Gender and Community Peacebuilding in Rural Afghanistan

Eirene Chen and Mariam Jalalzada

Abstract

This article examines prevailing cultural attitudes towards Afghan women as peacebuilders and explores the impact that an innovative UNHCR-sponsored refugee reintegration program has had on gender dynamics in several rural Afghan communities divided by a history of violent conflict. The program integrates inter-communal reconciliation activities with joint income-generation projects, in an effort to restore trust and strengthen economic capacity. The authors discuss how implementation methodologies have affected the lives of the women who participated in the program as community peace mobilizers. They also propose culturally sustainable strategies to facilitate gender equality in rural communities.

Author Profiles

Mariam Jalalzada was a Program Development Officer at the Sanayee Development Foundation from 2004-2005, where she was responsible for the design and implementation of several large-scale education, public health and peacebuilding programs. Prior to that, she was the Editor-in-Chief of *The Treasure*, a monthly English-language publication at the Peshawar-based Kabul English Language Center. In 2005, she was awarded a full merit scholarship to attend Simmons College in Boston, MA, where she is completing her BS in International Relations and Economics. She is excited to graduate in 2009 and return to lead women's development programs in Afghanistan.

Eirene Chen was a Program Development Officer at the Sanayee Development Foundation from 2004-2005, where she managed the Coexistence Program and provided technical assistance to the SDF's peacebuilding and capacity-building teams. A former US Peace Corps university pedagogy instructor in rural Uzbekistan, she recently completed a post-graduate fellowship at The Asia Foundation and now consults as a facilitator, community mediator and human rights advocate from San Francisco. She holds an MA in Conflict Transformation from the School for International Training (US) and looks forward to earning a PhD in political sociology while continuing her action research with international development NGOs on women's empowerment and appreciative peacebuilding.

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In July 2003, two years after the Bonn Agreement (2001) paved the way for the establishment of a broad-based, multi-ethnic, fully representative, gender-sensitive national government in Afghanistan, the United Nations and the OECD/DAC Network on Gender Equality hosted a high-level workshop on gender and reconstruction in Afghanistan. They concluded that "*sustainable peace, based on mutual respect, cultural diversity and gender equality, requires long-term efforts…including support to local communities as a way to induce a sustained process of social transformation in support of gender equality*."[1]

What does it really mean to induce a sustained process of gender-equalizing social transformation on a community level in contemporary Afghanistan? When there are significant imbalances in the quality of life available to men and women, what kind of support to local communities can best facilitate full empowerment for all?

The authors of this paper are two women who have explored these questions firsthand. We met in 2004 while implementing community rehabilitation programs at a leading grassroots Afghan peacebuilding and development NGO.[2] We are grateful for this opportunity to share our perceptions of gender and peacebuilding, both generally and through the lens of one unique community-based reconciliation program.

Mariam Jalalzada

After living in Pakistan for ten years as a refugee, I returned to my war-torn country, wanting nothing more than to take part in the huge effort of rebuilding our nation. I was overwhelmed by the energy and optimism the people were putting into their everyday life. Kabul, the city in which I was born and the city that was dead during my teenage years, was full of life again. As a Project Development Officer in the Sanayee Development Foundation (SDF), I started working with various health, literacy, and peacebuilding projects that were being implemented in remote areas.

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[1] "Gender and Post-Conflict Reconstruction, Lessons Learned from Afghanistan," *Report from the Joint Workshop of the United Nations Inter-agency Network on Women and Gender Equality and the OECD-DAC Network on Gender Equality* (Paris: July 10-11, 2003). Full report is available at: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/ianwge/taskforces/ParisJoint_Workshop_Report_final.pdf

[2] Information on the Sanayee Development Foundation available here: http://www.nawidefarda.com/sanayee.org/

As part of my job, I also had to report on new developments as well as challenges that faced our projects. For example, I had to check if our primary health clinics were fully equipped and equally accessible, if our peacebuilding and human rights training sessions included those who represented the entire community, and if women were consistently present in our literacy courses. I enjoyed working with women in villages, as I found them to be very willing to participate in our programs and capable of carrying out the responsibilities that we put on their shoulders. I was amazed at how eager they were to learn, from alphabets to women's rights to reconciliation and mediation.

Although I was among those fortunate women who were raised within liberal families that respected women's rights and roles in society, I was fully aware of the oppression women faced, especially in rural areas. I found the main reason to be lack of education among men and women alike. It was not only women but also men who did not know about women's rights.

Eirene Chen
In 2004, I traveled to Afghanistan to complete a field practicum for my graduate studies in conflict transformation. As a former teacher and teacher trainer with a longstanding interest in both the practice of social empowerment as well as the cultures of central and South Asia, I looked forward to learning how Afghan peace educators facilitate nonviolent social change, particularly in a gender-polarized environment.

I was also interested in how post-conflict peacebuilding programs are designed, implemented and evaluated. At the SDF, I focused on a UN-sponsored pilot refugee reintegration initiative known as Coexistence Afghanistan, for which the SDF has been the lead psychosocial implementing partner since 2004.[3] While it is not representative of the many peacebuilding programs that now abound in Afghanistan, it does highlight several salient issues that can also be found in other post-conflict reconstruction initiatives.

Context for Coexistence Afghanistan

In several of the provinces where the SDF was active, there had been reports of numerous human rights abuses from the primarily ethnic Pashtun minority who claimed that following the departure of the Taliban in late 2001, ethnic Tajik warlords and their supporters had expropriated precious land and water access points that did

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[3] Eileen F. Babbitt, "Evaluating Coexistence: Insights and Challenges," in Antonia Chayes and Martha Minow (Eds.), *Imagine Coexistence: Restoring Humanity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), pp.102-127. Coexistence Afghanistan is an outgrowth of a broader post-conflict peacebuilding intervention developed in 1999 by a team from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Harvard University and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. It was piloted in Bosnia Herzegovina, Rwanda and Sri Lanka before being introduced to Afghanistan in 2004.

not belong to them.[4] Water was being siphoned off from lower-lying lands and re-sold to returnees at exorbitant rates. The lower-lying land available to repatriated refugees was less suitable for farming. Pashtun men experienced threats and difficulty in finding work. Pashtun women did not feel welcome at local markets and health clinics and preferred to walk two or three times the distance, often through land-mined territory, in order to buy food and obtain medical care. Their children were regularly harassed en route to and at local schools, which few of their sons and even fewer of their daughters attended.

For their part, many of the Tajik residents upriver were incredulous at being asked to share resources that were not even enough for them. They claimed that the Pashtun returnees were lying and exaggerating stories of their victimization in order to gain favor with the international aid agencies, and that the truth was that among those very same Pashtuns were warlords who had aided the Taliban in destroying Tajik property and killing loved ones some ten years earlier. In one cluster of communities, most of the UNHCR field protection officers were Pashtun, as were the majority of beneficiaries selected for a small irrigation project—a fact noted with some cynicism by Tajik residents. A Tajik woman, commenting on her Pashtun neighbors, said: "We might go to each other's weddings, but our hearts are not clean. They're lucky to be allowed to stay here at all."

Coexistence Afghanistan: An Exercise in Peacebuilding

In Afghanistan, deep-rooted conflict between ethnic groups has existed for centuries. Intervening civil wars prolong conditions of instability and insecurity, forcing both refugees and non-refugees to remain focused on meeting basic survival needs. When these needs remain unfulfilled, it is very difficult for them to give attention to priorities that seem more abstract, such as conflict resolution.[5]

In response, Coexistence Afghanistan aspired "to promote peaceful reintegration of people returning to communities that have been divided by a history of violent

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[4] Further details on ethnic and sectarian dynamics in the provinces surrounding Kabul can be in International Crisis Group. *Afghanistan: The Problem of Pashtun Alienation*. Kabul/Brussels: ICG Asia Report 64, 2003.

[5] There are two human needs theories that may be useful for peacebuilding practitioners in this context. One is the seminal work of American psychologist Abraham Maslow, who suggested a hierarchy of human needs moving from physiological to physical security, sense of belonging, social recognition, and self-actualization. Peacebuilding practitioner Lisa Schirch has further developed this framework to include social needs (respect, security, participation), cultural needs (culture, religion, identity), and material needs (food, shelter, healthcare).
Abraham Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation", *Psychological Review* #50 (1943) pp. 370-396 and Lisa Schirch, *The Little Book of Strategic Peacebuilding* (PA: Good Books, 2004), pp.13-17.

conflict."[6] As with its sister programs in Bosnia Herzegovina, Rwanda and Sri Lanka, Coexistence Afghanistan aimed to accomplish this by:

(1) Promoting inter-communal interaction, trust-building, and cooperation,
(2) Facilitating rehabilitation and equal access to shared resources, through small-scale income-generation activities that members from the various conflicting groups would jointly design and carry out.

Generally, the UNHCR selected a local peacebuilding NGO to implement the trust-building activities and an international NGO to implement the livelihood and income-generation activities. That meant that for any given cluster of target communities, there were at least two NGOs, in addition to the UNHCR, various local constituencies, district and regional Afghan authorities, and military forces from other countries (in this case, NATO-sponsored ISAF patrols and Coalition-staffed Provincial Reconstruction Teams). As can be imagined, the plethora of organizations with frequently competing mandates, operating styles and internal organizational cultures helped create tensions and misunderstandings among the field staff. The SDF's peacebuilding team was eventually asked to also provide guidance in conflict-sensitive development practice for the donor, implementing partners and local authorities, drawing upon the principles of Do No Harm.[7]

But foremost, the SDF's peace mobilizers were tasked with facilitating inter-communal reconciliation between the ethnic groups in the various communities, for the purpose of promoting both harmonious relations and inclusive local governance. At that time, the SDF's preferred intervention method consisted of first conducting a comprehensive conflict analysis and needs assessment, followed by an intensive two-week inter-communal peacebuilding workshop held first for only men and then, with their permission, for women. In the beginning, the workshops were attended by up to thirty carefully selected community leaders from each identity group. Later, as the workshops grew in popularity and our understanding of community power dynamics improved, we realized the value of also inviting "spoilers," those persons whose resistance to a peacebuilding activity needed to be acknowledged and explored if the activity were to ever get off the ground.

Building upon the momentum generated by the workshop, participants would then be organized into an inter-ethnic peace council modeled upon a traditional Afghan *shura*

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[6] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Coexistence Initiative in Afghanistan Progress Report: Mid-September 2004 to December 2004", Office of Chief of Mission, Kabul, Afghanistan, 2004.
[7] Mary Anderson, *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace – Or War (*Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999). Do No Harm is a program-planning framework which 'seeks to identify the ways in which international humanitarian and/or development assistance given in conflict settings may be provided so that, rather than exacerbating and worsening the conflict, it helps local people disengage from fighting and develop systems for settling the problems which prompt conflict within their societies.' Information here: http://www.cdainc.com/dnh/

or *jirga*.[8] Peace council members were provided further training in conflict resolution and mediation skills, which they would then apply in their communities.[9]

In addition to serving as mediators, peace committee members were also responsible for jointly planning and implementing income-generating projects. The micro-scale of the project was frequently a source of tension and mistrust between the donor and communities. At the time, several of the villages had yet to be brought into government community development programs, so Coexistence was "the only show in town," and the UNHCR's available funds for infrastructure and economic development could hardly match the communities' needs.[10]

Projects that were most frequently proposed by men included dam construction (yet to be funded), road construction, school/clinic rehabilitation, animal husbandry inputs and aqueduct repair. Women focused on literacy, health education, Qur'anic instruction and vocational training in tailoring. The proposals suggested by women were smaller in scale and actually easier for a donor like UNHCR to fund, manage and sustain. However, fiduciary authority for joint infrastructure and livelihood projects generally belonged to the men; the women's *shura* could make suggestions but needed the men's approval in order to submit an implementation plan to the donor and partner NGOs.

Like many peacebuilding programs funded by international agencies, Coexistence Afghanistan was on a timeline, and its staff were under pressure to produce visible, exciting results within the project management cycle. Furthermore, because the UNHCR's mandate lay in providing short-term relief assistance to repatriated refugees, its scope of operations was incongruous with the larger amount of time and resources needed for enduring impacts to be solid and visible. Was it possible to make reconciliation and "joint problem-solving" sizzling, sustainable, *and* solvent—within six months?

Women as Community Peacebuilding Leaders

Almost weekly in the warmer months and monthly during the winter, we traveled by mini-van to visit a series of rural mountain communities in southern Parwan Province, about one and a half hours north of Kabul. Most of our community organizers were former school teachers who had mastered the art of listening and coaching; some were

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[8] Sometimes a village council already existed; in other instances, due to the migration of former residents to other locations, no cohesive council was in place.
[9] See also Village Development Committees in contemporary Nepal.
[10] For a comparative study, see the National Solidarity Program (NSP), a national community development initiative funded by the World Bank and administered by the Afghan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. Many Coexistence activities were implemented in areas that had not yet been targeted by NSP, although this had changed by late 2005, resulting in overlapping activities from both programs within the same communities. http://www.nspafghanistan.org/content/index_eng.html

more didactic than others, but all were experts at facilitating discussion and exhorting people to uphold Islamic teachings on nonviolence and human rights. Separately and jointly, we met with Tajik and Pashtun women in their homes and listened to their stories, complaints, hopes and suggestions over cups of tea.

These meetings were preceded and followed by initial or refresher workshops. Most workshops were either conflict resolution skills training or loosely structured Tajik-Pashtun dialogue sessions. They occurred over two to three days for about two hours each day and were held in the home of a community elder. Sometimes there was one senior facilitator who was fluent in Pashto as well as in Dari. Sometimes there were two facilitators who switched languages as needed. Depending on the skill, style and ease of the facilitator(s), the sessions would be either very elicitive or very didactic. Typically, a theme was presented and then opened for public discussion. Role-plays, drawing exercises, small group work and ice-breaker games were used less frequently. Most of the women were illiterate, so training materials consisted of hand-drawn pictures with minimal text, presented on an overhead projector. The projector ran on the host's mobile electricity generator. We provided lunch.

The rural women who attended the SDF peacebuilding workshops were not always able to offer each other empathy and compassion across ethnic lines, but they were certainly active in swiftly putting their conflict resolution skills to work within their own families and neighborhoods. In doing so, they demonstrated considerable resourcefulness, determination and courage. Gradually, the monthly and sometimes bi-monthly peacebuilding workshops became a venue for them to convene and share experiences as peacemakers. Accounts of marital infidelity, domestic violence and family disputes frequently dominated these discussions, but just as frequently, women were excited to report successes—persuading a husband not to expel his wife for having given birth to a daughter, talking two sons out of emigrating to Pakistan and into staying and working inside the village, settling a dispute between neighbors.

The workshops also provided a social space in which local women could exercise their leadership away from the scrutiny and restrictions of male community members. One particular community hosted several very active and enthusiastic participants in the joint peace workshops, including a very dynamic middle-aged Pashtun woman (the wife of a leading Pashtun elder) and several slightly more subdued but no less active Tajik women.[11] They might be thought of as the First Ladies of their communities and frequently were the ones who initiated joint social activities such as weddings and birthday celebrations. The next most populous group of women were the elders—widows and women beyond childbearing years, followed by young mothers.

[11] In this community, the Pashtun women were generally more socio-economically disadvantaged and were thus especially motivated to negotiate with their Tajik neighbors.

Unmarried women and girls generally did not participate on the council but sometimes observed the meetings.

It should be noted that the influence of local warlords did not disappear with the creation of these peace committees. In many cases, *zurguyon* (powerful people) whose actions had likely contributed to ongoing conflicts within their communities simply transferred their power to a new title within the new governance structure offered by our peacebuilding program. Local power-brokers remained present in all the peacebuilding workshops. During the voting process for the joint inter-ethnic committee, the most powerful warlord was frequently "elected" as head of the men's committee and his wife was similarly chosen to lead the women's peace committee. This was a significant challenge for peace practitioners, as the expectation to facilitate community "peace and justice" was frequently entrusted to individuals whose interest was far from neutral.

Yet, according to the SDF's peace facilitators, "village women, who are regularly put down by the men as illiterate and therefore incapable of making "sound decisions," are actually much more motivated to make peace and resolve conflicts than the men are. They cannot travel as easily between the villages—it is easier for an older woman to travel to workshops than for a younger woman. But they work very hard to solve problems in their families and between families, for example, between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. They are braver now and will involve men in solving family problems, whereas before, they were afraid to ask. The men will not make peace even if they are paid to do so, but the women do it freely and easily, out of their hearts, and yet we are not recognizing their hard work."

Why were the efforts of the women going unacknowledged?

We believe that there were a number of factors at play, ranging from socio-cultural constraints within the women's immediate families and communities to diluted support from program implementers, many of whom were operating within organizational cultures that lacked the capacity or willingness to ensure equal allocation of resources to men's *and* women's peace committees.

Challenges to Women's Participation in Community Peacebuilding Programs

The women's lives were so heavily managed by male family members that initially we were not able to encourage the women to even participate in our workshops, let alone serve as mediators or peace activists in their communities. We had to first form male peace committees and present to them a full week of peace education workshops that included the roles and rights of both men and women in society. It was only after these first workshops that the women received permission from their male family members *and* male community elders to participate in our workshops. Cultivating allies among

male community leaders, both secular and religious, made the subsequent work for our trainers much easier, as women were then given the authority to be active and have their contributions taken seriously.

In addition to resistance from men, village women faced a number of other challenges to attending our inter-ethnic peacebuilding workshops. Poor security, travel restrictions, and obstacles to procuring child care and meeting household responsibilities made workshop attendance a privilege for many participants. Village women expressed enthusiasm for the workshops and requested monetary support in order to be able to participate. However, several months passed before we were able to persuade project sponsors to allocate funds for basic necessities such as transportation to and from workshops as well as meals.[12] We tend to agree with Diane Francis that when participants have little money of their own, receiving an event-based allowance in compensation for loss of income may be a precondition for their ability to participate in a peacebuilding workshop.[13]

Men's Resistance as an Entry Point and Resistance to the Men

The aforementioned points were not always valued by some of our partners. In the beginning, planners at all the implementing agencies questioned the importance of allocating more time and human resources to secure the trust of the male community leaders. The reasons were manifold.

Ideologically, some planners felt that addressing the local men before addressing local women sent the message that the international community condoned the existing power dynamics between men and women. There were concerns that this would lead local male warlords to consider their power legitimized by the UN. The truth was that these men's power within a community was already tangible and legitimate, whether or not it was formally recognized by outside entities.

Planners also initially suggested that workshops for men and women ought to begin simultaneously. It is likely that they experienced pressure from within their own organizations to keep fund disbursement and project activities moving at a brisk pace; particularly for bilateral or multilateral agencies and the NGOs they contract, continued funding is dependent on maintaining an appropriate "burn rate" of funds within the project cycle. Fortunately, our fellow planners were flexible enough to amend their design as community response demanded.

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[12] Conflict transformation practitioners involved in facilitating dialogue workshops in contexts as diverse as Harare and Kosovo have raised similar concerns about the necessity of providing *per diems* for workshop participants. See Diane Francis, *People, Peace and Power: Conflict Transformation in Action* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp.223.

[13] Ibid.

Furthermore, after hearing descriptions of domestic abuse from the village women, it was difficult for many implementing staff not to demonize the mostly male perpetrators.

Ultimately, each person working on this project had to find a balance between provisionally accepting a set of sociopolitical dynamics they wished to change and advocating more directly and immediately for that change. At times, the line between "consensual behavioral modification" and outright coercion seemed fine indeed.

Deep-rooted Cultural Beliefs

In Afghanistan, a combination of patriarchal attitudes and internalized low self-esteem among women has reinforced a widely held belief that women's accomplishments are not as important as those of men, because women themselves are not held to be as valuable as men.

This issue is deeply rooted in a culture where families celebrate the births of their sons with big smiles and the births of their daughters with regret — especially observable in very remote communities. Thus, from the very beginning, men are given the sense by their own families, even their mothers and sisters, that they are capable of feeding the household and are therefore better human beings. Such reinforcement establishes a sense of power and accomplishment within men, and they learn from the very early stages of their lives that they are the capable, responsible and more important members of the family. They begin seeing women as the vulnerable and weak members of the community and do not expect them to do more than bear children and perform household chores.

In the early stages of their lives, women too, perceive the comparatively higher esteem in which their fathers, brothers and male relatives are held. They accept this as a matter of fact, and in most cases, they do not challenge these deeply-rooted and regularly reinforced cultural perceptions as they get older. For example, in most households, if the male breadwinner is alive, it is still considered a shame for women to bring in money to the family. In the eyes of men, this might be a case of honor or of saving their *naang* and *namoos* (both literally mean honor.)

However, male insecurity may also prevent men from respecting women as capable and successful figures in the community. A husband may be unwilling to accept that his wife is being appreciated by the community for the work she does, especially when he feels that he does not have a useful role. Furthermore, if her public stature even as a participant in a small peacebuilding program begins to overshadow his own sense of usefulness, importance or power, he may find ways to keep her from being able to remain active in the program.

This collective belief is not only a rural attitude. It is still strongly entrenched in urban areas, where many men *do not* want to acknowledge women's accomplishments. Women's efforts and breakthroughs as peace advocates, educators and community leaders remain sidelined when men do not recognize their value or contributions. This is true even for educated men and women within the NGO community, academia, private sector and government.

Fortunately, such attitudes are gradually changing. The demand for women's participation in public life has increased, and many organizations active in the national reconstruction process have made special efforts to recruit women into their programs, not only as beneficiaries but also as staff members, managers and directors. Men who were previously unwilling to let their wives take on jobs outside of the house are now accompanying them to their work site. Although this is a challenging issue for many development organizations (as they have to pay for the husband in order to recruit the wife!), we are hopeful that the stature of Afghan women will improve in the long run, as more and more women enter the workforce.[14]

Therefore, in order to respectfully, nonviolently and sustainably transform attitudes about men, women and peacebuilding on a community level in today's Afghanistan, we suggest the following:

Educate for Empowerment

Education is the basis for any effort to bring about changes in the power structure of a society such as one in Afghanistan where women have virtually no role outside that of wife and mother. Education not only gives one the power to read and write, but also increases the confidence and self-esteem of both women and men who seek it. An educated woman can contribute financially to her household, which in return will give her greater authority within the family. An independent woman can claim her rights better than one who is dependent upon her husband or on other male family members for survival.

However, education cannot be the only element in changing a society. It is a foundation for further shifts in awareness.[15] Once a woman or a man is educated, they will have the ability to critically consider the qualities preached by advocates of human and women's

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[14] Although not the case in the Coexistence project, this was a widespread practice from some of our rural health initiatives, where our female community health workers had to be hired alongside their husbands because they were sent to "unsafe" communities. Their husbands would only agree to let them work if they could accompany them as their *muharam* (guardian). Needless to say, obtaining funding for "additional staff" required additional negotiations.

[15] For example, popular education strategies adopted by a number of Afghan women have inspired comparison to the emancipatory "conscientization" popularized by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. http://www.rawa.org/policy.htm

rights. These educated men and women realize the importance of coordination between the two genders. The women will gain the confidence they need to use their rights in order to improve their lives as well as to persuade their male counterparts to recognize women's roles and importance in the community.

Involve Men, Especially Religious and Political Leaders, in Awareness Campaigns

In addition to education, awareness campaigns should consistently send out messages about human rights, peaceful coexistence, and healthy lifestyles. Since there is high respect for religion in every community in Afghanistan, especially in rural areas, messages spread through religious figures have a better chance of being received and taken seriously. Mosques, religious gatherings, and local meetings of village leaders are the best places to engage in spreading peace messages. Messages dispatched by these religious figures and community leaders are best accepted and heard by the rest of the community, as they are trusted more than outsiders are.

Working together with the predominantly male religious and community leaders is a must if a new development project is to succeed in a rural area, no matter what the project is. It is essential to work *with* and not against them. In one village, male elders were initially extremely reluctant to allow the women to participate in our peacebuilding activities. They were afraid that the SDF trainers would try to convert the women to a western model of feminism. In another village, women were able to participate in our human rights workshop only after we had negotiated with the men. Until the structure of Afghan society is altered in the long run, this has to be accepted as an important entry point — if not the more respectful one, at least the most feasible one.

Develop Economic Self-Sufficiency

Economic stabilization should be given priority in the poverty-stricken communities of Afghanistan. No matter how much we preach the promotion of peaceful coexistence among villagers, it will not be effective unless they are financially stable. No one will listen to us if they do not have enough to feed their children or keep them warm during the harsh winters. Women are more vulnerable to poverty, as cultural obstacles in the male-dominant societies do not allow them to earn for themselves, thus leaving them dependent on men. When women begin to contribute financially to their households, they acquire more confidence in themselves and are more likely to respect themselves and gain respect from men. Community peacebuilding initiatives are more likely to succeed if they incorporate a way for men *and* women to earn for themselves.

Create Stronger Gender-Aware Structures and Cultures within Peacebuilding and Development Organizations

While it is not our intent to conduct a gender audit of the Coexistence Afghanistan initiative, we have noticed a few things that may be relevant to other South Asian peacebuilding programs.

First, it would be unfair to attribute the difficulties faced by women peacebuilders in Afghanistan solely to internal cultural resistance. They — as we all — were also impacted by bureaucratic requirements and imbalanced resource commitments from *within* the funding and implementing organizations who were responsible for ensuring that this community peacebuilding program adequately addressed the needs of women and men alike. This was true despite the presence of many strong advocates for women's empowerment in each of the organizations participating in this project.

Although gender parity was not a primary focus for Coexistence Afghanistan, gender concerns had been sufficiently mainstreamed into the UNHCR's refugee protection protocol to require that each implementing NGO submit details on how their plans would address the needs of refugee women, youth and elders, as well as environmental impacts and HIV/AIDS concerns. While this input often amounted to little more than one paragraph in a twenty-five-page proposal, it is a promising step towards fuller integration.

However, because the plans, actions, and even internal dramas of the men's peace committees were more visible and directly applicable to the "good governance" aspect of the Coexistence program, the men's peace committees became more prominent and received more attention from the donor as well as from implementing NGOs. "Women's work," relegated to relationship-building within the domestic sphere, was not perceived as either exciting or substantive. Unless male NGO staff members were particularly intentional about highlighting gender parity, advocacy was left to their female counterparts.

Within at least one NGO, more program resources were allocated to the men's peace committees than to the women's peace committees for the Coexistence projects. These resources took the form of time, creative energy and ideas, money (both for salaries as well as for direct project costs), transportation, logistical arrangements and materials (for both trainers and workshop participants). For example, peacebuilding activities directed towards the youth often focus primarily on young men (e.g., sport, public theater), while young unmarried women, who are just as capable of cooperating across ethnic and sectarian lines to rebuild their communities, are not offered similar outlets and opportunities. Instead they are offered early marriages, which may or may not give them these opportunities later on.

These program resources also included training, mentorship, self-care and professional development opportunities for the invariably female staff assigned to conduct outreach to the rural women peacebuilders. Fewer women representing all the ethno-linguistic

communities targeted by the project were recruited to staff the project, yet the demands for their performance to match that of their male peacebuilding counterparts (who outnumbered them 4:1) were high. And female Afghan field staff in each organization had to contend with the same cultural pressures as previously described. Even those working for international NGOs or multilateral organizations were not always able to spend as much time in the communities as they would have liked, as requisite monitoring visits could sometimes last for several hours, and the field monitors needed to return to their own families by the time the last bus left their workplaces.

Additionally, providing psychosocial support is emotionally demanding work, and peacebuilding practitioners are not always able to remain neutral in charged situations. We succeed best when we have resources to validate and understand what we experience in the field, including the gendered dimensions of inter-ethnic reconciliation.

In short, greater mindfulness to the specific needs of women is needed in order to ensure that women's as well as men's concerns are adequately addressed in a community peacebuilding program, beyond merely the delivery of conflict resolution trainings. While not all agencies currently have the mandates, budgets and provisions to safeguard women's full participation in peacebuilding, we need to create and develop these structures.

Conclusion

Changes within the lives of women and men after thirty years of war cannot be brought about in a short amount of time. In our work at the SDF, we found that rural Afghan villagers were wary of changes introduced from outside, especially the kind of changes that shifted the position of power within the family. By facilitating learning, self-empowerment, trust-building and reconciliation, community peacebuilding programs are invaluable in that they offer men and women at even the most marginal levels of society the opportunity to evaluate their choices on their own terms, not those of others. If planned with full input from participating community members, and implemented with sensitivity, patience and foresight, these activities can also help re-balance longstanding and distorted attitudes about male and female roles in society. We are optimistic that as the priorities and organizational cultures of both international and national development organizations evolve, the needs, voices and contributions of women and men will be treated as equally important.

Women who have not been outside their villages their entire lives are becoming great entrepreneurs, activists and leaders within our societies. We are honored to learn from them.