



Let Me Keep My Childhood

Community Organizing Against Child Marriage
in Beqaa Valley





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A Case Study By

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Organizing Against Child Marriage in Beqaa Valley ¹

Walking into the unknown

In September 2019, Anas Tello — the Advocacy and Communication Officer at Women Now, a feminist organization that works to empower women and girls — began a quest to recruit community members in Lebanon’s Beqaa Valley to form the core team of a campaign against child marriage. Anas had no campaign name, no predetermined objectives, and no idea how this quest will turn out. He was entering uncharted territory. But Anas knew one thing: if any effort to reduce this phenomenon is to be successful, it must be led by Beqaa’s residents who are themselves impacted by child marriage.

Anas knew this from his own lived experiences. He recalls that his aunt had “acquired a sort of popular knowledge that enabled her to teach her children everything, including mathematics!” Despite being taken out of school in fifth grade, she “[was] always the one who did all the calculations when we played cards. It aches my heart when I think of her at that age as a child bride; she had so much potential.” It is this organic knowledge that Anas deeply values. And even though Anas is professionally trained as an architect, his master’s degree in Urban Sociology and his volunteering and work in psychosocial support, citizenship, and cultural diversity all reaffirmed his belief in community-led solutions. Anas was able to put his belief into practice when, during that same year, he was introduced to the Community Organizing methodology endorsed by another campaign supported by Women Now called Families for Freedom. ²

Luckily for him, it wasn’t just Anas who believed in the importance of taking leadership from the most impacted. Despite five years of advocacy, awareness-raising, training, and capacity building to tackle the issue of child marriage, Women Now was still surrounded by the same staggering numbers of Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian girls (and some boys) getting married before the age of 18. The Beqaa Valley hosts a higher percentage of these marriages, which are particularly prevalent amongst the Syrian refugee community due to various reasons including war and security, economic need, traditions, and gender norms. ³

“Too many times during my work I’ve seen smart little girls, with untapped potential like my aunt, coming to our sessions with their newborns on their shoulders [...] They know the dangers of child marriage, but “what are we going to do about it?” they ask.”

Here, the advocacy team at Women Now realized that they needed “something more than seminars and workshops.” Adapting to this need and reality, and with a leap of faith, Women Now decided to shift gears.

They decided to experiment with community organizing, which is when they partnered with Ahel, a community organizing foundation, that was already coaching the leaders of the Families for Freedom campaign in Syria.

Reflecting on this shift in the organization's approach towards child marriage, the difference in this attempt Anas explains was that:

“the same women whom we were working to support were now taking the lead to resolve their own problem with full autonomy.”

To enable this autonomy, Women Now not only provided logistical and financial support to the campaign but gave Anas the green light to dedicate 60% of his time towards serving as the Campaign Coordinator.

Anas and Nisreen Haj Ahmad, Co-Founder and Director of Ahel, who studied community organizing with professor Marshall Ganz at Harvard University ⁴, began holding weekly meetings to equip Anas with the skills and tools necessary to perform his role as the campaign coordinator. By then, it was already September, and Anas embarked on recruiting lead organizers for the core team. He recalled that he had met many inspiring women who took part in some of the organization's empowerment, protection, and participation programs. Anas initially reached out to seven women and heard their stories, three of whom joined forces with him to form the core team of the campaign. Fatima Aletere, Safaa' Sallat, and Rama Alsous are all survivors of child marriage and have lived firsthand the isolation, physical and psychological harm, or loss of prospect that comes with it. They didn't want to see any other girl endure what they have.

In fact, Fatima recounts that when Anas “approached me and I heard the word child marriage, I said I'm with you. He said hold on, don't you want to hear the rest? And I told him, no. I'm with you, all in.” It so happened that at that very moment in Fatima's life, her daughter, forced into marriage at 14 by the father, was extremely sick with neurological inflammation caused by the physical abuse she was facing from her husband. Fatima decided to put an end to this nightmare. “My husband threatened me. He said: if you want to get our daughter divorced then consider yourself divorced as well. And I said, then consider it done!” With that, her conversation with Anas couldn't be timelier.

Anas was no longer on his own and the fantastic four were up for the mission despite all their personal hardships. They just needed to recruit more people for the leadership teams. And so, the first question they asked themselves is “who are our people?” They defined their constituency broadly to encompass women and girls who have experienced child marriage, girls and parents who were resisting child marriage, and those who were born to a child-parent. They focused on two geographical areas in Beqaa which are Majdal Anjar and Chtoura. Women Now had been operating community centres in these areas for several years during which the organization established strong ties with the residents and created an environment of trust and safety for many local women. By choosing to focus on Majdal Anjar and Chtoura, the team capitalized on the organization's pre-existing resources.

Just as they began their recruitment drive, a popular revolution ignited the country. Anas, Fatima, Safaa' and Rama were now faced with the challenge of "finding the people who both **believe** in the urgency of the struggle against child marriage as well as **committed** to working on it" within a context of such critical political upheaval. The group decided not to compromise on the quality of their search. They insisted to uphold their criteria for selection — namely, a member of the impacted constituency, not motivated by financial reward, has strong community ties, and has a growth mindset.

At this point, Ahel designated a dedicated Lead Coach — Rawan Zeine, community organizing trainer and now Director of Teaching and Learning at Ahel — to support the organizers in their leadership journey. Supported by Rawan and Anas' coaching, Fatima, Safaa' and Rama went on to hold 1-on-1 meetings with nearly 40 potential leaders from Majdal Anjar and Chtoura areas. They shared their stories with them and listened to theirs. Rawan reflects proudly "it was a very rigorous process you know? They [Fatima, Safaa', and Rama] were updating the results of their meetings on an excel sheet and deliberating with each other and with us about the stories they heard and their choices and evaluations of the potential leaders." They simply wanted to get the best of the best, and they did. But it wasn't all roses given that many people, especially men, consider this topic a red line. In fact, Rama was kicked out of someone's house by the husband of a woman she was trying to recruit for the leadership team. In spite of these hurdles, the fantastic four grew into 17 leaders strong thereby constituting the two leadership teams of Majdal Anjar and Chtoura that would later transform this campaign into reality, and the campaign would become known as Let Me Keep My Childhood (La Tkabrana Ba'dnā Şiğār, referred to in this case study as La Tkabrana for short).

Creating a new reality

“Every time we faced a hurdle, we called for an emergency meeting, and we came up with an alternative solution [...] This pain is our pain. There was no way we were going to stop.” — Ghaida Doumani, core team member and co-ordinator of Chtoura team

It is now November 2019. Equipped with their lived experiences and against the backdrop of the Lebanese revolution, the 17 leaders attend a two-day workshop, led by Nisreen and Rawan, in which they collectively conceptualize the campaign’s story, strategy, and structure. The group has an abstract idea of the change they want to ultimately achieve, that is to reduce child marriage in Beqaa. But “how do you do that?” Anas asks “Where do you begin? How do you measure the impact?” Reflecting on that moment, Rawan says “there are lots of external factors that influence the increase or decrease of these marriages. So, thinking about a strategic goal was very, very tricky because it wasn’t something easy to measure.”

That’s when the discussion takes a turn. The leaders start to analyze the reasons behind child marriage and identify “traditions and societal norms” as the primary, though not only, influencing factor. They think through “how do we create a shift in norms and traditions?”

And after some deliberation, the leaders have an answer: They will create a shift if they can show that child marriage “is not truly part of our traditions [...] that a critical mass in our community opposes it but their voices are not heard.”

The campaign begins to crystalize and by the end of the two days, they have a game plan. Their strategic objective is to obtain signatures from 500 households in Majdal Anjar and Chtoura, pledging that they will not have their children married before the age of 18 and to change the stance of 100 families who are pro-child marriage. They debate whether to only target families who are pro-child marriage or also those who oppose it. But “our theory of change was that if we show that a critical mass opposes these [supposed] norms and traditions then we can achieve our overall goal” says Anas, and the goal here is to reduce the percentage of child marriage. The target number is rather low Rawan thinks but the leaders share a concern. “We were afraid to make our objective unattainable” Anas says.

Significantly, one intricate aspect about norms and traditions in this context is that people tend to conflate them with religion thereby adding yet another layer of sensitivity and a lot of room for polarization. The leaders knew this well and so they articulated the second theory of change that informed their approach, namely, to demonstrate that Christian and Muslim (Sunni and Shiite) clergy oppose child marriage.

With a solid strategic direction in mind, once again the leaders set out to recruit even more leaders this time to form their sub-teams across the different neighbourhoods within Majdal Anjar and Chtoura and thus be able to reach their target. During this time, the 17 leaders drop to ten but that

filtration process “leaves you with the ones who are truly committed and take the campaign work seriously” says Fatima. This fluctuation also reveals the abrupt life changes experienced by Beqaa residents, especially Syrian refugees like Rama who had to relocate to the South of Lebanon thereby leaving the campaign. But an important aspect of the community organizing framework is sustaining a continuum of collective leadership that is enabled by coaching and knowledge transfer. So, behind the scenes, Fatima and Safaa’ orient their team members on how to conduct 1-on-1 recruitment meetings and share with them what they had learned from the first recruitment drive. After a series of nearly a hundred 1-on-1 meetings, the ten leaders ask 32 new organizers to join the campaign and each of the two leadership teams grow into five new sub-teams to integrate new members. This scaling is known as the “snowflake” structure and leaders in those sub-teams are referred to as second-tier leaders to indicate the extended nature of leadership within a snowflake structure.

With such a beautiful snowflake amid a not-so-beautiful February snowstorm, Rawan leads the team through a second community organizing workshop where all the organizers gather for three full days to share their stories, get their teams set, review the overarching strategy, agree on sub-team metrics, and plan their tactics. To reach 500 pledges and 100 families, they agree upon, and practise, the campaign’s master tactic which is house meetings. The house meeting is a tactic rooted in the social network where one community member invites 10 – 20 people to their homes and with the support of an organizer they share their stories and ask people to sign the pledge. So, house meetings were the perfect tactic not only for achieving their objective but also for the kind of close-knit community to which they belong.

Yet, being a close-knit community brings its own set of challenges. Because it’s easy for stories to be interpreted as “airing dirty laundry” and because some people have predetermined notions about marriage and gender norms, it is difficult for organizers to share their personal stories — stories of pain and trauma about a social taboo — in a space that is not necessarily safe. But because narrative in community organizing is also about communicating hope, and thus helps build the inner strength of the storyteller while moving the listener to action, it is an equally powerful tool. So, responding to this complexity, Rawan leads 1-on-1 sessions with 10 of the organizers to coach them on telling their stories in the house meetings. There were “tears, silence, and laughter [...] there were stories of life and death, of sacrifice, courage and awakening. It was very intense but also very inspiring” Rawan reflects.

It is March 2020 and the campaign members have hit the ground running. They have held 21 house meetings with a total of 198 attendees from the community. The core team thinks that the hardest part is over, now that they have overcome the limitations created by the revolution and the snowstorm. But little did they know that a global pandemic awaits them and further yet, a series of devastating crises that will wreak havoc upon the country...

Lina Darwich, a second-tier leader in the campaign and member of the Chtoura sub-team, is supposed to host a house meeting on Sunday, 22nd of March. She was very eager about the campaign because she was a child when she gave birth to her first baby, an experience that put her life at risk,

and she had also endured years of abuse until she eventually got a divorce. Lina entered into a second union as an adult but this time round she made the choice herself and is happily married to a husband who is supportive of her activism. So, this campaign is very dear to Lina's heart. On Saturday, Lina calls all the 20 women she had invited and confirms their attendance, including some who were coming from geographical areas that are further away. She is mindful of the timeline the team had set for themselves and goes to sleep pleased that everything is in order. Lina wakes up the next morning, only to find out that there is a nationwide lockdown and widespread panic sparked by the COVID-19 virus. Her phone is ringing and beeping nonstop with women cancelling their attendance and others asking her what they should do, but she doesn't know what to do herself! "It was a total mess," says Lina. Eventually, and in consultation with the team, she cancels the meeting for everyone's health and safety.

Ghaida Doumani, a core team organizer in the campaign, says "it is true that the pandemic imposed on us a new reality. But we adapted. In the beginning, we shifted from house meetings to smaller meetings and then again to one-on-ones but then any sort of physical gathering was prohibited so we shifted to virtual calls. Every time we faced a hurdle, we called for an emergency meeting, and we came up with an alternative solution [...] This pain is our pain. There was no way we were going to stop."

By June 2020, and to their surprise, the group had exceeded their strategic objectives. They secured pledges from 1826 households and 176 families who changed their stance on child marriage. That was a moment of realization for the teams Rawan explains because they recognized "how much they are capable of."

Around 1100 of these households translated their pledges into a visible action by stencilling the campaign logo on the facades of their homes or tents. When the leaders went out to hang the logos with the supporting families, other people started to gather around the houses and ask questions. Some wanted in on the action, so they also hung the logo outside their own homes. Others hung the logos on their cars. That was when "all the work we had been doing became visible. People started knowing who we are" Fatima says.



The organizers putting up the campaign logo on the homes of the committed families

In addition, the campaign had obtained the support of six clerics from various faiths and sects through video recordings advocating against child marriage as well as five municipalities in Beqaa who endorsed the campaign.

In retrospect, Fatima reflects: “Surely [achieving all that] wasn’t easy... Yes, we had the Shawish [guard] of one of the camps preventing us from entry so we had to meet camp residents outside the camp and yes, the rising economic crisis meant that electricity and fuel were scarce and so was our ability to meet and commute. But we still did it!”

What, then, was the secret to this success?

Speaking truth to power

“It is not enough to tell people that child marriage has irreversible consequences on the child’s mental and physical health, it’s not enough to tell them that if their children get an education, they and their whole family will have a better life. We used our stories to change a society. From our stories, we transformed our pain into hope.” — Fatima Aletere, core team member, co-ordinator of Chtoura team, and elected coordinator of the campaign.

In most of the visits that Ghaida made, the families had doubts about her and her motives. To them she was a stranger who was going against what they believe is right; what they believe is in the best interest of their daughter, and what they’ve believed their entire life. But as soon as she shared with them her story, she felt “their doubts melt away” as “they begin to realize that I’m there because I care about them. Because I don’t want their daughter to miss out on her education like I did when I left school at 15 to get married. I don’t want their daughter to be abandoned by her husband after a mere 11 months of marriage like my daughter. I don’t want that mother and that father to go through the regret and agony I felt for letting my daughter get married so young.”

All the campaign leaders seem to share Ghaida’s sentiments. Lujain Tawashi, a second-tier organizer who is a member of a sub-team of Majdal Anjar, asserts that “our campaign succeeded because all its members have been affected by child marriage one way or another.”

Lujain recalls “when we were speaking to our community, we were able to convey the pain we felt in our life. Some people do this because it’s their job, but we do it because it is our life.”

Kawthar Abdul Fattah, an NGO leader and a campaign organizer also reflects on her own experience working in this field and concludes “The truth of the matter is that they [the organizers in the campaign] are driven by their lived experience. They have something that we don’t have and that’s where their strength lies.”

However, the power of the story went beyond its use by campaign members. Khalidya is a single mother to three daughters and one son and was displaced from Syria as a result of the war. Lacking the financial means to support them adequately, she got Khadija, her 13-year-old daughter, married to the first man who asked for her hand. After two months of physical abuse, Khadija came back to her mother and asked for a divorce. Shortly after, she got married to another man. Yet again, within a month he brought her back for a “visit” and never came back. She was one month pregnant. Khalidya had no means to support the newborn, especially with the high cost of the medical treatment needed for the baby’s lung infection due to moldy lodges in the camp. Behind Khadija’s back, Khalidya took the newborn to the father’s family. Khadija was outraged, she attacked her mother and for a year they were “living in hell.” So, for a third time, Khalidya gets Khadija married to another man hoping that this time it would work out alright. “It is not her fault” Khalidya says “It’s completely mine.” But once again, Khadija came back —thrice-divorced, with an abandoned child that she longs for, and a great deal of mental and physical pain all before she even turned 20.

Khalidya says “I made the same mistake three times, poor girl. She can’t stand me. Every time she sees me, she tells me that she hates me. I will not do this again with my youngest daughter, I will not have her married as a child even if she reaches 30.” Khalidya was one of the people who signed the campaign’s pledge after meeting with some of the organizers and felt empowered to share her own story after hearing theirs. Khalidya says that she was embarrassed to share her story before, for fear of being labelled and ridiculed by her neighbours and community, but she now spares no occasion to share her experience. In a deep, regretful voice Khalidya says “I am now willing to go live on all the radio stations and tell my story [...] I would have preferred living off an onion and a [piece of] bread rather than having my daughter go through this. I learnt the hard way.”

To celebrate or not to celebrate?

Having achieved a huge success in June by securing over 1800 pledges and shifting the stance of 176 families, everyone is thrilled to celebrate! It is now July, and they begin preparing for the celebration, but they are forced to cancel it due to various lockdowns. The organizers set another celebration date for August. They book a venue, develop the celebration program, and as they begin to send the invites, they cancel the celebration once again as they join the entire country to mourn the death and destruction brought about by the Beirut explosion. Eventually, in September, instead of a celebration they hold a public event as a closing ceremony attended by the organizers, community members, and supporters.

Despite their success, they remain unsettled. This feeling of unease is amplified when Rawan carries out the “closing evaluation” with the leadership team. Before this meeting, the leaders had spoken with all the organizers in their teams and sub-teams. While the organizers were proud that they have achieved their strategic objective, they took them back to the moment of conceptualization where the overarching change they desired was to reduce child marriage.

“We have 1800 pledges,” many said, “but does that actually mean that we’ve reduced the number of marriages? How do we know that those who signed the pledge will actually commit?” With every question asked, the leaders kept remembering that during the house meetings they held, a lot of women were telling them that there is more to be done. They are faced with two choices: to end the campaign with this closing ceremony and continue to reminisce about the great achievement they made or to look inwards, challenge themselves on what else they could do and take it a step further.

It is now September 2020, and the economic crisis in Lebanon is worsening. Electricity and fuel become rare and expensive commodities. A lot of the members are dealing with their own personal struggles whilst trying to survive amidst these stifling conditions and the blood from the Beirut explosion is not yet dry. Even if they decide to move forward, they do not know if Women Now will be able to provide the same level of support, which was critical for the campaign members’ ability to meet, access trainings, commute, and execute that first phase. And if they do go to Women Now, what do they say? They have no plan but there’s a decision to be made. So, they take the question back to the bigger group and the answer is very clear: the show must go on.



The organizers at the closing event of phase 1

Empowered by their belief in the significance of their struggle to reduce child marriage, the core team takes their enthusiasm to Women Now and Ahel and this is where the next strategic step materializes. They decide to ask the network of supporters they have built over the past year, the majority of whom are women, what is needed. This includes the people who signed the pledge, hung the campaign logo, or heard about the campaign. That is when Ahel trains the leadership team on how to conduct a listening drive and then the leadership team trains the organizers across all the teams to the same effect. Between November 2020 to January 2021, campaign members carry out an intensive listening drive with 500 households, and they receive an almost unanimous message: “tell the men! They are the decision-makers, and they should be your target.”

The day “she was attacked on the street”

The result of the listening drive puts the leaders of the campaign in a decision dilemma. They have been working mostly with women.

Their supporting organization, Women Now, works strictly with women and girls. But these very women are now telling them that they need to shift their approach.

In Lujain’s team, the proposal to work with men sparks a heated discussion. Some, including Lujain herself, are asking “how to engage the men? Wouldn’t that subvert the leadership, power, and agency of the women whom we are trying to empower? Will the campaign remain constituency-led?”

According to Lujain, these discussions eventually led to a grounded decision. Real change, they reason, happens one step at a time. “We can’t impose our ways on people. If we do, we lose. But by having fathers speak to fathers and brothers speak to brothers, we will achieve our objective and at the same time we [as women] will continue to lead and direct this effort” says Lujain. Lina agrees. She says that “we didn’t want to cause any quarrels between wives and their husbands so it’s better to let the father exercise the authority [that he already holds] positively by not letting his daughter get married young.” In the end, working with men is what the community demanded, and so the organizers heed the call.

Along with this foundational shift, other structural changes take place. This becomes a moment of rejuvenation in the campaign’s life. Inactive members and some first and second-tier organizers leave while new leaders join. Several new organizers are amongst the people who interacted with the campaign in its first phase during the signing of pledges or logo hanging. Organizers from the first phase are ready to take on bigger leadership roles, which is key to maintaining a strong and sustained collective form of leadership under the community organizing model. It is time for Anas to step down as the campaign coordinator and for this responsibility to be carried out by someone else. Two core team members, Safaa’ and Fatima, run for elections and Fatima wins by majority vote to assume the role of campaign coordinator. Anas remains involved as a lead coach along with Rawan.

In May 2021, the 60 leaders of this phase — women and men, new and old — come together for a strategizing workshop in which they develop their new strategic objective, theory of change, tactics, and structure. This time, however, something unexpected happens. Recall that they already have a critical mass of supporters from the first phase. They’ve also gained trust and legitimacy within their community; people know who they are and what their story is. But the question of the moment is how will they take pledges one step further? How will they ensure that these pledges are not “ink on paper” Lujain asks?

Once again, they find the answer from what they heard during the listening drive. They learnt that coincidentally, during the first phase of the campaign (between March – June 2020),

13 of the 176 families who changed their stance on child marriage, had actually cancelled the marriages.

Sarah⁵, a Lebanese woman who is a member of the campaign, takes them back to the day when she was visiting a family with the hope of shifting their perspective. The family was adamantly pro-child marriage, and the conversation was making Sarah pretty nervous. But, at that very moment, her life flashed before her eyes. She recounted how on her wedding night she escaped her husband's house and followed her parents only to be brought back to him despite her will. That same night, she was raped. She went on to raise his children. When she later had a child of her own, she found herself forced to deliver the baby alone at home in a tub. Within split seconds Sarah recollected her courage and shared her story with that family. After a moment of silence that to Sarah felt like a lifetime, the mother told her that they were not only pro-child marriage, but their daughter was in fact engaged. However, after hearing Sarah's experience the family decided to cancel their daughter's engagement.

With all this in mind, they make a bold decision. Their strategic objective for this phase is to stop 55 engagements⁶ and their theory of change is that they needed to convince 55 fathers — who would later become known as “The Brave Fathers.” To do so, the campaign leaders begin to recruit a critical mass of supporting men or “advocates” (ālriḡāl ālmunāṣiryūn). Their target is to meet with 220 men who are either neutral or supportive of the campaign amongst whom 110 would commit to executing the tactic. Their aim is that by September 2021, half of those committed (i.e. 55 men) would begin speaking to fathers in the community whose daughters are engaged and have formally agreed to the marriage. Without the listening drive, Lina asserts, this tactic would not have been possible.

“This time, it was the real deal” says Lujain but “it is a taboo. This is a very sensitive topic and we were literally getting into people's business!” Clearly, the team's confidence is boosted, and they are empowered by their mass of supporters from the first phase. So, their tactics went up a notch. They are now engaging in a more confrontational ask. Will the community still accept them? Or is their ask beyond what the community is willing to tolerate?

They begin executing their plan, but it proves to be a harder endeavour than they thought.

Juma'a Al Ahmad is one of the people who signed the campaign pledge during the first phase and was later recruited by his neighbor and campaign leader, Hanan Aletere, to join as an organizer in this third phase. Juma'a has a 15-year-old daughter whom he doesn't want married before she turns 18. He recounts that every time he went to court to serve as a witness to a union ceremony, he would see more people getting divorced than married, many of whom were children. "I would see a child carrying a child whilst fighting with her husband in the courtroom" says Juma'a and he doesn't want that for his daughter. "I told fathers about my approach with my own daughter" he says and "convinced six men to commit to [do] the same, but not everyone agrees [...] it is disappointing when people turn you away, but we do what we can."

It's already September and the team is struggling to reach their target. One of the advocates says "when the organizers asked me to stop an engagement, I twitched. It is a dangerous undertaking." Many men are reluctant to join because of their beliefs and social pressure. This reluctance increases when some Sheikhs start attacking the campaign, and some men who had initially joined start to drop out. However, the campaign leaders had anticipated such a reaction, which is why they secured the support of clerics from multiple faiths and sects from the very beginning.

This tension erupts one day at a training attended by 24 newly recruited advocates. A man who initially supported the campaign was having doubts after hearing a Sheikh at the Friday sermon that week saying that the campaign is threatening the social fabric. He shows up to the training and accuses the campaign of executing a foreign agenda and "subverting religion." Fatima has never been confronted with this kind of accusation before. But drawing on her personal story gives her a great deal of strength to handle the situation. At that moment, she finds herself standing up and responding from the heart: "Go ask all the women in the campaign who they are, and they will tell you. They will tell you that we were the ones who suffered and were abused for decades. We are the children of this community, and this is where we belong." She is further empowered by the fact that various religious clerics had supported their campaign during the first phase and is able to direct the man to those videos.

Eventually, group discussions and the video recordings of these clerics reassure many men who were beginning to worry about the claims being made by the Sheikhs and thus restore balance amongst their ranks.

Lina reflects that "while religion is more forgiving, it is often the economic need that is insurmountable" and Juma'a confirms that situations in which child marriage happens due to economic necessity are often "the most difficult conversations and the one with the least success rate." But just as economic strain is a factor in child marriage it is also a hurdle for men to join the campaign, as many need to prioritize their time to make a living than volunteering with the campaign. Some men withdraw because of that.

However, there is another consideration hindering their ability to recruit more men. An important factor in convincing people about this sensitive topic is hearing the experiences of women who endured this firsthand. It is **“unlike any kind of lecture. It is real”**

says Juma’a. But, one day, an organizer in the campaign had scheduled a meeting with a man in the camp to recruit him as an advocate. The man’s wife was not pleased by the meeting and so the next day, “his wife confronts this member of ours and hits her. She was attacked on the street [...] Other times men would commit to joining and a day later they would call to withdraw their commitment for this reason.” These are the kinds of sensitivities that “we need to account for in a 1-on-1 meeting between opposite genders.”

It is now October 2021, and the team is experiencing some challenges. Nonetheless, they have met with 420 men of whom 140 advocates commit to the campaign’s efforts. However, the 55 Brave Fathers are yet to rise to the occasion.

Mohammad Raja is one of the young men who commit to joining this effort. He attends a training organized by the campaign every Sunday for three weeks to acquire communication and negotiation skills, to hear stories from the leaders and share his own, and to equip himself with knowledge on the health risks of child marriage and familiarize himself with the religious arguments of supporting clerics. Mohammad, now 20 years old, was engaged a year ago to a 15-year-old girl. But during the engagement, he realized that they were not able to agree on anything, so “if it’s like this now, how will it be when we actually get married?” he asked, and they decided to break off the engagement. Mohammad regretted his decision to get engaged in the first place. He says that he now prefers to wait “until I mature a bit more and whoever I will marry will certainly not be under 18.”

Mohammad explains that the strength of this tactic — namely, convincing fathers to cancel the engagements — is that they only speak to fathers whom they personally know.

Mohammad has spoken to some of his colleagues, neighbours, and relatives and has convinced his friend to commit to not having his sister engaged at a young age. He also convinced another man to cancel his daughter’s engagement. “It’s not an easy conversation, to be honest. On some occasions, I had to go three times to the same household to convince them.”

Despite being off target for some time, November is when it starts to rain and when it rains... well, it pours! Of the 140 advocates, 90 men (instead of 55 per the initial target) march forward to bring the mission home. And by the end of the month, the mighty 90 took everyone by surprise. They had 61 engagements cancelled, 50 engagements postponed⁷, and 100 families agreed not to “present” their girls for suitors. That’s a total of 211 engagements, nearly quadruple of the campaign’s initial target.

Anas says that “we initially wanted to reach 55 brave fathers, but we also reached new categories.” Of the total, there were 168 brave fathers, and the rest were 27 brave grooms, 2 brave brothers, and 14 brave mothers who made this success possible.

The La Tkabruna team held a public celebration attended by over 300 people to honour these brave community members. They gave them certificates and commended them for leading by example. While the celebration was to commend the stance of the brave community members as well as the efforts of the leaders and advocates in the campaign, it also served the purpose of making these commitments public thereby reducing the likelihood that some may retract their promise.

Anas also recounts how on the day of the celebration, as people were getting into the buses to get to the venue, many more community members started to gather. There were nine buses leaving from nine pick up locations and across all the spots people started asking “where are you going? Take us with you to the celebration! We’d love to get involved in your campaign” thereby opening the door for even broader interaction even on this conclusive day.



Honoring the brave fathers at the closing celebration of phase 3

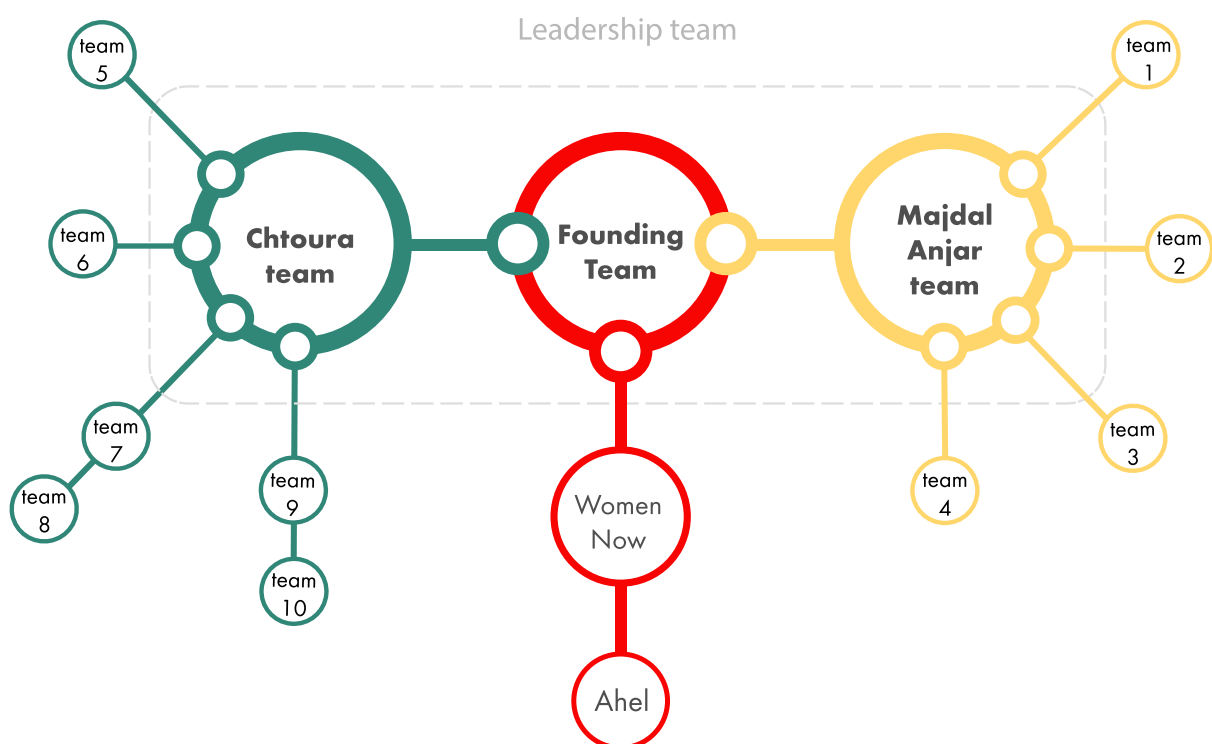
Reflecting on impact

Reflecting on La Tkabruna’s journey invites many layers of reflection. Perhaps the first notable observation is the role that Women Now played by taking that leap of faith and adopting the community organizing framework. It is a very delicate role because while the organization supported and enabled the campaign in every possible way, the staff of the organization (except Anas) had no direct involvement in its day-to-day operations. The power of this balance lies in the fact that Women Now truly vested power and authority of all decision making and planning within the leaders and organizers of the campaign.

Since the vast majority of the organizers in the campaign are members of the community and its leaders belong to the constituency impacted by the issue, they were able to mold and adapt the framework to suit their needs and context.

This is most obvious in the campaign’s adoption of culturally-rooted interventions. The first one was their productive interaction with the religious discourse and their engagement with religious figures and clergy. Many times campaigns are advised or pushed to take a strictly rights-based, legalistic, or otherwise secular approach. But the leaders and organizers of La Tkabruna knew how significant of a factor religion was to them as well as to their community at large, and so they grounded themselves in these assets. Abdo Hammoud, a sociology teacher and educator experienced in psychosocial support and one of the advocates in the campaign, emphasizes the importance of this aspect. He explains that “We live in a conservative society and many hold distorted beliefs [about religion] so here clerics could play a positive role in rectifying this. So when [La Tkabruna] invited clerics to the celebration it sort of broke [a barrier].” The second culturally-rooted intervention was their response to the demands of the community during the listening drive when they were urged to work with the men. Again, from a traditional feminist perspective, this may seem like a striking departure. But communities are experts in their lives, which also means that they know the solutions to their issues.

The fusion between an established organization with a strong community presence and a dedicated group of grassroots leaders gave birth to an unusual snowflake structure. Normally, a community organizing snowflake structure would entail a single circle in the middle (like the centre of the snowflake) known as the core team where each of its members serves as a coordinator of a geographical, functional, or theme-based team and then each of these teams would snowflake into further sub-teams with second-tier leaders and so on. La Tkabruna did something different.



In this structure, we see the two geographical core teams of Chtoura and Majdal Anjar (which have been referred to as the leadership teams in this case study) and one central core team composed of the campaign co-ordinator and the co-ordinators of the leadership teams who were liaising closely with Women Now and Ahel throughout. It was this innovative approach to and adaptation of, the snowflake structure that enabled this institutional-grassroots partnership which balanced between support and agency. Another important aspect of this structure was its ability to accommodate the fluctuating nature of the Syrian community in Lebanon who are in a state of constant relocation. As we saw, the leaders' commitment to capacity building and knowledge transfer was key to maintaining a resilient structure in the face of such instability and temporality.

Another crucial observation is the power of the story. We saw how the women leading the campaign used their stories as a tactic in every interaction they had — from house meetings to 1-on-1s to media outreach. While that is powerful on its right, there is a subtle yet equally important power to the story. They used stories to identify their constituency, recruit members, resolve conflicts, build strong team rapport, and more.

In other words, the constituents used their own stories as a leadership practice in their everyday organizing and not only as an outward-facing tactic.

It is what glued the teams together.

The result of this was a tightly bound team that became like a family. Fatima's experience captures this bond beautifully. She explains how the campaign made her stronger. "Before the campaign I was weak. But with La Tkabruna family, which grew from 42 members to 60, I count all of them as the family that has my back. With them, I'm stronger." As a divorced woman, Fatima faces a stigma imposed on her by her broader community. "They don't say you did the right thing; you saved your daughter's life. Her Aunt had to go with her to the doctor and hear for herself that my daughter had 80% neurological inflammation because my husband wouldn't believe me, he thought I was making things up to get her divorced." But when Fatima is surrounded by people who care deeply, "they remind me that I made the right decision. That alone is enough [to make me strong]."

One might think that such a strong familial bond would transform the space from an organizing space to one of socializing thereby affecting the pace and formality of the work.

While they did socialize of course, but counter-intuitively, this bond enabled them to be better organized.

Lujain asserts that "we wouldn't have come this way without follow-up, accountability, and introspection." That rigorous process that Rawan spoke highly of earlier in the case study when Fatima, Safaa and Rama led the first recruitment drive persisted and became the underlying culture. Members recall how every time any of them received a pledge from a family, they would send an update on the WhatsApp group. They cheered each other and stuck out to one another in times of difficulty. They

followed up with the signatories to translate their pledges into action through the logo tactic. They confirmed the commitment of those who cancelled their daughters' engagements by getting their testimonies on video and eventually holding a big celebration for all the brave fathers, mothers, brothers, and grooms. An organized family that holds one another accountable with love sounds like a pipe dream, but in La Tkabruna it was a reality.

The journey of La Tkabruna from an idea to reality began with a leap of faith and it wasn't just Women Now's willingness to take a risk in experimenting with a new methodology. But more significantly, it was the organization's trust in people's collective ability to create meaningful change. This was evident when the organization enabled Anas to dedicate 60% of his time to the campaign. This was evident when Anas ensured that every decision in the campaign was made by the leaders and constituents and when he stepped down as the campaign coordinator as soon as others were ready to take on this role. It was evident when Fatima and Safaa' trusted their team members to carry out the drive for recruiting second-tier leaders.

And this is precisely what community organizing is about: following the lead of the most impacted.

This community has not only tangibly tackled the issue of child marriage, but they now hold a formidable leadership capacity that they can employ to launch more campaigns and resolve other pressing problems their society faces.

Marching steadily, marching forward

It has been over two years since La Tkabruna was launched. The campaign went through three successful phases (the pledges, the listening drive, and the canceled engagements) and had a big closing celebration that took place at the end of November 2021. Here, one cannot but ask: now what?

The campaign leaders are excited about what they can potentially achieve in 2022. Both Women Now and Ahel have pledged to support the campaign in its fourth phase. The campaign leaders, Women Now, and Ahel are all hopeful that others (individuals, informal networks, and organizations) can benefit from this experience. Child marriage is not limited to the Beqaa or Lebanon, but is an issue that persists around the world. Countless organizations have worked to combat this phenomenon through awareness-raising approaches, but there is little evidence to suggest that awareness-raising has actually reduced child marriages.

La Tkabruna's experience is a testimony to the transformation that a constituency most impacted by a problem is capable of achieving when using community organizing and a shared leadership approach. Will the journey of this campaign inspire other organizations to take a leap of faith and experiment with community organizing as a means of giving the power back to impacted communities?

Endnotes

1. Many thanks to the numerous individuals who gave their time and effort towards helping develop this case study. Firstly, thanks to the leaders, organizers, and supporters of La Tkabruna campaign including Fatima Aletere, Ghaida Doumani, Lujain Tawashi, Lina Darwich, Kawthar Abdul Fattah, Ahmed Shahada, Juma'a Al Ahmad, Mohammad Raja, and Abdo Hammoud. Many thanks also to Khalidya. I extend my sincere thanks to Anas Tello. Further, I extend my thanks to Ahel's team including Reem Manaa', Farah Halaseh, Rawan Zeine and Nisreen Haj Ahmad.
2. To learn more about the Families for Freedom campaign refer to the campaign's official website <https://syrianfamilies.org/en/>
3. For some context, refer to Abby Sewell (Mar. 2, 2019) "Lebanon: More families are marrying off teenage daughters as economic despair sets in" *Al Arabiya English* https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2020/09/18/Lebanon-More-families-are-marrying-off-teenage-daughters-as-economic-despair-sets-in?fbclid=IwAR0ZGxiN7_kqgcQTAYiIQKYU7d5BSOdumlrKhcnwevZ8CoYnTw1oJ59skNQ
4. To learn more about professor Marshall Ganz and the community organizing approach he developed please visit his website <https://marshallganz.usmblogs.com/>
5. Name has been changed to maintain anonymity.
6. The reasoning behind the number 55 is based on the records from the Sharia Court in Barr Elias, Central Beqaa that members were able to access. The number of informal child marriages that were formalized at the court was around 185. They were aiming at a 30% reduction during a 6-month period. However, note that this number is an estimate as not all marriages are formalized at the court.
7. Some girls were aged between 16 – 17 so here the families committed to postponing these marriages until after the girls turned 18.

