Shahd El-Swerki (left), national UN Volunteer - Communications Assistant at UNDP Gaza, visited the cancer care centre and joined the women from the centre in sewing breast prosthetics which are distributed for free to female cancer patients. (Photo: UNV State of Palestine, 2015)

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Shahd El-Swerki

Being part of a story

**Gaza, State of Palestine:** Volunteerism is the path I have chosen to shape the development of my community and my own self-confidence. In my home of Gaza city, within the State of Palestine, volunteerism, as with many other things, takes its own particular shape. We volunteer to help people and to help ourselves in the context of high levels of poverty and unemployment. Since my graduation, I have volunteered regularly in my community; helping to clean streets, harvest olives, strawberries and oranges, and providing support to a mental health and psychosocial organization.

In January 2014, I joined the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Gaza to work as a national UN Volunteer Communications Assistant. I felt so proud when I joined them as in some institutions, a volunteer can be seen as someone who does things others refuse to do. However, in my case, I did everything everybody wanted to do! For me, this is the real achievement. I helped in increasing access to information about UNDP projects, the organization of public events, strengthening UNDP’s profile in the local media and
delivering UNDP messages of development to the local community.

Since working with UNDP, I have realized how important it is to work with and alongside my community. Gaining trust can be achieved by being as close as you can to the community, and by talking to people about what you are doing and what you are planning to do. I have learnt to ask people and to hear them, to be supportive of your team members and colleagues, and the importance of building a trustworthy reputation. During my lifetime, I have lived through three armed conflicts, which have had a significant impact on me as a woman, as a mother and as a volunteer. According to data from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the most recent of these conflicts, the 2014 Gaza Crisis, led to more than 500 000 Palestinians being displaced at the height of the hostilities with a considerable proportion of the population facing limited access to water and sanitation services. In addition, many patients experienced difficulties accessing medication, particularly cancer patients.

Despite these struggles, a number of Palestinian women living with cancer and female survivors of cancer have been volunteering their time to sew low-cost breast prosthetics to be distributed to women for free through the support of the Aid and Hope Programme for Cancer Patient Care. The slogan for the cancer care centre - "this life is mine, and I will live it" was inspired from the experiences of the Head of the Hope Programme's Association, Mrs Eman Shenan, who is a survivor of breast cancer. On the occasion of International Women's Day, last 8th March, I worked with the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme Field Unit in Gaza to organise a ceremony honouring Mrs Shenan and 50 female breast cancer survivors, taking this opportunity to acknowledge both their strength and commitment. It was such a great chance to interact directly with women I consider to be role models. Not only are they survivors, but they are also volunteers.

I will always be grateful for my assignment as a UNV Communications Assistant with UNDP. Without this opportunity, I would not have met the many wonderful women that I have, such as these women survivors of breast cancer, who shared with me their hopes, dreams and fears. I used to feel happy when reading stories about the positive things being undertaken in my community, but now being part of this work, the feeling is absolutely priceless.

Bio: Shahd El-Swerki is a national UN Volunteer Communications Assistant at UNDP-PAPP’s office in the Gaza Strip, State of Palestine. She holds a Bachelor's degree in English and French Literature from Al-Azhar University in Gaza and worked previously as a translator, project assistant and public relations officer. Shahd joined the UNV programme because she believes that the world is in need of volunteers, who are able to give without limits and with no other interests but learning and serving their own people.
Arab States

- State of Palestine • OCHA • cancer care

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 3: Good health and well-being