

# THE ISLAMIC ADVISORY GROUP

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER, ISSUE 12, JUNE 2019



## Asma, working with doctors to eradicate polio



Asma using the fatwa book to teach community Islam's support for vaccination.

Asma works as a female religious support person in the union council of Kechi Baig in Baluchistan, Pakistan. Saima Gull caught up with her to learn about her experience raising health awareness and supporting the polio eradication initiative.

### Tell us about your background and how you joined the fight against polio?

I belong to a *syed* (noble) family and am the oldest of my 14 siblings. I wanted to become a doctor after I completed matriculation but our economic condition did not allow me to move to college. I later joined Madrasa Dar-ul-Anwar Faiz Abad in Quetta to become an *alima* (female religious scholar) where I remained a student for over six years. After the completion of my studies I started teaching females of the area. Two years ago when I heard that the polio programme is looking for female RSPs I decided to sensitize the community about health-related issues. So even though I could not become a doctor, as

a religious support person I can now work with doctors who are serving humanity.

### What can women bring to the programme that men can't?

During polio campaigns a good number of refusals, especially religious ones, are recorded in Kechi Baig. Community health workers are unable to persuade female refusals inside households while at the same time male workers, including male support persons, are not allowed to talk to them. This is where my role starts. As a female religious scholar I visit the households and leave with their grandmothers convinced. As a madrasa teacher I have seen that most females are unaware of religious teachings of Islam and the role of women to improve society. Unfortunately, our school textbooks lack such information that can motivate young ladies. Here the polio fatwa book proves to be very helpful because it

contains authentic fatwas from venerated religious scholars.

### What skills do you draw on the most to perform your job?

I have dialogues with refusing females and it is crucial to listen to them about their reservations against the polio vaccine. I don't usually need to introduce myself since the majority of women know me as a madrasa teacher and sometimes find it unusual that I talk about polio. At first their behaviour and tone was very harsh. They would raise questions about why I stopped madrasa teaching and joined the door-to-door polio campaigns. Our good behaviour and knowledge is key to bringing positive change.

### What was your best moment doing this work?

It is a great achievement being part of the training sessions about polio and health where I talk about the fatwa book. In almost every campaign I work with community health workers and convince 15 to 25 hard refusals, a big opportunity to save children from polio.

### What challenges do you face and what is the way forward?

Unlike area supervisors who visit a limited catchment area I move in the whole union council to visit refusal households, which is very difficult. To make our efforts more effective, every area supervisor should have one support person to work with. There are very few female *alimas* working as religious support people for the programme so we need to attract more from female madrasahs.

## About the IAG

The Islamic Advisory Group (IAG) was launched in 2013 after consultations between Al Azhar Al Sharif, the International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA), the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) who make up the core membership of the group along with other religious scholars, technical experts and academics. It aims to muster support from Muslim religious scholars and groups, donor countries, and organizations for the global effort to end polio in the high-risk areas of priority countries (Afghanistan, Pakistan and Somalia).

### IAG secretariat

[facebook.com/  
IslamicAdvisoryGroup](https://www.facebook.com/IslamicAdvisoryGroup)

[twitter.com/  
IslamicAdvisory](https://twitter.com/IslamicAdvisory)

[secretariat@iag-group.org](mailto:secretariat@iag-group.org)  
[www.iag-group.org](http://www.iag-group.org)

## Refusal scholar turned advocate helps clear misunderstanding among fellow Afghan scholars

Molavi Abdul Hanan Himat has been advocating for polio eradication in Spin Boldak for the last three years. But this was not always the case. Five years ago he was against vaccination thinking that the polio vaccine is a Western conspiracy against Muslims in Afghanistan. That was until he was invited to a religious conference in Kandahar in 2016 when he got to discuss these concerns with prominent religious scholars and became fully converted to the cause. Today he advocates for vaccines against polio and other diseases to safeguard the children of his district.

Which is why when another scholar started to refuse vaccinations in the southern Kandahar province Molavi Himat was asked by the district communications officer of the polio eradication programme to intervene.

"I was sitting in the main mosque of Spin Boldak, where I act as Imam and teach religious education to students, when the district

communications officer of Spin Boldak came and asked for my support with a Mullah Imam of a village bordering with Pakistan," said Molavi Himat. "The Mullah had started refusing vaccination and asked people during Friday sermons to boycott the polio vaccine."

An all-age vaccination campaign had started at a crossing point between Afghanistan and Pakistan and an audio clip was circulating accusing WHO, UNICEF and other international organization of misleading the local communities through vaccination activities. The religious scholar started refusing vaccination after having listened to the clip, and after speaking out against vaccination during the Friday sermon 32 families started refusing the polio vaccine.

"I accompanied the communication officer to Haji Karim Khan village where Molavi Sardar Mohammad resides, which is half a kilometre away from the main crossing point between Afghanistan and Pakistan. We met him and he tried not to talk on the issue. But



Molavi Himat dispels religious misinformation using the IAG fatwa book. Photo credit: Abdul Wahab Ferozi

when I explained to him that I am a religious scholar and member of the Spin Boldak religious scholars gathering, he then agreed to discuss."

The discussion between Molavi Mohammad and Molavi Himat lasted three hours during which he was presented with the Fatwa book of the IAG where religious endorsements by prominent world scholars are made towards vaccinations. Now convinced of the polio vaccine's compliance with Islamic teachings, Molavi Mohammed accompanied the team to the homes of all those refusing families with

84 children being vaccinated as a result.

Spin Boldak is one of the high-risk districts with the second highest refusal rates in Kandahar province following Kandahar city. Molavi Himat is a brave polio advocate working in a community where religious scholars are scared to even discuss the polio vaccine, but he is committed to continue his support. "Working for polio eradication is everyone's responsibility. God will hold those responsible who know about the harms of polio yet still do not play their role."

### Polio update

51 wild polio cases of type 1 have been reported so far in 2019:

- 10 in Afghanistan
- 41 in Pakistan.

Efforts are ongoing through the implementation of national emergency action plans in both countries to address remaining gaps in coverage and surveillance, and in close coordination with each other.

### Urgent Ulema Committee meeting held in Pakistan to discuss Peshawar incident

An urgent meeting of the Rotary Ulema Committee was held on 22 June 2019 chaired by Haji Muhammad Hanif Tayyab to discuss the vaccination refusals that spread across Pakistan following the incident in Peshawar on 22 April 2019. The role of social media was discussed, as well as the utilization of popular television channels among the Pashtun community across the country. Aziz Memon, chairman of the National PolioPlus Committee hosting the meeting, played a video message that is circulating on social media showing a famous TV anchor delivering a positive message, and he requested participants to approach other such prominent

personalities to record and disseminate similar messages in order to counter any false information.

District Governor Irfan Qureshi requested the Ulema to spread messages supporting vaccination during the Fridays sermons. He suggested that an individual with polio could volunteer to stand next to the prayer leaders in the mosques so that everyone could see that refusing the polio vaccine can have a big impact on someone's life. Chairman Tayyab supported the idea and promised to communicate with the community of polio survivors in order to see how such an initiative might be supported.