



SHE CAN: A GROUP OF TRANSWOMEN BREAKS THROUGH BARRIERS

SHE CAN is a grantee partner group founded and run by refugee transwomen from Syria and Lebanon, that focuses on capacity building, community outreach and building resources and infrastructure through the "Empower Lab" project, funded by the Doria Feminist Fund. The project seeks to provide useful information, resources, and a supportive space through building a community online platform.

“Witnessing the resilience and strength of my community, this marginalized community of transgender refugee women in Lebanon, who refuse to give up, and insist on existing and fighting for their lives and their rights despite the unbearable systematic barriers – this is what inspires me to do the work I do at She Can”, says Reneh Adanov, a young transwoman activist who lived as a refugee in Lebanon for years, before relocating to Canada. The transgender community, particularly refugees, face a complex matrix of oppression, violence and discrimination; from social stigma to economic exclusion, to security risks, lack of access healthcare services and state-sponsored prosecution. Over decades, transgender people found solace and support in one another, and built alternative communities and families to survive brutal realities; many of which also morphed into activist circles and more organized rights groups.

“My community’s courage fuels my determination to advocate for a more just and equitable society where everyone can thrive”, says Reneh. Community is of high value for her, emotionally and professionally.

When asked about the story that has moved her the most in her activist journey, Reneh answers that the very story of She Can is what means to her the most. “To think that a group of young, refugee transgender women, who had struggled with rejection, discrimination and violence in Syria and Lebanon, actually found the strength within themselves and in one another to create a safe space together”. This is how She Can was a born, a warm circle wherein experiences and stories can be shared, peer support and solace can be sought, change can be dreamt and advocacy can be built.



However, the journey towards light is never smooth. Challenges will arise along the way, and they will have to be overcome through collective power. “I can’t identify one specific challenge, there have been plenty”, Reneh explains. In a context mired with transphobia, patriarchal violence, economic crisis, racism and corruption, Reneh and her group had to fight on multiple fronts to guarantee their right to exist, survive and thrive. Silence and surrender were not on the She Can’s agenda. “We faced pushback from many powerful actors and from different directions, but one particularly difficult hurdle arose when we needed to find a place for our long training days in Lebanon, one that was not only free of discrimination but also safe for everyone involved”, Reneh says. The group had to resort to creative and innovative solutions to ensure that their plans go on safely and securely. But they did it!

“We worked tirelessly for days until we figured out a way to overcome this obstacle. We weren’t going to back off. We needed to meet as a group. Our work depended on it. Our existence depended on it. Resilience. Resourcefulness. Commitment. These are the three keywords”, Reneh says resolutely.

It is no secret that measuring or evaluating the impact of community work is a difficult process. Building and capacitating a group of disadvantaged activists is an accumulative journey, and is rather invaluable. “In tangible terms, there is a shift in attitudes and perceptions among the transgender community that She Can works with, there is also increased access to resources, and improved living conditions. This is extremely needed and valued”, Reneh says. When a community is historically targeted and brutally oppressed by external forces – such as the case of transgender communities worldwide – this tends to breed internal violence and resentment that then plagues it and devours it from within. Hence, She Can places a great importance on cultivating values of empathy, solidarity and collectivity within the group. These values empower not only the organization itself, but also the individuals who then feel supported enough to grow and advocate for their rights.

“I make sure to listen to the voices of those directly impacted by the work I do”, Reneh stresses, “this is how I ensure that I’m in constant touch with the real-world to identify areas of continued growth and advocacy”, she continues. “My ultimate goal is to create and live in a more inclusive and equitable society where everyone can live with dignity and respect”, Reneh concludes.

The conversation with Reneh ends, but She Can’s story is far from ending. She Can is the living proof of the transformative power of community building, particularly for historically marginalized groups such as transwomen and refugees.

