

7 March 2024 – Women play central, diverse and multifaceted roles in safeguarding children from polio, proving that investments in women’s capacities and skills translate into investments in strengthening health systems.

The stories below highlight some ways in which women are breaking barriers, driving change and inching us closer to a polio-free world wherever they take charge – from doorsteps to laboratories to decision-making tables.

Driving regional solidarity for polio eradication

Dr Hanan Balkhy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean



Dr Hanan Balkhy made history in February 2024 when she became the first woman to take up the post of WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean. With unwavering determination, she embarked on her new role with a clear vision: to eradicate polio during her tenure.

In her nomination speech, she shared her inspiration, drawn from success stories of joint efforts

across the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region. Dr Balkhy fervently believes in the need for collective action to overcome the obstacles in the path to polio eradication.

Dr Balkhy will convene the Regional Subcommittee for Polio Eradication and Outbreaks. To champion the Region's work to consign polio to history, she will support the regional polio eradication programme, remove obstacles and work closely with global and regional decision-making bodies.

She calls upon all stakeholders to unite with resolute determination until polio becomes nothing more than a distant memory.

Blazing a trail with the Regional Subcommittee

Her Excellency Dr Hanan Mohamed Al Kuwari, Minister of Public Health, Qatar



An inspiration to women globally, Qatari Minister of Public Health H.E. Dr Hanan Mohamed Al Kuwari has been harnessing decision-makers' power to galvanize action for polio eradication.

As Co-Chair of the Regional Subcommittee for Polio Eradication and Outbreaks since 2022, she has created a strong sense of solidarity among Member States of the Region and partners, reminding them of the urgent need to prioritize polio eradication. Using every possible chance to highlight the challenges faced by countries with wild or variant poliovirus cases, she has mobilized action to reach vulnerable children with polio vaccines and other health services.

Dr Al Kuwari has used her platform and voice to reveal issues faced by polio eradicators in the Region and offer solutions. At the same time, she has raised the visibility of the trailblazing Regional Subcommittee's goals and work.

[Read more about the work of the Regional Subcommittee on Polio Eradication and Outbreaks](#)

Pioneering inclusion in Iraq's health sector

Dr Hanan Abdulghafoor Khaleel,
Director of Surveillance, Communicable Diseases Control Center, Ministry of Health, Iraq



In the realm of public health in Iraq, Dr Hanan Abdulghafoor Khaleel is a beacon of inclusion and progress. As Director of Surveillance at the Communicable Diseases Control Center under the Ministry of Health, she has advanced health care and broken down barriers for women leaders. She has done this through her dedication to eradicating polio and tackling other vaccine-preventable diseases.

Reflecting on her journey as a woman in a leadership role, Dr Khaleel describes it as an enjoyable yet challenging experience. She emphasizes the need for constant skills development and problem-solving to achieve the ultimate goal of better health for all.

For Dr Khaleel, the significance of her work lies in its tangible impact on saving lives and promoting disability-free living. She views disease surveillance as a prime example of the value of early outbreak detection and prompt response, which both minimizes costs and maximizes public health outcomes.

Dr Khaleel's message to other women who work to fight infectious diseases is one of resilience and inclusivity. She encourages them to stay strong, give their best and ensure that no one is left behind in the pursuit of a healthier future for all.

Exemplifying strong values to protect children from polio



Ms Huma Ashraf, Sindh polio programme 'Area in-charge', Karachi, Pakistan

Ms Huma Ashraf is known throughout the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) for her immense strength and courage. On 11 September 2023, she left home to undertake a duty she had done with passion for many years – verifying microplans for polio campaigns for children aged under 5 years to avoid missing any child. That day, she had a life-changing accident, in which she lost her feet. Ms Ashraf is braving this huge loss with resilience, acceptance and grace, her spirit unbroken.

Today, thanks to Rotary International’s pledge to provide her with prosthetic feet, Ms Ashraf is looking forward to resuming her role in protecting Pakistan’s children from polio and other diseases.

Read more about Ms Ashraf’s story:

[Huma Ashraf, an unbroken spirit – GPEI \(polioeradication.org\)](https://polioeradication.org)

Serving Somalia’s capital city as a disease detective

Dr Fartun Hussein Sheikh Ali, Banadir Surveillance Officer, Somalia



Dr Fartun Hussein Sheikh Ali’s job has turned her into a disease detective. As Banadir Surveillance Officer, Somalia, she searches for clues that may uncover any instances of poliovirus – either in children or the environment.

Having previously served as a medical doctor at local health facilities, Dr Ali is a popular figure among community members and health workforce. This means that people support her in her efforts to end Somalia's ongoing variant poliovirus outbreak. They share information about the polio vaccine's benefits with reluctant caregivers. And they look out for and report children who present with acute flaccid paralysis, the most feared symptom of poliovirus.

Mother to a young boy and girl, Dr Ali sighs when she says she feels that as a doctor, it's her responsibility to save every young child possible from polio, especially as it's an easily preventable disease. She chuckles when she quickly adds that she needs support from other women, and men, to achieve this noble goal.

View more stories about inspiring women who have made a mark on polio eradication efforts:

[Removing obstacles to timely polio detections](#)

Dr Hanan Al Kindi, Director, Central Public Health Laboratories, Ministry of Health, Oman

[Initiating rapid responses to any signs of polio](#)

Dr Iman Gohar, Provincial Rapid Response Unit Lead, Pakistan

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