



WISE GIRLS

Wisdom and Information on Sexual Health Education by Girls

Case Study | Za'atari Camp, Jordan

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From whispering the word “period” to leading puberty education for tweens

This is a story about a story. The story of how nine adolescent girls in Jordan’s Za’atari Camp designed *Jazirat Al Zohoor* (The Island of Flowers), a storybook that helps tween girls learn about puberty in a fun way. Together, the group of nine worked through the phases of **human-centered design (HCD)** to develop the story and use it to lead sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) education sessions for young adolescents. At the same time, each girl went through her own journey to discover accurate information about her own body, become comfortable talking about puberty, and find creative ways to reach tween girls with accurate and engaging reproductive health information. Over the course of a year, the girls built ownership and agency that extended beyond the program, built important life skills, and empowered a network of 127 tween girls to navigate puberty in Za’atari Camp.



A sneak peek into Jazirat Al Zohoor story

The Beginning

In early 2018, Mercy Corps was one of eight winners of the [Amplify challenge](#), a program that funded early-stage and innovative ideas to complex challenges. We were selected for our idea to create a girl-led, girl-designed solution that promoted adolescent sexual and reproduction health and rights (ASRHR) in Za’atari Camp. However, realizing that **adolescent girls are the real experts in their own lives**, we trusted them to lead us down a different path of exploration. Supported and funded by IDEO.org and the Department for International Development (DFID), we went with the girls through the different phases of human centered design (HCD) to unpack ASRHR issues in Za’atari to design a solution that was truly led by girls.

Human-Centered Design for Girl-led Solutions

Over the course of 6 months, Mercy Corps held 35 consultations with more than 130 adolescent girls and community members to understand the state of SRH knowledge, attitudes and practices in Za’atari. Specifically, we followed the four HCD phases: inspiration, ideation, prototyping, and testing.



“I asked my mom about the period, she only told me it’s blood.”

11-year old Syrian girl

During the **inspiration phase**, we consulted adolescent girls, parents, teachers, social workers and community leaders about adolescent girls’ SRHR needs, available resources and resource gaps. This phase taught us two main lessons: first, that tween girls (ages 10-14) learn about their bodies from their older peers and second, that there is a **huge gap in adolescent friendly resources around puberty and menstrual health for girls** growing up in Za’atari.

In the **ideation phase**, a group of 20 older adolescents ages 15 - 17 brainstormed and came up with suggested tools to teach tween girls about their bodies. All the suggestions had a storytelling component,

which led Mercy Corps, the adolescents and IDEO.org designers to develop a storybook in the **prototyping phase**.

Jazirat Al Zohoor, the story of a young Syrian girl, Zahra, who gets her *dawra* (period) for the first time, emerged from these phases. The story borrows its title from the Syrian expression that when girls hit puberty, “*they bloom*.” In a dream, Zahra visits the Island of Flowers where three young women walk her through the stages of puberty, explaining biological and emotional changes and dispelling common myths in the Za’atari community that discouraged bathing or playing sports during menstruation.

The girls were heavily involved in editing and illustration, then tested the story’s relevance by reading different sections to tween girls, leading to more story iterations and revealing areas for **older adolescents’ asset building** in reading, facilitation, research, and lesson planning.

As the teens developed the story, a core group of nine adolescents coalesced into a cohort of peer educators ready to **test** *Jazirat Al Zohoor* with tweens. The team - Wi’am (17), Malak (17), Zahra’a (17), Nagaham (17), Raw’a (16), Layal (17), Beesan (15), Areej (15) and Salam (15) – had been part of the HCD process since the inspiration phase. Before testing started, these peer educators went through three days of training on facilitation, medical awareness of puberty and reading aloud led by Mercy Corps, two Za’atari doctors and the organization We Love Reading, respectively.

Following the trainings, the peer educators attended 17 reflection meetings to design their story sessions and practice facilitation. Over the course of 4 months, teams of two and three peer educators conducted 33 sessions for 127 tween girls in 5 different camp locations, including Mercy Corps’ program space, households and school classrooms.

Main Insights:

Throughout their journey testing education sessions with tweens, the nine peer educators reflected on what went well, areas for improvement and how they envisioned their next sessions. Three main outcomes emerged in the process: a growing sense of the girls’ ownership and agency, an increase in key skills and reproductive health knowledge, and the growth of impactful girls’ networks. For every reflection, we will give you a sneak peek into the girls’ sessions!



Areej and Nagham in the reading out loud training

Ownership and Agency

This is both a cause and an effect of girl-led programming. The girls' ownership over the project played a huge role in developing their agency and in ensuring the project's sustainability: as their sense of autonomy increased so too did their confidence. While we designed opportunities to cultivate this, the more girls had the space and trust to own *Jazirat Al Zohoor*, the more engaging and impactful their sessions became.

One of our main goals was for tweens to gain accurate and actionable knowledge about their bodies, and **93.7%** of the tween participants said their SRH knowledge increased.

During the project, the girls designed the caravan space where they gathered to iterate, improve and lead their story sessions, and get support and feedback from each other. Their ownership over the different project stages and components showed in the girls' dedication to the sessions, how they began to challenge authority and the changes in their relationship with their parents and roles at home, too.

Agency to craft their own sessions

Each team was asked to read *Jazirat Al Zohoor* either in one session or divided in two sessions, and were encouraged to facilitate a follow-up session with tweens where they could dive deep into a particular topic around puberty. Loyal, Salam and Beesan developed a play about acne to present to tweens. During the session, the trio came up with creative ideas to get the information across. The three of them were very excited and in Salam's words, "We stayed up till 2 a.m. preparing for this session."

Not only did the girls dedicate time and effort to their sessions, but they also worked hard to ensure that the sessions were localized enough to reflect their culture. One session after another, the girls were able to read the story in their own Arabic dialect and create activities that resembled their community. The trio used traditional games as icebreakers and energizers and usually began their sessions by saying, "We will play a game that we all played as kids." The game was usually iterated to suit the topic of the session.

All of the peer educators shaped their sessions to look and sound like them. They did not look for Mercy Corps staff validation, but looked to the tween girls' interaction and reactions during the session to guide their work.



Salam acting out a play about acne

“At first I used to get shy from just hearing the word ‘period,’ but now I realize that it’s a normal thing, I’m used to it and can talk about it comfortably.”

Zahra’a, 17, peer educator

Agency to challenge authority, and dispel myths

Having a quick sneak peek at Raw'a's copy of *Jazirat Al Zohoor*, we observed that some words were crossed out and others were moved from one sentence to another. She clearly owned the story and treated it as something she could modify. She and other girls also became more comfortable questioning authority in other realms. In Wi'am's words, "We had enough knowledge to tell a facilitator from another program that the information she was giving us was wrong; we said "the uterus isn't a sponge, it's a muscle!".



Raw'a's copy of *Jazirat Al Zohoor*

The girls felt a sense of agency and self-confidence and ownership over the knowledge to resist the power dynamics of what presents itself as a source of authority, whether it is the book or an adult facilitator.

Building agency and voice at home

Beyond the sessions, the girls have expressed continuously how the project has helped them build their confidence and ability to speak up at home and in community spaces. Their parents echoed this, and mentioned that their girls have more power and motivation now to speak up. Wi'am, Layal and Salam's father said, "*Since the girls started this project, I feel that our relationship became more of friends rather than a father-daughter relationship. They are aware now and have their own ideas*". He also explained that his daughters have also become more willing to talk about any issue that they want to discuss.

Malak's mom on the other hand, also explained that "*Malak, became more aware and mature to discuss things with me that she hadn't discussed before, I feel that she can open any topic and discuss it openly compared to before.*"

Skills for Life

In addition to normalizing the topic of puberty to themselves and to the tweens they facilitated for, the girls we worked with also gained other lifelong skills. The nine girls received trainings on reading aloud, facilitation and science of menstruation before they started reading to the tweens. With practice, they developed these skills more.

The Three Main Skills

"*I thought we only had one hole!*" exclaimed Beesan after the session with the doctors. The girls have shown session by session improvements and growing comfort with SRH knowledge. The girls were able to normalize the topic of puberty for themselves and for the tweens. They also gained basic research skills for their follow up sessions and developed peer education skills.

At the beginning of the sessions, the girls were not able to answer the questions confidently. They made some mistakes in the information they delivered and asked for our assistance. Later in the story sessions, they were more confident about the information they had and in their facilitation skills, which allowed them to deal with unanticipated situations and questions in different ways. For example, Wi'am and Raw'a used a question box at the end of their first session, and followed up with answers in the second session.

Moreover, the girls' reading skills showed a huge leap. Their improvement was not only in technical reading skills, but in their storytelling abilities. It was very heartwarming to see Nagham, who at the beginning refused to read aloud, then lead the reading in her last sessions. In their personal reflections, it is also interesting to note how the girls' concerns evolved over time. At the beginning of the project, most of their concern was on how to read the story fluently. When they mastered that skill, they then started concentrating on being able to discuss different puberty topics with the tweens who attended their sessions. And as their confidence in the subject matter increased, they increasingly turned their attention to the experience of the session itself, concerning themselves with engaging activities that would the tweens would enjoy.

Exploring new topics

Throughout implementation, skills like research, ability to normalize sensitive topics and peer education were also skills that girls learned through practice and personal reflection. For the follow up sessions, the girls did their own research on the topics and reflected with us on the resources they chose. They had multiple discussions on what makes a reliable resource and how to triangulate data. When the girls felt confident in the knowledge and skills they had, they were able not only to facilitate the sessions, but also normalize the topic and discuss it openly.

Areej reflects on the way she changed throughout the journey, *“At the beginning of this experience I came and I thought ‘Who is this lady coming here talking to us about “aib” (taboo) things?!’ but then by our third meeting I was used to it.”* Areej was also able to normalize this journey for the tweens and tell them about how she felt at the beginning of the project.

Areej, along with the rest of the girls broke the traditional idea of how a teacher acts. At the beginning of the sessions, the core group dealt with the tweens in a teacher-like and authoritative manner. It took them time to break that idea, and deal with the tweens in a peer to peer way.



“We now understand the tweens quickly, what they want and what makes them feel comfortable”

- Wi'am, 17, peer educator

Girls' Networks

What we did not plan for or expect was that *Jazirat Al Zohoor* turned into a movement! The tweens who attended the sessions received a puberty tool kit with a hot water bottle, a notebook, prayer beads, soap, herbs, and a copy of the story. The tweens started approaching us to attend the sessions because they heard of it from a friend or a family member.

Building Trust and Safe Spaces

One of the project components that the adolescent peer educators tested was the number of sessions to read the story. At the beginning of implementation, the girls used to read the story in one session. Later in the program, they divided it into two sessions, which led to some unanticipated positive outcomes. Having the girls meet the tweens over two sessions allowed for greater trust and network building. This was reflected in the topics that they were open to discuss by the second or third session, if the girls facilitated a follow up session. In a very organic way, the sessions of reading the story turned from being only reading sessions, to a safe space where girls discuss different topics, from their favorite shows, to their first periods, to remembering their hometown, to love. The nine girls introduced the caravan after every session as a place the tweens could visit whenever they wanted. As Wi'am addressed the tweens in one of the sessions, *“This is our space, you can come at any time and chill here”*.



A group of tweens attending *Jazirat Al Zohoor* session

› *“I told my classmates that I attended this session, and I showed them the puberty kit”*

Tween girl after a *Jazirat Al Zohoor* session

Agency is Contagious

When Malak, 17, was asked about the most memorable moment of her journey as a peer educator, she said “when a tween told me that she sent her copy of the story to Syria for her cousin to read”. The sense of ownership the girls felt was contagious between both the older and younger adolescents who participated in Wise Girls. The power of having a girl lead the program sent a message to every other girl in her community that she too could lead the program.

The older adolescents were clearly advocating for the story, the safe space and for peer education. “*Who are you going to tell about this session?*” was the question that ended every session. A discussion with the tweens around normalizing the topic always followed. In their second or third collective sessions, tweens told stories of what they did with *Jazirat Al Zohoor*. Multiple tweens shared it with their friends and family members, discussed the topic with their moms, and even took to the initiative to read it to their peers. In some of the tweens’ words, “*I gave the story to my cousin,*” “*I told my classmates that I attended a session, and I showed them the kit*”, “*I read the story to my classmates during our sports class and they wanted to come. Some girls were shy, but we told them that this is normal.*”

The older adolescents were very inspired by the tweens’ reactions: it was one of the main motivators for how they performed. Their sense of responsibility towards the tweens and towards delivering a message was always a motivator expressed before and after their sessions.

What can our journey teach others who work with adolescent girls?

Throughout this journey with Za’atari teens, we faced challenges, successes, iterations and a lot of lessons. We found that **three components are essential for girl-led programming**: the HCD process itself; community engagement; and planning for flexibility.

HCD for Girls' Humanitarian Leadership

Girls must lead from the beginning in the design of the project, its tools and the implementation, monitoring and evaluation. HCD allows through its different phases for the girls' voice to not just be present, but to drive all processes. Transforming their role from passive recipients of services and tools, to active agents of these services they receive. The girls are consulted and asked in the first phase to define the problem and issue tackled. When the girls go through the HCD process to design the projects they will be leading, they reflect that process in their implementation and keep testing then, and never settle for a final product. They keep iterating! When the girls witness the change in the project and the development of it over time, they feel a sense of ownership over it. Again, HCD ensures girl-led programming that is culturally relevant and community integrated.

Community Engagement

To ensure organic growth of a project, you need to make sure that it is grounded in the community. Engaging girls' parents, teachers, community leaders and other gatekeepers is essential to make sure the change is holistic, and the girls are supported and encouraged, and not harmed. However, keep the girls first, and work with the girls to engage the community.

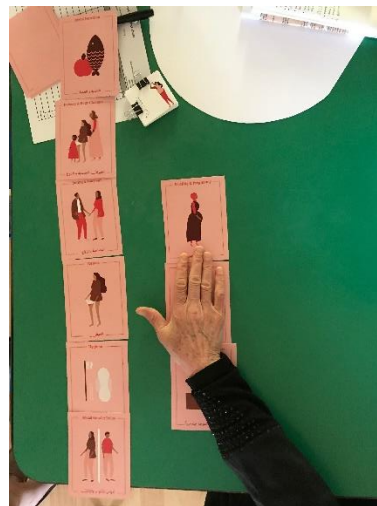
Start early on and repeat

Like the girls, parents and gatekeepers were involved from the start. During the inspiration phase, parents and community members were interviewed to provide their input on what they wanted their girls to learn and how they wanted to see that happening.

Before every Jazirat Al Zohoor session, our local facilitator outreached to parents and shared the storybook. After the sessions, we met with mothers to get their feedback and inquire about other topics that they felt were important for their daughters. We think that we still can take this a step further and have the adolescent girls lead the outreach by reading the stories to mothers, just the way they read to tweens.

Anticipate backlash to girls' rising agency

SRHR programming is not easy, let alone if led by the girls themselves. Girls leading and speaking about their bodies disrupts the status quo, which may trigger community backlash.



A social worker using the card sorting method in the inspiration phase



“If the parents don't know what will be said during these sessions, they will not send their daughters to attend.”

School social worker, inspiration phase

We saw this in Za'atari with family members, teachers and community leaders. One of the consulted moms suggested that we illustrate a bear instead of the girl in the story to make it less blunt. But is that what the girls wanted? Was that the approach to deliver accurate reproductive health information to tweens?

From the feedback we got from peer educators' parents, mothers expressed that through participation in WISE Girls, the adolescents became more outspoken and confident at home. While mothers were often proud of this change, Areej's mom expressed that, "Areej has always been outspoken and now she became very outspoken. I am worried if she starts expressing herself openly [in the community], the society will say that she is not well mannered."

It is very important to keep the discussions with the community members happening; however, keep in mind that the girls are in the center of the programming. These comments are an important reminder of the environment in which girls operate and grow, and the importance of thoughtful community engagement in parallel with girl-focused interventions.

Flexibility

For girls to own the project and community members to engage and have a say, the project has to be flexible and amendable. The plan should have the space to be continuously changed and iterated.

Keep testing and iterating

Throughout the project, multiple iterations took place for the story itself and for the implementation of the project. This was inspired by what the girls asked for, and the testing that took place. As for the content of the story, we learned that the language we used should be iterated further to suit the girls' dialect in the Camp. They understand the language, however, it does not represent their local dialect.

Another important thing that we iterated and tested multiple times was the M&E tools that we used to evaluate the tweens' knowledge improvement after the sessions. At the beginning of implementation, to get the tweens' feedback after every session, we started off with a written pre and post. However, it did not give the results we were hoping for. The tweens were not sharing much in writing. We then tested having a post only to evaluate the knowledge of the girls after the session. Finally, we then tested visualizing answering the questions through emoji characters that the tweens used to answer questions led by the older adolescents.

The girls also tested presenting to different number of tweens, and in different spaces. The girls themselves started doing their own testing in the way they presented the story, which wouldn't have been possible if not for the inherent flexibility of the project and deliverables.

Work plans and budgets

In order to be able to test and iterate, work planning and budgeting should include areas of flexibility in activities, deliverables and use of funds. Moreover, at a more narrowed level, your work with the girls, and the language used should reflect that flexibility. There is not one way to do things. We learnt this with the girls. Sometimes we noticed that unintentionally the girls thought that we wanted things to happen in a certain way.

Our Next Chapter

WISE Girls is yielding insights that are shaping Mercy Corps' approach and commitment to girls' leadership. The most important: Trust the girls. No one but them is able to decide what they need and how.

This journey has been transformative - not only for the girls, but for those of us who work with them every day. This process of putting them in the lead forced us to question our egos and intentions all the time. The journey has been painful, happy, messy, confusing, stressful and more! In a word, it is very human, which is exactly what our efforts need.



A tween imitating one of *Jazirat Al Zohoor* characters

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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