How international cooperation and micro-credit allow women to take back their lives: the Auxilia Onlus experience in Syria

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The war in Syria is not new. Since March 2011, there have been thousands of victims of a fratricidal conflict that sees the central government of Bashar al Assad opposed by many representatives of various groups, often simply referred to as ‘rebels’, but within whose ranks deeply different groups clash.

As always when there is a war, it is the civilians who are the first victims. Today in Syria, it is also difficult to get a count on the number of deaths or displaced or missing people. The many eyes of humanitarian organizations focused on the region have denounced over and again the abuses and violations of human rights carried out on all fronts. From rapes of women and girls to the recruitment of children: the situation is a real humanitarian disaster. It is impossible for people whose raison d’être is the respect of human rights, like us at Auxilia Onlus, to stand aside. To stay silent. To look the other way.

Our work started from the need to help the victims of the conflict: the first project was the support of children from the Iblib region, the border area between Syria and Turkey, isolated and abandoned by other international organizations. After the first few visits, we found that, as often happens unfortunately, the worst injuries were those suffered by children and women. However, we also noticed that women could be the key to unlocking the situation and could trigger a small positive change.

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2. Onlus stands for ‘Organizzazione Non Lucrativa di Utilità Sociale’ (not for profit organizations socially oriented); http://www.auxiliaitalia.it/en/foundation.html

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We are accustomed to think of women in the Arab world as submissive, hidden, and marginalized. Instead, especially in countries like Syria, there are emancipated women, armed with a strong university education, and who already before the war did not give up their freedom. Furthermore, the conflict may also stimulate those who had not had many opportunities to get out before. It is the women in the Middle East, even in such a fragile situation, who can take action to try to make a terrible situation more humane.

The action of Auxilia aims to re-establish a form of stability for the population living in the areas of Iblib and Atma. The cooperation activities encompass different fields, always placing special attention on women’s development: a school was created to involve children and reintegrate people who were working in schools before the war, a small health center was opened, becoming a landmark, and women were offered the opportunity to financially care for their families through micro-enterprise projects.

Indeed, these projects deserve further attention. How is it that in the midst of a terrible conflict like the one in Syria, there is room for micro-entrepreneurs? What can you produce with so few resources? How can products be sold and to whom? It is in this context that opportunities arise when international cooperation is structured, designed, and built in an effective way, addressing the needs of the area in which it operates.

In 2013, a project of female micro-entrepreneurship was started. The aim was to provide women from Idlib and Atma sustenance for their families through the production of scarves. Just scarves, an object used by many women around the world. What was special was the point in which they were made: a knot called ‘love knot’, from which derived the name of the product and the project: love scarves. The knot symbolized the precious bond between Italian women and Syrian ones.

At the Women’s Center in Atma, we organized a workshop open to all, where we delivered 100 kg of wool, which then increased thanks to some private donations. The production of scarves is particularly suited to the conditions
of the area because they can be produced almost anywhere, including in tents or at home. The idea to make women economically independent in Atma was developed together with the Maram Foundation, a British organization that is our partner in Syria. The scarves produced are then imported into Italy and elsewhere where they are sold at charity markets and awareness events. The goal, which has been partially realized, is to transform a refugee camp into an active community where you can work, learn, and grow. In this way, women and Syrian children can begin, slowly, to regain possession of their lives.

It is not the only humanitarian project that we wanted to vigorously carry out in Syria and in the Turkish border. In collaboration with the Department of Human Sciences, University of Trieste, Maram Foundation, and with the support of the Autonomous Region Friuli Venezia Giulia, we have implemented another project, ‘Aurora in Syria’, which consisted in vocational training, conflict mediation, and reconciliation. Within this frame, we have promoted some courses in various areas: mediation, negotiation, post-traumatic stress disorder, sewing, and knitting. One hundred and fifty refugees of Atma, from 15 to 50 years old and in particular widows, abused women, women with low education, and disabled women, have learned small jobs and strengthened themselves through their participation in the micro-credit activities.

Recently, our activities have increased in order to provide additional support and space for action for Syrian refugees. Al Bayti, which means ‘my home’, will soon come to life as a female youth center at the orphanage Al Bayti (Reyhanli, Turkey), to provide women of the area a meeting place where they can engage in specific activities and talk. The hope is that it becomes a space where micro-entrepreneurship projects can be carried out thanks to the psychosocial support also offered to participants.

At the same time, we also started the WomenNet project, aimed at creating a local network and support tools for refugee women. In this case, the primary objective is to offer psychological support to cope with the post-traumatic stress disorders that are often, unfortunately, the invisible wounds of war.
Choosing to support women is not a choice like any other, it is not the result of chance but a concrete response to the humanitarian emergency. Women have a fundamental role in every society and even more so in a community plagued by violence that forces them to escape far from home and to face enormous obstacles. Women can turn into an exciting and vital fulcrum. Most women are away from the logic of physical violence, less corruptible, and more sensitive to suffering. This way, even remotely, you can help those who need it most in a concrete way so that the tragedies and bombs of the past will leave room for a safe and bright future.