

Opinion**A Success Story of a Woman Medical Physicist in the Middle East****Huda Al Naemi PhD**

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Most of us pictures the Middle East as a region having conservative culture where women are considered second class citizens and men dominates the professionals in whatever field it may be. Not to mention the common misconception elsewhere that women are oppressed in this part of the world, many of us thinks that middle eastern women have a very limited opportunity when it comes to professional career and they are thought to be better off staying at home taking care of the household.

Yes indeed, such fact existed in the old days. It has rooted from the very own families of the Arabs and continued in primary school where girls and boys studies separately. Yes, there is an opportunity then for women, but it was limited only to teaching profession. But gone are those days; opportunities have opened for women. Slowly, the colleges started admitting women in the so-called “men field” especially in the healthcare industry.

In the 80's with the advent of increasing number of citizens within Qatar, Hamad General Hospital (HGH) was established, which then, was the biggest healthcare facility in Qatar. It opened working opportunities not only for men locally and internationally, but more importantly for Qatari women who wanted to pursue their career in healthcare.

And so, the opportunity opened for me and my friends to start our career journey at the hospital.

Having been equipped with academic qualification of Bachelor Degree in Physics, which I gained locally, I grabbed the opportunity to work in the Radiology Department of HGH where I started a challenging career as Radiation Physicist. Being a neophyte, in the battlefield of professionals with actual duties and responsibilities I was ready to face the technical challenges. Although I know then that being a woman in this male-dominated field of work in my country, I will be facing social and cultural challenges, its extent slowly sank in as they confronted me one by one.

Women in my country in those days, in addition to restricted driving locally, travelling entails substantial discussion with family requiring a heavily justified reason on why we should travel and how would be the

arrangements while staying abroad. So with my family standing firm about this belief, either my father or my brother would always be there to escort me whenever I need to travel which I am really thankful of. With regards to media appearance, although I was ready to face the public bringing with me my advocacy (and as a leader later on), again I was confronted by the sociocultural challenges of restricted appearance of women in public which I personally perceive as a barrier to the pursuance of my advocacy as well as my career. Later on, fighting for medical physics profession to be recognized in the country was another huge challenge I had to bravely work on.

And so, starting as a timid and shy young Arab woman, I had courageously dared to confront those challenges and has consistently expressed my strong desire to go for my vision. One thing I am sure then was that although I see windows of opportunities but it was not as fully opened for me being a woman in my region; and for this reason, I had to grab even the slightest window of opportunity I spotted regardless of how narrow that was. And it was my enthusiastically driven vision for medical physics to be recognized and represent my country (and the region) in my chosen field that has empowered me to face head-on every hurdle I encountered.

While working as a Radiation Physicist, I pursued my academic studies and gained the title of Doctorate in Medical Biophysics from Cairo University in Egypt. I later established the Radiation Protection Unit in Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC) and became the Chairperson for National Medical Licensing Committee at Qatar's Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) and Ministry of Municipality and Environment (MME). I led and managed the Radiation Protection Course for all radiation workers within the State of Qatar. Eventually, I became the Executive Director of Occupational Health and Safety Department where I direct various health and safety sections including the Radiation Safety Section which was later named as Medical Physics Section.

Being the only Medical Physicist in Qatar then, I represented the country internationally and had the opportunity to work with various international organizations such as WHO, IAEA, UNEP to name a few, and has implemented some of their projects at the national level. It has always been my aspiration to further the advancement of the medical physics profession locally and regionally. I established the Qatar Society of Medical Physics (QSMP) and co-founded the Middle

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East Federation of Medical Physics (MEFOMP) which I also became the President in 2018-2021. Furthermore, I have also initiated the MEFOMP Women Committee which has driven the growing number of fellow women medical physicists within the region.

Indeed, I can say that all my effort and sacrifices paid off. To name a few of the recognitions I received: In 2012, I was awarded as L' OFFICIEL Arab Woman of the Year for my contributions in the field of Medicine. I was recognized as Radiation Expert by the Qatar's Ministry of Justice in 2019; and in the same year, I also received the Healthcare Gold Medal Award from the Institute of Physics and Engineering in Medicine (IPEM) in recognition of my substantial and sustained track record at an outstanding level of contribution to the advancement of healthcare practice; related to physics and engineering applied to medicine and biology.

Nowadays, women in my country are more entitled in exploring career

opportunities than before. I believe that my kind of journey including the success me and my fellow successful Qatari women has gained, has been an eye opener for my countrymen and its leadership to provide such entitlement and eventually lay back restrictions for us women, as long as we do not go beyond our religious principles. With this, I will unceasingly support women empowerment and hopefully inspire my fellow Arab women to not be afraid of aiming high regardless of how huge challenges may be along the way.

At the present time, I still lead the Occupational Health and Safety Department of HMC. The department is continuously expanding alongside the inevitable expansion of the HMC facilities. I remain to have a key role in the medical physics organizations locally and internationally. With the support I get from my employment organization, professional organizations, colleagues and friends, I am more than lucky that my husband and immediate family supports me along in every step I am to further take.



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