

RLS Paper

Interview: Let's Talk About Gaza



RLS Project Coordinator Bessan Shehada interviews Majeda Al-Saqqqa, co-founder and Vice General Director of the Culture and Free Thought Association (CFTA) in the city of Khan Younis, Gaza Strip, about the urgencies and challenges faced by those working with youth in the Gaza Strip.

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"Let's Talk About Gaza" is a RLS format to highlight developments, stories, and personalities from the Gaza Strip.

Interview conducted with Majeda al-Saqqqa, co-founder and Vice General Director of the Culture and Free Thought Association (CFTA) in the city of Khan Younis, Gaza Strip. Questions were asked by Bessan Shehada, Project Coordinator of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine (RLS) in the Gaza Strip.

The Culture and Free Thought Association (CFTA) was established in 1992 out of a growing concern for the children of Palestine. The Israeli occupation had taken its toll on the lives of children and there was no safe space either inside or outside the home for children to stay. It was with the intent of providing such a place and to assist in building a better future for the citizens of this country that the Culture and Free Thought Association (CFTA) was first envisioned. Today, in cooperation with the community it serves, it is working towards establishing a progressive democratic society. It believes social development is the key to total development.

What's your experience with youth through your work?

My most recent experience was with youth in Khan Younis (in the Gaza Strip) during and after the war. It was recently accomplished with a RLS contribution to our youth program. So during the war, the situation was very difficult. From the first day, we witnessed that the aggression we heard about had caused many people to want to immigrate, especially youth from Khan Younis. There were at least 70 men and women who tried to escape through the tunnels. Some of them got stuck in Alexandria (in Egypt) and some of them managed to reach Italy. Their situation was a mixture of fear and helplessness.

They considered the war as the last straw because they saw no hope which is why they just wanted to get out, in order to have a better life.

We thought that youth represent almost half of the population and their main issue was that they are neglected and not involved. Even with the psychosocial support the organization was only targeting women and children. This is a kind of stereotype we all fall for, that they are the most affected, but nobody looked at the general picture that every human being was affected by the war.

The war was going on and the situation was so dangerous that we couldn't recruit volunteers, but we opened the organization and didn't stop anybody from coming. We found lots of youth came to volunteer because they wanted to be involved in the emergency response with CFTA, which was involved at a very large scale of intervention.

We were available at the shelters and in the streets with the IDP (Internal Displaced People). We provided lots of meals during Ramadan and we tried to assist the needs of the community and all this was only possible with the help of young people who came here. As a result, they felt that they were useful and doing something positive. On the other hand, we found that their work during the six weeks of the war affected them on one psychological level because they were exposed to the violence of the Israelis and they were trying to save others while in the process, putting themselves at risk.

So we decided to provide first aid psychological support for them, especially for our volunteers because we wanted them to stay on this high energy level and involve them more deeply. As a result, we decided to work with them on two levels. The first was to provide them with psychological support while the other was to keep them involved with their participation and let them work with us on issues pertaining to humanitarian aid and advocacy. What happened is we organized them to go to the field, helping us with the assessment to know what the needs of the people were on a weekly basis so they were involved in all processes of planning and procurement. They proved that they were responsible and all that they wanted to do was to help their community.

We found that some of the young people were doing lots of advocacy work through media and the social media, and they produced many films. Part of this effort helped us with fundraising, so they explained to the world what CFTA was doing on the ground. They also produced films about the situation but from the perspective of the people. They produced a film about the children who came to the CFTA children center and how they had this fear of losing this sole safe space. The messages that they sent through the social media were also very beautiful and very expressive.

At the beginning of 2015, after 6 months of the conclusion of Israel's war on Gaza, we started a partnership with RLS and decided to do more focused advocacy. We used specific tools in order to raise messages not about Gaza and children specifically, but to make it more about youth in general in order to involve them so they represented themselves and were not dependent on outside voices.

Today, when I look at the youth, I see how empowered they are and the challenges CFTA is facing and has faced in the past because we can't do anything without them. We also cannot impose things on them. Everything must be done in coordination with them. But the most important goal is the fact of belonging, and that they want to stay in Gaza and they feel that Gaza can provide them with something beautiful. Now, the desire to emigrate is much lower than it was back in June and July 2015, which we consider a success.

What is it about the work makes you happy or where you see positive development, are there any success stories you have? Do you see yourself as responsible for them now?

I don't feel that I am responsible FOR them, I feel I am responsible WITH them. They don't allow you to practice this kind of power, especially after a few years of their involvement in the democracy programs, youth rights, and campaigns, now they are really empowered.

Just going to the youth centers, I feel that I have gained the energy again because you look at these young people, who are in their 20s-30s, and they have no resources. Some of them don't have them because they have no money so they walk for 30-60 minutes to come to the center everyday because

they have projects and initiatives.

Yes, we have many success stories. One of them is of a young girl whose dream it was to work at a radio station. With the help of her colleagues, they assembled the recording system from old computers and machines, and converted the bathroom into a sound proof studio. They did this by lining the wall with egg cartons, which is also environmentally beneficial. Today, we have an online radio station that reaches more than 11,000 people. It runs for 8 hours every day, and it's not only listened to in Gaza. It's so beautiful to see this girl working, being involved, and producing her own programs. She did a beautiful program after the war. She interviewed people about funny things that happened to them during the war. It was received very well from people in the Arab world and she received many comments and hits on the channel.

What are the CFTA plans for the future?

There was a recent World Bank report that stated that 60% of the youth are unemployed. From our observations, we see the youth on the edge; drug usage is increasing and negative attitudes are rampant. We are thinking of doing youth initiatives in groups; part of it will be related to economic empowerment and the other part for advocacy. We will try to combine both together in collective groups and projects. In order to become more focused, we are going to create a mapping of the youth situation in Khan Younis, which is the primary targeted area of CFTA's work. We will highlight the available resources, show where the gaps are, and how we can work out the problems together with youth in the coming year.

The idea is also to expand the kinds of youth we are working with. For example, we want to focus on youth who are farmers and fishermen; we want them involved in our outreach program because there are still people who can't come here from the affected areas, such as Khuzaa and Abasan in the east of Gaza.

What obstacles does CFTA face in implementing projects in Khan Younis?

What is affecting CFTA's work the most is the occupation. With it comes the ongoing wars and conflicts, and the blockade which has lasted 10 years. On the top of all these problems we also have the poverty. There is no economy for Gaza. This ends up manifesting itself into radicalism and conservatism, and this is what happening in Khan Younis.

At the level of our activities, sometimes people refuse to have co-ed activities, but we try to be more transparent with the society. We try to send messages that our center is an open place, and there is no hidden agenda. Nobody is doing things behind the scenes and that the youth meetings are in groups and they are discussing shared matters that concern everybody. As a result, I believe we have gained the trust of the society, the families of the youth, and from the government over the years. They can see that the involvement of youth has become positive for society, but this still a challenge for CFTA. But the main challenge that we can't really work out is regarding the closure of Gaza. The youth don't have opportunity to travel outside of Gaza, and as a result, there is no interaction or exchange of experiences that we can provide them with the outside world. In Europe, youth at the age of 17 travel alone when they leave their families. In Palestine at the age of 60, people are going back to live with their extended families because they are losing everything on daily basis. Opportunities are very limited because of the occupation and the closure.