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PROFILE

Salwa Al-Najjab

Palestinian Health Care Activist

By Naela Khalil

Overcoming gender bias in male-dominated hospitals wasn't easy for Salwa Al-Najjab, but her success has inspired other Arab women. Her Juzoor Foundation brings medicine to poor and underserved communities.



Salwa Al-Najjab was the best female math student in her class, and her passion for mathematics would have led her to study at the College of Engineering, but for her Russian math teacher's advice to study medicine: "With your intelligence and your strong personality, you will be of more benefit to the women of Palestine as a doctor than as an engineer," the teacher said. Salwa Al-Najjab followed her teacher's advice, and today she is changing medical care in the Palestinian Territories.

The hospital environment stirred Al-Najjab's curiosity and her love of knowledge. She hadn't realized that her medical career also would show her that many women lived in very different circumstances from her own. Al-Najjab admits: "The hospital and the medical profession opened my eyes wide to conditions which I hadn't realized were as bad and as difficult as they were." Her lifelong professional and personal battle to support women's rights and to help provide better health care for women started when she began practicing medicine in 1979 at Al-Maqasid Hospital in Jerusalem.

She expanded her efforts to create better conditions for women in the mid-1980s. Carrying her physician's bag and instrument case, Al-Najjab visited Palestinian villages and refugee camps to give women medical

check-ups and treatment. She volunteered her time under the most difficult and complex conditions. She was creating change on the ground.

Today, after more than 30 years of work in hospitals and clinics in different parts of the Palestinian Territories, Al-Najjab heads the *Juzoor* (Roots) Foundation for Health and Social Development, based in Jerusalem. She continues to enthusiastically pursue her dream, although now, she says, it is more difficult "to influence health care policy decisionmakers to improve and develop the level of health care services provided to women, and to bridge the gap between service providers and recipients."

Al-Najjab's optimism is infectious. She maintains her smile despite the challenges she has faced in her life. During her early school years, she attended eight different schools in Ramallah, Hebron and Jordan. Her father worked first at the Jordanian Ministry of Education, then at UNESCO, so her family moved frequently. This meant she and her three siblings often changed schools, making it difficult to maintain long-term friendships. However, it was always easy for her to maintain her academic excellence.

Al-Najjab traveled to Russia to attend Moscow University in 1971. After one year of Russian language study, she enrolled at Kuban Medical School



Palestinian women wait for treatment for their babies at the United Nations Relief and Works Agency clinic in Gaza City.

in Krasdnada. Dealing with her fellow students was more difficult than learning a new language or other demanding subjects. Some Arab students looked at her disapprovingly; others underestimated her ability to succeed because she was a woman. She persevered in her studies, defying those who doubted her, and became a model of academic success. She became a mentor to Palestinian women studying abroad.

Her first job at Al-Maqasid Hospital presented her with major challenges. She was the only female resident doctor, and she began working in the obstetrics and gynecology section. It was difficult for the male doctors to accept a female colleague and professional competitor. The hardest thing for Al-Najjab was that the female nurses did not accept her either, because they were accustomed to dealing with male doctors. They believed that a male doctor was more competent and professional than his female counterpart. The atmosphere at the hospital reflected this masculine bias in the way they divided the work: Al-Najjab would do routine examinations of female patients at the hospital clinic, while the male doctors would perform surgical operations and circumcisions. They did not expect that this quiet, beautiful young woman would resist this arrangement, nor that the section head would support her.



A nurse in a West Bank community clinic examines patients. The clinic is part of USAID's Health Flagship Project to improve community health care.

Al-Najjab says: "I refused to accept their masculine [-biased] division of labor, and I stuck to my position: 'I will participate in surgical operations, and I will perform circumcisions on boys.' This didn't please them, and they nicknamed me 'the rooster.'"

Al-Najjab says that the first time she experienced discrimination against women was at the hospital: "I grew up in a family that offered the same opportunities to both sexes. Even my grandfather, back in the 1960s, allowed my aunts to study in Britain, to work outside of the house and to spend the night away from home. Therefore, the attitude that I faced from my

colleagues at the hospital astonished me."

Al-Najjab also learned about the unequal status of women. She says, "I felt that I was getting to know my society for the first time. I would feel distraught when I delivered the baby of a girl who was no older than 15, or when I heard women affirming to me, unprompted, that men had a monopoly over decisions regarding who their daughters would marry, whether or not to use contraceptives or how many children they would have." Al-Najjab adds, "Women don't have the right to defend their own right to an education ... It's a cycle that must be broken."

Al-Najjab's family valued knowledge. Her father defied convention by sending her to study in Russia. Although her mother hadn't completed her studies, she encouraged her four children, girls and boys alike, to continue their education. All of them graduated from college.

"Unlike other mothers, mine never talked to me about marriage. Instead, she would always talk to me about the importance of education for a woman's life," Al-Najjab recalls.

After seven years at Al-Maqasid Hospital, during which time she helped establish several high-quality clinics in Jerusalem and its suburbs, Al-Najjab left the hospital to work in the field. "I discovered that only a small number of people go to hospitals, either due to poverty or ignorance," she says. "If I wanted to provide health care to women, I had to go to them, wherever they were."

In 1985, Al-Najjab and a group of health professionals began visiting villages and refugee camps to provide health care. People's reactions were positive, but some doctors criticized her for damaging doctors' "prestige" by going to the patients rather than insisting that people come to the doctor.

By breaking this rule of prestige, Al-Najjab and her colleagues found conditions that they did not encounter in well-organized clinics equipped with winter heating and summer

fans. They met people in far-flung places who suffered from a severe lack of health care compounded by the complex political conditions resulting from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Al-Najjab says, "I treated women who had no bathrooms in their homes and others living in homes unfit for human habitation. I came into contact with a bitter reality that overturned all of my convictions regarding the concept of health: I realized that it wasn't only a question of physical well-being, but that health is also related to economic, social and psychological conditions, and to the environment."

She has fought many battles and continues to do so. Her convictions and her decisions are sometimes contrary to social traditions that limit women's rights. Al-Najjab is an activist who gets things done. She co-founded the Women's Social and Legal Guidance Center in Ramallah. The center shelters women who are victims of violence, offers them legal assistance, refers their cases to the police and refers them to a safe house for their protection.

"I used to believe that as the years went by, change for the better would take place. But what I am noticing today is the opposite. In this social environment of political frustration and poverty, fundamentalist movements have strengthened and are actively working to move society backwards at every level.

Women and women's rights are the most prominent victims," she says.

Besides leading the Juzoor Foundation, which seeks to influence health care policies, Al-Najjab heads the Middle East and North Africa Health Policy Forum, where she continues to strive for change. She was nominated by the U.S. Consulate General in Jerusalem for the U.S. Department of State's 2010 International Women of Courage award.

With a husband and three children, in addition to her medical practice and activism, Dr. Salwa Al-Najjab has a full life. Her prescription for success is this: "We cannot but be optimistic about life."

Naela Khalil is a Palestinian journalist. She won the 2008 Samir Kassir Award for freedom of the press.