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Afghan Women in the Peace Process

Pamela Collett

I know what is a mine, or tank, or *kalashnikov* but I don't know what does peace look like. Because I have not seen it. I have just heard of it from others.

Afghan third grade students
at Khorasan School, Islamabad, Pakistan

Young Afghans have never known peace. Many of the students who wrote this prose poem have never even seen Afghanistan. They have grown up as refugees in Iran or Pakistan. Seventeen years of war have erased nearly every Afghan's memory of what peace looks like. Nonetheless, a few Afghan women are trying to reconstruct a vision of peace for themselves, their children, their families and their communities.

Afghan women working for peace do so within a society composed of traditional, predominantly tribal cultures that do not accept women as decision makers or leaders. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was resisted in part because the communist-backed Afghan regime was pushing rural Afghan women out of *purdah* (seclusion), and into literacy classes. Rural male societies saw this as a threat to their identity, since they define honor as having complete control over the women in their families.

Inside Afghanistan, in the southern and western regions, the situation has worsened for women during the past year, thanks to the increasing control held by the Taliban military faction. The Taliban have forbidden women—except for some health workers—to work outside the home and have closed all girls' schools. Female teachers have also been forbidden to work in the boys' schools.

Under Taliban rule, women are forbidden the freedom of mobility, study or employment. A woman who went to the market alone in Kandahar was beaten by Taliban supporters, and later died from her injuries. A nurse who was ordered to operate on a woman refused because she was unqualified; she was then beaten for trying to consult a male doctor.

Taliban, most of whom come from the Pashtun ethnic group and have received religious and military training in Pakistan, claim that all contact between men and women—except near relatives—is forbidden in Islam. Their "fundamentalist" interpretation of Islam has rationalized their disregard for human rights and their direct use of force. Many claim that rather than "fundamentalist," a more appropriate term to describe the Taliban would be "fascist," since they do not represent an authentic interpretation of Islam based on the Qu'ran nor do they represent traditional patriarchal Afghan culture.

As noted in the September 1994 Special Rapporteur's report to the U.N., Afghanistan has no effective central government: not in the army, the police, the judiciary or the rule of law. Instead, the nation is governed by regional administrative units, led by commanders or councils (*shuras*); Afghans have no personal security because the armed militia are a law unto themselves.

In Kabul and in Mazar-i-Sharif—located in northern Afghanistan—women still have some mobility and work in offices, schools, and government agencies (although they're rarely consulted in internal decision making or in the U.N.'s external peacemaking process). They do not have to wear the *hijab*, but can walk down the street wearing a thin head scarf, a long skirt and high heeled shoes. In Jalalabad, which is governed by a *shura* that opposes women's human rights, a woman dressed this way would likely be stoned.

Three principal groups now control Afghanistan: those led by Rashid Dostum in the north, by the Taliban in the south and west, and by Burhanuddin Rabbani in Kabul. For several months, the Taliban, who control more territory than the other two rival factions, have been trying to capture the capital city, Kabul. Almost daily, the Taliban lob rockets on civilians in Kabul. Every day a few more are killed—people walking down the street, working in offices or riding in buses. Every day a dozen or more men, women, and children are brought to the hospitals, maimed or killed by land mines planted through many sections of the city.

Although the situation seems outwardly calm, people are frightened by the Taliban attacks. Many remember what happened in 1992, after the Soviets withdrew and the Afghan factions fought among themselves, destroying large sections of Kabul. Women and girls were not safe. Militias in Kabul would rape, torture and kill any woman from a tribe or ethnic group other than their own. Young women were abducted by commanders and forced into "marriage" (that is, raped). Commanders had as many as ten "wives." If the girls or their families resisted, they were often killed. Many families sent their girls and women away to Pakistan to protect them.

This was a very repressive time for women. Among other things, they had no reproductive rights. All contraceptive drugs had been destroyed by the *mujahadin*, because they were "un-Islamic." If any women or girls were seen on the streets in clothing that the *mujahadin* considered "improper," they were threatened with punishment if it happened again. Guards were posted in every office to watch how women dressed, and how they behaved. Women were told they must wear *hijab* (veil) and no makeup.

Some families in Kabul fear a repeat of the rape, torture and murder of 1992. One woman described the women in Kabul as "like the living dead, with no hope for tomorrow. They are not sure what may happen in the next hour." Many, especially educated women and widows, fear that if the Taliban overrun Kabul, they won't let the women leave their homes.

Women have suffered the effects of war in Afghanistan differently than have men. While men were off fighting, women suffered the loss of family protection, the loss of physical and economic security, the loss of home, and the loss of health and education services in their daily life. Although children,

husbands, brothers and other relatives were killed and wounded, women continued with their familial responsibilities.

Most of the Afghan refugees are women and children. Up to one third of Afghan women are widows. Many must care for their children alone, and somehow provide them with food, housing, health care and education, despite the ongoing war (and a limited ability to work). Refugee women living in Pakistan are often the sole supporters of extended families. One woman working for a U.N. agency in Islamabad supports 20 family members: "I have never married, because if I did, who would support all of my family?" she asks. Due to war, many women are playing a key economic role in their families, yet they still lack a decision making role in their society.

Female refugees, especially widows, have no right of safe return to Afghanistan. Traditionally, all women are supposed to be protected by a male family member. Because they now lack this, widows have no protection, no right to employment, benefits or guarantees of security. Women are sometimes targeted for revenge killings by particular factional groups or tribes. As a result, widows living in Pakistan, whose husbands were members of the former communist-backed regime, fear they will be executed if they try to return to Afghanistan.

The story of one woman illustrates these problems. After suffering through a year of constant bombing and fighting by rival *mujahadin* groups, a university professor fled from Kabul in 1993 with her husband and three children. They took only one bag filled with clothes for their children. When a militia man snatched the bag from her, she challenged him, demanding to know what her children were to wear if he took their clothes. He returned the bag. On a bus heading for Pakistan, they disguised their 11 year old daughter because they feared she might be kidnapped. After a long journey with several stops by armed militia searching for valuables, young women or members of rival factions, the family was ordered off the bus. They walked into the dark night, stumbling over rocks, urging their children to walk faster, frightened by every sound. Not knowing where they were going, they somehow found their way across the border into Pakistan.

The family came to Peshawar, where the professor's sister was working with the U.N. Her husband had to return to Kabul when he heard that two of his brother's children had been killed when a rocket hit their home. The professor never saw her husband again. She heard that he was murdered by the *mujahadin* upon his return to Kabul. She works as a translator, living with her mother (who is sick), her sister, her three children and her two nieces in two rooms above a shop in a bazaar. Her two nieces have been sent from Kabul so that they can continue their education since most schools are closed in Kabul.

The professor has nightmares that cause her to wail in an eerie whining voice. In her dreams, rockets fly through the air and she can see her family's house being destroyed. The walls of her family home collapse, and everything is gone. She is plagued by constant anxiety. Where can she go? What can she do to support her family if educated women have no right to work outside the home?

She loves her country, and hopes to return someday. But she also wonders whether she should try to emigrate to Canada. Where can she be safe? Where

can she see her children receive an education? She cannot answer these questions right now, but to help create answers for herself and other women in similar situations, she has joined a group of women who are working for peace in Afghanistan.

Despite the limitations placed on women, a few educated Afghan women—many of them displaced persons or refugees from Kabul—have decided to work for peace. Traditionally, even educated women have not played a major decision making role in their families, communities or countries. The shredding of their culture and the devastation of their country have pushed them to take steps for peace.

The few Afghan women who attended the NGO Forum on Women in Hairou, China in September 1995, as part of the U.N.'s Fourth World Conference on Women, were exposed to the international peace movement. Upon their return to Pakistan, they organized a follow up meeting in Islamabad. This produced the Afghan Women's Network, formed to work for peace and women's human rights in Afghanistan. Because they lack a tradition of civil society, where individuals voluntarily pursue projects to improve their society, Afghan women involved in peace activities lack organizational skills. But they are learning very quickly.

In October 1995, Equality Now, the New York-based international NGO for women's human rights, passed on a report on women's human rights in Afghanistan to the U.N. Human Rights Committee and to the *New York Times*. It noted that among other violations of women's human rights, U.N. agencies in Jalalabad had themselves suspended Afghan women staff in response to a religious *shura* decree that women were forbidden to work outside the home.

The report and the media response focused international attention on the human rights of women and girls in Afghanistan. In accord with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its own charter—which forbids discrimination—UNICEF suspended its educational programs in areas of Afghanistan where girls were denied access to education. This decision has provoked a debate within U.N. agencies and NGOs about whether women's human rights should be a pre-condition for humanitarian assistance. To provide a forum to discuss gender and development, the Advisory Group on Gender Issues in Afghanistan—comprised of U.N. agencies and NGOs working in Afghanistan—was established in Islamabad, Pakistan in December 1995.

But even the Advisory Group refused to endorse the idea that Afghan women should be involved in the peace process. Some members noted that the warring factions would never allow women's participation and that only military groups were relevant. The Afghan Women's Network disagreed, claiming there would be no lasting peace without women's participation. They quietly took action to try to include women in the peace process.

In January 1996, the Afghan Women's Network wrote to Ambassador Mahmoud Mestiri—the special envoy of the U.N. Secretary General responsible for establishing peace in Afghanistan. It explained the importance of including women in the peace process. The Network explained their view of peace, as something built up slowly in communities, based on mutual respect, cooperation

and human rights. It advocated this as complementary to the political process of stopping the fighting. Stopping the fighting does not equal peace. Peace will take time and effort to develop. All U.N., NGO and Afghan groups and individuals interested in peace must cooperate to build a truly lasting peace.

The Network explained to Mestiri and his male advisors that war has affected women differently than men. Women do not profit from the war: they get no power, money, or positions from it. Women only experience war's deprivations. Afghan women are not corrupted by war the same way as men. Most women are not involved with the Afghan factions. Women are better positioned to work for peace in Afghanistan than are most men, who are more directly involved with fighting and power games. As one woman noted, "Why is the U.N. talking to the warlords about peace? Their lives are based on making money and getting power from war. They don't want peace."

To hear women's views on peace, Mestiri must add a woman to his team. Otherwise, he cannot hear the voices of women, because in traditional Afghan communities, women cannot meet with strange men. Without any women on Mestiri's peace making team, the U.N. has effectively ruled out the participation of Afghan women. A female representative of the U.N. Special Mission, with the help of U.N. and NGO agencies, could arrange a series of meetings with women to discuss their views on peace. This could be part of organizing women's *shuras* for peace and human rights throughout Afghanistan, and among refugees in Iran and Pakistan.

The Afghan Women's Network has urged Mestiri to consult regularly with women and women's organizations. Mestiri has encouraged the Network to contact other U.N. officials, including the Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali to discuss the importance of including women in the peace process in Afghanistan.

But Afghan women are not waiting for the U.N. to act. Instead they have started a series of their own activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan to promote peace. In March 1996, a group of women in Mazar-i-sharif gathered in a circle in front of one of Afghanistan's most famous shrines to pray for peace. Traditionally, even women in *pardah* (seclusion) can visit shrines with other women to pray.

To stimulate discussion within the Afghan community, the Afghan Women's Network started a peace questionnaire that is being circulated among the Afghan community in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Network hopes individuals and organizations will spontaneously spread the idea of the peace questionnaire among Afghans to help initiate grassroots discussion about peace. The questionnaire invites people to give their ideas on "What is peace?" and "What can women, men and children do for peace?" Responses are published in the Network's newsletter.

Several members of the Afghan Women's Network work as teachers. They have asked their students to write and to make drawings about peace. A group of teachers and parents will select some of the writings and drawings, and put them in a booklet. They are also organizing an exhibit of student posters for peace. The prose poem that begins this essay illustrates the student writing about

peace. The students remain hopeful, as expressed in their words: "When peace comes, I will see what does it look like. I am sure I will then forget the names of all the weapons I know."