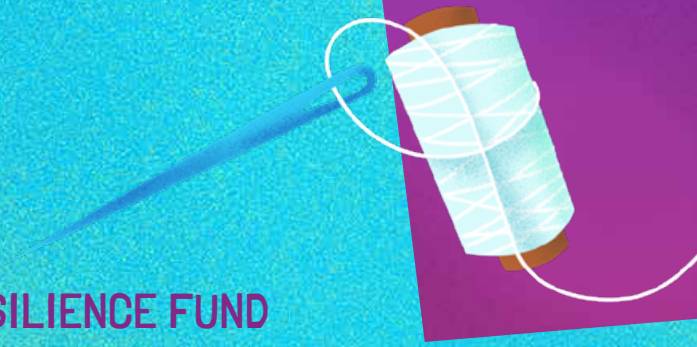


GIRLS RESPOND IN TIMES OF COVID-19

AYAT MNEINA – INTERVIEWING GLOBAL RESILIENCE FUND PANELISTS FROM THE MENA REGION



While COVID-19 has upended any collective normality for the world since the start of 2020, its negative impacts on marginalised communities have been magnified, particularly for adolescent girls. Furthermore, adolescent girls and young women from the MENA region had to contend with unique challenges; some specific to the COVID-19 crisis and other challenges they have had to deal with their whole lives, just compounded.

Recognising this unprecedented crisis, the Global Resilience Fund (GRF) launched an emergency funding opportunity to support girls' initiatives with small grants. The call for applications was widespread and teams of panelists from every region across the globe were assembled to aid in circulating the call and short list potential grantees through peer reviews of the applications.

In the MENA region, a total of 120 applications was received. They were reviewed by five panelists from the region, and 29 grantees were successfully awarded small

grants of up to \$5,000. Panelists were enthusiastic about the GRF's approach to this funding opportunity. Flexible requirements meant that many unregistered organisations and groups that would not normally qualify, including marginalised groups, could now do so. It also encouraged girls to mobilise in response to the call for applicants. Its timely nature also allowed girls to use the opportunity to help them address the specific challenges posed by the pandemic. The peer review element also gave panelists, which included girls, the chance to directly and collectively help girls and women with funding. The GRF provided panelists and grantees with invaluable exposure to develop various capacities; proposal development and project design, management and implementation, reporting and fundraising.

Globally, COVID-19 ushered in a period of great uncertainty - borders closed, lockdowns were enforced, and a great deal of confusion followed about how governments and individuals should and could

respond in order to tackle the pandemic and keep people safe. This uncertainty took many forms in the MENA region, including less than ideal, inefficient and unsafe lockdown and border closure attempts by some governments. Not because they were unprepared or caught off guard, they were just simply, and continue to be, incapable of enforcing an emergency response even with international aid. The region has historically suffered from incompetent and unwilling, yet repressive, governance or an absence of governance at all. As a result, the responsibility fell to communities, civil society, households, and individuals, many of whom could not recover from stay-at-home orders if their breadwinning could not be achieved remotely.

“There was pressure on activists to fill in for the lack of government services”, describes Amani Aruri, an activist and GRF panelist from Palestine. Activists and civil society mobilised to address the needs of their communities, many bearing a ‘double load’ as their own work and means of supporting themselves was also disrupted by the pandemic. Aruri describes how in Palestine, civil society had set up emergency youth councils ahead of the pandemic, comprised of committees designed to provide social, economic, health, and cultural support which they were

able to successfully coordinate and deliver to several villages.

“We made sure that no one was left behind, that everyone was getting their medicine, everyone was able to go to school, have enough food, fuel and supplies. Medicine was really important as many couldn’t afford to buy their medication for diabetes, blood pressure, or epilepsy”, says Aruri. People called on the government to distribute the much needed aid and funds they received, and yet there was no answer, no transparency.

In Palestine, the pandemic was a crisis within a crisis - a crisis under occupation. Lockdowns and restrictions on movement predated the pandemic in Gaza, where it became a humanitarian crisis post-COVID. Many Palestinians lost their source of income, and hundreds of thousands of those working in Israel, could no longer access work. Without the critical community interventions orchestrated by civil society in response to the pandemic, many would have gone under the poverty line and would have been unable to even provide shelter for their families.

At home, women and girls were subject to increased gender based violence (GBV) by male members of their household who were under increased stress during the pandemic,

“DURING THE PANDEMIC THE VIRTUAL SPACE BECAME A LIFELINE”, SAYS HANNA. THOSE PREVIOUSLY NOT USED TO MOBILISING ONLINE WERE NOW PROFICIENTLY USING TOOLS LIKE ZOOM TO CONTINUE THEIR WORK, BUT ALSO TO CONNECT AND SHARE THEIR SHARED STRUGGLES AND EXPERIENCES.”

combined with having to remain indoors at home all together. “We saw, not only an increase in violence amongst those previously exposed or at risk, but a whole new subset of the population that was not previously violent, now resorting to violence in response to the stresses introduced by the pandemic” says Sandie Hanna, civil society activist and GRF grantee from Palestine, whose project focuses on the intersectionality of feminism, education, and children. “Gender equality in children looks different and is perceived differently. Using art as a medium that is children friendly, interactive, amusing, fun and light at the same time to break through.” The GRF’s inclusive and accessible approach provided Hanna with a chance to start her project with funding that she would normally have had to compete for against other seasoned artists through traditional avenues, like embassies, who normally fund arts and culture projects.

“During the pandemic the virtual space became a lifeline”, says

Hanna. Those previously not used to mobilising online were now proficiently using tools like Zoom to continue their work, but also to connect and share their shared struggles and experiences. However, this conversely meant that those marginalised groups, including women and girls living in the most rural areas, without internet access, were further isolated during the pandemic. Being confined indoors also meant more control on women and girls’ personal devices by their male relatives, having their phones confiscated and being physically prevented from being online was also prevalent.

Women and girls in Iraq faced similar challenges. A sharp increase in domestic violence and GBV was observed, combined with a lack of recourse and a failing justice system where laws are placeholders, rarely enforced. Economic violence, where men take women’s salaries, is yet another form of violence that increased during the pandemic. Tara Ashour, a GRF panelist from Iraq, describes how

conflict and displaced populations meant that issues were layered; “Not only is there no gender equality, there is also no peace”. Women and girls had to contend with emerging expenses the pandemic now placed on them if they were to attempt to continue their respective work or gather in physical spaces. Without budgets or resources to buy or acquire masks, sanitiser and other personal protective equipment, convening safely was made more difficult. Transportation and logistics were also impacted by the pandemic. “Some of the projects we ended up funding, supported girls to get the required PPE they needed to re-start their work in the pandemic,” explains Ashour.

Tunisia benefited from a similar mobilisation of its civil society to the pandemic. They stepped up to the plate to fill the void left behind by the government’s incomplete responses. Women also locally manufactured masks in factories. However, the pandemic disproportionately discriminates against women and girls as their responsibilities double, erratic school closures make it more difficult for mothers to continue working while having to take care of children at home shrinks their economic potential.

Ten years after the Arab Spring, many of the gains that civil society achieved

in Tunisia are now under threat. Emna Mizouni, GRF panelist from Tunisia, says that civil society is now being vilified with over 2,000 activists arrested since the protests in January 2021, marking the tenth anniversary of the Arab Spring. A record number of illegal migrants are attempting the perilous journey across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe - over 9,000 attempted the trip in 2020 alone, more than the number combined over the last decade. She says; “People are left with nothing, no jobs, no dignity, no education which resulted in the protests in January to mark the revolution despite the lockdown order”.

In addition, all of the GRF panelists described how governments across the MENA region are taking advantage of the pandemic and using it as an excuse to crack down on civil freedoms. Increased surveillance and ‘security’, under the guise of health and safety measures, infringe on human rights.

While the overall experience of panelists with the GRF funding was positive, opportunities to further the Fund’s impact on adolescent girls and women’s mobilisation must be pursued. Sandie Hanna, a grantee and activist from Palestine expressed the need for funders to engage more in authentic listening and mutual

learning, “We need flexible funding for civil society to be able to work with girls, and even more funding for unregistered groups so girls themselves can take the lead. If we are ever to witness real change, it must be radical. So don’t be afraid of radicalising generations of girls. And don’t be afraid of or threatened by radicalising the restructuring of power.”

Palestinian panelist, Amani Aruri, stresses that challenges continue to grow and gaps are widening and thus funding needs to expand with it. “A year has passed and we already have learned many lessons from our experiences during the pandemic. Now’s the time to impact grant recipients by continuing to support them. It’s not a linear relationship - you can’t give girls \$5,000 and expect them to gain their right to freedom of speech. We’re contending with issues that governments and large organisations have failed to address.

This will take more time, more effort and more resources. We’re talking about sustainability, a collective solidarity movement, on a global level.”

Indeed, the GRF has proven to be a strong funding model and a lifeline to many adolescent girls and women’s initiatives in the MENA region during a much needed time. ■

Ayat Mneina is a Libyan activist, writer and researcher passionate about feminist movement building in the Middle East and North Africa based in Toronto, Canada. She is the founder of @ShababLibya and is committed to amplifying and widening spaces for youth and women voices. Follow her @amneina.

List of interviewees:

Amani Aruri, Occupied Palestine

Emna Mizouni, Tunisia

Sandie Hanna, Occupied Palestine

Tara Ashour, Iraq