

ASIA-PACIFIC

STRENGTH. DIGNITY. ABILITY.

WHEN WOMEN CHALLENGE DISABILITY

This International Women's Day, we armed ourselves with searchlights to look for inspiration – that was just our tunnel vision. We soon realized that this land is brimming with tales of resilience, where physical disability is no deterrence and the wheelchair is in fact the magical chariot. Disabled, but not discouraged, these women from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Myanmar and Pakistan are all about steely nerves and compassionate smiles. They prove yet again that there is no limit to their ability.

WITHOUT THEM, OUR JOB WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE

His name is synonymous with the ICRC's Physical Rehabilitation Programme. Having transformed millions of lives by working tirelessly over three decades in the war-hit country of Afghanistan, **Alberto Cairo** says the celebration of *International Women's Day* should be compulsory here.

“Everybody should thank women for the incredible work that they carry out every day despite being in the midst of unfavourable circumstances like war, poor security, poverty, prejudices and lack of opportunities. We need to acknowledge the resilience and ingenuity that they possess; the tenacity they show despite being marginalized and being victims of suffocating traditions. These are just a few of the reasons why this day needs to be celebrated here.

Every day, I see mothers and sisters bring their disabled children and brothers to us for physical rehabilitation. It is with them that we discuss the treatment plans. For, it is the women (and not men) who memorize the exercises and other techniques so that they can go home and ensure that the disabled family member practises them regularly.

We know that these loving and caring women will be the perfect caretakers despite having numerous other responsibilities. Without them, our job would be impossible.

I've met countless widows who've managed to raise their children alone, providing them with all that is needed, including a sound education. I wonder how many have had to play the role of both mother and father at the same time. And for that, and so much more, my admiration for them grows each passing day. Tabrik, Afghan women!”

For more, turn to back page.



THE WONDER THAT IS JERSEY NO. 7

Nilofar Bayat, Afghanistan

Posters of Roger Federer adorn the walls of her bedroom, and like the Swiss ace, Nilofar Bayat is all about sporting passion and resilience. At 25, this feisty law graduate from Afghanistan is the inspirational captain of the country's wheelchair basketball team for women. And much like her other "hero", Oprah Winfrey, Nilofar lets her light shine bright each time she wheels into the court, proudly sporting jersey No. 7.

A bomb blast in Kabul left her with paraplegia when Nilofar was just two years old, but she overcame the challenge of being in a wheelchair when she started playing basketball at the age of 19.

I am aware of my disability, but I am also aware of the endless possibilities that still lie ahead of me. Losing a part of your body does not mean the end of life. You're still capable, you're still alive.

OF BATTLING MINDSETS

"Afghan women live in one of the most conservative societies. I already had a tough life as a wheelchair-bound woman, and it got even more challenging when I became a sportswoman. The biggest barrier has been people's mindset, which can only change when they come across more women like me. First they laugh at you, and then they cheer you on! We must not be deterred – our fight for our rights must go on," she says.

Belonging to the southern province of Ghazni, Nilofar works as a data entry operator at the physical rehabilitation centre run by the ICRC in Kabul. But basketball remains her passion. "This sport has brought back my confidence and helped me change lives," the athlete says.

STEPPING STONES TO SUCCESS

A few months ago, when the young team flew to Indonesia for the 2018 Asian Para Games, Nilofar aimed for the winner's trophy. Bringing her teammates together in tight huddles during the matches, she was often seen cheering them on loudly. Clad in a white hijab, her face always resplendent and smiling, Nilofar motivated her team all along. Finishing fourth, she says, wasn't ideal, but the experience was priceless. "We're proud to represent Afghanistan at regional and international sporting events and feel extremely happy when people talk about the strength and positivity of our people, and not just the war and strife that they associate with Afghanistan," Nilofar says.

IN THE LIMELIGHT

Acutely aware that decades of conflict ravaged her dear homeland, Nilofar says it's difficult not to feel saddened about the harsh realities of life. But it's this struggle that seems to bring out the strength in many women like Nilofar, who have been able to follow their path. During their trip to Indonesia, Nilofar found a fan in a Japanese journalist, who was visibly impressed by the vivacious team captain. "It is amazing to see how famous we have become and it's great to showcase Afghanistan's other side to the world," she says.



HERO OF HER OWN LIFE

Inspired by Pakistani motivational speaker Muniba Mazari, who is also wheelchair-bound, Nilofar is now gearing up for the 2020 Summer Paralympics in Tokyo. She hopes that her team qualifies and says that she would be attending the opening ceremony as a special invitee.



A. B. Khan/ICRC

BEATING POLIO LIKE A BOSS

Rubina Shaheen, Pakistan

Seated in her office in the ICRC's Peshawar subdelegation, 31-year-old Rubina Shaheen paints a picture of success and happiness. Diagnosed with polio when she was a child, Rubina overcame all barriers in life and received an education, thanks to her mother's unrelenting support. Today, she is a secretary at the ICRC's Physical Rehabilitation Programme in Peshawar, Pakistan – a post she's held for two years. She is also a trained physiotherapist and disability expert.

Prior to working with the ICRC, Rubina was the disability programme manager with Comprehensive Health and Education Forum, followed by a stint as a microfinance lead officer with Khwendo Kor. All praise for her present work environment, Rubina says, "The ICRC invites ideas and work from disabled people in order to provide them with a platform to showcase their abilities."

While the rest of her family focused on Rubina's disability, her mother and brother ensured she received an education and egged her on to work and become self-reliant.

Her biggest support system, however, proved to be her husband, who also has polio. Without him, Rubina says, she would have found it much harder to ignore the naysayers. A love marriage for him, arranged for her, Raheel's support ensured that Rubina could step out and get a job.

The young couple's biggest joy came in the form of their son, who is able-bodied. She says they cried tears of joy when he took his first steps – they were so happy he could walk!

According to Rubina, there is a twin strategy to make life less arduous for those with disabilities – first, sensitize their families about the difficulties they face, and second, learn to ignore "what will people say". "Instead of looking at someone's disability, people should focus on their abilities," she quips.

Sometimes, all that people see is a beautiful woman with a disability and pity me. But in the end, the only opinion that should matter to me has to be mine.



BORN WITHOUT LIMBS, SHE SCALED GREAT HEIGHTS WITH PLUCKY RESOLVE

Ma Hla Aye, Myanmar

Ma Hla Aye is a wonder woman – not only has she conquered insurmountable odds, but she also makes one wonder about how somebody so gentle-looking can be a powerhouse of guts and gumption.

Suffering from tetra-amelia syndrome, 25-year-old Ma Hla Aye from Myitkyina was born without arms and legs. The disorder is extremely rare and can also affect other parts of the body.

The task was challenging since fitting someone with even two prostheses can be tricky, and Ma Hla Aye had to get four! But through her courage and strength, she learned to use the four new limbs in just one month.

Despite living all her life with this extremely debilitating disability, Ma Hla Aye has never let the smiles leave her face. She had to give up on her education when her brothers started working and could no longer take her to school. Not willing to sit idle, Ma Hla Aye started a small tailoring business.

In May 2018, she arrived at the ICRC-supported physical rehabilitation centre of the Ministry of Health and Sports in Myitkyina to be fitted with two lower prostheses and two cosmetic arms.

“Now I can do more by myself and go anywhere I want... just like everyone else. I can go to the market on my own and also help my mother in the kitchen. I don’t even need to stand on a chair when I’m doing my tailoring work. These prosthetics really changed my life!” Ma Hla Aye joyfully adds.

Regis Tiffeneau, the orthotist-prosthetist who worked with Ma Hla Aye in her rehabilitation, says, “The way Ma Hla Aye has handled the physical therapy is incredible and impressive. She won our hearts with her grit and positivity.”

THIS COACH'S MANTRA: SOLIDARITY, UNITY AND BONHOMIE

P. Chan/ICRC



Ann Sineth, Cambodia

She is the coach and captain of Kampong Speu's wheelchair basketball team for women, but a few years ago Ann Sineth was all set to quit the game. Disabled in one leg, Ann joined the team in 2013 and became the coach a couple of years later. But the initial days were tough. Pushing the wheelchair was difficult and she often found herself with bruises due to frequent falls.

"Training with American coach Mary Allison Cook was the turning point. She was so tiny, but she had immense strength. I learnt the skills of wheelchair basketball from her," the 30-year-old says.

Bullied as a child due to her disability, Ann gave up on her dream of becoming an accountant because she couldn't pursue higher education. In 2012, she received vocational training from an NGO and soon got to know about the ICRC and the basketball team. "Now, I focus on my health and invest time in friendships. Life is completely different," Ann smiles.

Winning the "All Star Award" at a qualifying tournament in Thailand recently is Ann's proudest moment. "When they called out my name, I thought there had been a mistake! I was adjudged the best player from among six teams," Ann exclaims.

As the captain, Ann makes sure her team remains motivated. "Team spirit is key. I encourage them to talk to me if there is a problem so that everyone can work together as a unit. If we don't give up on ourselves, even society will support us in whatever we do," Ann says.

ICRC SUPPORT

Since 2012, the ICRC has been supporting the teams in Kampong Speu and Battambang province to participate in women's wheelchair basketball. With the support, the teams established the Cambodian Wheelchair Basketball Federation, which was recognized by the National Paralympic Committee of Cambodia.



K. Phomisaakha



TAILOR TO SOME, TUTOR TO OTHERS, SHE SEWS UP HER LIFE WITH GRIT

Nilufa Yeasmin, Bangladesh

Neat stacks of colourful “kurtis” (traditional collarless long shirt) occupy most of the second-storey house that Nilufa Yeasmin occupies with her mother in Dhaka. As she browses through the latest designs and carefully puts the yarns and other sewing material aside, her gaze briefly rests on the wheelchair that also finds its space in her tiny apartment. Diagnosed with Pott’s disease, or spinal tuberculosis, when she was nine, Nilufa underwent a surgery but was left paralysed.

Nilufa underwent physical therapy at the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed (CRP), one of the ICRC’s implementing partners for our Physical Rehabilitation Programme in Bangladesh, and also got a wheelchair to make mobility easier. “We stay on the second floor and there is nobody who can help me down the stairs. Accepting the wheelchair as part of my life was nerve-wracking. Ensnconced in my tiny room, I learnt stitching from a relative and started a small business. Stitching on the manual sewing machine was hard on my back but all thanks to the ICRC, I got a cash grant with which I purchased an automatic one, apart from other necessary material,” Nilufa shares.

Life has been anything but easy for this 23-year-old but strong-willed Nilufa still finds the time and motivation to teach the neighbourhood kids. Though her income from tutoring is limited, she says encouraging children to fight despite the odds keeps her going. Because that is the most important lesson that she has imbibed in her life.

SHE'S GOT TRAINING ON HER MIND

Preeti Srivastav, India

"My legs don't work – but my brain does!" exclaims Preeti Srivastav, who lives in Ghosi, Uttar Pradesh, whenever anybody pities her for her inability to walk, or if someone frowns upon her love for makeup. She makes it clear to them that she uses only a *little* more space to navigate in her wheelchair than them.

Belonging to a family of six siblings, Preeti is sharp, alert and holds the highest regard for education. She credits her school, Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya, for helping her have a network of people to reach out to wherever in India she may be.

In 2012, Preeti was ready to follow her dream of becoming a doctor but a spinal injury resulting from a fall paralysed her. Preeti's family didn't let her dissolve into self-pity. Her father equipped Preeti with the skills needed to not only survive, but flourish, so that she could be independent — which Preeti achieved. She now runs a coaching centre for high school students. Meanwhile, her father is working on making their home accessible as well.

Preeti calls her mother and sisters her biggest inspirations, and idolizes Deepa Malik, the first Indian woman to win a medal at the 2016 Paralympics in Rio.

She also credits the head of orthopaedics department at AIIMS (India's premier medical institute), who told her, "You've studied biology – you know the problem you have. So get on with life!"

The ICRC's wheelchair user peer training, conducted in New Delhi in collaboration with Motivation India, brought about a huge change in Preeti's attitude. "Everybody was so positive and happy there. They're some of my closest friends now," she says. During the sessions, she was taught to manoeuvre her wheelchair, look after her diet and even manage menstruation. But Preeti is the most happy about the change that came about in her father's attitude thereafter.

Besides being an inspiring teacher, Preeti is also a budding poet.

An excerpt from one of her poems, *Himmat*, or *Courage* (translated from Hindi):

“*Jeeti jaagti insaan hun main, himmat ka dusra naam hun main...*
Despite my challenges, I am full of life. Courage is my middle name...”



WHAT LIES AHEAD

In 2019, Preeti has been invited to be a co-trainer for other wheelchair users, and guess who's the most enthusiastic about this – her father!

BREAKING STEREOTYPES THROUGH WHEELCHAIR BASKETBALL

Bangladesh

People with physical disabilities in Bangladesh often face societal barriers, evoking negative perceptions and discrimination. They are stigmatized and are often considered dependent. Of the total disabled population, women are highly marginalized and more vulnerable due to prejudices, maltreatment and poverty.

The Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed (CRP), together with the ICRC, continues to push the envelope by engaging these women in wheelchair basketball. Formed in 2016, the ICRC-sponsored and CRP-facilitated team has attended several training camps and international tournaments in Nepal (2017) and Indonesia (2018). The side won the championship in Bali, defeating the hosts. We got chatting with a few members of the team and were amazed at their courage and never-say-die attitude.

SHAPNA

Lack of advanced emergency care left Shapna in a critical condition after she was involved in an accident in 2007. Initially given only a few hours to live, she survived the surgery but the doctors could not save her limbs. A distant relative told the family about CRP and that proved to be a game-changer. “I was told I wouldn’t survive, but I’m active and play wheelchair basketball for Bangladesh now,” Shapna says. Though many questioned her decision to join the team, the same people now boast about her in front of the world. “They value me here and don’t judge me because of my disabilities,” she says. Shapna also works as the receptionist at CRP.



R. Sultana/ICRC



RATNA

Belonging to a rural area, Ratna had never even dreamt of boarding an airplane, much less play professional basketball. But life had different plans for her. “I was only 11 when I got married and became a mother soon after. A fall from the roof left me disabled. Since then, this wheelchair has been my only constant.”

Ratna gets to meet her son rarely, for her husband’s family doesn’t like it. But whenever they see each other, the mother-son duo talk their hearts out. “I show him videos of my game and that makes him very excited. I got my motivation to live from basketball,” she says. Overcoming her inhibitions of practising alongside the men’s team was a tough ask. But those days are long gone. Today, Ratna is a confident basketball player who feels tremendous pride in representing her country in the global arena.

LUTFA AKTER

Only three when she contracted polio, Lutfa Akter says basketball helped her break the mental shackles of disability. "I have to travel over 100 km from my hometown to play at the centre but the passion for basketball is so strong that nothing can keep me away. I find it liberating!" The first overseas tournament opened up a new world for Lutfa. "Even traveling to Dhaka was a distant dream. But going to a new land outside Bangladesh was surreal," she reminisces.



R. Sultana/ICRC



S. M. Morshed/ICRC

MARZANA

"I was 16 when I fell off a tree at my home in the village. Being a young disabled woman in Bangladesh, I faced challenges every step of the way. But my parents and loved ones cheered me on and ensured that I never gave up," says Marzana. Selected as the team's captain during the tournament in Bali, she couldn't contain her happiness when the side won all five matches against the host country. "Now I'm considered a celebrity among my family and friends. I want to keep playing for my country and want to see our team flourish," she says.

FAHIMA KHATUN

Fahima can't forget the last match of the series they played in Nepal. "My fingers were bleeding but all of us wanted to give our 100%. The joy we felt upon winning is indescribable!" she says. The team had earlier lost two back-to-back matches and she had cried hysterically after the defeat.

The Fahima of today is nothing like the Fahima who was confined to the wheelchair due to a fall from the roof. "I was terribly depressed and didn't think I had any future. But my conservative family stood by me and supported me each step of the way," she recounts. Now working as a receptionist at the CRP, besides being a basketballer, Fahima appreciates all the effort that the centre and the ICRC put into rehabilitating her and many others like her. It's due to their dedication that this determined athlete aims to become a better player and win tournaments for her country.



R. Sultana/ICRC



DISABILITY AND WOMEN

DOUBLE THE TROUBLE, BUT HALF THE SUPPORT

A record number of disabled Afghans sought assistance for the first time in 2018 at the physical rehabilitation centres run by the ICRC in the country. But behind this number – roughly 12,000 – lies the fact that there are innumerable people still out there who don't have access to physical therapy. In a milieu that is charged with conflict and challenges, how easy is it for women with disabilities to get the help they need not just with physical rehabilitation, but also with reintegration into the society and restoring their dignity? We catch up with **Alberto Cairo**, the ICRC's physical rehabilitation manager in Afghanistan, and try and find some answers.

Q: War is tough on everybody. But for women, especially so. What's your experience been regarding this in the context of Afghanistan?

A: War affects everyone but women always pay a higher price. They're asked to "replace" the men without even being given the rights or opportunities that are available to men. I will never forget those bare winter months during the civil war when the widows were left alone to support the family. Though desperate for food, clothes, firewood and other necessities, they would always smile in front of the kids to shield them from the gloomy reality, trying to make their childhood as joyful as possible. Often when I find myself complaining about small things, I think of those times and find great lessons in their resilience.

Q: Talking about women with disabilities, what role does physical rehabilitation play in their empowerment?

A: It's difficult being a disabled person in Afghanistan because of the physical and psychological obstacles. To be a woman with disability is even tougher. Physical rehabilitation is the first step towards social reintegration. I've seen women gain self-confidence once they get the necessary support. It could also be because they feel they have much more to prove to the world. Physical rehabilitation, social reintegration and sport are essential tools to restore their self-esteem. For disabled women, twice penalized by the disability and the prejudices, the process is even more important. Their "resurrection and recovery" are much more visible.

Q: With an aim to restore their dignity, the ICRC supports the wheelchair basketballers in Afghanistan. How do families and the society at large respond to the idea of women playing basketball?

A: The reaction of the families ranges from a resolute "no" to a "maybe". It's not common for families to see the women play a sport as the prejudices run deep. But we try our best and the physiotherapists often discuss this with the parents. We've also had instances where mothers have "pushed" their daughters to join the team, having understood its importance. The media is playing a positive role by talking about the inspiring stories of these players.

Q: Has the policy of inclusion that led to employing disabled people in our rehabilitation centres also meant more employment opportunities for women?

A: For years, women had very few jobs to choose from. Though many more are now employed as orthopaedic technicians, bench workers, physiotherapists and data operators, I wouldn't say that "positive discrimination" is the reason behind that. More women are now employed because their presence is needed and their contribution is necessary. The fact that all our employees – men and women – are former patients, proves that anybody can achieve anything if they're presented with the right opportunities. Men or women.



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