

From Student to Doctor

A Young Graduate's Story of Leadership in Gaza

Courtesy of Taawon (Welfare Association)



Suhair M., a medical graduate, walks into a temporary clinic set up inside a displacement camp in Gaza.



On International Women's Day, the offices of UN Human Rights, UN Women, and the United Nations Population Fund in Palestine launch the "We Survive, We Lead" campaign to amplify the lived experiences of Palestinian women. In partnership with Taawon (Welfare Association), we present stories of suffering, resilience and leadership as a testimony and a clear call to action to uphold and protect dignity and human rights.

In Gaza, leadership is not always visible from a stage or behind a microphone. Sometimes it is found in a hospital corridor under bombardment, in a young woman refusing to abandon her patients, her profession, or her future.

Dr. Suhair graduated from the Faculty of Medicine at Al-Azhar University in 2024. By September of that year, she had begun her professional training at the Indonesian Hospital in northern Gaza. Medicine had been her dream for years. "A person should not spend their whole life in vain," she says. "This was the message I wanted my life to carry." Within weeks of starting her training, the war erupted. Hospitals were besieged. Programs were suspended. Entire neighborhoods were empty. Suhair and her family were displaced multiple times, moving from north to south and back to central Gaza. When they returned home, they found it largely destroyed. Yet she did not stop.

While many colleagues were forced to leave, Suhair moved between Al-Aqsa Hospital, Al-Awda Hospital, and field facilities in the central region. Transportation was scarce; sometimes she walked long distances just to reach the first available bus. There was no protection from rain or shelling. Hunger made concentration almost impossible during long shifts. "We saw severe blood loss. We saw malnutrition," she recalls. "There were moments when we had no treatment available and had to search for alternatives." When communications were cut, and ambulances could not reach them, staff members ran under bombardment to nearby hospitals to call for help. Leadership, in these moments, was not a title. It was a decision. The decision to show up.

As a young woman doctor, she also carried her family's fear. "At the beginning, my parents didn't want me to go out. They were afraid for me," she says. They called constantly to make sure she was safe. But gradually, they came to understand that her presence in the hospital was not just work; it was a responsibility.

The war changed her understanding of medicine. "It made me realize how important our role is in society, how much people need us," she says. In a matter of months, she gained experience that might otherwise have taken years. "The war taught me how to be strong."

Yet even as she served on the frontlines, another barrier threatened her future. Like that of many graduates in Gaza, Suhair's university certificate was withheld due to accumulated tuition fees during the war. Without the official release of her degree, she could not formally continue her specialization or advance her career.

Through an ISNAD scholarship, Taawon's initiative to protect higher education in Gaza had her outstanding tuition covered, and her certificate was issued. The support did more than settle a debt; it restored her academic standing and secured her professional path. "The obstacle was removed," she says simply. "Now I can continue."

For her, survival is not passive endurance. It is action. It is walking to work when transport is unavailable. It is treating patients despite hunger. It is insisting on education when systems collapse. It is refusing to let war define the limits of possibility. "The biggest lesson I learned," she says, "is that I will not give up. No matter how hard life is, we continue."

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Something Stronger than Fear

Courtesy of UN Human Rights Office in the Occupied Palestinian Territory



Yasmeen in the girls' makeshift tent, providing reproductive health and psychological services. UNFPA-funded project, Gaza City. ©SDF.

Yasmeen is a 27-year-old woman from Gaza City. She told the UN Human Rights Office in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OHCHR OPT) about her story of survival and her work to advance children's right to education against formidable odds.

"I used to love my life. I lived in a beautiful home with my family; I had a job and volunteered everywhere. I got engaged. My life felt stable. I was grateful. Before the war, I used to think about the future. Make plans. This is over now. We thought this was going to be like other wars: heavy, painful, terrifying, but survivable. By the third day, it was clear this time was different. The bombing was insane. The internet was shut down. People were shouting in the streets, telling us to evacuate because the army was advancing.

"We refused to leave Gaza City. We made the decision to stay together under one roof. My grandfather's household of four families all stayed in two three-floor buildings with a shared courtyard. We were besieged three times. One siege lasted 21 days, with Israeli tanks stationed two minutes away from the house. We hid on the ground floor so that the soldiers could not see signs of life. The building next to us was bombed, and the rubble collapsed onto my grandfather's house. There were no injuries, but every service was cut off: water, electricity, everything. There was water in old basement tanks, filthy and not fit for drinking, but it kept us alive. Food was rationed to one piece of bread per day. After the siege, we cleaned the rubble and stayed. We survived two more encirclements, including one during Ramadan.



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"Six months into the war, I realized I could no longer live paralyzed like that. A colleague from the Social Development Forum (SDF),* where I had volunteered during the COVID-19 crisis, reached out. They needed a field coordinator for an emergency education project in northern Gaza. Despite the risks, I accepted without hesitation. My family begged me not to go. My mother was terrified. But I needed to reclaim some purpose, something stronger than fear.

"Our team had only three people. We searched for safe areas – 'safe' only by Gaza standards. We created educational spaces for children, sometimes in old schools, sometimes in family homes, sometimes using nothing more than a tent that became unbearably hot during the day.

"The situation was so miserable that we had to weigh rights against each other: the right to life, the right to shelter, the right to education. When the spaces we used were needed to shelter newly displaced families, we vacated. We escorted children to and from the educational spaces as if we could protect them from airstrikes. We tried.

"There were no bathrooms for children, no proper classrooms or equipment, and constant danger. But the children laughed there. They played. They learned. They felt human again. I was proud.

"Eventually, I transitioned to coordinating a UNFPA-funded project serving youth, adolescents, and women. I ran spaces for women and girls that offered reproductive health services, psychosocial support, and safe learning hubs. Today, I manage a team of 12 members.

"The war changed me. I am more stubborn now, and somehow more hopeful. I do not know what I will choose. But I insist on choosing. It is my right. Thinking about the future now feels like trying to see through fog. But here is what I know with certainty: I love my home; I love Gaza. I loved it before the war, and I love it now. I am not scared by its streets, and my love is not erased by its scars and mounting rubble."

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*The Social Developmental Forum (SDF) is a Palestinian NGO focused on fostering youth leadership in sustainable development. SDF is partners with the UN Human Rights Office in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OHCHR OPT).



Displaced Countless Times

Courtesy of UN Human Rights Office in the Occupied Palestinian Territory



Mayson.



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Mayson is a 37-year-old widow from Beit Lahia, Gaza, a mother of a five-year-old son, and a person with disability. She shared her story and plea for the future with the UN Human Rights Office in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OHCHR OPT).

"I was born with a vision impairment, and I have a glass eye. My husband was the miracle of my life, my rock, and my support. I was happy and safe with him. But the story was cut short.

"We are from Beit Lahia in northern Gaza. Things were tense there from day one; airstrikes never stopped. We lived in the same building as my husband's extended family. The bombing was scary and kept intensifying. My sister and I took my son and sought refuge in a school building. My husband was supposed to join us the following day. But his phone stopped ringing. I called everyone in the building, everyone in my husband's family. Phones were not ringing. One number finally rang. Someone picked it up. He said everyone is dead. It was a fire belt; airstrikes killed everyone. I searched for his body in hospitals. I showed his photo to the nurses. I couldn't find him anywhere. My brother came to take me south, but I wanted to see my husband. My brother paid for a bulldozer, which kept digging for a week. My husband's body never recovered. I wish I had stayed with him and never left the house. This was in October 2023, just a few days after the war started. It has now been over two years since I lost him. I never had the chance to say goodbye, or to honor and bury him with dignity. There is no grave to visit.

"Since I left my house in Beit Lahia, I do not remember how many times I have been displaced. I can count at least 16 times. In the first tent, my son couldn't stop crying for his father, and people around us kept yelling at me to keep him quiet. Everyone was grieving. Everyone was suffering. There was no space for his grief.

"The war is not over for me. It was raining the other day, and my tent was flooded. All night, I cried while carrying my son from one spot to another inside the tent to try to keep him dry.

"I do not forgive the world for what has happened, for what keeps happening. My son spent two of his five years in this world in war, without his father, and in extremely difficult conditions. He has speech and learning difficulties, and there are no facilities to help him.

"If I ever leave Gaza, it will be to get a new glass eye. It has been painful, and I haven't been able to get medical attention for it. If it were not for Stars of Hope,* I would not have had a shelter and been able to support and feed my son.

"I had a life and a home. My son had a father. Now, it's all gone. There is no clarity. It feels like we are heading into the unknown. And the war is just not ending. I can't even protect my child from the rain."

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*Stars of Hope is a Palestinian NGO focused on the rights of people with disabilities and partners with the United Nations Country Team's Disability Inclusion Working Group, which is led by the UN Human Rights Office in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OHCHR OPT) and UN Women. Stars of Hope is also part of the Protection Cluster which is coordinated by OHCHR OPT.