

Since July 2011, RIB has been conducting early childhood learning following the Kajoli model addressing children of 4+ years and most recently in the current year, a Kajoli crèche for the supervision of 3+ year olds have been introduced. In both these endeavors women have played an important role.

Starting with 6 centres in both camps in 2011, Kajoli centres now number 10 in Kutupalong camp operating from single shift upto two shifts according to the student population in each block and 11 in Nayapara camp running in double shifts. The total number of children now amounts to 746 in both camps.

The success of the Kajoli centers in the camps also raised the need for protection and supervision of pre-school children inclusive of 3 year olds, who were left outside supervision. So in 2013, RIB also included a programme for block-based crèche for three plus year olds managed by mothers. As of now 6 such crèche or day care centres, 3 in each camp was set up to be followed by more covering all the children of that age in the camps. The total number of children in the crèche to date is 191 and is expected to increase as other blocks follow the example.

The focus of the Kajoli centres is joyful learning. The primary feature of this Kajoli model is that helps children learn to read and write through fun and games thus making learning attractive. It is a model that runs on the basis of community or social ownership for example the teacher, who has to be a woman with minimum educational background, but must love children, belongs to the same neighborhood as the children, the parents of the children pays the teacher and makes important decisions for the running of the school through an Association. Each mother also takes turn in feeding the children once a month. All this was difficult to do in the camps, because refugees were not allowed to earn an income and hence they lived in a state of dependency. Women, especially young single women in camps were further constrained because of cultural restraints. But instead of being daunted by the situation, RIB decided to engage the community through participatory action research where animators and potential women teachers from the community were trained to mobilize the community and engage them in self-inquiry processes of self-management and development. Through such processes men and women discussed and debated the idea of how best they can contribute towards establishing the establishment of Kajoli. Needless to say, Kajoli would not have seen the light of day in the camps if this process was not followed.

The first challenge was to find a space for each centre in each block. This was due to the fact

that there were no available space for such centers and permissions for additional construction were in the prerogative of the Government. The blocks were the closes that one could get to the idea of neighborhood and we learnt through a scoping exercise that parents preferred to send such young children to a nearby place rather in the relatively distant primary schools. The solution of the space came from the teachers and mothers of the community. We were stunned when we learnt that they were ready to offer their own living spaces for the holding of classes, even in two shifts, which virtually meant that the family's living space would be occupied by children from 9am to 4pm with a lunch break in between. We thought that the provision of incentives to the women teachers could be behind this, because normally such girls would not have an opportunity to find themselves a good job that also gave them social protection (being in their own neighborhood). But later it dawned on us, that it was not only the money but the sense of self-respect that developed within themselves, as well as the social recognition they gained from their families, community and most of the children. The special bonding between the teacher and children went a long way towards gaining for the centres both acceptability and purpose. When the first batch of children graduated to the pre-primary level at the formal schools, they used to rush back to their respective "Kajoli Madams" before even going to their parents (their own term of endearment) and tell her of what happened there. Very clearly the teacher had been redeemed in their eyes as their mentor.

At a later stage when the Kajoli students were given micro-nutrient biscuits distributed by WFP, we urged mothers to consider being there when the biscuits are distributed. Each mother in turn would ensure proper distribution took place. They would wash the children's hands, give them water to drink etc. The mothers were first baffled as to why they were asked to do such things, but then later started to enjoy it. It also created an extra parental bonding in the whole Kajoli experiment.

The role of mothers as managers was taken an extra step forward in designing the Kajoli Creche. It was put forward to the refugees that if each mother of a 3 year old would supervise and look after the children at the crèche for 3 hours per shift, instead of having one person look after it, then they could all benefit from this exposure. The responsibility of looking after other people's children as well as their own would boost their self-esteem. Again the mothers felt baffled. They had many questions to ask. Wouldn't it be simpler to have one person look after the children as in Kajoli centers. Then the children could have a focal point. Would they not be confused with this rotation of mothers etc. In the orientation session we had asked them to bring some of their 3 year old for demonstration purposes. Instead of answering the questions directly, we threw open a box of toys for the children to see their behavior pattern and instantly children of all ages (some 2 year olds and babies had also come with their mothers) gravitated towards the toys and for the next few minutes were totally lost to the world. We realized that if

there were ample materials and activities to distract the attention of the children, (play materials, drawing, singing etc) the tendency to cling to their mothers or her proxy would gradually wear away. But of course the mothers had to be trained to handle such situations. The crèche had only just begun, but its future looks promising, since as a result of their experience of participating in Kajoli centered activities and Mothers Associations meetings as well as their exposure in activities of other NGOs women in the camps are already demonstrating their abilities in decision-making, problem-solving, mentoring and managing.

Meghna Guhathakurta