



This photo shows retired Japanese police officer Masao Gunji posing with his Hello Kitty collection at his pink-painted Hello Kitty house in Yotsukaido, Chiba prefecture. — AFP photos



Masao Gunji, a retired police officer, standing at an entrance to his pink-painted Hello Kitty house with his wife Yoshiko Gunji (left) in Yotsukaido.



Masao Gunji showing his Hello Kitty collection to a neighbor at his pink-painted Hello Kitty house.



Masao Gunji (right) posing next to his Hello Kitty collection as his wife Yoshiko Gunji (left) looks on, at their pink-painted Hello Kitty house.

Ex-Japan policeman breaks records with Hello Kitty collection

'This is his dream'

A 67-year-old former policeman with the world's biggest Hello Kitty collection has become the envy of little girls everywhere with a quarter of a million dollars' worth of moon-faced memorabilia. Masao Gunji, who spent his working life on the trail of hardened criminals, now spends his retirement tracking down pink and white soft toys to keep in a Hello Kitty-

themed house, which he built specially and has become a magnet for tourists. "Kitty has been like the love of my life. Though he doesn't live in the property, Gunji was recognized last November by Guinness World Records for his collection, having spent around 30 million yen (\$267,000) on thousands of items, including the house. More than 5,000 items he owns bear Kitty's iconic

red bow, propelling Gunji past the previous record holder, also Japanese. Gunji's wife Yoshiko says she fully supports her husband's passion. "I don't care how much he spends on Hello Kitty," she said. "People need to make a mark on the world, and Hello Kitty is the one he lives for," she added. "This is his dream." — AFP

Afghanistan's Sesame Street gets proud brother muppet

Zeerak the bespectacled orange muppet is the latest innovation from Sesame Street in Afghanistan: a children's TV character who reveres his educated older sister, brought on to screens to show a new generation that a woman's place is beyond the home. Producers are betting the new character—a four-year-old boy dressed in a traditional shalwar kameez and a waist-coast embroidered in Afghan national colors will inspire millions of children—and their parents—to see the value in education. Zeerak's big sister Zari, introduced last year with great fanfare as the first Afghan muppet to join internationally cherished characters such as Big Bird and Elmo, has already proved a success on the local version of Sesame Street, known as 'Baghch-e-Simsim'.

Massood Sanjer, head of Tolo TV which airs the show, believes introducing a boy, who adores and wants to emulate his school-going, older sibling, will "indirectly teach the kids to love their sisters" in a conservative, gender-segregated nation which traditionally has invested more in its sons. Baghch-e-Simsim is the only program on Afghan television dedicated to children and has a remarkable reach—a recent survey showed some 80 percent of children and parents with access to television watch the show.

Sanjer believes the show can, from an early age, underline the importance of educated women in Afghan society, but also show boys that a good education benefits everyone. "People—kids and parents, who have access to TV are watching and know the brand of the character. So it is a very good sign that people love to learn and it is great to use media as an education tool for kids," he told AFP. That message still needs to be hammered home in many parts of Afghanistan nearly 16 years after the end of the Taliban's repressive regime. A report published last year by the National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment Center showed that just 66 percent of boys and 37 percent of girls aged 15-24 can read and write, while barely 45.5 percent of Afghans attend primary school, and 27 percent secondary school.

Driving social change

The broadcaster is utilizing everything it can to help



Afghan puppeteers Seema Sultani (left) and Mansoor Shirzad hold Sesame Street Muppets 'Zeerak' and 'Zari' as they meet children after a recording at a television studio in Kabul. — AFP photos

change attitudes -- the new muppet Zeerak's name means 'smart' in Dari and Pashto, Afghanistan's two official languages. And even his trendy, black-rimmed glasses were chosen for a reason.

Producer Wajiha Saïdy explains that wearing spectacles is seen as shameful for Afghan youngsters, so they wanted to address the issue and show it to be normal. Across its global iterations, Sesame Street has made a point of inclusivity with its cast. Earlier this year the American version debuted a character with autism, while in South Africa the program features a HIV-positive muppet.

Last week it courted controversy in the US after tweeting a group image of some of its stars to reflect a rainbow in support of 'LGBT Pride Month'. "Sesame Street is proud to support families of all shapes, sizes, and colors," the official account said.

In Afghanistan, the show's attention to equality extends to its casting, with two talented female puppeteers, Sima and Mansour, lending their voices to Zari and Zeerak. Zari is by far the favorite character on the show in Afghanistan, according to the study commissioned by Tolo which surveyed some 1,500 children and their parents. Just 60 percent of Afghanistan has access



Afghan puppeteers Seema Sultani (right) holds new Sesame Street Muppet 'Zeerak' as she performs with colleague Mansoor Shirzad, holding Muppet 'Zari', during a recording at a television studio in Kabul.

to television, but Baghch-e-Simsim is also broadcast on the radio across 44 FM stations, says Anwar Jamilli, who runs the audio programs. The producers also organize small mobile theatres that travel to kindergartens in rural areas, with Jamilli estimating that they reached nearly 20,000 children last year. He says the show's focus on friendship and sharing brings a dose of happiness to children living with the ever-present threat of violence. "This is very new for Afghan children," he says. — AFP



Afghan puppeteers Razia Nazaria (left) and Mansoor Shirzad dress Sesame Street Muppets 'Zeerak' (second left) and 'Zari' ahead of recording at a television studio in Kabul.



Afghan children meet Sesame street Muppet 'Zari' after a recording at a television studio in Kabul.