

hours of work, the women receive 4800 NIS [about 1200 USD]. We made an agreement with the head of the local council that, in order to ensure the continuation of the project, after 36 weeks we would transfer the administration to the women. That way we would be sure that they would be independent. Thus, the women went through a process from being powerless to being productive and entitled, as well as activists. You can feel that they are empowered; they feel it because they are partners.

In sum

Amal closes the interview by recapping the main principles she and her organization have developed and applied in their communal projects:

- focusing on the community's strong points in order to deal with its weak points;
- relying on the community's resources (*ta'azil*) to create the innovativeness (*tagdeed*) of the project;
- taking a positive approach to the community that encourages assuming responsibility for planning their occupational and social future;
- actions that combine respectful intervention and a dialogue with the community;
- a critical approach that is constructive and open to dynamic changes.

The ultimate goal, according to Amal, is the creation of a socioeconomic network that leads to a feeling of identity and belonging of the women participating, as well as to a feeling of ownership over the goals and process of the project.

The Women's Courtyard: A critical feminist practice for work with young women in Jaffa¹

MIRIT SIDI

The Women's Courtyard is a sheltered and sheltering community space for girls and young women, aged 13 to 25, living in and around Jaffa. The Courtyard is located at the intersection of the "distressed neighborhoods" in southernmost Jaffa, bordering on Bat Yam; it is a periphery within the center, a city within a city. Only in the last few years has a process of gentrification begun in this peripheral space. While the socioeconomic character of the various Jaffa neighborhoods is homogeneous, ethnically speaking they are heterogeneous, with a mix of Jews (mostly of Middle Eastern descent or new immigrants), Muslim and Christian Arabs (among them families of Palestinian collaborators with Israel), mixed Jewish-Arab families and the like. The Courtyard serves young women from all of these ethnic sectors who share a low socioeconomic level. According to statistics of the Department of Social

Services of the Tel Aviv Municipality (2006), the rate of Jaffa residents receiving welfare services from the Social Services Department is very high—32%, as opposed to 13.8% in the rest of the municipality. In addition, Jaffa is characterized by a rising crime rate, including juvenile delinquency, which results in a large degree of personal insecurity for its residents.

The Courtyard was founded to be a place of connection, commitment and responsibility and to provide an alternative for girls and young women who suffer from injustice, discrimination and neglect. We had the profound feeling that these girls and women were an invisible group—both silenced and silent—and that their needs were not being satisfactorily addressed. Yet, this was a group with great strengths on an interpersonal level: friendship, openness, joy and dedication. These factors led us to open a place in which the only stated common denominator is gender. The assumption was that this would allow us to find strengths that would create new ways of coping, even given the great differences that exist between the ethnic, religious and, to a certain extent, socioeconomic groups that make up the population of girls and young women in Jaffa and the hardships they face. Those who come to the Courtyard are from different social groups: Muslim Arabs originating in the area; new immigrants from the former Soviet Union, particularly the Central Asian republics—some Jewish, some Christian and some who define themselves as Muslim; and girls from old-time Mizrahi families. Most of the girls and young women live in poverty, and their life circumstances derive from a social placement composed of multifaceted marginalities.

The Courtyard creates a space whose goal is to provide treatment of the immediate needs, desires and future aspirations of each girl or woman. This is made possible by the creation of significant relationships with Courtyard staff members; by the development of personal processes; and by the broadening of concrete options as a result of developing social networks, working to guarantee rights and providing practical assistance.

The staff—all of whom are women—currently numbers some 10 salaried employees and 25 volunteers from different fields. The Courtyard is open five days a week from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. Every Wednesday, a hair salon from the Shuki Zikri chain operates within the Courtyard, offering free services to the girls. As an integral part of the Courtyard's activities, the salon helps reinforce the Courtyard's placement within the community and its accessibility. In Jaffa we are known simply as "Shuki Zikri." Aside from that, the Courtyard offers an "open space"; advocacy and mediation services; activities such as dance, art and jewelry-making; private tutoring; mentoring; ongoing individual and group therapy, as well as specific treatment in times of crisis; enrichment and entertainment activities; trips; parties; and employment-related activities, such as a preparation group for entering the workplace, a young working women's support group, friendly employers, a computer course, mentoring during transition into workplaces, an employment fair and a housing fair (in which three adult young women may share an apartment for a

period of one to two years as they complete their personal process toward independence).

The guiding principle of the Courtyard is to develop a practical approach that organically addresses and responds to the life circumstances of the girls. Rather than apply a fixed set of professional skills, we strive to provide services in which the professional practice develops out of the needs of the girls as we get to know them over time.

This feminist practice takes place through dialogue, egalitarianism and acceptance of the values and differences that women can share. Orme (2002) points to four main arenas in feminist practice in social work:

- The life circumstances of the women: women sharing their life experiences in different fields related to oppression and discrimination in their personal and professional lives.
- A woman-centered practice: identification of and response to needs that are unique to women.
- Work with difference: because of the common experience of oppression, women can more easily identify with, value and respond to sources of social difference.
- The different voice of women: women experience the world differently from men; specifically, they have a different perspective on social and moral issues having to do with work with difference.

In the daily practices of the Courtyard, we try to put this feminist model into practice in a variety of ways.

Women-centered practice, exemplified by the "open space" concept

The concept of open space can be applied to any activity that takes place within or without the physical border of the Women's Courtyard that is not targeted toward a specific goal (like mediation and advocacy projects, employment or housing). It includes interactions among the young women themselves, between them and the Courtyard staff, and between the people in their lives and the staff. In effect, the open space is the keystone of the activities of the Courtyard, making it more than just a physical place, but also a setting that makes these interactions possible, with special attention given to personal, group and community factors. This setting gives the Courtyard the identity of a home and yet places it within the flow of the girls' daily life. Before the opening of the Women's Courtyard, we renovated the building and the large courtyard around it for almost a year, recognizing the great importance of the physical surroundings in conveying the message that we want the girls and the community to receive. We want the girls to see the Courtyard as integrated within their surroundings—located within it and open to it—and at the same time as an alternative space that looks and functions differently from the situations that are

available to them in their lives. It was out of this understanding, and the desire to characterize the Courtyard as a place that gives services per se, that we opened up the hair salon. The salon situates the Courtyard as a place that gives high quality general services to the women free of charge, and as such it is relevant for and attractive to a wide population of young women.

In addition, the open space is capable of absorbing the young women's life situations and challenges and offering responses to them. Besides being open—meaning that activities take place in all areas of the house and the courtyard without limitation and that we give the girls the freedom to choose the time, location and character of their personal process—the space is organized in such a way as to provide direct responses to a large array of needs, such as food, a place to rest, warm human contact, learning and enrichment activities, hygienic products, contraception, clothing, bus fare and train fare. Thus, there is a consistent message of fundamental caring within the open space.

The relationships between the girls and the staff develop out of this multifaceted message of caring and freedom. These relationships have no predetermined definitions; as they are being formed, the girl and the staff worker find a common definition for their relationship: what it includes, what its limits are and in what way it differs from the other services available to them. Most of these relationships are characterized by cooperation, a high degree of availability and access, a partnership and reciprocity.

In an open space such as this, it is important that the space not be divided up hierarchically. Hence, there is no spatial division in the Courtyard between the staff and the young women; all make the same use of the same spaces (hair salon, kitchen, restrooms, courtyard). Moreover, all events are shared by and organized by everyone. Another example of the attempt to avoid hierarchical relationships within the space is that the starting point of the relationship between a staff person and a girl is the girl's choice of the staff member. In contrast to other places that provide therapy, in the Women's Courtyard, the girl can choose not only which intervention is appropriate for her, but also who will accompany her in the process.

The almost complete lack of hierarchical divisions among its users, along with the existence of various elective spaces, enables the creation of a "home-place" for the girls. A home-place is any comfortable and safe environment that allows for the development of a feeling of security (emotional, social and physical), which is a prerequisite for self-development. Beyond that, a home-place is a place in which the girls can defy the limitations of social and political norms, as well as a place in which they can forge relationships with adults and peers from different places. The key to the conceptualization of home is the idea of a place in which the girls can be connected to one another and to themselves. The open space provides a safe environment in which to be with girlfriends and to hold positive peer interactions. These friendships within the protected space have a great impact on the development of self, and thus the open space enables the creation of a community of young women—a community within the community—in which the use of the space is part

of the girls' daily continuum. A girl may arrive spontaneously after school, just to eat, on the way to a doctor's visit, to make an appointment at the hair salon or looking for a girlfriend to go shopping with her. No appointments are necessary, there is no guard at the gate, and there is no limit to reception hours between opening and closing time. They can come and go, return or not, as they choose. Family members and friends also stop by to ask if someone is there, to drop something off or just to say hello. This relationship with the surroundings turns the space of the Women's Courtyard, and the place of the girls in it, into an integral part of the public community.

The following example, taken from the daily reports of the staff, illustrates the Courtyard's organic integration into the daily life of the girls and the staff:

Shaharat comes in, and after a glass of water (it is very hot today), she goes on her way because today is the older girls' day, and she is little. She eats a pita bread and goes off, because she is just back from school and there is no one waiting at home.

Within this situation of spontaneity and choice, which lends a fundamental and broad sense of caring, the space can be one that allows a meaningful connection between the young women and the staff; it is a meeting place that provides an opportunity to make connections.

The connections that the girls make with the staff, including the volunteers, transform them into significant figures in the girls' lives. I am referring to a substantive and enduring presence that gives the girl the feeling that she has someone who is aware of her, observes the world through her eyes, empathizes with her and acknowledges her as a person of worth and significance. This encounter has two simultaneous effects. The first is therapeutic from its very occurrence, and the second constitutes the beginning of a specific and targeted intervention. Feminist researchers, such as Gilligan, Jordan, and Miller, claim that relationships are more important for girls than they are for boys their age. Girls attach more importance to dependence, reciprocity and attachment. Furthermore, a home is a place of support and listening. Through this "girl talk," the encounter turns into the kind of reciprocal relationship that is important for women's development (Hirsch et al., 2000).

The Courtyard also addresses the need of these girls—who grow up in homes in which the feminine roles there do not allow them to develop a career or realize their dreams—for a place that will offer or introduce them to this choice, and thus will enable the expression of different parts of their personalities. The staff is comprised of women from varied backgrounds in terms of their education, ethnicity, religion, language, age, personal status and worldview. The "feminine atmosphere" in the place creates open and direct lines of communication, in which the girls can talk about and receive varied responses to any aspect of their lives. Not only are they given the chance to experience caring, intimacy and significant relationships, but they also learn from the wide array of role models provided by other girls, staff

members and volunteers, in various roles, spending many hours a day together in all kinds of situations, including conversations, meals, cleaning, a cup of coffee and formal meetings.

An open space that allows encounters between women representing different social placements and possibilities can be seen as a practice of working with difference and similarity in which the multicultural space embeds difference within the common denominator of gender, thus creating a common language, similar frames of reference and the ability to provide similar comprehensive responses. The potential in the girls' encounter with difference and the way it enables them to know themselves is nicely demonstrated in the encounter between Tali and Dina. Dina is a young woman who came to us through her sister. She described herself as very shy, not social and insecure. She began doing movement therapy with a student from the Lesley University School of Expressive Therapy, and would arrive only for her sessions and then go straight home. One day she heard singing from behind the door of the hair salon, and asked who it was. She was told that we have a young volunteer, Dina, who sings in a jazz band and gives voice lessons to the girls. Tali told me that her biggest dream was to sing and perform. She began to meet with Dina, and a courageous and open connection was forged between them. Tali began to come to the Courtyard more often, to participate in activities and to become closer to the staff. Her therapy process became deeper, exposing a difficult life full of traumas and hardships and a brave willingness to deal with them. Now, Tali is about to perform in a festive end-of-summer performance at the Courtyard, with many guests invited. She defines her encounter with the Courtyard as the opportunity of a lifetime to be what she only dreamed she could be. This combination of the different functions of the open space in the Women's Courtyard turns it from a place in which therapeutic activity takes place into the therapy itself.

Multifaceted marginality

"Multifaceted marginality" (Krumer-Nevo, 2006) is key to understanding the young women's circumstances. This concept refers to the varied ways in which different marginality factors—gender, class, ethnicity and nationality/religion—intersect. The entire complex of a girl's identity ultimately influences her possibilities and opportunities (or lack thereof) to participate in each of the social placements. This concept is relevant to our work because the demographic makeup of the users of the Women's Courtyard presents us with the challenge of dealing with the construction of reality through different social categories—namely, ethnicity, religion and gender—with the class factor providing the common denominator for the young women. Practices of dealing with the issue of poverty in the Courtyard include active mediation, advocacy, social networking, creation of opportunities, and intensive efforts by the girls and their families to take advantage of these.

The story of Nadia, whom I have known for about five years, illustrates how the intersection of the different components of social marginality characterizes not only the issues faced and opportunities available to her, but also the assistance provided by the Courtyard staff. Nadia is from an Arab-Muslim family. Her father was addicted to drugs and very abusive toward his family. The family lives in dire poverty in the public housing projects in the Ajami neighborhood of Jaffa. When she was two years old, Nadia and her three younger sisters were sent away to different boarding schools and hostels in northern Israel. Nadia was fifteen years old when her father died. Two weeks later, all of the sisters returned home from their respective institutions. At that point there were already seven people living in the house, including the son of her drug-addicted sister, the only of her six children not in foster care or an institution.

Upon her return to Jaffa, Nadia tried to adjust in the Amal High School. But her recurrent panic attacks, as well as her unsatisfactory reading, writing, arithmetic and general study skills, led to a series of failures. Despite these problems, she struggled to stay in school and even received a grade of 90 in one subject in her matriculation exams. She wanted to be like her brother, who had finished school and today is a respected teacher and lives in an apartment of his own. But the daily home reality of economic distress, violence of an older brother toward the girls in the family, the lack of a father, a sick mother with no authority over her children, and life in the tough and dangerous insular neighborhood dictated a different path. After leaving school, she began hanging out with girls who were a bad influence on her, going out with boys and drinking alcohol. She became involved in an obsessive relationship with a young Arab man from northern Israel. When she realized he would never marry her, but rather some girl from a good home who wouldn't embarrass him, something broke in her and she began to hang around with men who spoiled her—with telephone conversations, clothing and even spending money.

Her entire family, even very distant relatives, was angry at her for hanging around with those types and threatened to hurt her. She turned to us for help and was sent to mental health services. The Jewish-Israeli doctor to whom she was referred did not understand what she wanted and prescribed her pills. She did not take them because it is forbidden to drink alcohol while taking them, and she knew it would be irresponsible and make the situation even worse. After a crisis, she was transferred to Zofia, a closed hostel for at-risk girls. She worked up her strength for three months and decided that she would not go back to Jaffa and waste her life there. At the end of her stay at Zofia, no appropriate framework was found for her, since few suitable options exist for Arab girls outside the home. She returned to Jaffa and another difficult period began. She turned her survival mechanism into a means of making a living. Then something broke in her again, and when the situation became truly dangerous, she was again removed to a closed hostel. When she returned, she was subdued. A few months later she got married. To everyone's surprise, she married a young man from a good family, not from the projects.

She had rescued herself and become a respectable woman. But her husband didn't trust her because of her past. He forced Nadia to dress traditionally and wear a head covering and kept her locked up in the small house they moved into. She was not allowed to go anywhere, including her mother's house, since it was in the projects. He did not even agree to let her go out and work, even though people repeatedly tried to convince him. Her panic attacks became stronger and more frequent, and she ended up in the emergency room several times, where she was given a shot and sent home.

She became pregnant and gave birth to a son, who is now six months old, and she is an amazingly dedicated mother. Now she is pregnant again. She says that she and her husband are always fighting; she is subject to persistent cursing, beating and humiliation. She cannot take it anymore and constantly threatens to leave him, saying he will have to support her and the children with housing, food and everything they need. But she doesn't have anywhere to go. There is no room in her mother's house, and she has no other place.

This story exemplifies the ability to cope with the life circumstances created in a complex multifaceted marginality. Basically, every one of Nadia's attempts to change her reality through accepted social channels—work, marriage, education, migration, material things—was met by various obstructions, and in fact what ultimately dictates the path of her life are the social parameters of poverty, tradition, family circumstances, living location, the suitability of community services, ethnic and religious identity and, of course, gender. All of these determine the opportunities available to Nadia and limit her chances of getting out of a life of suffering, oppression and humiliation. No act of resistance could withstand the combined power of the elements of her identity and the possibilities that are a consequence of that.

Within an existential reality of loneliness, alienation, desperation and lack of faith and a fundamental experience of neglect, helplessness, lack of choice and invisibility, the emotional placement is one of reduced possibilities, danger, fear and pain. The act of individual intervention, on its own, cannot change or cancel these circumstances, but it can act within the circumstances to add choices, ease suffering, advance interests and solve problems in a concrete way. In Nadia's case, many different actions were taken, each time in keeping with the components of the context in which her distress occurred and according to her needs and desires. In these actions, all of the central practices of the Courtyard were integrated and made one another possible: mediation, advocacy, humanitarian aid, community action, significant relationships, consideration of the entire life circle, tutoring, mediation with welfare and education services, teaching occupational skills and transition into the work force. Specifically, the following actions took place over the five years of our acquaintance with Nadia, each with different Courtyard staff members: a very close connection with her and all the members of her family; provision of a home-place for Nadia throughout the week, during all the years of our acquaintance up to her marriage; intensive, 24-hour monitoring during periods of crisis, physically in

the Courtyard and by telephone at night and on weekends; help in studies and completion of part of her matriculation exams; transition into a work place; help in leaving the house and finding a place to stay in times of danger; help paying debts that she was unlawfully signed on as a minor; assistance in personal processes with her husband on the subject of alimony and divorce; and Doula services during pregnancy and birth.

Today, the Courtyard is one of the only places Nadia's husband allows her to come to—after much insistence and struggle, and after a period of almost two years in which he kept her locked in the house. He began to allow her to go out when we were helping her during pregnancy and birth, which he appreciated very much.

Developing awareness of the marginal position

While developing concrete responses (such as employment and housing), the Courtyard staff takes into consideration the position of the women and the kind of obstacles that gender presents (lack of social networks, traditional women's roles, position within the family, work with poverty and out of a reality of poverty). We also keep in mind the need to enhance their awareness of the social contexts that construct their position and the possibilities that these create or impede. This is done through cooperation with the community and the schools; the establishment of a network of friendly employers; training of mentors for intensive mentoring in the process; and the operation of a "networks" program (a five-month course and workshops aimed at creating this awareness).

Awareness of their marginal position develops over time, in particular once relationships of trust and "knowledge" develop between the girls and the staff—once the girls find that there is genuine caring and a response to their desires and troubles. It is important to emphasize that this awareness develops through dialogue. If there is no significant relationship between the girl and the staff person or the place, the girl can experience the Women's Courtyard as a kind of violence, trivializing and indifferent to the girl's position. An example of this can be found in the case of Lena.

Lena immigrated to Israel from Kazakhstan when she was about three years old, with her mother and sister, leaving her father behind. As in Nadia's case, family difficulties led Lena to be sent away to a boarding school. Lena did not get along there and soon found herself going from institution to institution until she returned home at age 14. Today she and her mother live in an apartment they bought with a mortgage. They cannot maintain the payments and live under the constant threat of repossession and eviction. Lena's mother lives on a handicap stipend and does not work. Language difficulties and her health situation make it very difficult for her to take advantage of the services that could help her, and therefore she does not realize many of the rights to which she is entitled. Lena was expelled from several schools.

At her last school, a criminal complaint of vandalism was lodged against her. After a period of truancy during which her criminal record grew, Lena had to find a job because of their dire economic situation. For the past three years they haven't had food in their house; they are hungry and Lena is very thin. They didn't have money to pay for gas, electricity, water, clothing, bus rides or anything at all. Lena's attempts to fit in the workplace were long and arduous. Her lack of education, the hunger and fatigue, the anxiety and outbursts, and her criminal record made only very simple and temporary jobs possible. When she found work at a place with better employment conditions, the gap in behavioral codes were huge, with her outbursts, her inappropriate dress and her crude manner of talking.

After three years during which she switched work places many times, and following a very intensive relationship with Liora and me, Lena managed to find and keep a job at a clothing store. She began paying the household expenses and became the backbone of the family. In our most recent meeting, Lena told me,

Now that the economic pressure is off a little, I understand that if I want a different life, I have to deal with everything I've been through in my life, I mean real treatment, because otherwise I won't be able to go study and have a profession. That means to persevere and to succeed, to really succeed. If I keep doing the jobs I do now, I'll always be poor, and I will be treated like I'm nothing.

A different voice

The life circle of the women and their position within it (as daughters, wives, mothers) is a common denominator that engenders different ways of coping among the women and girls. The Women's Courtyard does not place limitations on the participation of girls based on their personal position. Rather than divisions, there is a deep understanding that the girls' lives are on a dynamic continuum that includes transitions unique to the lives of women. Out of this reality, we have also built a variety of responses that allow each one to be part of the Courtyard, regardless of whether she is single, married, a mother, a girl, a teenager, a young woman and so forth. Thus, the responses develop according to the different life situations and needs of the young women who come to the Courtyard: leisure, guidance through pregnancy and childbirth, instruction for mothers, seeing through marriage and divorce processes and dealing with adolescent stages of development (health, sexual relations, relationships, family ties), all the while being mindful of the specific cultural contexts to which the women belong. The actions in the Courtyard have developed in response to what the girls bring with them and include workshops on sexuality, nutrition and women's health; broad responses to the issue of employment; advocacy in family affairs (e.g., divorce, alimony, child custody);

housing issues; abortions, pregnancy, childbirth and childrearing; babysitting services during workshops or lessons; literacy and completion of education; peer groups on interpersonal subjects; and social and therapeutic activities by age group.

It is important to note that all of the activities mentioned here take place in groups in which there is no division by affiliation, whether religious, national, ethnic, socioeconomic, health-related or otherwise. The only division that is sometimes made is by age, and that is owing to issues that may be inappropriate for young girls, in light of the wide age range from 13 to 25. The great differences between the women receive a joint response through work that deals with the places in which we as women deal with similar situations, from the fact of our being women, with all the practical, emotional, private and public complexity involved.

NOTE

¹ This piece was written during a process of practice and study. I founded the Women's Courtyard along with Liora Kessel in 2003. Since then we have been running it together. In the last three years I have been writing my masters thesis at the Department of Social Work at Ben Gurion University, under the guidance of Dr. Michal Krumer-Nevo. The thesis is entitled "The Women's Courtyard: Documentation and conceptualization of a critical practice in social work with young women and girls in Jaffa" (Hebrew).

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