



## OBSTACLES THAT MAKE SURGERY FAR FROM THE FEMALE DOCTORS' AMBITIONS IN DAMASCUS HOSPITALS AND UNIVERSITIES

Hisham Al-Hammami<sup>1</sup>, Aliaa Bakr\*, Ramah Al Sawah and Mhd. Nezar Al Sharif

Faculty of Medicine , Syrian private university (SPU). Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic.

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### \*Corresponding Author

Aliaa Bakr

Faculty of Medicine , Syrian  
private university (SPU).

Damascus, Syrian Arab  
Republic.

### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aimed to define the barriers that face female students and residents when persuing a surgical career. **Methods:** A blinded questionnaire was distributed to female medical students in clinical years, and female residents' in Damascus hospitals between July and August 2017. **Results:** (93) resident doctors and (344) medical students participated in our survey. 27.3%(94/344) Of students plan to become surgeons. 47.1%(162/344) of students and 53.8%(50/93) of doctors indicated that the balance between social life and work is the main barrier 82.8%(77/93) of female doctors and 71.2%(245/344) of medical students said that the nature and

circumstances of work such as long working hours were an important obstacle. **Conclusion:** A balance in working life, the nature and circumstances of work, including working hours and sexual discrimination in society are the most important obstacles facing female students and doctors as surgeons.

**KEYWORDS:** Surgery, Obstacles, female students and residents.

### INTRODUCTION

Despite the big number of female students that enter faculty of medicine, a much smaller proportion applies to become surgeons. In previous studies such as a published paper entitled "POSTGRADUTE MEDICAL JOURNAL" in 2012 in UK hospitals, It was shown that work-life balance Is the main deterrent in a surgical career<sup>[1]</sup>, and the paucity of female role models and perceived sexual discrimination may cause female doctors to dismiss surgery as a career.<sup>[1]</sup> In addition, the Royal College of Physicians published a paper in 2009 "WOMEN

IN MEDICINE”): Stated that the future acknowledged that women would make up a greater share of the future medical workforce and was supportive of increasing the options for flexible training and part time working.<sup>[2]</sup>

Up to our knowledge, this study is the first of its kind in Syria. This study aimed to determine the barriers that face female students and residents in Syria in becoming surgeons.

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

This is a cross-sectional study of two different group of participants; first group was female medical students in fourth, fifth and sixth year in Syrian private university and Damascus University, the second group was female residents’ in Damascus hospital, Moussat Hospital and AlZahrawi Hospital. Voluntary participation was necessary from all participants.

### **Questionnaire**

An anonymous closed question paper survey entitled "Barriers that keep surgery away of doctors’ ambition" was distributed to the participants between July and August 2017. The questionnaire was designed to seek subjective answers related to career choice, work life balance and sexual discrimination.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was carried out using spss v23.

### **Ethical Approval**

We did not require any ethical approval. We had individual consent taken from participants and institutions administrators at each site.

## **RESULTS**

We had a total of 437 participants with 344(78.7%) medical students and 93(21.3%) resident doctors.

**Table: Summary of the results of our study.**

|   | Students response |            | Foundation Doctors response |           |
|---|-------------------|------------|-----------------------------|-----------|
|   |                   |            |                             |           |
| Are you considering a surgical career?                            | No                | 127(36.9%) | -                           | -         |
|   | Maybe             | 123(35.8%) | -                           | -         |
|   | Yes               | 94(27.3%)  | -                           | -         |
| Do you consider surgery suitable for you as a female?             | No                | 138(40.1%) | No                          | 54(58.1%) |
|   | Maybe             | 111(32.3%) | Maybe                       | 18(19.4%) |
|   | Yes               | 95(27.6%)  | Yes                         | 21(22.6%) |
| Affected by work life balance                                     | No                | 104(30.2%) | No                          | 27(29.0%) |
|   | Maybe             | 78(22.7%)  | Maybe                       | 16(17.2%) |
|   | Yes               | 162(47.1%) | Yes                         | 50(53.8%) |
| Affected by work nature (long working hours...)                   | No                | 56(16.3%)  | No                          | 10(10.8%) |
|   | Maybe             | 43(12.5%)  | Maybe                       | 6(6.5%)   |
|   | Yes               | 245(71.2%) | Yes                         | 77(82.8%) |
| Affected by possibility of harassment                             | No                | 54(15.7%)  | No                          | 19(20.4%) |
|   | Maybe             | 41(11.9%)  | Maybe                       | 13(14.0%) |
|   | Yes               | 249(72.4%) | Yes                         | 61(65.6%) |
| It will affect your feminism                                      | No                | 170(49.4%) | No                          | 41(44.1%) |
|   | Maybe             | 114(33.1%) | Maybe                       | 19(20.4%) |
|   | Yes               | 60(17.4%)  | Yes                         | 33(35.5%) |
| Fear of specialty (needs courage)                                 | No                | 309(89.8%) | No                          | 72(77.4%) |
|   | Maybe             | 25(7.3%)   | Maybe                       | 14(15.1%) |
|   | Yes               | 10(2.9%)   | Yes                         | 7(7.5%)   |
| Might affect your chances of becoming a wife                      | No                | 188(54.7%) | No                          | 62(66.7%) |
|   | Maybe             | 58(16.9%)  | Maybe                       | 12(12.9%) |
|   | Yes               | 98(28.5%)  | Yes                         | 19(20.4%) |
| Fear of the privacy of the specialty                              | No                | 224(65.1%) | No                          | 58(62.4%) |
|   | Maybe             | 76(22.1%)  | Maybe                       | 20(21.5%) |
|   | Yes               | 44(12.8%)  | Yes                         | 15(16.1%) |
| Affected by it being a men dominant career                        | No                | 141(41%)   | No                          | 37(39.8%) |
|   | Maybe             | 91(26.5%)  | Maybe                       | 32(34.4%) |
|   | Yes               | 112(32.6%) | Yes                         | 24(25.8%) |
| Do you think you will be embarrassed during the examination?      | No                | 212(61.6%) | No                          | 51(54.8%) |
|   | Maybe             | 100(29.1%) | Maybe                       | 28(30.1%) |
|   | Yes               | 32(9.3%)   | Yes                         | 14(15.1%) |
| Will you be embarrassed during rectal examination?                | No                | 88(25.6%)  | No                          | 28(30.1%) |
|   | Maybe             | 65(18.9%)  | Maybe                       | 13(14.0%) |
|   | Yes               | 191(55.5%) | Yes                         | 52(55.9%) |
| Will you be embarrassed during the examination of male genitalia? | No                | 84(24.4%)  | No                          | 19(20.4%) |
|   | Maybe             | 74(21.5%)  | Maybe                       | 11(11.8%) |
|   | Yes               | 186(54.1%) | Yes                         | 63(67.7%) |

**DISCUSSION**

We found that 27.6% of female students have considered surgery as a specialty. This may be due to the high ambition of the students at this stage of their medical career and the

independent life style that this specialty provide while not knowing the difficulties of this field on the nature of life.

Generally speaking, housework and raising children are the responsibilities of the mother. Therefore, being a surgeon or considering becoming one renders these responsibilities more strenuous. They have to balance between their career and their responsibilities in order to establish a comfortable lifestyle. It was noticed that (47.1%) of students found this issue a major obstacle.

Surgeons usually have many tasks including ward rounds, operations, clinic patients' and administration of them (3) which, in turn, requires long working hours. (71.2%) of students believed that long hours of work is a big barrier, as it does not suit the students of a woman.

Despite the great development that occurred in Syria in the 21st century, the eastern society as a whole still gives dominance and biased confidence to men's abilities in the surgical field. This rendered (72%) female students to choose "Sexual discrimination" as a reason that could prevent them from choosing a surgical career.

This male dominance as surgeons is imposed by both the physiology of their bodies and the mentality of society as well. Also a man's life responsibilities concentrated on work and not on housework or children raising.<sup>[5,6,7]</sup> (32.6%) of the students considered that an issue, however, the majority (41%) said it was not. Furthermore, (26.5%) were not sure if this as a real obstacle.

The nature of male society and what gives for male doctors of infinite powers, have made female students anxious about being harassed and disturbed, so that 72.4 of students and 65.6 % of doctors found harassment during work by male is major problem.

Moreover, about half of the student participants' in this said that the surgical career does not affect their feminism or their appearance.

Surgery is one of the professions that needs both boldness and courage due to its frightening scenes and the fact that it requires rapid life-saving decisions. However, only 28% of participants noted this as an obstacle.<sup>[4]</sup>

Medical career in general and specifically surgical career concentrates greatly on the privacy of the patient during the examination. The examination of perianal area as an example may cause an embarrassment to female doctors when examining it.<sup>[8]</sup> However, this was not an obstacle for many female students. Perhaps these students did not experience the situation in practice and real life.

It should be noted that the responses of residents in non-surgical specialties were remarkably different regarding the previous point. It should be pointed out that (55.9%) of the residents felt uncomfortable doing a male rectal examination and considered this is a major issue that prevents them from choosing surgery as a profession. Meanwhile, (67.7%) of the residents believed that the examination of the external genitals is a big obstacle due to its consequent embarrassment.

The sample of the residents was small compared to that of the students for two reasons. The first is that our goal was not making a comparison, but was understanding the obstacles that make the surgical specialty far from the aspirations of the students as a whole, whether students or hospital residents'.

The second reason was the difficulties experienced by researchers during data collection. The task of filling out questionnaires from residents was not easy because of the nature of the work, their preoccupation with the patients, and the overcrowding in the public hospitals in Damascus.

However, this questionnaire was welcomed by a group of female residents who had a role in promoting the common points that was presented in the questionnaire.

To conclude, the balance between work and social life and the nature, circumstances of work including working hours and sexual discrimination in society are the most important obstacles for female doctors who wish to specialize in surgery.

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