Bringing out the bravery in everyone
Capoeira for Syrian refugee girls in Za’atari camp, Jordan

Lutheran World Federation (LWF), Jordan

Hidden from the outside world, a spacious caravan inside Zaatari Camp’s Peace Oasis Community Center run by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) provides a safe and private setting for girls to practice Capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian martial art that combines dance, music and acrobatics. The echo of drum beats through Peace Oasis is the only hint of what lies within the caravan: rhythmic music, copious laughter, and an eclectic mix of choreographed and improvised martial arts sequences.

Five Syrian refugee youth have been trained by LWF to be Capoeira facilitators. Ruqaiya, a 20-year-old from Dara’a, had never heard of Capoeira when she interviewed for the position. She recounts:

“When I applied, I thought maybe I was going to be a Zumba teacher. Then I started to learn Capoeira, and I loved it. The movements were challenging but I was proud of myself as I mastered them one by one. The first day I had to teach a class by myself I was nervous. I did so much preparing! But 10 seconds into the class, my fear faded as I saw that the girls were having so much fun. I am braver now.”

In Zaatari Camp, Ruqaiya explains, girls have fewer opportunities than boys to play freely, so Capoeira provides a unique opportunity for girls to engage in free and creative movement. LWF has tailored the program to meet the needs of the girls, providing an enclosed female-only space, and speaking to prospective families to explain the positive impact of Capoeira. Beyond the physical benefits of exercise, Capoeira can be used as a tool to release negative emotions, make friends and heal from traumas. Ruqaiya illustrates:

“There was a girl who barely spoke when she joined. Capoeira is a partner sport, but at the beginning she didn’t want to work with anyone. Then, a few weeks into the class, I saw her choose her own partner. And every class after that she chose a different girl to play with. Capoeira brings out the bravery in everyone. It is a safe space where everyone can be themselves.”

Rasha and Malak, age 13 and 14, have been friends since they both arrived in Zaatari camp six years ago. They joined Capoeira together, and have since mastered complex movements, memorized songs in Portuguese, and learned to keep impeccable rhythm on the drums. Rasha describes her experience:

“The first day was very awkward. The movements were strange and I had never heard this kind of music before. But I got better and better, and as I got better my confidence grew. I look up to my Capoeira coaches and I learn from them. When I grow up I want to be a Capoeira coach, or a doctor, or both.”

LWF partners with Capoeira Al Shababi to implement the Capoeira programming in Zaatari Camp. Central to the program’s success is the Training-of-Trainers approach, through which Syrian youth coaches are supported until they can lead the classes themselves. Not only does this encourage youth leadership, but
children gain positive role models from their community whose behavior they emulate. Malak explains, “When I go home after class, Rasha and I teach Capoeira to the other girls in our neighborhood.” This method also ensures the projects sustainability, as the tradition of Capoeira – a tradition that is intrinsically cross cultural – is passed on.

Since the beginning of the Syria conflict, the LWF has assisted refugees from the Syrian war and the Iraqi crisis accommodated in host communities and in camps. The “Peace Oasis” in the 5th district of the Zaatari camp has been a flagship for our camp community-based psycho-social intervention, targeting specifically youth aged 14 to 24. A broad range of activities intended to increase resilience and promote stability have been targeted at the refugee population living outside of camps (currently around 82 percent of the total refugee population).

(Images and video available in high resolution upon request)