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An Afghan Polio Survivor's Journey

Like many polio survivors, Shapari was too young to remember most details about contracting polio. “My parents said I had come down with a fever. Soon,” she recalls, “I lost sensation and energy in both my legs.” As a young girl growing up in Afghanistan, Shapari remembers not being able to run and play with her classmates. Each day, she looked forward to her father coming to pick her up and take her home.



Shapari with diploma from Gandhara University. Courtesy of UNHCR Pakistan.

In fifth grade, events out of her control once again dramatically changed the direction of her life. Conflict had broken out near her home in Afghanistan, and her family, fearing for their safety, fled across the border into Pakistan, where they settled as refugees in the city of Peshawar.

Life was not easy as a refugee, let alone one with a disability, but Shapari's parents managed to enroll her in a local school. Her parents described her as a hard-working and bright student, but, without proper medical care, her physical

condition continued to worsen. Weakness in her hands made it difficult to even hold a pencil.

With the help of supportive teachers, Shapari managed to reach the 12th grade. However, her physical ailments and ever-present social stigmas surrounding disability in Pakistan pushed her into depression. For the next three years, she barely left home.

Concerned about her condition, Shapari's mother urged her to get out and go spend time with her sister. As her mother pushed her in her wheelchair, Shapari had a fateful encounter that would alter the course of her life. “As we were on our way to my sister's home in Hayatabad, an old bearded man saw my mother pushing me in a wheelchair,” Shapari recalls. The man suggested she visit Habib Physiotherapy Complex and meet with Dr. Mahboob Ur Rahman, its founder and director.

Dr. Mahboob Ur Rahman, who can be found in PHI's *Post-Polio Directory*, has been assisting Afghan refugees and other polio patients since the 1980s when he established a free polio clinic in Peshawar, a city of roughly two million people 35 miles from the Afghan border. He opened Habib Physiotherapy Complex in 1997 and has also arranged free polio camps in different districts all across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in northwestern Pakistan.

Once she arrived at the Habib clinic, Shapari was able to receive proper rehabilitative care. After approximately three months of treatment, she no longer required the use of a wheelchair to get

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around. After six months, Shapari was able to walk without the use of crutches or orthotic support.



Shapari with her mother (right). Courtesy of UNHCR Pakistan.

Dr. Mahboob Ur Rahman became a sort of mentor to her and helped get her a scholarship to work toward a BSc in Physiotherapy at the Mahboob College of Physiotherapy/Mahboob Medical Institute, an initiative made possible by the support of various NGOs operating in the country. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees and the International Rescue Committee have been instrumental in supporting

the institution's rehabilitation and physiotherapy training program. In particular, UNHCR supports the training by covering tuition fees, course material costs, transportation and stipends for trainees.

Shapari also received a DAFI scholarship through UNHCR. Funded by the Government of Germany and administered by UNHCR, the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee initiative, known by its acronym DAFI, grants scholarships to deserving young refugees enrolled in Higher Education Commission (HEC) recognized universities, colleges and polytechnics in Pakistan.

Shapari thrived in the program, but problems with her health interrupted her plans. Showing determination, Shapari pushed on and eventually graduated last year from Gandhara University Peshawar's physiotherapy program. She has since returned to Afghanistan to help treat those with disabilities who might find themselves in similar circumstances to hers as a child.

Shapari's journey shows what is possible when polio survivors in that part of the world are given access to proper medical care, education and other forms of social support. "I told myself, I have polio, but polio does not have me." ■

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Post-Polio Health International's mission is to collect, preserve and make available research and knowledge to promote the well-being and independence of polio survivors, home ventilator users, their caregivers and families, and to support the health professionals who treat them.

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