

# 2021 WINNER OF THE REGIONAL UNHCR NANSEN REFUGEE AWARD IN ASIA

## BIOGRAPHY

### Dr. Saleema Rehman



Dr. Saleema Rehman is a 29-year-old Afghan refugee, living and practicing medicine in Pakistan. She is the 2021 Regional Winner for Asia of the UNHCR Nansen Refugee Award. As an Afghan refugee, she faced significant barriers in her quest to become a medical doctor. She struggled to gain the support of her community to pursue her dreams, largely due to traditional norms regarding girls' education. Nevertheless, in 2009, she beat the odds by securing the only seat reserved annually for an Afghan refugee in a medical college in Pakistan's Punjab province. In 2014, she completed her five-year bachelor's degree in Medicine and Surgery, and upon graduation she became the first-ever female Afghan refugee doctor of Turkmen origin.

Over the years, Dr. Saleema has remained committed to serving others. In June 2021, she embraced the opportunity to open a private clinic in Attock, the area where she was raised. There, she began offering health care to both Afghan refugees and local Pakistani community members, particularly assisting expecting mothers. Dr. Saleema's ability to speak to her community in their language (Turkmen) greatly promoted antenatal care. At her clinic, Dr. Saleema offers her services free of charge to those in greatest need.

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*“Whether I am in Afghanistan, Pakistan or anywhere else, I want to serve humanity with my whole heart,”  
says Dr. Saleema.*

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Her life and work have marked her out as a changemaker within the Afghan refugee community. She is an inspiration to other girls and has helped shift traditional attitudes towards girls' education.

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*“Education is very important in our lives because investing in the education of a woman is not just an investment in that particular woman, it's an investment in a whole next generation.”*

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Women's health is also a passion of Dr. Saleema's. Recently, she completed a specialization in gynecology and obstetrics. She had been training for four years, many of them spent working at Holy Family Hospital, which is a public institution in Rawalpindi, also in Pakistan's Punjab province. At this hospital, she delivered more than five babies a day and provided critical care to hundreds of mainly Pakistani women each week.

At the hospital, Dr. Saleema stood shoulder to shoulder with her medical and health colleagues to respond to COVID-19. She has since been a strong voice on COVID-19 within her community, spending time with people to dispel myths and promote vaccinations, as well as continuing to raise awareness on prevention and personal hygiene.

This year, the Nansen Refugee Award recognizes Dr. Saleema's courage and dedication as a medical professional, as a COVID-19 hero, as a changemaker in the promotion of girls' education and as someone with a clear vision for the welfare of women in her community. She conveyed gratitude for having been issued a medical license from Pakistan authorities in 2021. This is the

first year this was possible. It offers an opportunity for Dr. Saleema and refugees like her to reach their full potential and to use their valuable skills to contribute to their host country and local communities.



## Background information on the Afghan refugee situation and refugees in Pakistan

Afghanistan has faced many displacement cycles over the years, with 2.3 million Afghan refugees seeking safety and asylum in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. In Pakistan, nearly two-thirds of the 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees are under 25 years of age. Providing access to education and livelihood opportunities to such a young population is crucial, particularly to enhance their self-reliance, ability to contribute to their host country and to build the capacity of Afghan youth in the hope they get a chance to contribute to Afghanistan's future.

The international community has committed itself to support solutions for Afghan refugees. In 2012, a Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) was created by the governments of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, with UNHCR. A Support Platform for the Solutions Strategy was one of the initiatives to emerge after the UN General Assembly adopted a Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) in 2018. For more information on the SSAR and Support Platform, please visit: <https://ssar-platform.org/>