

Let Me Keep My Childhood

Community Organizing Against Child Marriage
in Beqaa Valley



Second Edition in Two Parts

2 SECOND
EDITION

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PART ONE

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Community Organizing Against Child Marriage

A Case Study By

Juman Abujbara



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Let Me Keep My Childhood

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, 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 Tkabruna Ba'dnā Şiġār, referred to in this case study as La Tkabruna 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 celebration 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.

Sarah⁴, 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 engagements⁵ 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 ālmunāṣiryŋ). 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 postponed⁶, 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 Tkabrana 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

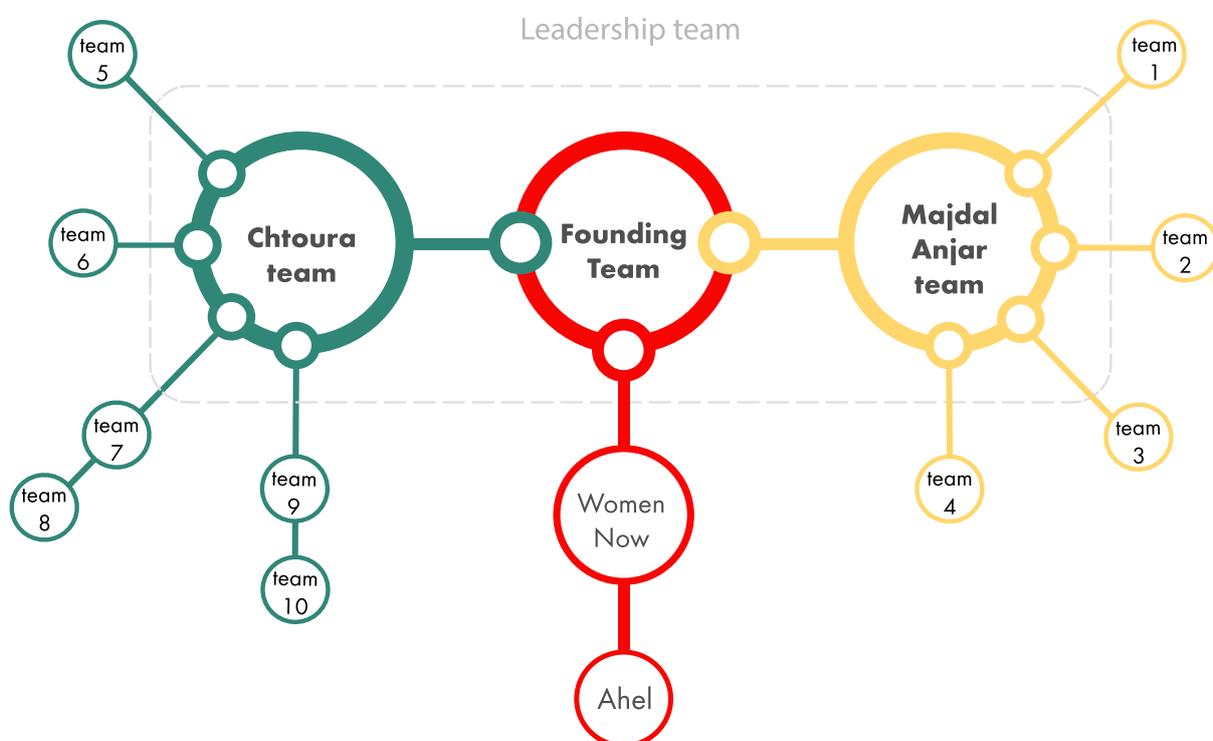
Reflecting on impact

Reflecting on La Tkabrana’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 Tkabrana 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=IwAR1bgb8q6x3YNkvPBy3lAIS9c-DrRX-wEppS5KE5-DNDGe4367Y6GWN2OGWI>>
4. Name has been changed to maintain anonymity.
5. 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.
6. Some girls were aged between 16 – 17 so here the families committed to postponing these marriages until after the girls turned 18.

ANNEX



2 SECOND
EDITION

ANNEX

Let Me Keep My Childhood

Community Organizing Against Child Marriage

A Case Study By

Afnan Abu Yahia

Adapted to English by:

Rama Sabanekh for Ahel



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“Let Me Keep My Childhood” Case Study Annex

The Journey Continues: Phase Four

With a single impulsive decision, Yamama’s life took an unexpected turn. At the age of 17, her maternal cousin proposed to her, deeming her «suitable for marriage.» Caught off guard, Yamama found herself agreeing without fully comprehending the consequences. The moment her mother asked, “Your cousin wants to marry you, is that alright?!” she hastily responded with, “Yes.”

In the blink of an eye, Yamama stepped into a relationship with a young man she barely knew. She, like many girls around her, thought of marriage as a joyful union, symbolised by a groom, a beautiful dress, and a grand celebration. But as the months passed, the weight of the challenges and conflicts began to bear down on Yamama.

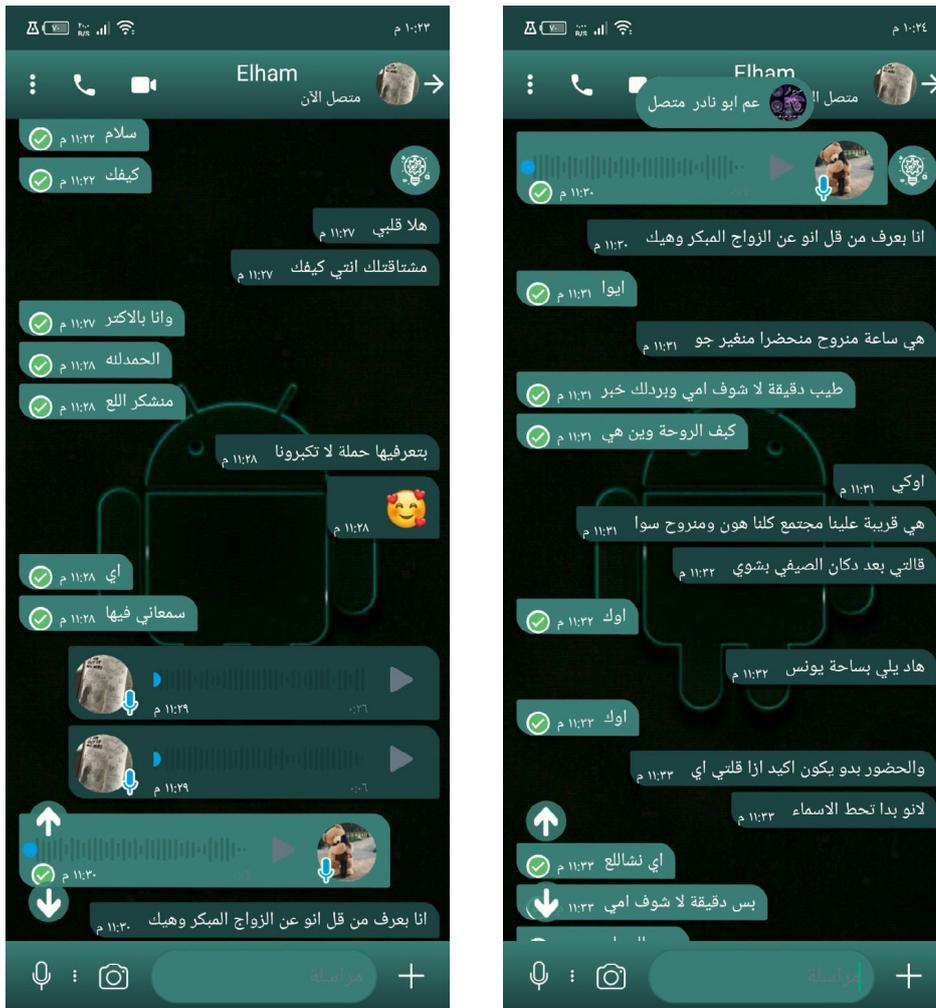
After eight long months of being engaged, Yamama started to grasp the magnitude of her situation. Doubts crept into her mind, and she finally mustered the courage to express them to her mother. “I am not prepared for such a significant step,” she confessed. Deep down, she held a steadfast belief that the life she had always envisioned was drastically different from the stumbling reality she found herself entangled in.

Yamama’s mother wasted no time taking action after Yamama’s decision to break off the engagement. She contacted the cousin’s family and delivered the news. As soon as the call ended, Yamama felt a surge of liberation coursing through her veins.

Unable to contain her excitement, she rushed to share the news with her trusted friend, Elham. Elham had always been a confidante, sharing Yamama’s concerns about child marriage and dreams for a brighter future. As the words spilled from Yamama’s lips, she declared with unwavering resolve, “I refuse to be a child raising another child!”

In the midst of their elation, a brilliant idea formed in their minds. As they engaged in a spirited WhatsApp conversation, Elham proposed a daring plan. She suggested that Yamama become a “youth ambassador” for the “Let Me Keep My Childhood” campaign. This groundbreaking initiative had emerged in 2019, spearheaded by a

campaign constituency who had themselves experienced the detrimental impact of child marriage in Lebanon's central Beqaa Valley. With the campaign's guidance, countless child engagements had already been annulled or postponed.



(WhatsApp conversation between Yamama and Elham introducing her to the campaign and the efforts to end child marriage)

Encouraged by her own empowering experience of breaking off her engagement during the campaign's second phase, Elham fervently urged Yamama to join their ranks. She recognized Yamama's unwavering dedication and her unique insight into the challenges faced by other engaged girls. For Yamama, the campaign presented

an ideal platform to champion her cause and invest her time, especially since her educational journey had been cut short, unable to progress beyond the ninth grade due to the challenges of obtaining all the necessary documents and certificates when her family sought refuge from Syria to Lebanon in 2012.

As Yamama became involved with the campaign, she discovered that it had already made significant strides months earlier. They had conducted 250 one-on-one meetings with parents, which included influential mothers, advocates, and courageous fathers. Some of these parents had been acquainted with the campaign since its inception, and a few had even joined their efforts wholeheartedly. Together, they formed a robust support base, and the campaign regularly sought their counsel and advice on tactics and complex issues at hand.

During its fourth phase, the campaign received valuable insights from parents who highlighted the imperative of combating the issue by engaging girls who firmly rejected child marriage. These parents emphasised the significance of including these resilient girls in collaborative leadership roles, empowering them to influence their peers to break off engagements. The campaign recognised the pivotal role of girls aged 13 to 18 and sought to actively involve them in its efforts.

Furthermore, through listening drives, another critical concern surfaced: the presence of self-appointed unregistered Sheikhs who lacked any legal authority but claimed to act on behalf of the Sharia' Court. This unscrupulous practice enabled them to conduct marriages for girls below the age of 18, posing a significant challenge that the campaign aimed to address.

In June 2022, the campaign organized a significant three-day session titled "Formation of the Campaign's Core Team in its Fourth Phase." Their goals were twofold: to engage with 860 children who firmly rejected early marriage, persuading their parents to support their decisions, and to secure a directive from the Sharia' Court to hold unregistered Sheikhs accountable for their actions. The session was expertly facilitated by Rawan Al Zeine from "Ahel" and Anas from "Women Now." Rawan expressed that this meeting played an important role in the campaign's journey by aligning its goals with the insights gathered during the listening drives. As a result, the campaign's document was formulated, defining the objectives and laying out the strategic plan to engage with new segments of society. The core essence of this plan revolves around coaching young girls on establishing cooperating with the Sharia' court.

Throughout the campaign's journey, both Anas and Rawan had played crucial roles



“Formation of the Campaign’s Core Team
in its Fourth Phase” Session

in the previous phases, with Anas initially coached on community organizing by “Ahel”. However, as the campaign progressed into its fourth phase, it gradually began to embrace greater autonomy in its planning and decision-making processes. While still valuing the support and expertise of Anas and Rawan, the campaign’s leaders, including Safaa, developed their community organizing skills, taking on more empowered and independent leadership roles. Anas

reflects on this transformation, saying, “We used to meet every week; now, we meet every month,” highlighting the positive growth and maturation within the campaign’s leadership team.

As a prime example, Safaa Salat, the General Coordinator of the campaign, demonstrated her early commitment by participating in a group reading drive organized by “Women Now” back in 2019, yearning for an opportunity to make a difference. It was during this event that she was introduced to the campaign in its nascent stages and took the initiative to form a team in her area, Majdal Anjar. Anas coached her to take charge and lead a team.

In the 2021 elections for the position of General Coordinator of the campaign, Safaa contested, but the victory went to Fatima Al-Atar. Nevertheless, the fourth phase brought fresh opportunities, and before Fatim’s departure for medical treatment in Turkey in May 2022, Safaa, among four other candidates, was selected to assume the role of campaign coordinator. She embraced this significant responsibility with utmost readiness, having been well-prepared for it.

Fatima emphasised the paramount importance of collaborative participatory leadership within the campaign, which has ensured its continuity. She added that Anas has played a crucial role in coaching campaign leaders, enabling them to confidently step into coordinating roles whenever required. This nurturing environment paved the way for Safaa and her fellow leaders to flourish and make a lasting impact.

Safaa found a reflection of her own childhood in Yamama's experiences, having gone through early marriage herself, even though she couldn't prevent it at the time. Yamama, on the other hand, saw in Safaa the embodiment of her aspirations—a leader capable of instigating change. The fourth phase proved to be the opportune moment for their collaboration, as well as the rest of the campaign's leaders and ambassadors, in tackling the issue of child marriage. The timing was ideal, given the willingness of parents and society to address this matter, a sentiment reinforced by the insights from listening drives and the support of a strong popular base that lent legitimacy to the campaign's advocacy.

Approaching the involvement of the girls, aptly known as “ambassadors,” required a caution during the campaign's early stages. It was clear that engaging them prematurely might invite backlash, potentially hindering the campaign's progress and continuity. Concerns arose about possible accusations of being influenced by foreign agendas or succumbing to external pressures. As a result, thoughtful consideration was given to the timing and method of their inclusion, ensuring the campaign's effectiveness and avoiding unnecessary challenges and readily packaged accusations.

Headlining Participatory Leadership

By the conclusion of August 2022, Yamama was one of 390 female and male ambassadors that the campaign was able to gather by reaching out to their network of acquaintances — girls who had previously dissolved their engagements or pledged to reject early marriage. The selection criteria for the ambassadors included their commitment to rejecting child marriage and attending five coaching sessions.

Their designated role was to mobilize young girls who faced the risk of early marriage, with a clear objective of persuading them to refuse such unions and break off existing engagements. The campaign aptly referred to them as “Courageous Girls.”

Yamama eagerly attended the inaugural coaching session, where a warm camaraderie blossomed among the ambassadors. Engaging discussions about the perils of early marriage and a comprehensive introduction to the campaign and its objectives took centre stage.

In this gathering, Yamama was thrilled to connect with numerous ambassadors who shared her unwavering passion and dream of creating homes free from “child brides.”

During one of the sessions, Yamama voiced her thoughts, saying, “I was always conscious of the perils of early marriage internally, but now I have learned to articulate these sentiments into compelling and persuasive arguments about its detrimental health, psychological, and social implications.” These transformative sessions equipped Yamama with valuable skills and newfound confidence.

In the second meeting, Yamama delved into the skill of building one-on-one relationships, one of the five essential practices of community organizing, designed to foster strong and committed connections within the campaign. With determination, she pledged to find a young girl who was engaged at an age under 18. Upon returning home, she vividly recalled two girls in her neighbourhood, Jumana and Lamia, who had announced their engagements a few months ago despite being below the age of 17. Eager to make a difference, Yamama requested a meeting with them, employing the relationship-building techniques she had learned during the session.

During the one-on-one meeting, Yamama courageously shared her personal story as part of the community organizing approach. She openly spoke about her own unhappy experience with early marriage, discovering that Jumana and Lamia were not faring much better in their own situations. The daily risks they faced were evident, making it relatively easy for Yamama to convince them to break off their engagements. In this powerful exchange, Yamama extended an invitation to attend the third coaching session.

As a trio, Yamama, Jumana, and Lamia eagerly attended the third session, a moment that filled Yamama with a profound sense of achievement and belief in her capacity to effect change. This session centered around the ambassadors’ personal stories, experiences lived with the harrowing phenomenon of child marriage. Jumana and Lamia found themselves deeply moved by the narratives shared during this gathering, as some stories resonated deeply with their own personal journeys.

The rejection of early marriage and its far-reaching impact on childhood dreams were further solidified for both the ambassadors and the young girls attending the session. It became a safe space, providing them with the liberty to express their opinions and emotions freely, while enjoying a high level of privacy to share impactful details without reservation. In this nurturing environment, they felt at ease to open up and speak from the heart.

As the fourth session, “The Drawing Session,” commenced, excitement filled the air as everyone eagerly reached for their colours and blank papers. Yamama, who did not complete formal education, let her hand glide skillfully, crafting a mesmerising vision on the canvas—a majestic mountain embraced by lush green trees, while a quaint wooden house basked in the warm sunlight atop the summit. She aptly titled her masterpiece “Nature and Freedom.”

In the fifth and final session, the ambassadors and young girls participated in crafting colourful bead bracelets using the campaign’s colours of white and red. They wore these bracelets as a symbol of their rejection of early marriage and to proudly share their leadership roles when asked about them. Yamama described the girls as they worked on assembling the bracelets, concentrating on threading the beads onto the elastic string, and laughing whenever the beads accidentally fell on the floor, prompting them to try again. “At that moment, I felt like we were all children,” Yamama said.

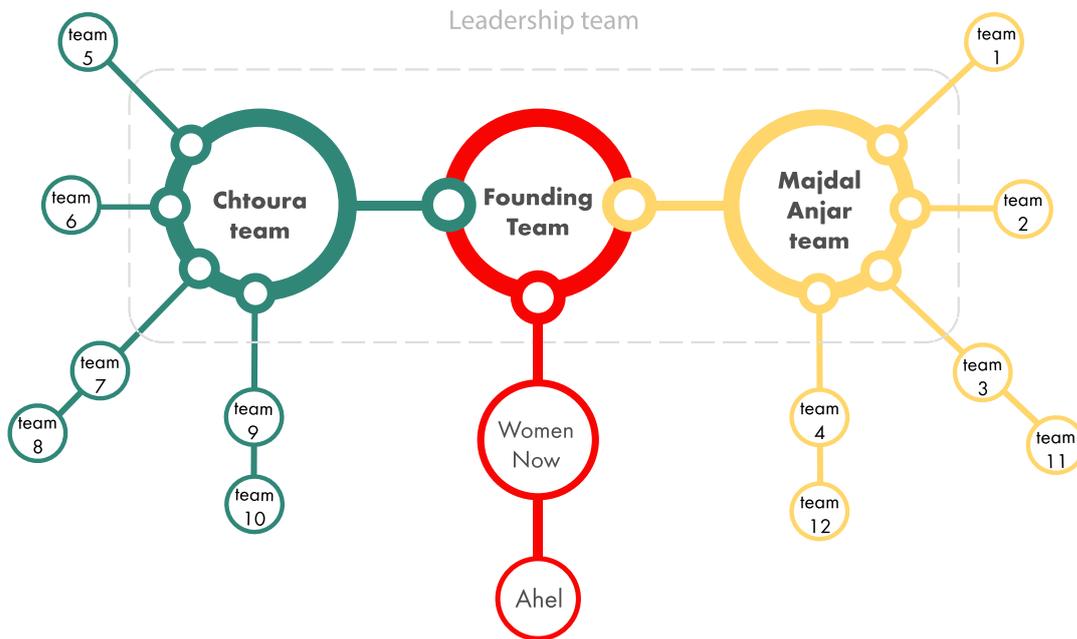


**“At that moment,
I felt like we were all children”**

Yamama



From drawing sessions and bracelet making sessions



Reaching Heights

The ambassadors were successful in persuading at least one young girl from their community to break off, postpone, or altogether reject the idea of early marriage. While most of these girls informed their families of their decision, some encountered resistance, prompting the ambassadors to employ a tactic of training the girls in the art of persuasion and negotiation. Lina Darwish, a coordinator of a local team in Bar Elias, actively participated in organizing this training, while the facilitation was skillfully executed by Fatima Suleiman and Ghaydaa Domani, coordinators of the main geographically-specific teams for the campaign, after being coached by Anas.

Lina emphasised the significance of negotiation and persuasion skills, especially for those girls who lacked the final say in their marriages. Yamama, having already navigated the process of convincing her mother to break off her engagement, was not required to attend the training. Nonetheless, her unwavering commitment to Jumana and Lamia, coupled with her insatiable desire to acquire new knowledge, served as strong motivations for her active participation in the training sessions.

During the training sessions, the young girls were equipped with valuable skills on how to approach their families effectively, choosing the right moment and communicating with respect and clarity. They grasped the importance of articulating the risks associated with child marriage and shared their personal experiences, highlighting the transformative impact the campaign had on their lives. Open discussions ensued,

addressing the personal challenges they encountered, eventually leading to their parents' commitment once they were convinced of the girls' decisions.

Jumana and Lamia emerged triumphant, successfully persuading their families to break off their engagements, and they kept Yamama well-informed of all the progress and details. Yamama felt an overwhelming sense of joy when Jumana revealed that she had become a leader in the campaign, now empowered to make decisions and express her opinions. However, her happiness soared even higher when she realised that her active involvement in the campaign had played a vital role in preventing the marriages of both Jumana and Lamia before they reached the age of 18.

Upon completing this phase of the plan, the campaign achieved an incredible milestone, having reached out to 479 children—both boys and girls—who valiantly rejected early marriage and effectively convinced their families to support their decision. Remarkably, the parents pledged not to arrange engagements for their children below the age of 18, and for those under 17, they chose to break off the engagements and for those above 17, engagements were postponed.

In this poignant moment, Sami Armosh, the coordinator of one of the local teams in Majdal Anjar, felt an overwhelming sense of accomplishment. The campaign had transcended mere quantitative achievements; each girl's story represented a challenging journey and a triumphant testament to safeguarding her future and securing her fundamental rights.

These stories formed the heart of the public meetings, a tactic artfully employed by the campaign in three distinct geographical areas: Majdal Anjar, Bar Elias, and Saadnayel. The purpose of these gatherings was to honour and celebrate the ambassadors who served as the vital link between the campaign and the young girls in their communities. The campaign wholeheartedly praised these fearless girls for their unwavering commitment to the cause, as well as the parents who wholeheartedly supported their daughters' dreams, safeguarding their futures and childhoods.

During one of these profound public meetings, a religious figure from the area raised concerns, accusing the campaign of transgressing religious principles. However, before Anas or Safaa could respond, one of the remarkable leaders stepped forward and engaged him with profound logic. She passionately conveyed the pain she experienced due to child marriage and eloquently asserted her right to stand up and defend the future of her daughters, fervently advocating for the change they deserved.

Starting in October 2022, the public meetings became a platform to showcase the remarkable drawings created by the ambassadors and young girls during the drawing session. Surrounding themselves with these evocative depictions of their dreams and aspirations, a poignant atmosphere filled the air. In a moment of immense pride, Yamama confidently took hold of the microphone for the first time, addressing a sizable audience, and fearlessly sharing her own transformative journey with the campaign. It was a powerful realisation for Yamama, understanding that her involvement had not only supported her decision to break off her engagement but also contributed to her personal growth and honing of communication skills, allowing her to interact with people and passionately advocate for her rights.

Lina, too, observed the far-reaching impact, witnessing mothers approaching her with heartfelt gratitude, saying, “Look how much my daughter has positively changed after attending your sessions.” This heartwarming feedback was a testament to the profound effect the campaign had on the lives of these girls and their families.

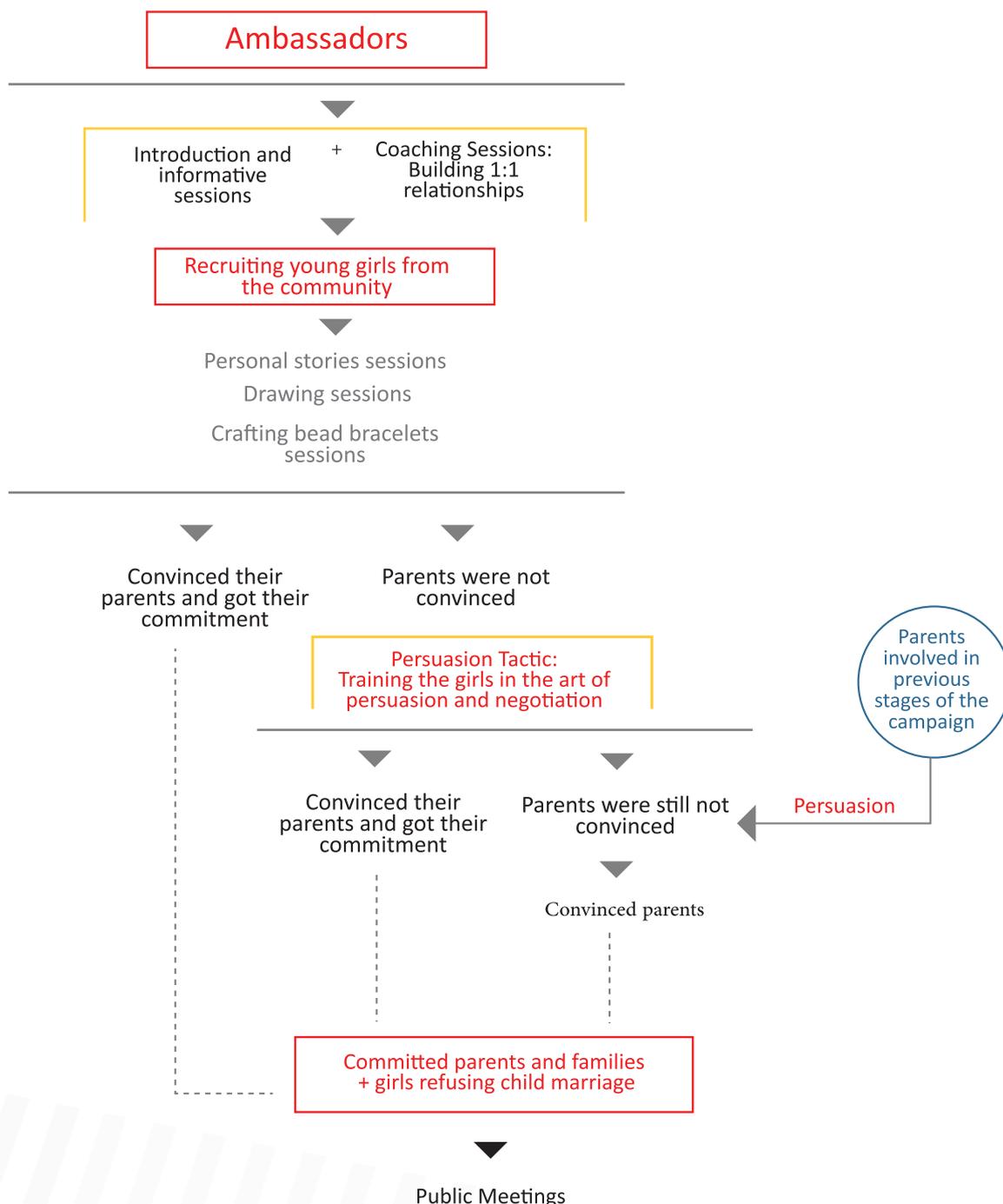
As the public meetings concluded in October 2022, the campaign found itself standing at a critical crossroads in the implementation of their plan for the fourth phase. Despite making remarkable progress and surpassing the halfway point of their journey, the campaign had not yet achieved half of their target of reaching 860 commitments to reject child marriage. This realisation caused deep concern for Safaa, as she understood the magnitude of the challenge ahead and recognized that achieving such a goal would not be an easy task. In response to the prevailing circumstances and the limited timeline, the coordinators involved wisely decided to make necessary adjustments to their plan, acknowledging the need to be agile in the face of challenges and the ever-evolving situation.

With the new alternative plan, instead of recruiting new ambassadors to participate in five new coaching sessions and then inviting young girls they had recruited to learn negotiation skills, the campaign shifted its focus to investing in the existing leadership of the current ambassadors. They aimed to build on their experiences from the previous months, empowering them with more leadership and responsibility to achieve greater impact and reach more commitments rejecting child marriage.

The current ambassadors took on the responsibility not only of recruiting young girls but also of personally convincing them to make the commitment. Instead of bringing them to group sessions, the ambassadors held one-on-one meetings with the young girls to persuade them to reject child marriage. This approach proved successful, and

Yamama successfully convinced seven young girls to gain commitments from their parents to reject child marriage.

The campaign's organizers worked together to support and coach the ambassadors, ensuring they were well-equipped to persuade. This collaborative and participatory effort among the organizers, ambassadors, and campaigners allowed them to work efficiently and effectively in record time, achieving their desired goal.



From Solidarity to an Assertive Claim

With the relentless efforts of both organizers and ambassadors working in unison, the campaign achieved its ambitious goal in its entirety. They successfully broke off 109 engagements, postponed 90 engagements, and garnered commitments from 662 parents who pledged not to marry their children before the age of 18. Simultaneously, on another front, Kauthar took the lead in a dedicated team, Al-Arz team, tirelessly working towards achieving the campaign's objective of obtaining a Sharia' court order to prosecute unregistered sheikhs involved in child marriages.

Kauthar, a Lebanese woman, had joined the campaign in 2019 after receiving a well-deserved invitation due to her civil activism. Her involvement included running for municipal elections and being an esteemed member of a social committee passionately advocating for the rights of Syrian refugees. Additionally, she skillfully managed the alliance of "Talaqi"» associations, actively promoting dialogue and networking among various components of civil society. For Kauthar, declining to participate in this campaign was never an option, as she perceived her active involvement and fervent opposition to the child marriage phenomenon as a natural extension of her dedicated work within the civil community.

In 2020, Al-Arz team produced a compelling video featuring religious scholars and representatives from various religious institutions and Sharia' courts in Lebanon. In this video, they passionately expressed their rejection of early marriage and wholeheartedly pledged their support for the campaign and its vital work. Additionally, the campaign organized a significant visit to the Sharia court, where they witnessed a willingness to cooperate, particularly concerning the actions of unregistered Sheikhs.

This newfound cooperation was further solidified after Sheikh Bilal Shihada, the head of the court's office, personally attended the campaign's events, familiarised himself with the involved organizations, and even participated in the closing ceremony of the third phase. During this momentous event, Sheikh Bilal Shihada eloquently spoke about the laws and the religious stance regarding the issue of early marriage, further fortifying the campaign's efforts to effect meaningful change and garner support from different sectors of society.

At the onset of the fourth phase, Al-Arz team embarked on a significant mission, visiting Judge Younis Abdul Razzaq, the esteemed head of the Sharia' court in West Bekaa, on three separate occasions to earnestly request the issuance of the much-

needed directive. The initial visit proved to be a challenging arrangement, facing two reschedules despite reaching out through Kauthar's brother, who serves as a court notary. Undeterred, they persisted in their pursuit.

Their first meeting, held in October 2022, had a clear objective: to comprehend the judge's stance on their critical issue and to introduce Al-Arz team and the campaign's invaluable work in a candid manner. During this pivotal encounter, the team adeptly informed Judge Younis Abdul Razzaq about their proactive activities, highlighting the pivotal role they played and elaborating on the dire living conditions in the camps, and their adverse impact on child marriages.

Following the success of their first meeting, where it became evident that the judge was aligned with the team's mission to combat child marriages, the campaign decided to take their engagement with Judge Younis Abdul Razzaq to a deeper level during the second meeting. Moving beyond solidarity, they aimed to delve into critical inquiries concerning the role of the Sharia' court.

The campaign's primary focus during the second meeting was to inquire about the court's stance on prosecuting unregistered Sheikhs who conducted oral marriage contracts with two witnesses present and without any formal recognition or documentation by the court.

Furthermore, they sought to address the issue of exceptions granted by the Sharia' court, allowing legitimate Sharia' Sheikhs to approve marriages of girls under the age of 18 with parental consent, as stipulated by the Sunni Personal Status Law—one of Lebanon's 15 sectarian laws.

The team diligently gathered crucial legal information about the issue, actively engaging in various events alongside Lebanese women's organizations. These productive discussions revolved around their goals and the imperative need for future collaboration in implementing their strategies. As a result of these efforts, the team gained significant civil support from prominent entities such as the «Not Before 18» campaign, which also garnered backing from the Democratic Women's Gathering. Their united front advocated for essential amendments to civil laws through decisions made by the Parliament, propelling the campaign to become a reputable reference in community organizing for girls' rights. Consequently, their influence expanded, leaving a profound impact on the civil context and their unwavering fight against legislative amendments that supported child marriages.

Armed with this legal knowledge, al-Arz team boldly proposed the idea of cooperation between the Sharia' court and the campaign during their second meeting. The proposal centred on the concept of a general directive empowering the campaign to actively monitor and report traditional elders involved in child marriages. While the judge displayed a cooperative disposition, it became evident that issuing the directive during the same meeting would require further deliberation and consideration.

With the leadership of Kauthar, the dedicated al-Arz team persisted with their phone follow-ups with Judge Younes Abdul Razzaq until they reached their pivotal third meeting in December 2022. During this momentous gathering, they were met with the long-awaited announcement of the directive they had tirelessly advocated for.

The directive issued a clear and decisive statement, affirming that the authority to grant permission for marriages solely rests with the court judge or the Sharia' judge, or any authorised official designated by the judge. Additionally, it explicitly emphasised that unregistered Sheikhs who performed marriages for minors had no legitimate or legal status within their region. This declaration marked a significant milestone in the campaign's mission to combat child marriages.

With this directive now in place, the campaign is set to collaborate with Judge Younes Abdul Razzaq to initiate a robust investigation and monitoring process. Any individuals found to conduct marriage contracts without obtaining permission from the chief Sharia' judge of the Sharia' court will face the necessary consequences.

Thanks to the dedicated efforts of Al-Arz team, one of our campaign's teams, we had the privilege of meeting with Judge Prof. Dr. Younes Abdel Razzaq. He serves as the head of the Sharia Court in Western Beqaa. During our meeting, Judge Prof. Dr. Younes Abdel Razzaq enlightened us about the legal intricacies related to marriage contracts.

Judge Prof. Dr. Younes Abdel Razzaq unequivocally emphasized that customary sheikhs who perform marriage contracts for underage individuals in our locality are acting contrary to the law. Based on his insights and guidance, we are in full agreement with his position.

To uphold the sanctity of the legal framework, we are committed to meticulously investigating and pursuing action against any individual who ventures to conduct a marriage contract without the requisite approval from the head of the Sharia court. Their names will be promptly reported to the appropriate authorities, and due legal

measures will be pursued against them. Our shared objective is to ensure that all marriage contracts are conducted in strict accordance with the law, safeguarding the well-being of young individuals in our community.



Drawing our attention to Article No. (70) of the Marriage Contract Legislation, he highlighted that the authority to grant permission for a marriage contract rests solely within the purview of the court judge. Furthermore, he referenced Article No. (348), which stipulates that the solemnization of marriage contracts is the prerogative of the Sharia' judge or a designated Ma'zoun under the judge's authorization.

The directive was a ray of hope, uplifting Kauthar's spirits as she shared the momentous news with the campaign group via WhatsApp. It served as a powerful testament to the unwavering commitment and organized efforts of the entire campaign, culminating in their ability to challenge authorities and advocate for their supervisory role at this critical stage. For Kauthar, this achievement held even greater significance than her previous bid in the municipal elections of 2016. It showcased a profound, community-oriented success that brought her closer to the people's genuine concerns and aspirations.

The impact of the campaign's collective efforts was palpable, and each member felt a sense of empowerment and pride in their contributions. Whether through breaking engagements, postponing them, persuading parents, or successfully obtaining the directive to hold unregistered Sheikhs accountable, every individual had played a crucial role in bringing about change.

Throughout its four stages of adopting the community organizing approach, the campaign not only maintained its momentum but also underwent a transformative shift in its goals and awareness. This continued accumulation of experiences and lessons learned enriched the struggle, making the change they fought for more sustainable and effective.

Responsibilities Amplifying with Every Celebration

Amid an atmosphere brimming with joy and a sense of accomplishment, the campaign organized a spectacular closing celebration for the fourth stage in December 2022. During this momentous event, they proudly announced the fulfilment of their goal, which entailed parents firmly rejecting child marriages, and the issuance of the highly sought-after directive from the Sharia' court. The significance of this achievement reverberated throughout the venue, resonating with the nearly thousand attendees, a much larger crowd than initially invited.

The enthusiasm and overwhelming support were palpable, with parents arriving in large numbers on buses, demonstrating their unwavering trust and ownership in the campaign's cause. The resounding applause for the brave ambassadors and young girls who were rightfully honoured filled the venue with a sense of pride and celebration. This unexpected influx of parents and their heartfelt appreciation expanded the event beyond its initial boundaries, making the stage, once dedicated to honouring courageous fathers and supportive men during the third stage, now a vibrant platform to celebrate the remarkable ambassadors and young girls who not only fearlessly rejected child marriages, but also convinced their families and peers to do so.

During the jubilant celebration, Yamama warmly embraced Jumana and Lamia, a surge of pride evident in her eyes as she witnessed their unwavering determination to reclaim their right to education after breaking off their engagements. Despite the challenges they faced, these resilient young girls were adamant about returning to school, and Yamama could not help but feel immense admiration for their strength and resilience. As they waved at her from a distance, their wrists adorned with the vibrant bracelets of the campaign, the touching image etched itself deeply into Yamama's memory.

With each level of success achieved in the campaign, a new chapter of dedicated work unfolded, pushing them further towards their ultimate goal. Child marriages presented a multifaceted challenge, deeply entrenched within societal and religious traditions, posing significant hurdles for institutions and authorities attempting to create a suitable legislative environment, enforce the laws, monitor violations, and effectively address the issue.



From the celebration of the completion of the fourth phase of the campaign in December 2022.

The campaign firmly believed in its popular base to exert influence, recognizing that the path to significant change required a continuous and evolving process. They understood that transformation through organizing campaigns was a journey comprising multiple steps and phases, rather than an instantaneous achievement. As they navigated this path, the campaign encountered challenges from decision-makers who often shifted the blame on traditional and societal norms, particularly when parents sought the involvement of unregistered Sheikhs in marrying off their young daughters.

However, the campaign was determined to alter this narrative and present a new perspective to its constituency. They demonstrated, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the resolute rejection of this harmful phenomenon by the community. Over the years, their unwavering efforts had a profound impact, instilling renewed confidence in the power of the people to create change. Through their collective dedication and perseverance, the campaign achieved what civil society institutions alone could not have accomplished.

This remarkable example of community organizing underscores the significance of grassroots and rights-based institutions putting their trust in the leadership of the constituency—those directly impacted by the issues. It emphasises the necessity of adopting successful models that bring about profound societal transformations through community organizing approaches. They revolve around coaching leaders

from the constituency, comprehending the social and political context surrounding the problems at hand.

This approach paved the way for young girls to assume leadership roles during the campaign's fourth phase, following the preceding three stages that primarily focused on convincing mothers and fathers to dissolve their daughters' engagements.

Reem Manaa, Director of the Coaching Campaigns Department at «Ahel», emphasises the valuable insights gained from the coaching experience provided in collaboration with the campaign. Through this partnership, they recognized the significance of establishing further collaborations with grassroots institutions that embrace community organizing approaches. Beyond merely delivering services, these partnerships extend to supporting other campaigns in achieving their objectives and creating a more profound impact on a diverse range of issues.

Meanwhile, Anas from “Women Now” says that the organization has shifted its collaborative focus with the campaign to coaching and logistical support. Nevertheless, «Women Now» remains steadfast in their commitment to stand by the campaign, advocating for the community organizing approach to address various women's issues in different locations.

Through her participation in the campaign, Yamama not only liberated herself from the threat of child marriage but also emerged as one of the esteemed «Childhood Ambassadors» destined to be future leaders of the movement. Fueled by determination, accomplishment, and unwavering faith in the power of the people, they will persist in this transformative journey. Yet, the triumph of the fourth stage doesn't guarantee a smooth road ahead for future campaigns, as challenges are bound to surface.

The recent court's directive aimed at curbing unregistered Sheikhs brings potential risks for the organizers, particularly in a country grappling with waves of racism towards Syrian refugees. In this dynamic landscape, the path forward remains uncertain, and numerous possibilities exist regarding the shape and direction of the campaign in its fifth stage. Nevertheless, the campaign's resolve to accumulate knowledge and pursue its objectives with both quantitative and qualitative achievements remains unwavering.



Members of the campaign after the completion of the fourth phase.



«After the completion of our fourth phase, we gathered yesterday for a full day to evaluate our intervention this year. We assessed our goals, strategic directions, and the work culture within our teams. We also celebrated the three circles of our success: individual, team, and our impact on the world. We documented the learning that we will carry with us into the upcoming stages of our campaign.»

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