"Women of Algiers in their Apartment: A Local Safe Space"

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Section I

The goal of our project was to launch a series of participatory workshops with women involved in peace keeping in the metropolitan area of Algiers. This August, over the span of three weeks, we organized three days of group workshops, and one day of final presentations open to the public, involving women from different ages (15-25, 35-45, 55-65), who participated one way or another to peace keeping during the Civil War of the 1990s, after the Civil concord of 1999, and recently, as trends of radicalization became stronger in the post-Arab Spring North African region.

No other fundraising efforts contributed to the completion of this project. Rather, we solely relied on and maximized the funds provided from the Davis Project for Peace Initiative.

This project stemmed from the will of three childhood friends, me, Anys and Nesma Merhoum, respectively trained in the fields of urban planning, architecture and social sciences, to reflect upon and engage with post-Civil War Algiers' urban landscapes through the prism of past and present ideological and social conflicts.

My team intended to explore the intertwining of past civil war crisis with the actual social crisis, which is as virulent as in neighboring Arab Spring movements, yet rampant and too distilled to bear the shape of urban riots. We considered that the women of Algiers, who have been both victims and fighters of these trends of violence and radicalization, needed to be heard, and offered a safe space in which they could voice their concerns about the current shape their city is taking. We targeted three neighborhoods specifically impacted by violence during the 1990s Civil War, and connected with local agents to help us logistically implement these participatory workshops. Thanks to their local expertise and generous input, and thanks to the willingness of the women residing in these neighborhoods to collaborate with us, we were able to organize very enriching workshop sessions.

Details about the Host site and unfolding of project:

We started carefully planning these workshops in March 2018. Over the past months, we worked relentlessly on anchoring our upcoming initiative in the local scene, in order to recruit workshop volunteers and participants and prepare the long-term unfolding of this project. We started to prepare the logistics of the events as early as possible, and acquired the required furniture for the workshop space, resources, food for the different meals shared together. We also planned to record these workshop sessions and recruited a video artist in order to capture these images. In addition to this, we were able to recruit eight volunteers to help lead activities during the workshops.

The three neighborhoods our workshops focused on are the Casbah, El-Biar and the popular neighborhood of Bab-el-Oued. They are all characterized by a very strong neighborhood culture, the important role women play in the everyday lives of all citizens, and the fact that they concentrated violence during conflicts that tore the city, and are still neighborhoods where radicalization trends are strong.

We used a workshop agenda detailing all activities that took place during the workshop, in order to collectively re-imagine aspects of the everyday functioning of these neighborhoods, through women's eyes. Such a workshop agenda, and associated materials (historical and current maps, plans of neighborhoods, photos, infographics) served as resources to train our volunteers prior to the workshops, and to foster discussions among participants on the days of the workshops.

From July 30 to August 3, we introduced the aim of the project to volunteers and prepped the last-minute logistical steps prior to launching the formal workshops. Workshops were held between August 4 and August 12. On August 18, we held the final public exhibition opening to the larger local audience, discussing highlights of the workshops series and ways forward. Partnering organizations,
local neighborhood residents, families and friends were invited to this event, via the strong use of word of mouth, phone calls and social media.

Challenges:

We feared that the project was not going to work prior to launching the workshops, due to two main reasons. First, we experienced a few issues in transferring the necessary funds locally around the time we had to purchase most of the equipment needed to set up the workshops.

Second, we faced an issue that is recurrent in participatory planning, and which has to do with the recruiting of workshop participants. We had initially strongly mediatized this project via social media, which has become an unforeseen platform of information and organizing in Algeria over the past years. These efforts were at first proving to be successful and quite helpful in organizing the upcoming workshops. We had also issued a more formal open call targeted at local organizations, including women from a local high school, a regional Berber association, a church-based community organizing association, and the Mayor's office neighborhood antennas. While the online reactions to the project were very positive, we did not get confirmations from workshops participants through that medium and, as the date of the workshops was getting closer, we needed to use alternative modes of recruitment. We were eventually able to do door-to-door outreach, either in person or by phone, to residents from the targeted neighborhoods thanks to the networks of local partnering stakeholders.

Were it not for the help of family members and local partners, we would likely not have been able to implement this project on the ground. We were able to benefit at certain times from discounts and good deals on transportation, equipment acquisition, food and use of space. This support was even more so critical when we experienced last-minute issues with securing the space we used for all workshops and the final public exhibition.

Our knowledge of the local dialect, and our acquired experience in participatory planning methodologies, allowed to make this project go overall pretty smoothly. We were able to constantly work in French and Darija and all workshops were marked by beautiful moments of communication, trust and friendship building with all the residents who were extremely generous with their time and input. The workshops were both full of fascinating moments of exchange during the scheduled planning activities. They also turned out to be the most convivial gatherings celebrating the strength of these women, as we all collectively bonded over shared meals and music listening.

In addition to this, other stakeholders who attended the public exhibition became also very interested in the initiative. They are ready to get more involved at the neighborhood level and offer their help to continue building upon this project along with the residents who took part in the workshops.

A definition of peace:

To quote the words of a wonderful workshop participant from the neighborhood of Bab-el-Oued, peace is not just about signing a Civil Concord, or disbursing large funds to fix the buildings and roads which make up the city that was once torn by a war. It is also about taking the time to sit down, the way we tried to do it, and taking the time to hear people out, let all the stories good or bad come out. Only then can the healing begin, and peace start to be guaranteed.

Short and long term contributions of this project to peace building:

The first aim of this project was to allow women involved in these three districts to share a safe space and talk about their hopes and wishes for the future of Algiers. This space was intended to be their platform to share what their expectations of everyday city life should look like. The second aim was to allow for the transfer of knowledge and the tying of lasting collaborative ties among generations of women. The third aim was to underline through this constructive effort that the genealogy of violence can be overcome through inclusive dialogues, intergenerational exchange, and ways to allow underrepresented groups to express themselves.

Beyond the Summer of 2018, my team plans to make a long-lasting commitment to reiterating such thematic participatory workshops. We will also rely on a very solid set of commitment trackers.
measuring how these workshops are doing, because the tracking of results is key to the evolution of this project.

We will evaluate the level of participation to this first set of workshops by analyzing participant data features (demographic, socio-economic, income, level of education) to produce a short report in Fall 2018 underlining how to include more diverse profiles. We will also work on strengthening ties made with the first round of participants who took part in the workshops. This will allow to recruit further participants and create volunteering opportunities in order to train workshop assistants for the subsequent editions. On a long-term basis, our intent is to extend these workshops, both thematically, and by including additional neighborhoods. We also plan to create an online platform that gathers results from all workshop editions.

**The way this project has impacted how we view the world:**

Women do possess 'ordinary knowledge' that can help ensure that policies proposed reflect local conditions and values, especially in the case of issues that concern broad public interest, such as housing, community and economic development and transportation improvements. We got the privilege to build solid relationships with women who are in charge of so many important tasks locally, from handling the house to earning a steady income, to raising children. If their input is more taken into account, and if they are integrated more and more into civic participation, that can be a strong element for peace keeping in the North African region.

**Quotation:**

We had Assia Djebar's *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* (1980) core message in mind as we were putting together this project: gather women residing in a popular neighborhood, or women residing in a social housing project, put them together in a room, and just silently witness the wonderful empowering interactions and testimonies that can spur from that. "Women are in charge of so many important tasks locally, from handling the house to earning a steady income, to raising children. If their input is more taken into account, and if they are integrated more and more into civic participation that can be a strong element for peace keeping in the North African region". Magda Maaoui