



## SUCCESS STORY

### Free Child Care Aids Single Parents and Their Children in Kosovo

#### Leadership training spurs politician to take action



Councilwoman Arta Tahiri (center) discusses the childcare program with two single mothers (Arta Sylejmani, left, and Nerimane Hashani, right).

Photo by: USAID

*"If I didn't have this program, I would still be sitting in the dark with my children. Now, I have the inspiration that I can do more; I'll be able to find a job and provide for my children."*

—Arta Sylejmani, single mother

March 2016 – With preschools and kindergartens often filled past capacity in Kosovo, it is especially difficult for single parents to arrange child care. But now some cities are offering free child care, to the benefit of children and parents alike. It all began with a discussion of social issues.

In 2012, Arta Tahiri, an elected councilwoman in Kosovo's municipality of Ferizaj/Uroševac, attended the Week of Women organized by USAID through the National Democratic Institute (NDI). The annual event gathers hundreds of Kosovo's women leaders to discuss social issues that women in Kosovo face every day and learn new skills that will help them in their chosen fields.

A trainer asked Tahiri, "What would be a program that would help single mothers?"

"Free childcare!" she replied. As a single mother herself, she blurted the answer.

Since 2012, USAID has supported the Week of Women, which addresses a different topic each year and provides an opportunity for women to engage and network. To complement the event, USAID initiated a Women's Leadership Academy, where participants can further their leadership skills and work on an initiative of their own such as free child care, with coaching from the trainers.

Tahiri went to the local social services office, learning that 110 single mothers could potentially benefit from her initiative. Her hard work convinced the mayor to offer free childcare at two local schools for children of single mothers. In addition to free tuition, single parents moved to the top of the waiting list.

As Tahiri explains, "Besides the children, I wanted to change the lives of mothers."

When Nerimane Hashani needed to return to her job as a police officer, there was no one to help her take care of her son. Toward the end of her maternity leave, she visited the local school to ask about its childcare program—and learned it would be free.

"This was a very big relief for me, because having to take away the money for childcare takes away something I could provide my son," she said. Her son, who is now 21 months old, started attending the program daily when he was 9 months old.

"Besides a relief financially," says Hashani, "it is also a relief personally to know my son is cared for. He can't wait to come here and see his friends.

And the school encouraged him to eat more foods, when he sees that the other kids do.”

Arta Sylejmani first heard about the program from a friend, and at first she couldn’t believe it. Her husband had recently passed away, leaving her with a distraught two-year-old—and she was pregnant again, with twins. She knew her daughter was happiest when she had a chance to play with her cousin, so the thought of sending her to play with other children everyday was a dream come true.

“For a single mother with three children, to have someone help even half an hour makes such a difference. To be out from the morning until the afternoon is a miracle,” says Sylejmani. “It also benefits my daughter. When she is isolated in the house for 24 hours, it’s impossible for her to not miss her father. When she has the chance to be with other children, she forgets her pain.”

Since attending the program, her daughter resumed eating and sleeping normally, and the tantrums she threw after her father died have stopped. Now, she talks about the games she plays, and she tells her little sisters, “You will come soon, too!”

The twins are 11 months old and will start going to the school in a month. And Sylejmani will be able to focus on looking for work.

“After my husband’s death, the first months were all black,” she says. “I just had to take care of the children all the time; I couldn’t even think of anything else. If I didn’t have this program, I would still be sitting in the dark with my children. Now, I have the inspiration that I can do more. I’ll be able to find a job and provide for my children.”

Local councilors in other municipalities have spread the idea through roundtables and National Democratic Institute programs like “Week of Women,” sharing advice and examples on how to implement free child care.

This year, on March 8—International Women’s Day—the municipality of Lipjan/Lipljan announced it would become Kosovo’s fifth municipality to offer the benefit to single parents.

This initiative—designed by a woman, and addressing an issue commonly thought to affect women... is benefiting men, too. Single fathers confront the same issues balancing work/childcare as single mothers, and a handful of them have also enrolled children through the program.

With safe, educational childcare, and parents able to provide for them, a new generation of Kosovo’s citizens will be better prepared to become leaders someday themselves.