

CASE STUDY

Inspiring the next generation of girls in Zummar, Iraq

December 2023

In Zummar, women are usually confined to the household - denied opportunities to come together and voice the change they want to see. Tired of this, Rajya, a member of a WPT in Domiz Camp, decided to no longer be quiet. This came after Rajya's 7-year-old daughter returned from school distraught and in tears after she, and her friend, had been beaten by their teacher because they had shared a pen with her friend. It was at this moment that Rajya realized she no longer could repress her voice and felt compelled to take action.

Jumping into motion, Rajya decided she would go to the school and file a complaint against this teacher. However, before proceeding, she wanted to convince the mother of her daughter's friend to come with her, as her daughter was beaten too. Initially hesitant and scared, the other mother was reluctant to join and step outside of the usual societal norms that deprived women of a public voice. Undeterred, Rajya remained adamant, urging her that they must stand united to ensure that the teacher would never again lay a hand on their daughters.

After successfully convincing the other mother, both went to the school, and Rajya spoke to the principal, who apologized on the teacher's behalf and promised this would never happen again.

“On my way out of school, all of my daughter's friends gathered around me and kept on asking how come you are allowed to be in the school and why are you here? When I told them that the reason was to file a complaint and talk to the principal about that teacher who kept on hitting them. The girls were amazed and in shock. For them, women are not the ones who go and file complaints; women are not supposed to talk to principals and women definitely don't have the power to stand in front of a male teacher. - **Rajya, WPT member in Domiz Camp**

“I was happy that I had the opportunity to change how women are being perceived by those little girls and let them know that women can be strong and confident, that women are not helpless and I'm hoping when they grow up, they will be more courageous and more confident than me. - **Rajya, WPT member in Domiz Camp**

Yet, unfortunately, the next day, Rajya found that her daughter, as well as her son, were severely beaten by the same teacher. This time, her daughter had marks on her face and body. She told Rajya that the teacher hit her because she complained to her mother and that she should never complain to her parents about anything the teacher does. They believe the teacher targeted the son as well to emphasize this message.

Furious that the teacher beat both her children, Rajya was determined to not give up and would take a different approach. This time, Rajya decided she would ask the army at Domiz Camp for their help and support – despite having previously had problems with them and trying to limit her interaction with them.

However, after attending Nonviolent Peaceforce's (NP) Community Security Forum (CSF) with the army and security actors, she realized that they were not against the community in Domiz. On the contrary, she realized their genuine desire to assist and support the community, actively exploring solutions to avert their displacement or homelessness in the event they need to vacate Domiz Camp. This shift in perception bolstered Rajya's confidence to engage with them.

“The CSF made me change how I perceived the army and the security actors. That's why I was determined and confident that if I ask for their help, they will support me, and they did. - Rajya, WPT member in Domiz Camp

Rajya went to the army, taking her daughter with her as she wanted her to see that women can speak up for themselves, breaking norms and traditions.

“I insisted on taking my daughter with me because I wanted her to be brave and tell to the lieutenant general her story by herself. I want her to be confident and fearless and know that she can do anything and she shouldn't be afraid of anyone. - Rajya, WPT member in Domiz Camp

Applying the skills and confidence she gained at NP's trainings and as part of the WPT, she asked the lieutenant general for support on the issue, who was happy to assist. He called the principal, who proceeded to call Rajya and convened a meeting with her and the teacher, where the latter apologized to Rajya and her daughter. He promised both of them that he would stop hitting children.

Such a story is indicative of a durable impact. Without NP's support, Rajya had been too scared to speak up out of fear that she would be shamed and judged by her society.

However, as an active member of the WPT and her continuous attendance at NP's UCP trainings, she felt encouraged and safe to use her voice and be herself, realizing that she would be attacked for standing up for herself and her community.

*I won't lie and say that I was a weak shy woman all my life because I wasn't, but deep down I always felt that it wasn't my right and that I was just different. However, NP helped me realize that this should be the normal, and due to the sessions, I attended with NP, I was encouraged to be myself, a woman who wants to stand up for herself and who shouldn't be afraid of society. For instance, when I attended the CSF that NP organized, at first, I couldn't believe that I was in a meeting with men from our community and that we should talk about our problems and concerns in front of all those security actors and the Mayor of Zummar. However, the other women and I did. We talked and didn't care that men were in the room. We felt that we have the right to present ourselves just like them, and I'm forever grateful that I had the opportunity to be part of NP's peace teams. - **Rajya, WPT member in Domiz Camp***

Rajya's story is merely one example of how NP is supporting the community to reject all forms of violence, empowering women to assume leadership roles and advocate for themselves, while building trust and bridging the gap between the security actors and community. Her actions have trickled down to inspire a younger generation of girls that women have a powerful voice, which they can use to inspire positive change. Such increased confidence and access to self-advocacy for the women of Zummar is not only reducing violent incidents but also contributing to long-term inclusive peace and security.