The BMJ Appeal 2023-24: The Syrian health workers pulling 24 hour shifts to keep their maternity hospital open

Through earthquakes and civil war, the doctors and staff of the Ain Al Bayda Hospital are going above and beyond—even as a funding crisis threatens to shut them down

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Ghufran, a 22 year old midwife, works a 9 am to 4 pm shift in an antenatal clinic at the Ain Al Bayda Hospital in northwest Syria. She’s responsible for monthly check-ups on patients who live in one of the 58 neighbouring camps for internally displaced people, who have been unable to leave through a decade of barbaric civil war. “The biggest danger to pregnant women here is anaemia caused by malnutrition,” she says.

When her shift has finished Ghufran moves to the obstetric wing, where she works for the remaining hours of the day. She’s on duty as one of six midwives working in a rota along with a surgical team and nursing staff. These gruelling working hours are the only way to provide essential care given the scarcity of available medical staff, says Waseem Bakir, health coordinator of Violet, a Syrian non-governmental organisation. “There’s a constant risk that pregnant women won’t find the medical care they need,” says Bakir.

**Importance of female doctors and staff**

Ghufran works in the recently opened maternity unit at the Ain Al Bayda Hospital. The unit boasts operating rooms offering caesarean sections when needed and an incubator department—both lifesaving rarities in northwest Syria. There’s also a medical analysis laboratory, a pharmacy, and an intensive care department. The unit is funded by ActionAid UK, which works for a better future for women and girls living in poverty and is this year’s BMJ annual appeal charity.

Rama, 26, has been living in a displaced person camp for 10 years and is six months pregnant with her first child when she speaks to The BMJ. She’s one of more than 5000 women and girls who have received medical care at the hospital this year. “In the new hospital there’s a women’s ward and a female team, which is excellent—it’s so difficult to communicate with male doctors,” she says.

The team at Ain Al Bayda provide the service for the poorest and most vulnerable members of the Syrian community. Eight in 10 of the 4.6 million people who have been trapped in temporary displacement camps since their homes were destroyed are women. And the new service is up and running against the odds: ActionAid UK is scrambling to fill a huge gap in healthcare funding in the region that followed a dramatic reduction in international donations, including a halving of aid for Syria from the UK government since 2021.

“All women have the right to carry a child and give birth in a safe, caring environment,” says Alam Janbein, ActionAid’s director for the Arab region. “However, as we see too often, in emergencies it is women’s needs that are the first to be deprioritised. There’s no doubt that the UK’s cuts to overseas aid have been a devastating blow to women’s and girls’ rights.”

**Giving birth in an earthquake**

ActionAid UK’s commitment to funding Ain Al Bayda meant that help was available when a major earthquake struck the region on 6 February 2023, killing 8000 people and injuring thousands more.

Ghufran and her colleagues were on duty delivering babies as the tremors shook the hospital, and several women went into premature labour through sheer terror. She recalls one patient who was seven months pregnant who arrived at the hospital shortly after the earthquake struck. “She was in such a state mentally that she couldn’t stand,” says Ghufran. “We were able to help her become calm. Even so, she had PROM [pre-labour rupture of the membranes] and gave birth prematurely.”

Khadija, an assistant surgeon, adds, “Many premature babies were born around this time, with many surviving through being put into incubators.” But others died in infancy, as diseases spread easily in the camps. Pregnant women, new mothers, and newborn babies are at risk of fever and dehydration, as tents don’t provide protection from the high temperatures.

“Pregnancy and childbirth don’t stop in a crisis,” says Bakir. “As we focus on recovery in Syria, services for women and children must be front and centre of the international response, and their protection should be prioritised.”

The hospital has been vital in saving lives, but its future is uncertain. “We only have funding up to August 2024,” Bakir tells The BMJ—and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs warned last month that humanitarian aid to the country was 72% underfunded.

For Ghufran, every small victory is important. An opportunity to continue providing this gruelling, dedicated work is all she asks.
The BMJ’s 2023 annual appeal supports ActionAid’s work with women and girls in over 45 countries to help achieve social justice and gender equality and to eradicate poverty. Shifting the power and working directly with women and girls, including in humanitarian emergencies, means that women’s specific health needs are less likely to be overlooked, putting them in a better position to build the future they deserve. Please donate to help women and girls live full, safe, and healthy lives, regardless of where they’re born. You can donate now at https://actionaid.org.uk/changelives/bmj-annual-appeal-2023-24

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