286 - Ruling on Muslim women working as nurses and doctors

the question

My wife is studing to become a nurse at a University, is it lawful to: -examine patients(male or female) and give them baths which are apart of the class projects.
-examine men as a nurse in non-emergency situations at a non-muslim hospital.
-work at a home for the mentally ill where the co-workers are male and the patients are also.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

If a woman finds that she has to work because of necessity, she is permitted to work outside the home, as is indicated by the fact that the two daughters of Shu’ayb used to water the sheep, and the story of Asma’ bint Abi Bakr working outside the home. If a woman is widowed with children, and has no breadwinner and is receiving no money from the Bayt al-Maal (treasury), it is permissible for her to earn a living. Although we say that a woman is permitted to work outside the home when it is necessary, she should nevertheless do only the work she needs to do in order to meet her needs. If a woman has professional skills which not every woman possesses, and which are needed by other woman and society as a whole, then it is permissible for her to practice her profession outside the home, so long as she adheres to the conditions prescribed by sharee’ah and has the permission of her legal (shar’i) guardian. The evidence that it is permissible for the woman to work outside the home in a field where there is a need for her work, as long as she adheres to the conditions prescribed by sharee’ah, is to be seen in the fact that at the time of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), midwives used to attend women in labour, and skilled women used to practice circumcision, and he did not condemn them for doing so. It is also known that Rufaydah al-Ansaariyyah used to treat the wounded in her tent, which had been set up in the

mosque for that purpose. She was very skilled in treating the sick, and her work was done with the knowledge and express permission of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). Sa'd ibn Mu'aadh was transferred to her tent for treatment. This indicates that it is permissible for a woman to practice her profession outside the home, and by analogy we may deduce that it is permissible for a female doctor to open a clinic outside her home for the treatment of women and children. By doing this, she is fulfilling the duty of fard kifaayah (a duty falling on the entire community – if some people fulfil it, responsibility is lifted from the rest, otherwise all will be held accountable. Translator). Such clinics make it easy for sick women to come to a female doctor, hence they no longer have to uncover their 'awrah before a male doctor when they need treatment.

But this permission is given on the condition that this work does not affect her duties towards her own home, husband and children, and that she has her husband's permission, because these duties are her individual duties (fard 'ayn), which take precedence over her responsibilities towards the community (fard kifaayah). When there is any conflict, her individual duties must come first.

(Al-Mufassal by 'Abd al-Kareem, 4/272).

Another hadeeth which describes Muslim women at the beginning of Islam practising a profession was narrated by Hafsah, concerning a woman who used to treat the wounded. Al-Bukhaari, may Allah have mercy on him, reported in his Saheeh that Hafsah said: "A woman came and stayed at the fort of Bani Khalaf, and told us about her sister. Her sister's husband used to go out on military campaigns with the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). He had been on twelve campaigns, and she (his wife) had accompanied him on six. She said, 'We used to treat the wounded and take care of the sick…'"

(Reported by al-Bukhaari, no. 313).

But a woman's work as a nurse or doctor is regulated by the rules indicated in other Islamic texts. Al-Haafiz ibn Hajar, may Allah have mercy on him, commenting on the above hadeeth, mentioned

some of these conditions: “What we learn from this hadeeth is that a woman is allowed to offer medical treatment to a non-mahram man (one to whom she is not related), so long as this takes the form of bringing medicine to him, for example, or other forms of indirect treatment (i.e. with no touching or direct contact involved) – except in cases where it is necessary and there is no fear of temptation (such as in an emergency situation or in the event of a disaster).”

If a woman works in complete hijaab, without touching a male patient, or being alone with him in any way, and as long as there is no fear that she may be the cause of temptation or be tempted herself, and she is not neglecting a more essential duty such as taking care of her husband or children, and she has the permission of her guardian, then it is permissible for her to work. In principle, men should be treated by male doctors and nurses, and women by female doctors and nurses. There should be no mixing of the sexes in medical treatment, except when it is necessary and as long as there is no fear of temptation.

And Allah knows best.