

Profile

Rita Giacaman and Rana Khatib: promoting health for Palestinians

Rita Giacaman takes the steps two at a time to her office, at a branch of Birzeit University located in downtown Ramallah, the bustling West Bank city near Jerusalem. The stairwell of the Institute of Community and Public Health is bare except for a single philodendron plant that, against all odds, has flourished and grown around the banister and railings with such strength and tenacity that the vine rises for several storeys. The same vitality is evident in both Giacaman and Rana Khatib, who is Director of the institute. Through a mix of passion, scientific rigour, and black humour, these Palestinian professors have nurtured a collective academic effort aimed at improving health conditions and services in the occupied Palestinian territory. "We produce more under crisis," Giacaman says. "There is no time for despair. We need hope."

Since 1978, when the collective was informally launched to meet the need for independent Palestinian health research and planning, Giacaman has been a driving force. Her pet project evolved to a formal Birzeit University Department in 1982 and was upgraded to become an institute in 1998, when Khatib signed on. Then, "we metamorphosed", Giacaman explains, "after severe military attacks kept too many students and faculty away during the 2001–2004 period. Eventually, we had to rent new premises inside Ramallah." Now 35 faculty researchers and staff are employed by the Institute of Community and Public Health in a multidisciplinary team. "We straddle between academic theory and practice and favor *de facto* policy making on the ground, not a top-down approach", Giacaman adds.

The two women—Giacaman, a Christian from Bethlehem, and Khatib, a Muslim from a venerable Jerusalem family—are good foils for each other. They were both educated abroad, are working mothers who had their children relatively late, and are committed to intensive research, teaching, training, fundraising, and intervention as public-health professionals. They view primary health care not just as stop-gap clinics in remote areas, but as an entire system of linked community health care in the West Bank and Gaza.

Dark eyes flashing, Giacaman says she's "proud of our resilience, and continual non-violent resistance to injustice through linking academic work to societal needs. Politically we are neutral. We deal with everybody." Their work requires a "familiarity with abnormality", says Giacaman, and efforts now are devoted to orienting traumatised Palestinian youths and other vulnerable groups to cope constructively with a lack of access to opportunities and excess violence under the Israeli occupation.

Khatib is calm and meticulous, yet unflummoxed by surprises. She recalls how, during the Second Intifada, as soon as a military curfew was lifted, she and her team

would dash around trying to document the health situation and collect data instead of stocking up on food like more practical housewives. "The political situation made me see things differently", explains Khatib. "We can make positive changes through supporting the community and through public health. Over time, small quantitative steps can create a qualitative change." Their programme is diverse: it encompasses epidemiology and biostatistics, health management, environmental health, and psychosocial and mental health. "It's not work, it's life," laughs Khatib.

Giacaman recounts how, until recently, any mention of the Israeli occupation drew rebukes from scientific journal editors, who would envision a torrent of hate mail and opt out. Neutrality seems a lopsided construct in these circumstances. "We had such a hard time publishing anything about Palestinian health or explaining the health consequences of war", she recalls, adding, "We just want the chance to expose the truth in a scientific way." The institute goes beyond truisms, such as the 1967 slogan "War is not healthy for children and other living things". Giacaman and Khatib back up such assertions with specific data.

A recent quality-of-life study by the Institute of Community and Public Health revealed that the separation barrier erected by the Israelis in the West Bank damages health by splitting up extended families. Without in-laws on hand to impart traditional child care and folk medicine, and with the local midwives blocked from free access by internal checkpoints and curfews, the negative effect on maternal and child health is measurable. Another pressing concern is dealing with chronic diseases while coping with insecurity and violence across the West Bank. Diabetes, metabolic disease, and cancers are prevalent, but turning research results into action to tackle these diseases is complicated by the political and socioeconomic situation.

Giacaman and Khatib do not push political advocacy platforms but prefer to work directly with institutions. Mostly, their institute cooperates with the Palestinian Ministries of Health, Education, Agriculture, and the Environment, plus a smorgasbord of local and international non-governmental organisations and United Nations relief agencies. "We learn from them about the issues that come up and work with them to deal with these issues", Giacaman says. "We don't compete."

The Institute of Community and Public Health is committed to easing the burdens caused by stressful conditions inside the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. "Whatever happens, we are here to stay", concludes Khatib.



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