Healing the wounds of war in Afghanistan

Years of conflict and war have left many Afghans disabled due to landmines. For women especially, losing a limb can result in social exclusion and poverty. ICRC's orthopedic centers train and employ staff members with disabilities, enabling them to regain their self-respect and reintegrate into society.

Barriers to reintegration
After more than 30 years of war, Afghanistan is one of the countries in the world most affected by landmines and other explosives. Over 100,000 people have been left handicapped and more than 800,000 left with mobility impairments during the most recent decades of the conflict. Especially children and women who walk to collect firewood, or go to the market are vulnerable.

Farzana Sadat, 34 years, lost her leg when she was 14. She still remembers the distress it caused her: "One day I was leaving to get an iron from my aunt's house. Our suburbs had been cleared of landmines and because of the demining I felt safe. But on my way the accident happened. I could see that one of my legs was missing. I thought I would just go to the hospital and I would return home."

REHABILITATION CENTERS KEY SERVICES (Q1 2016):
- Assisted a total of 33,303 patients
- Made 5,210 prostheses
- Granted microcredit loans to 132 patients to start small businesses

BUILDING WOMEN’S RESILIENCE
But my leg was amputated and I was distraught. I never thought I would be able to be a healthy person again, nor walk or work again.

Marginalization and physical access to services and community life in general are challenges faced by all persons living with a disability. In Afghanistan, where traditions and gender norms set tight boundaries for a woman’s life and ambitions, a disability such as Farzana’s is a cause of poverty, social exclusion and despair.

**ICRC action**

The ICRC has been permanently present in Afghanistan since 1987. To assist victims of war, opening an orthopedic center in Kabul was one of its first activities. Today, 28 years on, there are seven ICRC orthopedic centers in Afghanistan supporting any person with a mobility handicap.

Mindful that disabled patients need more than a plastic leg and the ability to walk again, ICRC champions the rights of the disabled for an active role in society through education, employment, sports, micro credit loans and vocational training. In order to set an example, to prove that a disabled person can work as well as someone who is able bodied, the orthopedic program has adopted a policy of “positive discrimination” by employing and training only disabled people.

After having received prosthesis from ICRC, Farzana began working in the laundry at the orthopedic center in Kabul. Later she became a trainee orthopedic technician and over the next years she continued her training. Now, Farzana is heading the prosthetics department. She has worked at the center for more than 18 years. Moreover, she is the family’s breadwinner, supporting her parents and 11 siblings.

**Achievements**

All 680 employees at the centers are former patients. The fact that the staff at the orthopedic centers are themselves disabled has a huge positive effect on the patients, especially new arrivals. Having experienced disability themselves, they better than anyone, understand what patients are going through, and can help them overcome their fears and concerns.

For staff members like Farzana, working in the center gives peace of mind. By reaching a management position Farzana has become an inspiration to other girls and women and challenged the traditional view of what disabled women can achieve.

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**KEY ACTIONS FOR SUCCESS**

- Training former patients as staff members in orthopedic centers
- Ensuring economic security, education and training as part of rehabilitation