

# SHATILA STORIES

## **SETTING:**

In 1948 the Shatila refugee camp was established to accommodate Palestinians fleeing into Lebanon—they were told that they could go home in a week's time. Seventy years later, they remain trapped in this overcrowded urban slum plagued with poverty and crime. Since the Syrian civil war 1.5 million Syrians have flooded over the border. They too were told they could return to Syria after a few months. Today, one third of Lebanon's population are refugees. Many Syrians settled into Shatila, further stretching the capacities of the camp—it covers a mere 1 square kilometer, for up to 40,000 residents. Among them are thousands of children.

Shatila —infamous for the 1982 massacre in Beirut— has a bad reputation for violent conflict: gang wars over drug territory, family feuds and clashes between rival militias all make the camp a dangerous place for children. Most parents don't allow their children to play outside of their homes, leaving them without an outlet for their energy. So, in 2017 we gained exclusive access to the Shatila refugee camp to work with a group of Syrian children to help them make their own short films. Working to realise their vision for the big screen we got to know the children, their families and the NGO aid workers—all struggling to create a better life. What is it like growing up in Shatila? What does it take to survive? And when will they find a home again?

These are their stories.

## **STORY STRUCTURE:**

The documentary is structured into two narratives that run in parallel: In the first we follow the children during their filmmaking journey with behind the scenes footage and excerpts from their films. This serves as the classic story-arc with a beginning, middle and end and will engage the viewer with bittersweet emotions. At appropriate points we turn to interviews of parents and NGO workers who provide an insight into their living conditions, setting the darker undertone of the film. Every segment focuses on topics such as: the trauma of war, violence in the camp, poverty, sexual abuse and discrimination which are then thematically connected to the children's films. For example, Obid, a Lebanese child, disrupts the filmmaking workshop with a racist outburst which allows us to explore the wider topic of discrimination that Syrians experience in the Lebanese state.

## **STORY THEMES:**

We meet Mustafa, an 11 year old boy who fled his home village when ISIS took control, and wants to be a cameraman. Together with his scruffy and lively classmates they set about making a film together.

Kevin, the project manager at the children's school, provides the informative back-bone of the film and talks about his struggle to protect his students from sexual predators. Ali, the father of two of the protagonists, talks about his fears for his children: menacing drug gangs, kidnapping and financial struggles where underage girls end up getting married off to rich men. Mohammad—who had to bury two of his own children—describes how there's no escape from poverty in Lebanon. He's destined to work, not only into old age, but all the way to his grave. Heart wrenching stories show how trauma from the war manifests in the children and often leads to violent behaviour. A boy whose mother abandoned him a few years earlier, has an aggressive outburst in the classroom after spotting her again in the marketplace that morning.

However, despite their situation, the kids show an inner resilience. They enthusiastically come up with imaginative ideas, using their limited resources and immediate environment to bring their stories to life. We see the kids develop their own voice in their films and this allows us to witness what the children experience in Shatila as their films are a reflection of their own lives. Finally, as the children watch their final product in a make-shift cinema we see how, through their imagination, they are able to create other worlds and escape the harsh reality of Shatila. The situation for refugees in Lebanon is a humanitarian crisis ignored by the world. Despite this, the children's strength and the satisfaction NGO workers derive from helping others, leaves the viewer with a sense of hope.