Rights awareness offers path to change for children in East Jerusalem

By Charmaine Seitz and Hanan Michael



EAST JERUSALEM, State of Palestine, 29 March 2016 - When violence and fear take hold in a community, the voices of children - including their hopes and aspirations - should be heard to help them focus on what is possible, instead of despair.

"Our society is full of violence," says 11-year-old Ehab*. "We can't keep quiet any more. We have to raise our voices and let people know that we have rights."

Here in a small community center in the Silwan neighborhood of East Jerusalem, young Palestinians like Ehab are finding their voice. "Now that I know my rights, I can claim them, to live in dignity and to be respected," he says.

UNICEF and its partners are helping to prevent violence and protect Palestinian children from it at home, at school and in the community by teaching children how to achieve their rights and accept their responsibilities -- to play, to access education, to be protected and to protect others. Children are encouraged to express their concerns and build on positive coping methods. Those in conflict with the law are provided with emergency support including legal aid and psychosocial support.



POSITIVE THINKING

Iman, 11, says she resents how society treats girls. She has decided to be a lawyer and to fight for justice as a result of the activities provided at the center. "I learned my rights here and how to deal with people, how to protect myself from any kind of violence. I can face being a girl and a member of the society - it's my turn to make change and a better future."

At Wadi Hilweh Center, social workers of the Palestinian Counseling Center (PCC) work with 18 children ages 9-12. Children learn constructive ways to protect themselves from all forms of violence and explore their strengths and weaknesses as a means of becoming more confident.

"We face several problems [doing this work] in our society: trust in our work and acceptance of change," says PCC social worker Mahdi Shaudi. As in many cultures, Palestinian society sometimes resists the idea that children should advocate for their rights. At the same time, these children are coping with issues far beyond their years and need to be aware of their rights to ensure they are achieved.

NEED FOR PROTECTION

Israeli settlements marked by blue and white flags dot Silwan's jumble of homes. Violence between settlers and Palestinians is commonplace here, and the Israeli military frequently patrols the streets. Many children have been arrested, interrogated and detained, resulting in psychosocial distress.

In recent months, as violence has escalated throughout the West Bank, the rise in tension has resulted in increased violence at home and in schools, where parents and teachers are struggling to manage and address young people's fears, while coping themselves. More than ever, young people and those around them need access to positive tools to help them change their environment.



NEW PERSPECTIVE

The Palestinian Counseling Center, through funding provided to UNICEF from Japan, has been able to support 168 children in psychological distress, using play therapy, crisis intervention, group therapy and referrals to improve their symptoms. The parents of counseled children have learned positive discipline techniques that they say are helping them better understand their childrens' needs. Parents, too, were provided with individual counseling and emergency intervention when required.

Change is critical, says 11-year-old Ibrahim. Children should be respected at home and at school.

"I learned all my rights here at Al Mada Centre through this project," he says, and then lists them: "My right to education, to play and to live in a safe place. Now I can talk without fear. I have self-confidence and I can argue for my rights."

Nearly 30,000 children and 45,000 caregivers were reached with child protection services including life skills education, child/caregiver interaction programs, case management support, psychosocial support and legal assistance to respond to the multiple needs of vulnerable children across Palestine in 2015. The interventions were part of a cross-sectoral $11.6 million grant from Japan.

** All the names of the children have been changed*

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