved occasional small talk mostly about the weather and the bus driver's extensive knowledge on the different kinds of Nescafe he gets from street vendors. The chitchat eventually came to halt when we reached an army check point before reaching the village itself. Apparently, you could only enter that area if you held the Lebanese citizenship; otherwise you would have to acquire a permit. This is all goes back to the politics of the Israeli withdrawal from south Lebanon. Hani was told to show his permit and eventually asked to step out of the bus.

Coming from a legal background, I knew the regulations needed to be upheld but I also was aware of the humanitarian ramifications of hindering such a program. Hani didn't want us to wait for him and waste the day at the check point so he told us to leave him in the middle of nowhere just so we can move

forward with our day. Now, I was alone with the driver and a stranger to the area. Hani gave us directions and followed them to the word. We started picking up children from their houses. They flocked in and I asked them about their names, trying to memorize as much as possible. I knew that I had to make friends with them so that they won't make a fuss on the bus and end up injuring themselves. So I delegated every three seats with a boy and a girl to keep the order and they happily took on the responsibility.

After a small chat with three siblings I discovered that they were under the impression that they were headed to a swing set to play. This statement wasn't completely false, but with Hani out of the picture I didn't confirm nor deny their assumptions. When we arrived, we were welcomed by more volunteers. I was told to help the children out of the bus and then about the details of my job that day. Apparently, I would join a professional in a classroom-like environment where he encouraged them to be expressive and to talk for themselves.

But if I had to choose highlights from that day, I'd choose the ones that happened outside of the professional setting.

First, Motasem, a witty child that followed me everywhere and called me "Ostaz" or teacher, I saw fondness in his eyes and decided to ask him more about his life without pressuring him. It was as if he was waiting for someone to give him the bare minimum of attention and when he received it he started talking. "I don't want to work with my father", he told me, averting his eyes to the ground as if he said something shameful. He then explained to me how his father wanted to pull him out of school because he wanted more income entering the household. He told me how much he loved math and how he wanted to become a teacher. Albeit, a teacher that doesn't need a stick to teach, as he put it. He asked me if I could tell the people I'm with that he wanted to go back to school.

For some reason, he thought that group of adults had the authority and power to do so. Needless to say, it was heart breaking to tell him the truth so I nodded at his request. Shortly more children gathered around us.

The second highlight was two cousins fighting and yelling at each other, after we finished our second session. Again, I was referred to as a teacher and was called to intervene. Apparently, they were bickering over whether to go back to school or to skip. The girl wanted to attend class because she had science and for her, one should never skip science. On the other hand, her male cousin wanted her to cover for him because he was “too bored” to go to school. After letting them debate, I chimed in when he called her a “hayawane” or an animal, which is derogatory to say the least. I sat them down and asked him why he wanted to skip and why she wanted to attend. Turns out he wanted to skip because “men don’t need science, they need muscles”. Meanwhile her reasoning was a bit more convincing, the girl wanted to become a doctor and education means a great deal to her. The idea itself made the 11 year old boy burst into laughter “a female doctor!!” he chuckled. I can’t say I was surprised, but perhaps I expected more of the younger generation. She stood up and pushed him. I sat her down and asked him why he laughed. He simply explained to me how women are meant to be doctors for their children and only their children. So I asked him if his sister or wife would fall ill would he prefer the doctor to be a man. He looked at me appalled as if I insulted his entire family. Then he got the hypocrisy in his prior statement and retorted, “...maybe some could be doctors”. I laughed and tapped him on the head while his cousin paraded her smile of a small victory.

Shortly thereafter, a girl of roughly fourteen approached me smiling, her friends started to giggle from behind. She seemed shy and was thoroughly inspecting the area perhaps for her

mother or a nosey aunt. I introduced myself and asked for her name. She said that she loved “my class”. I didn’t argue with the notion of the activity being a class, so I smiled and said thank you. Aya was particularly interested with me being a law student. She asked me if I had any female classmates and was shocked to know that girls were the majority in my major. Right then and there, I saw the sparkle in her eye. She looked at her friends and smirked as if winning a bet. I then offered her a seat next to me but as soon as she was inching closer her mom yelled and it was as if all color escaped her face. She had to go and I didn’t argue. In my eyes she was merely a child but I was aware of the social norms in a deeply conservative area so I let it go, I didn’t want to cause any troubles to the team I was with.

Aside from the children, the conviction and dedication of the team on the ground gave me hope. And perhaps a couple of words with a stranger could plant the seed of change. Who knows hopefully, Motasem could become the Ostaz he dreams of. And with a little empowerment Aya could wear the robes of a lawyer and demand to be seen as an equal.

As we headed back to Beirut and its urban comfort, faces and stories started rolling through my memory. As a volunteer, my role might have been miniscule in comparison to others; however, the impact it left on me is massive. Jina Al Dar proves itself as a beautiful endeavor into the human condition of marginalized societies. I’m extremely grateful to have taken part in such a giving experience.