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# COVID-19 and Girls' Rights: A Series

Part Six: PALESTINE



WITH AND FOR GIRLS

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**In this series With and For Girls shares learning, resources, knowledge and calls to action regarding the impact of COVID-19 on girls globally. It draws from the Collective partners, girl leaders at the grassroots level and the leadership team at Purposeful, within which With and For Girls is a programme.**

**The series will highlight how, in this global health and economic crisis, girls will continue to be the worst affected, and a multitude of issues will be exacerbated, whilst new concerns and inequalities will also arise. We talk to girls in organisations we work with that are responding to unique challenges under COVID-19 and we will highlight the vital work done by girl-led and girl-centred organisations that require urgent additional funding at this critical moment.**





Credit: Fadi Aroui

*“Supporting the most marginalised people such as girls, children and women should be a priority as they are the most affected by the crisis and its aftermath. Crisis ends, but discrimination’s impact lasts for generations. The first thing to combat during hard times is discrimination against those who are affected the most.” — Suha Ziyada, Programme Director, Shoruq*

Occupied Palestinian territories have been under COVID-19 lockdown since the beginning of March, but it is not a new experience for Palestinians and girl-led organisations in the region, who work in state of emergency as a matter of course. We spoke with two With and For Girls Award-winning organisations in Palestine about their unique experiences of life in lockdown, both before and during the pandemic.

**Shoruq** works in the Dheisheh Refugee Camp to provide girl-only spaces that allow girls to share their experiences with others and better support one another. Girls receive training on how to express themselves using media, including music, audio, video, photography and dance. In 2014 Shoruq started a pro bono law clinic that provides legal and social support for refugee children from the Bethlehem district who are in conflict with the law.

**Stars of Hope**, headquartered in Ramallah on the West Bank, offers support to women and girls with disabilities while pushing for policies that ensure their rights are respected and guaranteed. The organisation — the only one of its kind in Palestine — offers skills training to girls and women on topics including gender equality awareness, microfinance principles and leadership. The organisation also offers girls and their families affected by disabilities psychosocial support and peer counselling. Stars of Hope has been working with other organisations to get the Ministry of Education to include students with disabilities in mainstream education. Following successful campaigns, some schools have been specially adapted for the requirements of people with disabilities.

## Greater risk for disabled or poor girls

*“Service providers at times of emergency are often unable to provide disability focused services and interventions due to lack of space, information and staff trained in caring for disabled people.”* — Kefah Abu Ghoush, Executive Director, Stars of Hope

Girls and women are often left behind by government and humanitarian response in times of crisis. This neglect is redoubled for girls with disabilities and redoubled again for Palestinian girls with disabilities. Stars of Hope is conducting an independent needs assessment for girls and women with disabilities during the COVID-19 outbreak to assess whether women and girls with disabilities were included or excluded from current emergency interventions. The organisation employs women with disabilities to conduct the assessment as they understand girls and women to be more trusting of their peers than of non-disabled service providers. The approach also makes use of their widespread networks and subsequent ability to reach more isolated girls and women.



Credit: Fadi Arouri

Girls with disabilities are affected more severely by COVID-19 than the rest of the population. Stars of Hope's Executive Director, Kefah Abu Ghoush, tells us that, girls with disabilities “are at higher risk of contracting COVID-19 due to barriers accessing

preventive information and hygiene, reliance on physical contact with the environment or support persons, as well as respiratory conditions caused by certain impairments. Implementing quarantines or similar restrictive programs may entail disruptions in services vital for many persons with disabilities and undermine basic rights such as food, health care, wash and sanitation, and communications, leading to abandonment, isolation and institutionalisation. When ill with COVID-19, girls with disabilities may face additional barriers when seeking healthcare and experience discrimination and negligence by healthcare personnel. Service providers at times of emergency are often unable to provide disability focused services and interventions due to lack of space, information and staff trained in caring for disabled people.”

The severity of impact is also affected by levels of poverty and access to goods and services. The virus doesn't discriminate between people based on race or gender or religion but the impact where there is poverty or inadequate services is much worse. As an organisation run by and for refugees living in a refugee camp that is under occupation, Shoruq knows it doesn't alone have the capacity to fight the outbreak. Ziyada tells us, “we understand that our only chance to fight this virus is to be together and to help and support each other. That's why Palestinians continue to exist even with the occupation. Our strength is our unity and our strong linked communities.”

In order to curb the detrimental short-term effects of COVID-19 on the lives of Palestinian girls, these organisations advocate for provision of personal hygiene kit, medical and food packages to vulnerable girls and their families.



Credit: Kayane Antreassian

## **Mental Health Support — taking in-person work online**

Girls are also in urgent need of psychological support. Lockdown measures mean many girls have been unable to access the support networks, peer groups and mentors who they usually rely on for psychosocial support. Both Shoruq and Stars of Hope highlight the increased cases of domestic violence girls are exposed to under COVID-19 isolation, which in turn increases depression and anxiety. Domestic violence is often left unaddressed, making it more difficult for girls to access treatment for trauma endured. This is exacerbated among girls who are refugees or disabled as they are often left vulnerable and ignored. Ziyada tells us that under normal circumstances, refugee girls have limited access to creative development activities and psychosocial support, but now they have almost none, “they are depressed and ignored. Some of the girls we spoke to said that they have fears which are not expressed and that they are stressed. No one is providing answers to their fears and their concerns, or caring for their psychological health.”

In response, Shoruq is providing a platform for refugee girls to access psychological support. It is also addressing families of girls to reduce rates of domestic violence. It has formed a taskforce of psychosocial professionals to provide support to girls and their families. Shoruq aims to work on three distinct tasks: awareness raising, prevention and intervention and will do this through a joint effort by Shoruq social workers, volunteers, psychological professionals and child leaders to provide child-to-child therapy and methodologies both online and over the phone. Stars of Hope is similarly conducting virtual psychosocial counselling sessions with individuals and groups, in partnerships with established counselling centres.

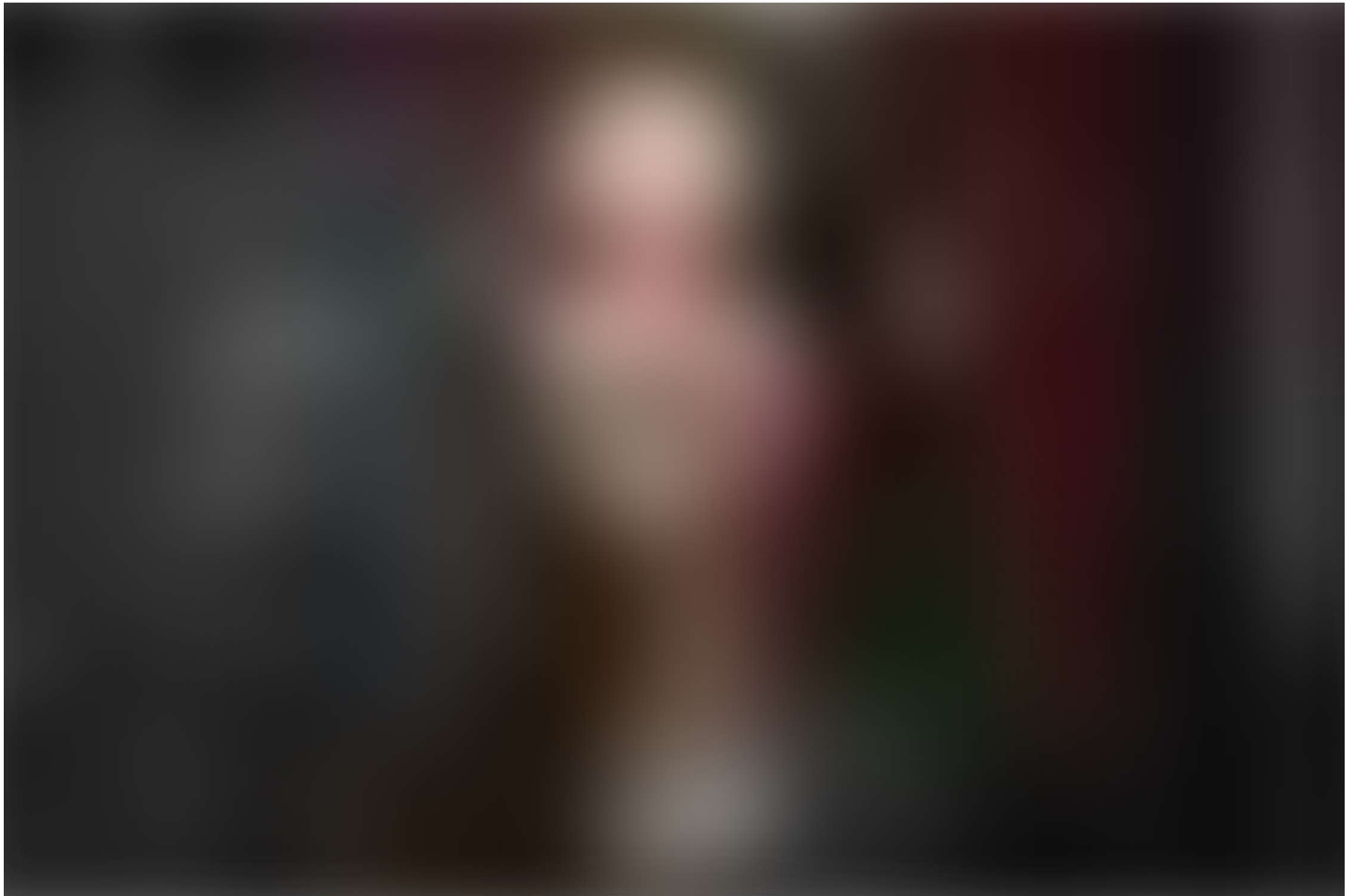
## **Media — to train and empower**

Shoruq is running online media training sessions for girls called “Independent Media: Raising Youth Voices” (RYV) addressing different fields of media, filmmaking and rap music. All these training sessions are currently being held via Zoom and social media groups where participants can connect and discuss the content. Girls have found these sessions really useful for them to develop their skills in media and art. The organisation



says that girls with access to creative outlets, support networks and who have their voices heard will be better equipped to deal with the psychological strain of living under COVID-19.

Stars of Hope also plans to utilise digital platforms for virtual distance learning and decimating information on infection prevention, time management during the emergency and disability rights. However, as many girls in Occupied Palestinian territories do not have access to a device or internet, they require support in getting girls online in order to stay connected, safe and supported.



Credit: Kayane Antreassian

## After the Crisis


The Executive Director of Stars of Hope makes an impassioned plea to redress the institutional discrimination that exists against disabled Palestinian girls, “The current state of emergency has uncovered and highlighted the structural dysfunction of the systems in terms of identification, protection and response to the needs of girls with disabilities. The effect of the exclusion and discrimination of people with disabilities is magnified during the state of emergency due to lack of resources, inappropriate


trainings, scarcity of information, and inaccessibility or unavailability of adequate services to girls with disabilities. The embedded exclusion of people with disabilities and specifically women and girls with disabilities is too vivid to be ignored. We call for structural and systematic reform of the policies, systems and enforcement mechanisms of all sectors within and beyond the times of emergency.”

Shoruq demands that attention be paid to the deep psychological impact on girls as a result of COVID-19 and lockdowns. It highlights the role that grassroots organisations play during the crisis and beyond in supporting marginalised and underprivileged communities, particularly in areas of psychosocial support and creativity.

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