

Gaza: “We need double the amount of supplies”

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Wala cleaning the injury of a patient in a shelter in Rafah. | HI

Wala provides nursing care to people in their homes and in the shelters. She talks to us about her life, her work and the situation in Gaza.

Why did you choose to become a nurse and work in the health sector?

Ever since I was a child, I dreamt of becoming a nurse. At school, I was the health leader in my class. With the encouragement of my family and friends, I pursued my dream and graduated as a nurse with first-class honours. I then began working with non-governmental organisations like HI. Working with HI has been a rewarding experience. As you know, HI was among the first organisations to intervene and assist people in the emergency designated shelters in Gaza.

What skills would you say are necessary to your job?

advice and instructions to patients. As nurses, our work isn't just about dressing wounds; we also offer guidance and raise patients' awareness. We educate them on wound care, emphasizing the importance of keeping the wound dry and protected; we explain the need for proper nutrition, and so on.

During wound dressing sessions, it's important to raise awareness about the different aspects of care, especially when treating patients at home.

In shelter settings, I explain to patients how to prevent the spread of scabies and lice, for example, and emphasize the importance of personal hygiene, although it is hard to ensure in the shelters. I also show them how to clean their own wounds. I teach their caregivers to assist me during the wound dressing sessions, especially if the patient is likely to be displaced and I won't be able to reach them. After seven or eight sessions, when the caregiver is able to take over dressing the wound, I remove the case from my files.

For people able to dress their own wounds with the help of their caregiver, we provide a wound dressing kit.

What needs are you encountering in the current crisis in Gaza?

The nursing bags we carry are quite basic considering the number of cases we are dealing with. We really need double the amount of supplies in our bags, especially gauze, grip bandages and saline solution, so we can deal with an emergency or treat multiple patients in different locations, such as rooms, classrooms, or tents. Having more supplies on hand would mean we could respond quickly to urgent cases without the risk of running out.

Another essential requirement is electricity. We need power to keep our phones charged, as well as to operate a work phone and sim card. Patients often communicate with us on our personal phones when their needs are urgent. A spotlight would also be useful so we can see what we're doing when treating patients in tents at night.

What are your biggest challenges?

We have encountered many challenges in our work, particularly in our interactions with patients. Many of them are stressed, scared, and in severe pain. Also, the rooms we work in are sometimes poorly lit; we have to use the torches of two or three mobile phone to see what we are doing.

There are often delays in getting supplies because they get held up at checkpoints. This can make it difficult to provide timely care. Transport is another challenge, as some cases are in hard-to reach areas. Schools serving as shelters are often far apart, as are the tents in which some of the patients are living. But we always find a way around these challenges.

We seek support from hospitals or colleagues in other organisations, for example, when we're running short of supplies or for other difficulties. In cases where a patient requires specialised care, such as for severe burns, we use a referral system to transfer the patient to an organisation that can provide the necessary treatment.

Despite the numerous obstacles we face, we remain committed to our work. Since the beginning of the war, and to this day, we are determined to continue providing care until every injured person in Gaza is healed.

What do you like best about your job? What motivates you?

One aspect of my work that I truly appreciate is witnessing the positive reactions of our patients, and especially when I can see them making progress. It brings me joy to see a once scared child now fearless and prepared to tackle challenges. Some people have even specifically requested the assistance of HI nurses and volunteers because of the motivation and support our services gave them, which I deeply appreciate.

Is there a story or an anecdote that has stuck with you and that you would like to share?

I will share a personal story. On 9 November, I was working in one of the shelters. I had finished my work and I was about to leave the shelter, write up my report on my day's work and charge up my phone because I hadn't had access to electricity. Just as I was leaving, I saw a lot of people at the entrance. They had come to tell me that my house had been bombed and no one was left alive. Two of my colleagues were with me when I received the news. I started running towards my house; it felt like I would never get there. I kept running despite the fear and pain I felt inside. When I arrived at my house, I saw that it had indeed been bombed, and there was no trace of my family. People and civil defence started asking me who was in the house, so I replied that all of my family was inside except me, as I had to go to work. They asked me for the names of my parents and siblings, and at that moment, I couldn't remember. There hadn't just been my direct family inside, but also my sisters and cousins who had fled their own homes to take shelter with us. After 10 minutes, all their names came back to me and started sharing them with the rescuers. I couldn't take on board what was happening. They took me to the hospital to search for them in the hope of finding some of them alive, especially my father, to whom I am very close.

I found my mother and sister-in-law at the Kuwaiti Hospital and my two sisters at Al-Najjar Hospital. They began bringing me body parts to identify other family members. I couldn't find my father. Then, three days after the bombing, we found his arm on the roof of our neighbour's house. My mother, two sisters, and two brothers were injured and were suffering from open wounds, fractures, and burns, but I was able to take control of the situation, treat their wounds, follow up on their cases at the hospitals, and be with them. Thankfully, they have recovered, but those moments still haunt me; I remember them whenever there's a similar incident.

What do you wish for in the future?

I hope to be a source of support for every person who needs it. We all need each other. My specialisation is human beings.

Since October 7 and the escalation of violence between Israel and Hamas, some 32,000 Palestinians have been killed – including at least 10,000 children - and 75,000 injured in the continuous bombing of Gaza by Israeli forces. This deadly offensive comes in the wake of a massive attack launched on Israel by Hamas, in which 1,200 Israelis were killed and 240 Israelis and foreign nationals were taken hostage.

HI is alarmed by the very high number of civilian victims, the lack of safe humanitarian access and the limited number of trucks being able to enter the Gaza strip daily. Along with more than 800 organizations, HI is calling for an immediate ceasefire to put an end to the carnage and ensure the provision of humanitarian assistance to the affected population.
