

INTERVIEW

with Suheir Nofal, master's student at the Institute of Energy and Climate Research at the Forschungszentrum Jülich

“I REALLY LIKE THE RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT IN JÜLICH”



You applied for a research stay in Jülich as part of your Master studies. How did you get the idea?

Suheir Nofal: My supervisor in Palestine suggested the idea to me. I have chosen to complete my Master degree in the field of Renewable Energies. This is a new joint Master program at Palestine Polytechnic University (PPU) in Hebron – my home university – and Al-Quds University in Abu Dis. It is financed by the European Commission. I am part of the first generation of students in the program. There is currently a lot of EU funding for the field of Renewable Energies – this was one of the reasons I applied to the program. Incidentally, Palestine Polytechnic University is presently getting funding for a solar roof. My stay in Jülich is a chance for me to perform experiments that I couldn't do at home due to lack of facilities and equipment.

What is your scientific background?

Suheir Nofal: I studied engineering at Palestine Polytechnic University and graduated with a bachelor's degree. But afterward, in spite of very good grades, I couldn't find a job. Possibly because I am a woman. However, women make up the majority in my field. That is because the men all go abroad to study. The main problem is that there are no jobs. My specialty is Civil Engineering, the construction of buildings and infrastructure, such as bridges. But only very few infrastructure projects get approved in Palestine. Another factor is the high percentage of people with a university education in Palestine. We live with a continuous political conflict and everyone is looking for a way to improve their situation. Everyone who can at all afford it sends their children to university. At the university, your course of studies does not depend on individual preference, but on your grades. Those who left school with good grades are given the choice of either medicine or engineering by their parents. After graduating with a Bachelor's degree, most can't find a job. This has led to a new trend toward Master courses.

You have been at the Forschungszentrum Jülich for half a year. Is this the first time you went abroad?

Suheir Nofal: No, I was able to visit other European countries in the period between my Bachelor and Master studies. Right after my final examinations, I was very discouraged because I didn't know how to proceed. Then I started listening to lectures by an Egyptian professor of psychology on the internet. These centered on the question of how to find out what you want to do with your life. Based on this, I drew up a to-do-list for my life. On top was travelling. Even as a high school student I dreamed of the Eiffel tower, never believing I would one day really get to Paris. Travelling is difficult with a Palestinian passport. Also, I had no money. I have many siblings, and my parents had to pay for all of them to receive an education. But then I started to learn French and I got the opportunity for a stay in Southern France. That was my first time abroad. I spent one month living with a guest family and had a wonderful time with many sight-seeing trips and new friends. France was a wonderful experience. After that, I knew how it works. Then I applied for a six-month stay in Rome, supported by the Erasmus program of the EU. This was my best experience yet. I had to organize everything myself: making contact with the university, finding an apartment and registering with the police for a residence permit. For the first time in my life, I had an income of my own and could afford small excursions. During this stay, I even went to Spain for two weeks to participate in a two-week workshop that I had successfully applied for funding to attend.

What was the beginning in Jülich like for you?

Suheir Nofal: At first it was difficult finding an apartment. However, everyone helped me. My supervisor was very supportive and all my colleagues at the institute explained and showed me a lot. Regarding the research culture, the biggest difference between the Forschungszentrum and my home university are the facilities. At home, we don't have many laboratories because everything – equipment and materials – is so expensive.

Here you work in the field of Photovoltaics. What is your research topic?

Suheir Nofal: I work on liquid phase crystalline thin film-based solar cells. These have a lot of potential, as they are relatively easy to build and have a high energy conversion efficiency. It is my task to study the properties of the incorporated materials with different methods of characterization.

Shortly you will return to Palestine for your Master's examination. What comes next?

Suheir Nofal: I am currently applying for funding for a PhD position. In my PhD project, I plan to perform thermal simulations of solar cells. I have experience with simulations because I worked with them a lot during my Bachelor studies. Although the software is not the same, the basic principles are.

Any further plans?

Suheir Nofal: I definitely want to stay in research, living and working in Europe. I really like the research environment in Jülich. In addition, I want to travel much more. I want to take a road trip and visit all European countries by car. First, I would like to go north to Sweden. I enjoy nature so much, a forest or the sea. I don't know yet if anyone will join me but I don't mind travelling alone. So far, everything I've done on my own has been a positive experience and I have good memories of it all.

The interview was conducted by Kristin Mosch.