INFLUENCING MINDSETS THROUGH COMMUNITY THEATRE IN JORDAN

Powerful Performances
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JVL Learning Series

The JVL Learning Series is an ongoing initiative to share lessons learned as the project is being implemented. Topics include private sector engagement in Jordan, client experiences with savings and loan groups, effective strategies for enterprise development and measuring women’s economic empowerment.

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Jordan Valley Links

Enterprise Development for Women and Youth in the Jordan Valley

MEDA’s Jordan Valley Links Project (JVL) is working with local partners to economically empower 25,000 women and youth in the Jordan Valley and increase their contribution to Jordan’s economic growth. Women and youth are supported with training and mentorship to improve their business acumen and are linked to markets where they can sell their products and services. To increase access to finance, JVL partners bring together Savings and Loan Groups (SLGs), self-replicating, member-driven groups that meet regularly to save small amounts of cash which can be lent to members. JVL is building support for entrepreneurship in families and communities through communication campaigns, community theatre and role models who promote the value of self-employment for women and youth.

JVL focuses on three sectors:

- **Clean technology** – women and youth are being supported to start businesses promoting waste management/composting, solar/photo-voltaic systems and other energy-efficient technologies.
- **Community-based tourism** – a model that empowers community members to actively engage in offering unique experiences for tourists to explore local traditions and ways of life, while stimulating economic growth and protecting cultural heritage and natural resources.
- **Food processing** – one of the largest subsets of agricultural activity in the Jordan Valley, this sector is popular among women entrepreneurs. JVL supports women and youth to improve production systems and facilitates access to higher value, sustainable end markets.

![Figure 1: Overview of JVL project](image-url)
In a small community centre in Sweimeh, Jordan, a group of women has gathered to watch a performance by Jordanian NGO NAFE’s theatre group. Two actresses enter the room and launch into their sketch:

Actress 1: “Where’s your mother-in-law?”
Actress 2: “I have no mother-in-law!”
Actress 1: “Did she die? Did something happen?”
Actress 2: “What? You know I can’t kill an ant! I got a divorce.”

The recently divorced woman has no money and wonders how she will manage. Her friend suggests that she apply for a small loan and start a business.

Once the situation has been illustrated, a facilitator from NAFE stands up and the sketch pauses. The facilitator turns to the audience and asks for their impressions. After a moment of silence, several women begin offering opinions, including that early marriage is bad for society and leads to divorce.

The sketch resumes, rejoining the divorced woman as she discusses her plan to start a business with her brother. Her brother, with whom she lives, forbids her to work, or even to leave the house. He also refuses to give her money. After some discussion, his wife convinces him to let his divorced sister work from home.

Next, the scene changes to an office environment where a married woman and a single woman are working. Their male boss flirts with the single woman and assigns all the work to the married woman. The actors pause the sketch and invite a member of the audience to come up and take over the role of the married woman. She improvises with the actors, and the scene is concluded with the married woman being fired for requesting time off to go to a medical appointment for her children. When the audience is invited to comment, there is an energetic discussion on employee rights and workplace sexual harassment.

The final sketch begins with a teenaged girl talking on her phone to plan a day out with a friend. Her father enters her room and asks what she is doing. When she begins describing her plans, he tells her she will not be able to meet her friend anymore because she is getting married – to her friend’s father.

When the sketch finishes, the women in the audience immediately begin a passionate discussion about early marriage and its effects on families and communities. Most of them had themselves been married young and identified strongly with the topic. One audience member stated, “I was angry at the father [in the sketch] because he wanted his daughter to marry an old man.” Another said she refused to marry her daughter young, though she herself had been married at 141.

1 Performance took place on June 25, 2019, in Sweimeh, a Jordanian village near the Dead Sea.
MEDA and NAFE: Driving Social Change in Jordan

In Jordan, MEDA partners with the National Association for Family and Empowerment (NAFE), a local non-profit organization that provides financial literacy, business skills training and facilitates savings and loan groups. To support these activities, NAFE established a community theatre group using drama to promote gender equality and economic empowerment for women and youth.

In 2011, NAFE’s founder and Project Manager Rania Hayouk was working on a behaviour change communications initiative with an international NGO, conducting awareness raising sessions in communities. Though the information they shared was valuable, they noticed that audiences seemed bored. Hayouk began to think about ways to capture people’s attention. NAFE decided to form a volunteer community theatre group and received a huge number of applications from interested actors. They selected men and women with a good understanding of the issues, and those who could – or had the potential to – act. The troupe that was selected had varying levels of acting experience, from former paid professionals who had been trained by the National Center for Culture and Art, to complete novices. NAFE provides ongoing training and support to the group and facilitates the process of bringing productions to communities.

NAFE’s Creative Process

After conducting research on which issues are important in specific communities, the troupe develops material for their performance. They generate a script, sketching out characters and scenarios, and then rehearse and improvise to test the ideas. Stories are realistic, but not based on a specific person. New sketches, especially those with sensitive material, are tested with a small audience to gauge the reaction. Topics and scripts are reviewed and updated regularly, based on discussions with local communities to ensure the sketches remain relevant. Before performing in schools or closed communities, the troupe seeks approval from the Ministry of Education or religious leaders.

“Sometimes audiences don’t want the [NAFE community theatre] team to leave. They ask them to do more and more.”

– NAFE Project Manager Rania Hayouk

“These are topics we all care about.”

– NAFE audience member, in a focus group discussion
Research and brainstorm
• Select issues relevant to the community

Rehearsal and improvisation
• Generate script together
• Sketch out characters
• Actors improvise and swap roles to examine multiple perspectives

Finalize script
• Group agrees on script and how to perform so it is most realistic

Test material
• Group tests messages and performance with small audience
• If necessary, adjusts material

Perform
• Audience participation encouraged

Figure 3: NAFE’s creative process

The NAFE community theatre group, which performed the sketch that opens this paper, is part of a large and growing outreach method known as edutainment. Edutainment, or educational entertainment, is the process of entertaining people while teaching something. It is built on principles of behaviour change science, but rather than simply providing information, it also leverages the appeal of entertainment. Messaging to positively influence knowledge, attitudes and social norms or practices can be woven into a wide range of entertainment, including web-based programming, television or radio shows. These tools can be used to begin dialogues, which in turn can change mindsets.

Typically, edutainment engages audiences on an issue through the power of storytelling: narratives and characters engage audiences and elicit responses that are both emotional and rational. As Sean Southey, President of edutainment provider PCI Media stated, such narratives allow audiences to enter a story with both head and heart. For maximum success, the narratives should be rooted in a recognizable reality, but the fictional element is also critical, allowing audiences to examine and discuss a topic that may be controversial in a ‘safe space’, a step removed from their own lives. Narratives allow audiences to see complex situations and potential consequences in a realistic context, but one that is a safe distance from their daily reality. In contrast to more traditional behaviour change communication, narratives offer people a chance to see an alternative choice or lifestyle that may be otherwise difficult to envision. For example, if the tradition is for women to marry young or for families to have many children, it may be difficult to envision different life choices. Edutainment can highlight alternatives to social norms in a positive light. In this way, stereotypes and social norms that limit people’s options can begin to shift. For example, anecdotal evidence in Jordan points to greater acceptance of women’s entrepreneurship in communities where JVL’s initiatives, take place, including NAFE’s community theatre productions.

Behaviour Change Communication in Action

MEDA’s Greater Rural Opportunities for Women (GROW) project in Ghana made use of Talking Books, small, portable devices that were deployed to groups of women in rural communities. The Talking Books were loaded with pre-recorded messages in local dialects on a range of topics, including sustainable agricultural techniques, financial management, nutrition and gender. Messages were updated quarterly, and new messages were uploaded on urgent issues such as Ebola, cholera outbreaks and fall army worm, which is infesting West Africa.

Women Lead Farmers bring Talking Books to their group’s weekly meetings, where messages are played on topics depending on the season and the activities of the groups. The devices are also rotated among group members where the entire household can benefit. In this way, women in the community have gained technical expertise and are being recognized as holders of valuable knowledge.

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Edutainment in Action

Serialized television programs such as soap operas or telenovelas have been successful vehicles for edutainment. For example, Women’s World Banking and their financial services partner, Banco Adopem, developed a telenovela in the Dominican Republic to promote savings behaviour. Messages on the value of savings were reinforced by Banco Adopem’s parallel advertising campaign, which provided people with the opportunity to act on the information by opening and operating savings accounts.

MTV’s Staying Alive Foundation describes their HIV prevention and health messaging work as “a ground-breaking 360-degree mass-media behaviour-change campaign.”

Focusing on a television series called Shuga, the campaign also incorporates radio, digital, social media and mobile elements. As of 2019, seven seasons of the program have aired, depicting the relationships and struggles of groups of young people in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. A randomized control trial conducted among viewers in Nigeria found improvements in knowledge and attitudes towards HIV and risky sexual behaviour, and behaviour changes included increased likelihood of HIV testing and decreased STDs among women.

MTV Shuga currently reaches an estimated 720 million viewers, and with new seasons scheduled to film in India and Egypt, the show is poised to hit a billion viewers.

The Womanity Foundation’s fictional animated series ‘Be 100 Ragl’ features Noha, a radio journalist who demonstrates leadership and determination as she fights corruption through her reporting, a role usually associated with men. In addition, the series engages with societal perspectives on gender issues; Noha’s family must come to terms with the divorce of her sister, who leaves an abusive relationship and pursues her own goals. Sexual harassment, girls’ education and widowhood are explored. Originally launched as a radio program, Womanity added visuals as the program moved onto digital platforms, including Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, key to reaching their target audience of young men and women. The digital content includes short videos, many only be a few minutes long, complemented by in-person discussions, clubs and public debates across the MENA region.

While evidence is still emerging on the effectiveness of edutainment, studies have shown positive impacts on financial literacy, health, political participation and conflict resolution.

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4 MTV Shuga website [http://www.mtvstayingalive.org/campaigns/]
5 Banerjee, Ibid.
7 Arabic for Worth 100 Men, from the Arabic idiom that a woman is worth a hundred men because she is strong and can make good decisions. Photo: [https://womanity.org/programs/fiction-for-womens-empowerment/]
8 See, for example, this blog which summarizes an evaluation conducted on MTV Shuga, a television series promoting safer sexual practices among young people: [https://voxdev.org/topic/health-education/entertaining-way-behavioural-change-fighting-hiv-nigeria]
Edutainment Innovation in the Jordan Valley

NAFE’s community theatre fits into the spectrum of edutainment initiatives being undertaken by a variety of organizations – but with an unusual twist. Like the examples described above, NAFE uses edutainment to break down social stereotypes, raise awareness and encourage debate on social and economic issues in Jordan. They tackle a range of relevant and potentially sensitive topics, including child marriage, restrictions on women’s mobility, workplace discrimination and gender-based violence, including physical, verbal and emotional abuse. However, unlike many other forms of edutainment, NAFE provides a fully interactive experience, with live performances that invite audience participation. As described in the sketch that begins this paper, the performances are frequently paused, and audience members are invited to discuss themes. Frequently, people share their own stories as they relate to the performance. Audience members are even invited to come onstage and become part of the performance.

Some performances are delivered to women-only audiences, depending on the community and the timing of the performance. The actors stated that sometimes women in the audience are more hesitant to give opinions if men are in the audience with them. However, the actors prefer performing to mixed audiences, to spread the messages more widely and to solicit opinions from both male and female viewers. MEDA held focus group discussions with two groups of women who had attended performances and though a few women said they were more comfortable in female-only audiences, the majority were open to sharing the experience with their husbands and sons.

In fact, many said they had talked about the topics discussed in previous performance afterwards with their husbands, saying that their husbands “needed to hear about these issues too, especially early marriage.” MEDA includes awareness raising as a central component in our gender equality work; upon learning more about the realities of women’s lives, many men become more empathetic, even open to change.

On the JVL project, NAFE’s interactive theatre provides an innovative and engaging way to introduce new concepts to potential clients and catalyze discussion, laying the foundation for social change. The specific concepts vary by region but focus on the key interventions that the project wishes to implement. For example, in the Sweimeh region, JVL is mobilizing

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9 Two focus group discussions were held on June 25, 2019, in Sweimeh. The first group had 15 women and the second group had 10 women.
women into Savings and Loan Groups (SLGs). The JVL team supports NAFE to incorporate into performances messaging around SLGs and the social problems they can help families overcome. In partnership with JVL, NAFE has also written sketches on how gender-based violence prevents women from market engagement and how early marriage prevents women from participating in SLGs, which negatively impacts the family’s economic situation. NAFE performances promote the benefits of entrepreneurship in general, and include messages specifically targeting food processing, a key sector of engagement for JVL.

NAFE’s performances mobilize community members and stimulate interest in JVL activities. The sketches can open people’s minds to choices that they may otherwise not have considered for themselves, such as entrepreneurship.

Driving Change One Performance at a Time

Behaviour change takes time, particularly when it involves deeply rooted attitudes and perceptions, such as ideas about gender roles and interpersonal relationships, either in the workplace or at home. It is also challenging to measure this change. Data collection is ongoing, but after only 12 performances with JVL, NAFE’s community theatre group has already begun to see an impact.¹⁰

In focus group discussions, women who had watched performances stated that they preferred community theatre over more traditional awareness raising sessions. The performances were more entertaining and “closer to [their] hearts and minds.”¹¹ NAFE Project Manager Rania Hayouk confirmed this, saying that “sometimes audiences don’t want the team to leave. They ask them to do more and more.”

¹⁰ At the time of writing, the community theatre’s 12 performance had been attended by 405 people, 343 women and 62 men. In addition, approximately 45 male community members attended but did not sign attendance sheets at the performances.
¹¹ From focus group discussions held on June 25, 2019, in Sweimeh.
Audience members described previous performances they had seen. They described sketches about economic empowerment, marriage and divorce, and said, “these are topics we all care about.” The interviewed women confirmed that the theatre performances allowed them to see alternatives and nuances that they had not considered before. For example, they realized that in some contexts, such as the workplace, compliments can actually be a form of harassment. They are beginning to think more analytically about interactions with market actors and family members.

After watching sketches about early marriage, a focus group respondent who had been married at 14 and lost two babies said she felt like she was “not 20 but much older.” Most of the women were themselves married young. They told their husbands what they had seen and said they should not treat divorced women as was depicted in the performance.

NAFE staff collect responses from audience members during and after performances, including the following:

- One woman informed her daughter during the performance that she would no longer encourage her to marry young, and instead, she should seek self-employment opportunities.

- Some women indicated that they have been exploited by their employers and had not been paid their wages since they didn’t have contracts. After the performance, the women stated that they will not begin work again without having clear terms and conditions and a contract, so they could claim their rights.

- The majority of women who attended performances indicated that they have gained new knowledge and information on how to identify and handle workplace exploitation and sexual harassment.

During discussions with the JVL team, actors in the troupe also related several stories of performances in which messages clearly resonated with audience members. One performance about inheritance featured a woman who was signing over everything to her brother. In the middle of the performance, a woman in the audience shouted, “Stop!” She went on stage, grabbed the actor playing the brother and told her own story. In her life, she had signed over her property to her brother and didn’t want other women to do this.

Edutainment is one of many innovative tools that JVL staff and partners are using to economically empower women and youth in the Jordan Valley. NAFE’s community theater is opening people’s minds to the benefits of self-employment to individuals, households and communities.

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12 Interviews with two of the community theatre actors were held on June 25, 2019.