

MIRACLE MAKER

Dr. Ayesha Mohammed Abdullah, Managing Director of the Sciences Cluster of TECOM Investments Business Parks, tells **Umaima Tinwala** why a woman is not 'just' a woman, and how we can change the future.



Dr. Ayesha Mohammed Abdullah is a woman who knows how to work under pressure. As Managing Director of the Sciences Cluster of TECOM Investments Business Parks, she oversees Dubai Healthcare City (DHCC), Dubai Biotechnology and Research Park (DuBiotech), and the Energy and Environment Park (ENPARK), juggling her time between the three distinct entities.

She's also a wife and mother who takes the time to talk to her sons about their future, and be a companion and partner to her husband. And last, but not the least, she is an Emirati woman who takes her role in the world quite seriously, representing her fellow citizens on a global level in her industry.

But express any fascination on how she manages to successfully manage every aspect of her life so well, and she dismisses it with a shrug. "There've always been lots of expectations on me, so I'm used to dealing with it," she smiles.

Dr. Abdullah is the oldest of four children, born in the UAE, "before Dubai became glamorous". Coming from a family of well-educated professionals meant that, even though she was a woman, what was expected from her was no different from what was expected from her brother. "My parents empowered us with education. They allowed us to do whatever we wanted. I would say that my father was ahead of his age, because he never differentiated between my brother and me. In fact, at a time when women were pushed into traditional roles of teachers or doctors, he gave us the freedom and resources to tread a different path," she says.

True to her father's ideals, Dr. Abdullah went to a non-conventional school, where boys and girls studied together. "It was not very common, and at that time we had very few schools like that," she explains. But the freedom that she and her siblings were allowed never translated to lack of discipline. "We were still a conservative family, and I would simply say that I imbibed the values and importance of discipline and hard work from my upbringing," says Dr. Abdullah.

Which meant that although Dr. Abdullah was pursuing her education, her personal life was not put on hold. She was married at the age of 18, after which she went to the United States on a scholarship to study

biomedical and electric engineering.

"It was quite an experience. I had my first son during my first semester there, and by the time I was an undergrad, I was also a mother to two boys!" she laughs. While a situation like that may be unimaginable for some, for Dr. Abdullah, she took it in her very confident stride. "Although, to be honest, I did choose not to go to medical school because I thought it would be too overwhelming with two little boys. I was lucky to have had supportive neighbours, but I had to make a choice," she says.

The most valuable support though, came from her family. "I truly believe that men and women can't go through life alone. They need the support the other offers. The men in my family have been that way. My father was an enabling person who helped me grow and never put any limitations to what I can achieve. Even my mother was very supportive – she helped me hands-on in raising my own kids," says Dr. Abdullah.

And Dr. Abdullah has the motivation to give her best. "More than anything, I can't let myself down, mostly for my children, because I am their role model. There was many times in my life, with school, family and a job when it got difficult, but I had to push on," she asserts.

While in the USA, Dr. Abdullah absorbed more than just what her curriculum included. "It was a different time back then. Americans were not suspicious, rather, they were friendly and hospitable. There was no negativity, although there was a lot of curiosity. At first, people thought I wore a headscarf because I was bald! I had to explain to them that it was for religious reasons," she laughs.

But the questions and curiosity never had a negative impact on Dr. Abdullah. If anything, it made her keener to continue. "They were the best years of my life, where my curiosity was fuelled by the things around me and I learned a lot," she says.

Once back in Dubai, Dr. Abdullah went to work as Director of Engineering for the UAE Ministry of Health, becoming one of the few women who were part of the working force. "Did I face discrimination because I was a woman? Sure. But that's not exclusive to this region. Women across the world have the same issues – they just don't get the opportunities that men have. And sometimes, we too can have a defensive stance. I think we should be more normal,

not wait to pick up negative vibes and be paranoid. It's important to be confident, and good, perhaps better at what you do than your male colleagues," she advises.

From there on, Dr. Abdullah trained at an engineering firm, and completed a lot of projects that gave her the technical expertise she needed. She then went back to the UK to do her MBA. She came back to the UAE, and a year and a half later, was back in the UK for her PhD.

"By then, I had four sons and one daughter. I could not leave them all behind for such a long time, so I took along my three younger boys and daughter. As you can imagine, it was not easy," she smiles.

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Alternating between attending school events, home, sorting out the usual problems, taking her children out for entertainment, and of course, keeping up with her own coursework ensured she had to cope with huge struggles. "There are times when you have to compromise. As a woman and as a mother, you do try to do as much as you can. You have to explain to your children that you appreciate their time, enjoy their company, and try to make up for lost time as much as you can. As long as you are sure you did the best you could in that situation, that's enough," she says.

For Dr. Abdullah, who herself came from a modern-thinking family, it is important to

impart the same values to her own kids. "It's an empowering environment for kids when they see their mother working hard, balancing family, work, etc. I believe it really had a positive impact on my boys," she smiles.

Old-fashioned and restrictive mentalities can only be changed if the next generation is taught new lessons. And that change, believes Dr. Abdullah, begins at home. It is this staunch belief that pushed her on in her darkest days.

"Sometimes I was working so hard, I felt dejected, and felt there was no light at the end of the tunnel. But then, I would think of my children. What message would I be

giving them? That it's ok to give up when the going gets tough? Life is not easy, you are going to have challenges, bottlenecks that threaten to break you. But you need to persevere. This became a self-empowering agency for me, where I told myself I could do anything I set my mind to. You don't have to be a rocket scientist – anybody can achieve what they want if they put their mind to it," she states.

Her replies come easily because Dr. Abdullah has been asked quite often why she does what she does. What motivates her to push for the best on all fronts in her life, be it work or at home? "As a society, I owe a lot to my country. It's a sense that you have to do something, not



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only to make yourself proud, but to go abroad and excel academically, become a representative for your country and religion, and break the stereotype,” she says.

But although her words come fast and furious, there is no aggression in her belief. “How we bring about that change should not be confrontational. As women, we need to become contributing members of society, raise our children well, break the norm. We have to do a lot of ourselves, and once we get that opportunity, we prove that we are as smart as anyone, and the same people who wrote us off earlier will give us another chance,” she says.

However, Dr. Abdullah is also careful about not using her status as a woman to gain any special privileges. “It’s about being human, not about men and women. I should not be asking for a break because I am a woman. I have always worked with men – most of my life, my bosses were men – but they always gave me the break. In the UAE, we are very fortunate. It’s just a matter of time as more women get into the work force. Mostly because today, women are not only working for themselves, but also for economic reasons as families need two incomes for survival and for a better lifestyle. And it’s not going to impact family life, because women can strike the balance. We will never make a choice between career and family,” she asserts.

Today, Dr. Abdullah is achieving one success after another at the workplace, growing from one leadership position to another in her six years with Dubai Holding. “The time that I have spent at Dubai Holding is phenomenal. It has been a time of growth, time of achieving the impossible, thinking out of the box. It has been about positioning Dubai at a global level – a fantastic joy ride,” she gushes.

And there is true passion behind her love for the work she does. “The advantage we had was that we started with a clean slate. It was a blue sky project, where we could use all our creativity, learn from others, and do something totally new,” she says.

Dr. Abdullah’s career has been predominantly in healthcare. So when she was offered this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, she could not refuse. “Coincidentally, my paper during my thesis was on how we grow knowledge-intensive scientific industry in a developing country. I explored how one can create knowledge partners, what works, what does not,

drew on experiences from other countries, and I was fortunate that, on some level, I had the chance to implement that in Dubai. It was basically putting what I had learned over four years into practice,” she smiles.

So Dr. Abdullah first established the regulatory framework for DHCC, which she achieved in two years. Her background helped as she could draw on her own expertise, and was in a position to tap resources from all over the world. She asked the questions and got the answers. And she does not fail to thank the people she works with. “I have a team of wonderful, passionate, committed, and extremely intelligent people, people who want to change the world. They want a legacy that will outlive them – that’s their level of commitment,” she says.

But with all the joy and compliments for work well done comes an indication that her head is still firmly set on her shoulders. “I am not going to claim that we have achieved everything. We have a long way to go. This is only the tip of the iceberg – we have the capacity for a lot more,” she says.

Her reward, she says, comes from the fact that they have managed to bring quality medical services close to home, to see patients and how the medical services are improving the quality of their lives – you can’t put a dollar value on that, it’s a feeling that transcends you.

Today, Dr. Abdullah can proudly say that she has grown, personally and professionally, not just in terms of acquiring knowledge, but also in dealing with different people, different cultures, learning how to close major deals, how to deal with partners, taking collaborative approach, etc.

For Dr. Abdullah, the next five years seem to be just as daunting as the early years of her career. “My children are going to make their career choices, and I hope they grow up to be intelligent individuals. In addition, in my new role, I have to establish synergy between the entities, and explore new avenues for growth,” she says.

Given her history, and apparent ease with balancing personal and professional life with equal dedication and passion, this does not seem like a hurdle Dr. Abdullah will not be able to tackle successfully. And therein lies the secret to her success.



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