



Iraq Nursing Program Crosses Social Barriers and Offers New Hope

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Luma Falah once dreamed of becoming a dentist, but sanctions, war and a strict Islamic culture in her home country of Iraq made her dream impossible.

But now Luma is on the front lines of health care as a nursing aid in the village of Saqlawiyah in Western part of the country.

In this area surrounding Fallujah, villagers adhere to the most conservative Islamic and tribal traditions. Men and women do not interact on any level, not even if it's a matter of life and death.

Men don't want male doctors touching their wives and daughters. And it's hard to recruit women as nurses or midwives. Many Iraqis view nurses as women of loose morals because they work long hours in hospitals, and they treat male patients.

Dr. Ayad al-Hadithy never accepted that point of view. He's a child and maternal health care physician who spent his career trying to lower rates of maternal mortality in Anbar province.

"I think the patient will look for help from anyone," he says, "whether he is male or female, Iraqi or other culture."

That's why Dr. Ayad created the Pink Program in Saqlawiyah, training ten women as nursing aides, teaching them basic first aid and prenatal care for expectant mothers.

[Click here for a video report on the nursing program.](#)

The U.S. State Department reconstruction team is funding the program, in which each woman receives a salary of about \$200 per month.

But the women say they're in it for more than the money. It's a chance to serve their community and fulfill their own ambitions. Most of them are housewives in their mid-30's, starting a career for the first time.

Ahlam Khamis barely finished middle school. Now she has a job and a sense of purpose.

"I can give injections, take blood pressure and if somebody gets burned I can treat him," she says with pride.

Dr. Ayad says surrounding villages are still recovering from the "dark time," from 2005 to 2007 when the area was in the grip of insurgents. "Anbar province was under the control of Al Qaeda and the terrorists," he says, "They kill too many people."

By 2007, local tribal leaders got fed up with Al Qaeda and its tactics of bombing civilian targets and violent intimidation. They joined the Americans to fight the terrorists through a movement known as "The Awakening".

As Al Qaeda and its unbending Islamist ideology was driven out, the doctor appealed to local imams to support his nursing program.

He recalls what happened next: "They said, announced in their Friday prayer that it's not shame, or not prohibited for female to work as a nurse. It's a good job."

For Ahlam and Luma, it's also a chance to help their neighbors at a critical time for the country. Luma feels she's making a contribution, "especially now that Iraqis are subject to explosions at any time."

It may be too late for Luma to realize her ambition of becoming a dentist. But Dr. Ayad hopes that she and some of the other students might take the next step and enroll in a three-year professional nursing school.

By Malini Wilkes
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