



## ACTION FIGURES

### nargis shearzad

Survival of the Fittest  
by Pamela Varkony



Photo by Paula Lerner LernerPhoto.com ©

**Hometown:** Kabul, Afghanistan

**Stay-Slim Strategy:** Spinning to burn fat and eating healthy, low-sugar foods like yogurt and whole grains

**Essential Pastime:** Hanging out with friends at a local café

#### Why We Admire Her

A heavy gold curtain is pulled across the glass doors of a three-story building in the heart of downtown Kabul. There's no sign outside, but local women know what's hidden here. It's Venus, one of the capital's first women-only gyms, founded by fitness lover Nargis Shearzad. When a fall nearly crippled her at age 3, Shearzad's family created a makeshift physical-therapy routine to teach her to walk again. It worked so well, she became an avid runner. "I knew exercise was the secret to staying pain-free," she says. In early 2005, just 4 years after the United States ousted the Taliban from Kabul, Shearzad decided to do something her female relatives wouldn't have considered in their wildest dreams: open a gym.

#### How She Got Started

Shearzad's liberal-minded dad encouraged her to get a computer science degree, take a job at Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWSN) — an organization that works to predict crop failures in multiple countries — and open Venus. She met with a mentor

at the Business Council for Peace, a nonprofit that helps women in war-torn regions start businesses, where she learned how to craft a business plan. With the money from her first loan at the Kabul Bank, she rented a two-room retail space in the city's business district for \$350 a month. The first room is now a cozy lounge complete with a couch, coffee table, and beauty bar where women can freshen up postworkout. The 20-by-30-foot back room is equipped with mirrored walls, stationary bikes, step climbers, treadmills, stability balls, and a massage chair — a good-luck gift from her girlfriends.

**What She's Accomplished**

So far only about 30 women, from Kabul housewives to international expats, have joined Venus (cost: \$20 a month for unlimited access). One of five staffers opens the gym at 6 A.M. while Shearзад heads to her other job at FEWSN to help pay the bills. She returns in the afternoon and stays until close at 7 P.M. "I watch women come in here and get strong, but more than just body composition changes. They are transformed both inside and out," she says. "And their husbands are supportive because [the women] go home happy."

**What's Next**

Despite recent riots in Kabul, Shearзад plans to open four more locations in the metro area within the next 2 years. "I have great confidence in the future of my country."

Appeared in the September 2006 issue of Women's Health