

Community Centre for Refugee Women and Children

Morocco



© UNHCR/Dragana Vlastic

"I am really happy with this laudable initiative that has allowed me to follow courses in tailoring, bakery and hairdressing, as well as follow workshops on HIV/Aids. I encourage all those who work to help the refugees. A big thank you to the Fondation and its staff for being always available to listen to us."

- Seu Florence, refugee

LOCATION

Rabat, Morocco

DURATION

12 months
(1 Jan 2008 – 31 Dec 2008)

IMPLEMENTING PARTNER

Fondation Orient-Occident
www.fondation.orient-occident.org

DONOR

Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein of Jordan

BUDGET

US \$22,500

OVERVIEW

The majority of the asylum seekers and refugees in Morocco are from Sub-Saharan Africa. A significant number are unaccompanied minors and single mothers who have been victims of sexual violence. Due to the absence of a legal status, language barriers and lack of employment opportunities, they have difficulties integrating into the local society, and adults can find only temporary and poorly paid jobs in the black market. With the support of UNHCR, through the Women Leading for Livelihoods initiative, the Fondation Orient-Occident established a Community Centre for Refugee Women and Children. The centre includes a library and an internet café. It offers a range of activities and services tailor-made for refugee women and children. A kindergarten was also established to take care of small children to give allow the mothers and older children to participate in other activities.

AIM OF PROJECT

- Improve self-reliance among refugee women and their families by encouraging income generating activities and offering vocational training.
- To improve the mental health of the refugee women through the provision of psychosocial services such as counseling sessions and recreational activities.

RESULTS

- 84 women are registered with the Community Centre for Refugee Women.
- 20 children (between the age of 0-7years) are registered in the kindergarten. Trained refugee women run and manage this day care centre. Games and snacks are offered.
- **3 training courses** (in hairdressing, selling cosmetics, bakery, tailoring, IT, Arabic and French) aim at increasing the marketable skills of refugee women and girls. All courses are taught by refugees.
- This gives refugees a chance to start their own small businesses through micro-finance support, enabling refugees to apply their newly acquired skills.
- **Weekly counseling sessions** are provided to address the psychosocial needs of the refugee community. Social workers regularly conduct home visits, including to women and unaccompanied minors to follow up on their situation.
- In the case of severe psychological problems (including those arising from Sexual and Gender Based Violence) refugee women are referred to psychiatric care. A psychologist provided counseling and trained counselors in posttraumatic stress disorder and depression.
- **Several recreational activities** were organized such as celebrating Women's Day and Refugee Day. A library and internet café are open to refugees, Moroccans and migrants.
- Women are also encouraged to socialize and talk to each other about their difficulties in adapting to their new situation.
- **Regular information sessions on STDs/HIV/Aids** prevention, testing and treatment are held at the centre. This helps raise awareness of sexual diseases, and consequently by giving women economic empowerment, they won't have to

resort to sex for survival.

- Hairdressing and cosmetics group: 30 beneficiaries; Bakery group: 40 beneficiaries;
- Tailoring group: 30 beneficiaries; IT group: 40 beneficiaries; English course group: 25 beneficiaries; Arabic course group: 15 beneficiaries.

IMPACTS

This self-reliance project has a positive impact on the living conditions of refugees. Firstly, it enhances a rights-based approach as refugees **develop a sense of ownership** by producing their products and running their own micro projects. This consequently increases their self-esteem as they have more control over what they do to earn a living. Secondly, **socio-economic integration is improved** as vocational skills are acquired – especially in those areas of high demand in the host society. The project envisages involvement of refugee **community workers** in order to increase the participation of the refugee community in the decision-making process.

- **After participation in the courses, no women have been officially employed.** Refugee status (accorded by UNHCR) is not validated by the authorities and refugees are not issued with a residence permit. Therefore, refugees cannot be offered an employment contract. However, refugee men and women do work in the private and informal sector, and some women found a job as a domestic worker. Involvement in the training courses did provide women with the opportunity to acquire new skills and capacities which gives them hope for the future.
- A number of **refugee women have set up their small enterprises** with micro grants and management support provided by one of UNHCR's implementing partners. Refugee women are active in commerce (the sale of food, arts, crafts) or as service providers (internet services, hair dressing, waitresses).
- As at August 2009, the Community Centre for Refugee Women and Children was still operational. There were 87 women enrolled in training classes (18 women in hair dressing, 43 in baking, and 40 in tailoring). In addition, 31 women participated in a series of awareness raising sessions on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and 8 women participated in language training classes.
- The centre continues to operate thanks to additional funding by the Swiss Development Cooperation which has been secured for 2009/2010. The centre also benefits from funding under a joint UN program to combat sexual violence against women and UNIFEM has given a small grant to the centre. Due to this funding, the centre is expanding its activities and the hiring, training and support of refugees can continue.

LESSONS LEARNED

Through the various activities, refugee women learn how to best address the challenges for building a self reliant refugee community.

- A **participatory approach** gives refugees a chance to regain their self-esteem and improve their socio-economic conditions.
- **Supporting refugee women to take ownership** of their lives and those of their children and families remains a prime objective of the project, which is being continued with additional funding from other donors including other UN agencies.
- **Men are involved in certain parts of the training projects** (for example, the sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) awareness raising sessions) because in this way men become aware of the inequalities between men and women, and realise that women's empowerment is essential for the family's well being.
- There has been **no increase in domestic violence** following women's empowerment, however cases of domestic violence still continue to be reported. Only one reported case could be potentially linked to women's empowerment through the activities of the centre.