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A Survivor's Successful Story: Sadafmo

by Dr. Reykhan Muminova [Tajikistan Mine Action Centre]

As one of more than 800 Tajik landmine victims, Rahmatova Sadafmo is a 32-year-old woman living in the small mountainous village of Dashtijum on the Tajik-Afghan border. Despite losing her leg in a tragic landmine accident, Sadafmo is able to support herself and her young son with assistance from the Tajikistan Mine Action Centre. She helps other landmine victims and looks toward her future with hope and enthusiasm.

"It was one of the happiest days of my life, but it became a misfortune," remembers Rahmatova Sadafmo's father, remembering the day his 18-year-old daughter was married. Her wedding took place 10 October 1996, during Tajikistan's civil war, and then early in the morning all her family members and close friends began to travel to the groom's house for the reception. Near the border, close to a checkpoint, Sadafmo stepped on an anti-personnel mine. The mine blast injured five people: Sadafmo, her three-year-old niece, her two sisters and her mother.

She watched her right leg immediately tear off and fly away. Shrapnel pierced her left hand and abdomen. As Sadafmo was rushed to medical treatment, she was conscious enough to try to stop the bleeding by tying her leg with her headscarf.

Although the nearest medical facility provided first aid, it took 12 hours to transport Sadafmo to the central regional hospital where she underwent a below-knee amputation. Due to complications following the surgery, including infection, Sadafmo had four more surgeries in the 10-month period after her accident. The last surgery took place at the main hospital in Tajikistan's capital of Dushanbe, resulting in an above-knee amputation. Fortunately, the International Committee of the Red Cross sent Sadafmo to the Baku orthopedic center to receive a prosthesis. Since then, when needed, she receives replacement prostheses free of charge in Dushanbe's national orthopedic center.

The second explosion of the day occurred when Sadafmo's uncle, fetching her water from the Panj River, stepped on a landmine. Her uncle endured a traumatic above-knee amputation and soon died in the Kulyab Regional Hospital from severe bleeding.

Sadafmo's fellow villagers have never treated her negatively due to her disability. "My neighbors understand my hard life, and they behave with respect to me and perceive me as an independent and strong person," Sadafmo says. However, after getting married, Sadafmo and her husband experienced strain in their relationship due to her disability. On their wedding day, Sadafmo's husband was attentive to her—he and his father visited her in the hospital several times. Following the initial hospital stay, she had about a year-long treatment process and after treatment she became pregnant. As time wore on, financial stress mounted for Sadafmo's husband, and he felt pressure from his family to divorce her. Seven months into Sadafmo's pregnancy, he left, cutting off all support to her and their son.

Despite these hardships, Sadafmo's family remained especially accommodating and supportive. She returned to her parents' two-room house where she lives with her son, parents, two sisters and her brother's family. With her family's support (mostly from her parents), she delivered her son. However, her elderly parents' small pensions are not enough to financially support Sadafmo and her son. Her brothers have families, so they cannot care for her either. Her disability pension coupled with the "children allowance" as of July 2010 is 100 *somoni* per month (approximately



Sadafmo giving an interview at the opening ceremony at the Summer Rehabilitation Camp for survivors in the Romit Valley.

All photos courtesy of the author

US\$22.74¹), which is not sufficient to support her and her son.

In the midst of these life-changing events, Sadafmo became very depressed, even talking to her family about suicide. She later participated several times in summer rehabilitation camp activities organized by the Tajikistan Mine Action Centre, where she received physical and psychosocial rehabilitation and met new friends. After individual and group psychology sessions and art therapy, she regained a positive outlook on her life. By socializing with other survivors, she alleviated her depression and regained her confidence. Here, she learned she wasn't the only mine victim and found peers also in need of support. Meetings and roundtables with representatives of Tajikistan's Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population taught her about rights of persons with disabilities, degrees of disability, pensions and privileges.

TMAC also mobilized resources from a private donor to provide Sadafmo with a new sewing machine. She received business training from a special boarding school for young persons with disabilities in Dushanbe where she attended essential six-month training course in 2007. Sadafmo actively participated in the International Campaign to Ban Landmines 2007 workshop held in Dushanbe, Dushanbe's 2009 Regional Workshop, and other victim-assistance workshops and advocacy events organized by TMAC. In addition, Sadafmo participated as an observer in the Tajikistan delegation at the Cartagena Summit on a Mine-Free World in December 2009. There, she learned how the States Parties made extensive progress to assist victims and meet the survivor-assistance challenges common to all mine-affected countries. Her participation in these events invigorated her to make a personal contribution. During the victim-assistance parallel sessions, she told her story and answered questions regarding her challenges.

Sadafmo graduated in 2010 from a three-month dressmaking training course organized by the Association for Aid and Relief with support from the private Japanese company AEON. Sadafmo told her trainers, "It is very important to feel that I am part of society, and participation in this course gives me a chance to increase my income." Now she can support her economic needs and reduce her social vulnerability. Her self-esteem has increased, and she has started to look toward the future with hope and enthusiasm.

Sadafmo tailors custom-designed women dresswear for neighbors in her community and she also creates clothing using national embroidery patterns. She specializes in napkins, pillowcases, bed sheets and dresses Tajik women usually wear at home and in public. Her son helps her with house work that is difficult for her, such as collecting water from the river, purchasing products from the market and gathering wood.

Before the accident, Sadafmo dreamed of having four or five children and serving as a housewife for her family. Now her aspirations have changed—she hopes one day to live independently, give her son a good education, continue her dressmaking business and stay active in TMAC events devoted to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. At the closing ceremony of the dressmaking course, Sadafmo declared: "I continued my education and became a good specialist. Now I can provide the best future for my son." ↴



Sadafmo attends a dressmaking course at the Special Lyceum for Youth with Disabilities, a boarding school for young persons with disabilities.

Endnotes

1. Currency conversion as of 11/16/10

Biography



Reykhan Muminova, Ph.D., is a psychiatrist who graduated from Tajik State Medical University in 1988. She worked as a psychiatrist for Tajikistan's National Research Institute of Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities where she started her research devoted to landmine survivors and their quality of life. She authored more than 20 scientific articles in different medical journals and research papers published in Tajikistan and abroad. She has worked for TMAC since May 2006, and has significantly contributed to its surveys and victim-assistance activities.

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