

A PIONEER LEBANESE WOMAN PHYSICIAN IN THE UNITED NATIONS

This is a brief resume of Dr Jihane Tawilah's great and distinguished career in the WHO. She is a pioneer that opened the road and paved the way for many to follow.

Dr Jihane Tawilah is currently the World Health Organization Representative at the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the past 10 years, she has served as the organization representative in Djibouti and the Sultanate of Oman.

Dr Tawilah received all her graduate and postgraduate medical training at the American University of Beirut in Lebanon. Specialized in Family Medicine, she also holds a master degree in Public Health with focus on health services administration.

She started her career with WHO in 1990 serving in her own country Lebanon where she established and was the first manager of the National AIDS Control programme in Lebanon. Later, she assisted in other WHO collaborative programmers with the Ministry of Health in Lebanon, in areas of health promotion and education, control of diseases including epidemiological surveillance, women development and health research.

She has also held the position of lecturer in Epidemiology as well as Social and Preventive Medicine at the Faculty of Medical Sciences in the Lebanese University for seven years.

In 1997, Dr Tawilah joined UNAIDS in Geneva as Inter Country Regional Adviser on AIDS for the Middle East and North Africa Region after which she was appointed by WHO as Regional Adviser on HIV/AIDS

and Sexually Transmitted Diseases and was based in Egypt at the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office for five years.

The World Health Organization (WHO) is the policy making, directing and coordinating authority on international health within the United Nations system. It is in fact by its constitution an intergovernmental technical agency that allows its member states to decide and act jointly on global health challenges and improving people's well being. To



that purpose, more than 8000 WHO public health experts from more than 150 countries work globally to ensure that health guidelines and standards are produced and that adequate health research and effective health interventions are conducted in order to meet the needs of the people.

In her capacity as WHO representative, Dr Tawilah acts on behalf of the Organization as a whole, and is the Senior Officer responsible for all aspects of the health collaborative activities of WHO in the country. For the past two decades, Dr Tawilah has contributed effectively to national, regional and global health policy formulation and implementation from the Eastern Mediterranean Region. As for the beginning of her career, Dr Tawilah considers it as a totally unplanned departure from her initial plans for clinical practice. I started with WHO by pure chance; I was completing my postgraduate studies at AUB. WHO Lebanon office was searching for a medical officer. The Dean of Medicine, Dr Adnan Mroueh and the Chairman of Family Medicine department, Dr Ghassan Hamadeh, at AUB, approached me and recommended me to WHO. At that time, there were only a few medical doctors with Public Health training. It was difficult at first to adapt to an international organization but I was lucky that many of my experienced friends were always ready to give support. I also had the chance to have a very good role model, my first supervisor, Dr Rahmani. What I have learned from him was invaluable for my professional development.

It is difficult for me to imagine now how my life would have been outside public health and the organization. I am passionate about public health and very satisfied of how my life turned out. WHO has given me the chance to grow as a person and as a professional; it has enlarged my horizons and gave me the opportunity to learn about diversity of people, cultures and countries. One thing for sure, if I didn't have the chance to be with WHO, I would have worked in the public field, may be an NGO or a teaching institution.

VARIOUS CULTURES

I have a heart of a nomad, and adapted to every place I have been. I try always to understand the host country and its people. I enjoy the diversity and discovering various cultures and also sharing our Lebanese culture with others. It is interesting that wherever I have been, I have felt great welcome, respect and consideration to Lebanese people



and confidence in their capacities. The only drawback of being away from home is that I miss my family and friends and I often lag behind the latest developments in the country. I often know more about the politics of the host country than those of my own country.

Unfortunately at WHO, men still outnumber women in the professional categories, although the number of women staff has been increasing steadily over time. At the most senior level, however, the gender imbalance is worse: women constitute only 22% of the staff, a ratio that did not improve over the past decade. Out of a total 2290 staff in the professional categories worldwide, there are 59 women at most senior levels, four of which are posted in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

She said: most of the women I have met at WHO are achievers and they have made a difference in their areas of work.

WHO has shaped my life and personality as a whole. Every posting was a great learning experience. It increased my confidence in others and myself. On a professional level, it was great to be part of some breakthrough developments in the Eastern Mediterranean region. In resource constrained situation such as in Djibouti it was possible to establish the first medical school ever; Notwithstanding all religious and cultural circumstances, Iran has now one of the most



advanced models for HIV harm reduction in injecting drug users and vulnerable women; it was also possible to make a paradigm shift in the national approach to public health emergency preparedness and response in a country with infrequent emergencies such as Oman.

About the effect of word financial crisis she said: It is difficult times nowadays for all organizations because of the global financial crisis and simply because of a changing world. WHO is currently reforming to be better equipped to address the increasingly complex challenges of the health of populations in the 21st century. From persisting problems to new and emerging public health threats, WHO needs to be flexible enough to respond to this evolving environment. There are now a great number of diverse players in Health including foundations such as Gates foundation and international funds such as the Global Fund for AIDS, TB and Malaria, which influence tremendously the

health responses in many countries. There is need for a greater coherence in global health and WHO should renew itself to continue to play a leading and effective role in contributing to the health of all peoples.

INTEREST

Nothing in particular except sometimes, the fact of having long working hours, it is difficult to manage and keep up with social relations and occasions. That is what she said. I am now for the first time in a country where I cannot speak the native language and this has its limitations; I miss for example going to theater and movies and watching dancing performances. Nevertheless, I like to read and enjoy listening to music and I have an interest in history. Being in different countries increases my curiosity to make further discoveries in these areas.