

# Painting glass as a psychosocial intervention: reflections of a psychosocial refugee outreach volunteer in Damascus, Syria

***Maha Ismael***

*This personal reflection describes the experience of a psychosocial refugee outreach volunteer in Syria. Born and raised in Iraq, the author fled with her family to Syria in an attempt to escape the violence. Trained as an English teacher and educational psychologist in her home country, she volunteered to help other refugees in Syria and describes this as challenging, but very rewarding. Key factors to be able to continue her work are the importance of weekly supervision and being part of a team. Her work includes the facilitation of peer support groups, including groups where participants learn practical skills, such as painting glass objects. As well as providing refugees with some additional income, they also benefit from the mutual support they receive.*

**Keywords:** community based psychosocial support, community outreach, healing environment, Iraq, psychosocial centre, Syria

## **How I became a psychosocial outreach volunteer**

In 2005, I fled from Iraq to Syria with my family, because of the worsening security situation in my homeland. We returned to Iraq in 2006, but when we returned armed militias attacked us and killed members of my mother's family. We miraculously survived and fled once again to Syria.

I had graduated from the College of Education at Baghdad University English

department, as well as a teaching institution, where I studied education and psychology. This educational background, as well as my energy and desire to support others, enabled me to encourage and comfort others, give them hope that tomorrow will be better than today, help them to change their lives and lift themselves out of a state of despair and frustration. Being a refugee myself, I worked through similar suffering, as other refugees had done, and continue to do.

In 2009, I began volunteering with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) programme in Syria. I like to help others regardless of their background, and that is why I became a volunteer. Due to the huge problems most refugees face, many of them feel very distressed, and are unaware of where to go for support.

## **My work**

As a psychosocial outreach volunteer, as well as a member of the community, I try to identify people in distress and provide them with some basic support. This includes follow-up on individuals and families who are in need of psychosocial support through home visits and telephone calls. At the Psychosocial Centre, I am involved in

facilitating peer support groups for women and adolescent girls, as well as other activities such as psycho-education for women and men, boys and girls. My work also includes accompanying difficult and/or complex cases to the mental health care services. Many refugees consider the volunteers as a means of communicating between the refugee community and UNHCR. We are called *'the voice of the refugees'*.

It is very important to me to attend weekly supervision meetings for referrals, discussion of cases, feedback and support. Although I have a background in psychology and a strong desire to help, in my experience, good supervision is of critical importance to my work. Our supervisor has supported me and the other volunteers, and provided us with training. The most important trainings for me were those focussed on facilitating peer support groups and the training of trainers.

As psychosocial volunteers we face many challenges. Sometimes refugees demand quick solutions. However, we cannot make promises and often we do not have the power to overcome certain problems. Sometimes we are also exposed to risk when dealing with difficult people, e.g. clients experiencing psychotic breakdowns or trying to commit suicide, who can become aggressive and agitated. While we do receive monthly compensation as volunteers, to cover the costs of transport and telephone, sometimes these expenses are higher than the compensation, creating financial stress.

### **The centre**

The psychosocial outreach counselling centre was established in 2009. It is run by a team of refugees, most of who are psychologists or social workers, under the supervision of the UNHCR. The centre provides a variety of psychosocial activities to refugees,

and to the Syrian host community. It serves as a bridge between the work of the outreach volunteers and the refugees; it is also a place where refugees can find relief from daily pressures. Through psychosocial counselling, refugees and outreach volunteers can discuss their problems and find support. I often call the outreach centre *'the bee hive'*, because the refugee outreach volunteers are working around the clock, as busy as bees, with all their energy to make *'honey'* for the refugee and host communities. In fact, not only refugees feel welcomed coming to the centre, but volunteers as well. When I come to the centre and see people, help them and listen to them, I forget my own problems.

### **Glass painting**

One of my favourite activities is to facilitate glass painting. I not only teach the participants how to paint on glass, but use the activity as a kind of indirect peer support group. At the beginning of each session, I ask the participants individually; *'how was your week?'* Through their answers I can hear what is important to them and any good or bad events that had occurred. In this way, while they start to paint on the glass, they are also listening to each other. In one of the groups, a widower was talking about problems with his children, and the women in the group were able to support him through sharing their experiences, and how they coped with their children. By the end of the activity, the participants had shared problems and experiences, while also learning a handicraft that could contribute to their livelihoods. One of the participants started a similar course in another community centre, and many sold their items in bazaars.

As I knew the importance of this activity for the participants, who waited eagerly for the weekly sessions, I did my best to provide them with support in various ways. For

### **Sarah**

Sarah, an Iraqi refugee woman, was suffering from problems with her husband, isolation and boredom. When she came to the centre, she did not know how to get out of her situation. I introduced her to the activities of the centre. She decided to participate in glass painting, and after a brief period she came to me and said thank you. Sarah felt much better and learnt how to cope with her husband. She told me that she is calmer than she was, and has learned how to control her anger. At the end of the course, she re-registered in glass painting, because she saw that it had helped her to improve.

### **Naima**

Naima is an Iraqi refugee woman from Babil. Contrary to the positive association that Babil or 'Babylon' evokes for most Iraqis, and people around the world, this city reminded Naima of the killing of three of her closest relatives and of the domestic violence her husband and his family inflicted on her. When she fled to Syria with her two young daughters, Naima found security, shelter and assistance, but life continued to be hard. She had no appetite, was feeling lonely, could not sleep and often cried at night. There was *'something to express'*, but she could not find a way to do it. Recently, when asked about how she feels, Naima declares with a sparkle in her eye that she is *'strong like a mountain.'* even if being a single, refugee mother is still not easy. . . So, what happened to change her outlook? Twice a week, Naima goes to the outreach centre to learn new skills and attend peer support group meetings. When she went to the centre for the first time, Naima did not know what *'psychosocial'* meant, but said; *'people at the centre welcomed me with smiles, understood and helped me to express my feelings'*. Now, Naima wants to become a teacher in glass painting and sewing, so that she can *'pass on the smiles'* she has received.

example, I would bring sweets to the class, and on one occasion I organised a small graduation party for them. Most importantly, I did not cancel any of the weekly sessions. When facilitating groups, it is very important to maintain the confidentiality of the information shared by the participants, avoid giving advice or making promises, and to respect each other's opinion. This ensures that everyone feels comfortable and at ease to share their experiences. Some examples are in the boxed text.

### **Changing context**

The current crisis in Syria has affected our work dramatically and we face a lot of

additional challenges. It is difficult to move around and to access basic services. In addition, prices have skyrocketed and many clients, who had previously improved, have now relapsed. Eventually the centre had to close down because of the increasing problems with security. Despite this, we had to find an alternative plan to provide the activities of the centre in a safe environment. As a result, we have conducted activities during home visits, and support group sessions in public parks that were deemed safe, or in the houses of some of the refugees or volunteers. I have also navigated between different centres where I delivered psycho-education sessions.

Last year the project was handed over from UNHCR to the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). This has ensured the continuation of the project. It is good to integrate the programme into the running programmes of SARC, and to link it to the mental health case management system. This also facilitated the building of the new volunteer programme, with and for Syrians. Given the overall situation in Syria, the volunteers had been afraid that they could not continue their work, after so many years of experience. The transition to SARC also meant that there is less direct communication between us, the volunteers with UNHCR, which has also meant that we could not

assume the role of being the refugees' voice, as before.

### **Conclusion**

I worked for a period of five years as a volunteer and learned how to cope with difficult situations, how to help people who have suffered violence and how to assist them in creating alternative solutions. I feel that I am stronger than before.

*Maha Ismael is a psychosocial outreach volunteer with the mental health and psychosocial support programme of UNHCR in Damascus, Syria. email: im20111@yahoo.com*