



SUCCESS STORY

A Young Woman Mobilizes Grassroots Drive for Health Reform

Through USAID community advocacy activities, women are taking the lead in solving community health issues.



Image: Chemonics

Ministry of Health Nurse Asma Jawbera and Community Coordinator Haya Awyasa work together in the new clinic to improve health services. Here, Asma and Haya provide a check-up for a woman suffering from diabetes identified during Haya's home visits.

"We are improving health services and inspiring residents to care about their health rights...and building a community of volunteers," said community coordinator Haya Awyasa.

Haya Awyasa greets a father walking with his young children, asking him if his family has been vaccinated. She alerts him to the next clinic vaccination day and rumples the hair of the youngest child. "This would never have happened three months ago," Haya laughs. "I was too shy and it would be impossible for me to interact on the street with a male stranger, but my work is changing my life."

As a 24-year old sociology graduate, Haya dreamt of finding work that would let her experience the world. Yet in her northern West Bank village on the outskirts of Nablus, employment options were few. An exciting opportunity arose when USAID began working across 15 Nablus villages to participate in an unprecedented grassroots movement to improve public health care, through its the \$86 million USAID Palestinian Health Sector Reform and Development Project (known as the Flagship Project). The Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH), with the support of the USAID Flagship Project, is establishing a dynamic and continuous interaction between health facilities and the communities they serve, initiating the "Champion Communities" program.

When Haya was offered the role of Community Coordinator working to support a newly formed community-clinic committee, she thought her dreams had finally come true. "I studied so I could work and really change life for the betterment of all," she said. Although her father initially resisted, imagining her coming in at late hours and conversing with men in the field, Haya was able to persuade him of the importance of the champion community initiative. She is now a key element in its successful implementation in her village – and has already made a difference to community health.

In the first three months of their work with the MoH, Haya and her colleagues managed to move the local clinic from a dark unventilated space to a well-lit, healthier environment. Community response was immediate and positive: when the community coordinators began visiting homes to talk to women about health issues, doors opened wide and tangible changes began taking place.

Through the USAID Flagship Project, the MoH is empowering women to participate in planning for and guaranteeing access to quality services within their own community and region. Working alongside women like Haya are female MoH nurses and district supervisors, who are helping the Ministry solve community-identified health priorities. As a result of this community-Ministry coordination, the MoH has provided more physician visits, increased outreach into homes, brought essential ultrasound equipment and training, and improved the clinic pharmacy. "We are improving health services and inspiring residents to care about their health rights...and building a community of volunteers", she said.

As Haya assists the clinic nurse in reading a pregnant woman's blood pressure, the two women proudly recount their most recent community coup. During a recent health outreach session for women, Haya and the nurse tackled community anxiety about the swine flu vaccine when the nurse vaccinated herself. Seventeen mothers followed suit.