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Soccer program determined to level Lebanon's gender playing field

By Jens Juul Petersen

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BEIRUT: Lebanese women are fighting a silent revolution on the soccer field through the popular club program of Danish NGO Cross Cultures Project Association (CCPA).

Haifa and Huda are two young women on an important mission; they want to change Lebanese society by promoting gender equality and giving young girls the opportunities they didn't have themselves.

"We are here ... because we want to change something," says 28-year-old Huda Saad, who together with her friend Haifa Shihab, 32, is taking part in a seminar in Beirut for volunteers in the CCPA popular club program.

The two school teachers want to establish their own club for girls in their southern hometown of Maarakeh.

"There is nothing like that in our town. All sports activities are for boys and men, but we want to make a club for girls – and only girls," says Haifa, who has been living in Maarakeh her entire life and says she is fed up with how society sees and treats girls and women.

"We have had no opportunities to do sports and physical activities. It has been very frustrating for us," she adds.

Neither Huda nor Haifa played much sports during their youth and childhood, but it doesn't mean that they don't want to.

"We like sports and would love to do more. It is important to do sports, and with this club and the activities I will force myself to train, play and be more active," says Haifa.

The CCPA popular club project is important and necessary in Lebanon, says Huda: "The existing clubs are not good. People in these clubs are only looking at talents, and it is not important to them if the children have fun or not. It is all about being good, winning and finding talents: male talents!"

Contrary to this, CCPA Lebanon is focusing on a mixed inclusion of children, regardless of gender, talent, social standing, religious and ethnic distinctions. The CCPA popular club project is working to support the development of an active civil society, based on diversity and equality, where females are encouraged to take an active part in order to promote gender equality and nondiscrimination.

The idea of popular clubs is new to Lebanon. And popular clubs for girls will be a revolution – especially in the south, say Huda and Haifa.

"There are no associations which can help the girls. Everything is about men and boys. We want to change this and make clubs for girls, where they can have the opportunities, they deserve," Haifa says, and Huda continues: "We have so many skilled girls all over Lebanon who want to be active and play sports, but sadly the society and the men don't accept this."

The hometown of the two women is located in a conservative area around the port city of Tyre, where patriarchal domination and cultural sensibilities have made it difficult for CCPA Lebanon to organize sports activities for girls and women.

Local CCPA coordinator Adel Saad has experienced how complicated it was to attract girls and women to sports activities, not only in the south but all over the country: "This is Lebanon, and it is not normal for girls to participate in sports outside the schools. We need to change this, but it should be done slowly."

Saad is optimistic about involving girls: "I am sure that when we get started with the activities, we will not just have 20 girls playing. We will have 100 or maybe 200 coming to play. There have been no activities for girls earlier, but this doesn't mean that there isn't a need!"

By including girls in sports activities, Huda and Haifa hope that this will mean a lot to their society and especially to the status of women within it.

"There is an idea here that girls with hijab don't do sports. Men think that we are not interested and don't like being active, but this is so wrong. We know many, many girls and women who are like us," Huda says.

"I want to change the impression that girls with hijab can't do anything except sitting at home being quiet. By doing sports we can change this and express ourselves," Haifa says.

Huda and Haifa say they chose to play an active part in society through CCPA Lebanon because of the reputation of the organization in the area.

"CCPA has succeeded other places, which is important for us. We don't want to fail again. We will not try in vain. Many other NGOs and organizations have been working in our region, but many are only showing off. CCPA seems more honest and serious," Haifa explains.

It is obvious that many people in Lebanon are not ready to deal with strong and independent women doing sports.

Even these two women had to struggle before going to the CCPA seminar in Beirut, far away from their hometown.

"Our families were against it. Staying at a hotel with 50 men is not a good thing to do for young, decent women. We couldn't convince our families to allow us to go, so in the end we just said: khalass [enough], we will go whether you like it or not. And now we are here – and hopefully we can gain a lot from it," Haifa says

Haifa and Huda have been looking forward to the seminar for a long time.

"Here we can meet other people with experience who can teach us something. We learn strategies and methods, and the strength to dare sacrificing our efforts on this project. We will hopefully get more guts!" Huda says.

But it is not only the two women who are here to learn. According to Haifa, the male instructors and trainers also have many things to learn: "Some of the men here are not used to have women around them. But they have to learn this: women are also allowed on the playing field and to take part in society."

The small liberation battle for Huda, Haifa and their Lebanese sisters has started.

There is still long way to go, but Haifa is optimistic and motivated: "We will need time. Things don't change overnight here, but we know that we can do it. We know that we can change how other people are seeing women. We can't lose faith – and we can't fail! But we need patience."

Tags: Beirut, Children, Lebanese, Lebanon, Revolution