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Peacemakers' Tales from Afghanistan



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An oral history project on how women build peace in their
communities





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Editor's Introduction

Apioneering oral history project has yielded this small collection of stories gathered from twelve extraordinary Afghan women who have devoted their life to building peace.

These women come from eleven of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, each of which has a particular conflict context. Their educational background varies and they have followed different career paths. Together, their life experiences span every human challenge including surviving suicide attacks. Most of these women are members or have been members of Provincial Peace Committees. Some have also been elected to the Provincial Council, and many have worked with the Department of Women's Affairs.

But it is not their engagement with official peace-building institutions that has brought them to peace work. Rather it is the work of their whole lives—from running secret schools to writing to women's health campaigns to resolving family disputes—that makes them invaluable members of the Provincial Peace Committees and other peace structures. Each of these twelve women has intervened in a crisis moment, averted violence through dialogue and devised win-win solutions that are based on listening

carefully to understand and that take a long-term view. Most of these crises take place within the family but replicate the features of conflict at the societal and national level—deeply held beliefs, unequal relationships, the language of violence, grievances that are long-standing and the absence of communication. That this experience carries over is illustrated by the ease with which most of these women have initiated dialogue with insurgents and drawn them into the peace process.

The stories these twelve women have shared with us are full of important insights and lessons about peace and peace-building, and we have barely skimmed the surface with these short accounts. What this underscores is the critical importance of documentation, oral history projects and archival work even as we address every day's pressing contingencies. There are lessons in here to be learnt around the world and ideas that can be replicated in many locations. For every one of the women in this collection, there are scores out there whose names we do not know, whose faces we will not recognise, whose stories we will never learn and whose life-lessons will be forever lost to us—unless we recognise the importance of projects like this one, even in the hardest of times.

The stories have been arranged in alphabetical order by the first name of the peacemaker. They are based on interviews in Dari and represent very slightly edited versions of the peacemakers' own words. We have limited our text to the bare minimum, providing context and clarifying transitions.



Amnia Faiza Sharifi

Amnia Faiza Sharifi is an educationist by profession, having been Principal at the Mahmood Raqi High School in Kapisa. She is also a Provincial Peace Committee member. She shares her experience as a peacemaker in her own words:

1. “A Shia girl was in love with a Sunni man. Given their religious beliefs, there were many barriers in their path, and the girl ran away to the boy’s home. This caused a lot of problems and controversy.

“For two months, I, along with other members of the Provincial Peace Committee and Women’s Affairs Department met them.

“As her mother-in-law was treating her badly, through my mediation we arranged for the couple to live separately. We found a job for the boy as an employee in one of organizations and provided an education for the girl. She has now graduated from the Mahmood Raqi High School and is studying further.”

2. “Most people in Kapisa are farmers. For almost three years, they have been facing drought in their lands. Naturally, water-sharing is a source of conflict between two districts. We organized a couple of meetings for finding the best solution. The Provincial Peace Committee, religious and district elders together arrived at a solution that was acceptable to both districts.

3. “In our neighbourhood, lived a woman named Shima Gul who had four children (two girls and two boys). Her husband was a driver. He had a second wife, and one day when he came home he saw them fighting. His reaction was to beat Shima Gul so much that she had to be hospitalized.

“After this incident, Shima Gul insisted on getting a divorce. She left her children behind and went to her father’s house. When I met her, I tried to get her not to make any decisions. I had contacted the Women’s Affairs Department, and together with the village head and the mosque mulla, we obtained a guarantee letter from the

husband that he would not commit violence against his wife in the future. She did not divorce her husband and now she has a good life.

4. “Child marriage is one of the most unacceptable customs but many people still arrange them. A boy and girl were engaged from childhood but since the boy’s economic status was weak, the father of the girl did not want them to get married. Instead, he found another groom who was rich. We sat with both sides and discussed the problem in detail, especially with the girl’s side, and finally convinced her father.”



Dr. Anisgul Akhgar

The first female surgeon in Badakhshan, Dr. Anisgul Akhgar has a remarkable record of public service. She has been the head of Sara-Meyasht (the Afghan Red Crescent Society); Department of Women's Affairs, Badakhshan; Badakhshan Electricity; and Pohand Ghazanfar Institute of Health. She has been a lecturer in the Badakhshan Medical Faculty. She has been the Founder and President of the Association of Volunteer Women of Badakhshan. Dr. Akhgar was a member of the Bonn Conference (2001), the Emergency Loya Jirga (2002) and the Constitutional Loya Jirga (2003).

“During the Mujahidin government, we established the first volunteer women organization with six other women. We used to meet secretly in Faizabad. We conducted an informal survey and identified many financially weak widows having handicraft skills. We encouraged them to enter to the market and create the demand. Therefore, a group of women started sharing the ideas with shopkeepers to provide them the material, so they can start this business. The only condition

between supplier and customer was payment upon sale of the crafts. Over time, we found this work came to involve most of their families, and even with a low percentage of the profit, their economic status changed. Deep inside, even more had changed visibly. The first change was how women started building business relation with small and big shopkeepers. In addition, economical dependency was less; women could become self-sufficient and even help their husbands.”

“We regularly organized commemorative events, and invited tribal and religious leaders (for instance, the Martyred Professor Rabbani) to participate. The UN representative, Vendor Wil, and Professor Rabbani regularly met in Badakhshan during the Mujahideen government. UNAMA, WFP and UNICEF were actively working in our province at this time and with their help, we started a 6-month bakery project for 20 widowed women through which they learned baking and could improve their economic status. Apart from this, with the help of women and their

communities, we were quite successful in implementing a variety of projects across the seven districts of Jerim, Baharak, Argo, Derayam, Tagab and Kishm, including fruit and vegetable processing; tailoring; literacy program and election awareness.

While implementing the bakery project, the women volunteers came upon a very serious child health issue. Lack of awareness meant women did not have medical check-ups during pregnancy; there was no vaccination for newborn children; and child mortality rates were high. With the help of UNICEF, they requested a health education and awareness program to be held over six months in six districts of Faizabad. Twenty experienced teachers were recruited as Project Managers and the programme was implemented from home to home. A fundamental difference was made in avoiding child death and creating awareness about ante-natal care.

Dr. Akhgar has had much experience resolving family disputes, as the following stories illustrate.

I. "In 2002, a woman came to my office and complained that her husband was beating her and she wished to separate from him. During our discussion, I found that her husband is not letting her visit her mother and her sisters-in-law interfere in their family matters. After listening to both sides, I found that the conflict was not between husband and wife as much as arising from both sets of in-laws. By following up regularly with both sides, I was able to resolve this problem so that the couple could stay together and live as they wanted."

II. "In 2005, I was responsible for the Women's Affairs directorate in Badakhshan. One of the Human Rights employees visited my office with a woman who was being beaten by her husband. I admitted her to the hospital because she was in very bad health. I requested her husband to come and tell me the real story.

"He said, 'I have two wives; my second wife is my cousin as well. I have five children from my first wife and one child from my second wife. Both wives were living as a joint family and they divided their household responsibilities. But my second wife was reluctant to do housework and was always asking for a separate household. Finally, I set up a separate household for her with my limited budget, but here too she is reluctant to do housework.' The second wife was asking for the same compensation that he is providing his first wife's household.

"I organized another face-to-face discussion and found the husband was

speaking the truth. I requested both to be patient and work with the limited budget they have. After six months, the woman came back and complained about her husband. She asked me to visit her house and see its condition. There was no carpet, she said; the ceiling was in bad condition and she was sleeping on the floor.

"I arranged another meeting with her husband and asked him for clarifications. He said, 'The house is under construction and work will be finished soon.' In addition, I found that she took the carpet to neighbor for washing. I checked this information with the woman and she confirmed this, 'Yes, my husband is telling the truth.'

"Finally, the husband told me that his second wife wanted him to divorce his first wife. He neither could nor did he want to. I warned the woman not to create conflict within her family, and made her aware of the law. After some time, I saw her husband in the market and he was very happy. He thanked me for mediating in their family problem."

III. "I was responsible for health-related matters in one organization where we conducted a survey to identify poor families in order to help them by distributing food. Two districts, which we had not planned to cover, created problems for us, asking us to include them or give up on distributing food to the others as well. We held more than 12 meetings to resolve this conflict. We met and discussed the matter with religious

elders. We created strong relationships among them and thus resolved the dispute with the two districts."

Dr. Akhgar has also been instrumental in reaching out to insurgents to join the peace process. "It is not only normal people who are visiting my clinics. I also treat insurgents and their family members. I invite and encourage them to join the peace process."

"When I contested the Parliamentary election, I visited Deraya district. Mawlawi Abdul Hadi, a famous Taliban leader, had full control over the area. Security conditions were unstable. I made the effort to meet him. He warmly welcomed me and was open to my discussing this matter, even inviting other religious elders to be present at our meeting.

"Some time after my return, I was informed that Mawlawi Abdul Hadi had taken up arms and was encouraging the insurgents. Immediately, I contacted the governor and sought a meeting with him [the governor] but the request was rejected. On my own, I located a strong focal point contact who would take a message to Mawlawi Abdul Hadi. My message to him was, 'Please join the peace process and help the people and surrender to government; or else, innocent people will be the victim of such insurgency activities.' Finally, after regular contact and follow-up, we succeeded in getting the Provincial Reconstruction Team's guarantee letter that Mawlawi Hadi would not go to prison. He joined the peace reintegration process."



Fawzia Younus Kakar

Fawzia Younus Kakar, who holds a Bachelor's degree from the Education Faculty, and serves as a Member of Provincial Peace Committee and Provincial Council, Zabul, says, "I have five children, two girls and three boys, and this is my favourite identity so far."

"I participated in emergency, transitional, traditional and constitutional Jirga (Loya Jirga). I was elected twice to the Provincial Council of Zabul, for the first time on 26th September, 2005. Based on my track record in the Provincial Council, I confidently contested elections again and received more votes than the men in the election. I served for 3 years as Secretary of the Provincial Council during the first term and as Deputy Council Head for one year in the second term. In that role, I dealt with family disputes, met with reintegrated insurgents to support their families and also promoted the message of peace through workshops with the mothers and wives of insurgents in Zabul province.

"I have survived seven suicide attacks. In one of them, I was injured. In another, the car was again attacked, members of my family martyred and I was again wounded. The third time, opponents killed my husband and two of my children were also injured badly. My husband had served as a district governor for ten years in different districts of Zabul Province. He had served his nation as a fighter once, and I will not let him down. I now live with my five children."

Fawzia Younus Kakar's main achievement is her mediation and conflict resolution role in resolving the issue of Zabul nomads, or Kuchis. Since the provincial government didn't give them space to live, and evacuated their tents, they started rebelling and fighting the local government and police. She became their representative and conveyed their grievances to the Provincial government. This stopped their sons from joining the insurgency and taking up arms against the government. She was able to arrange for one of the local mosques to serve as a schoolhouse for their children,

girls and boys both, that now goes up to the second grade. Through her involvement, the nomads now have an elected representative in the Zabul Provincial Council and opportunities for political participation.

1. "A family got their teenaged daughter engaged to an old man. But the girl was in a relationship with someone else. When her brother learned this, he drenched the girl in petrol and burned her to death. When we heard, we took the case to the Department of Women's Affairs. Today, the man is in prison."

2. "A young girl was in a relationship with a married man, and one year into the relationship, ran away from her home to the man's home. Out of humanity, the man's household accepted the girl and got them married. When her family found out, they filed a case. Both of them were imprisoned. The man was however released after the case was heard, while the girl is still in prison. We are following up, and have contacted the concerned justice departments to resolve her case."



Haji Mahbooba

A true daughter of Sar-e Pol where she was born, Haji Mahbooba has more than 20 years of experience in different capacities in both government and non-governmental sectors. She has taught at Juzjan High School, served as a Provincial Councillor of Sar-e Pol, and currently works as an advisor in Women for Afghan Women (WAW). Having served as a Member of the Provincial Council of Sar-e Pol, she is now a Provincial Peace Committee member. She conducts vocational training in the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP). She has been involved in the re-integration of 790 political militants to the peace process, and 300 of these are currently working in the local police.

Some stories Haji Mahbooba shared with us follow.

1. "I received a call from the crime department of Sar-e Pol. 'Haji Mahbooba, come to the hospital. A 21 year old girl has swallowed poison.' I hung up and quickly visited the hospital, where I saw the girl lying unconscious. The doctors worked hard

and she finally regained consciousness. I approached her and asked about the problem: Where was she from and why had she swallowed poison?

"She shared the story of her life, making an official statement to the crime department of Sar-e Pol. She was sent to a safe-house (shelter).

"My father married me to a 30 year old man and I am not happy. I do not understand the value of my life. My father is a cruel man and did not listen to me. One day my husband brought me a packet of tablets and forced me to eat. He told me they are useful for a head-ache and I told him I did not have a head-ache. He forced me to swallow the pills and I am now in the hospital."

"After hearing the issue, I invited both parties for a face-to-face talk. They refused and I was obliged to send their documents to the municipal court. The municipal court resolved the issue in favour of the girl. She is now going to school and her parents are very happy."

2. “A high school graduate from Sar-e Pol had a ‘telephonic’ relationship with a boy in Herat. This went on for six months. Then they met and dated in person, and the girl went to Herat with the boy. As soon as the father learnt that the girl had come from Sar-e Pol, he sent her to the Department of Women’s Affairs in that city. After some days, her father claimed that his daughter was kidnapped and abused by the boy’s family.

“The Department of Women’s Affairs of Sar-e Pol called and informed me.

“I went to look into the issue. I had frequent meetings with both sets of parents. I suggested to the father of the lady, ‘Your daughter is old enough to get married and she is now 20. Your daughter is happy with this boy, let them marry.’

“Initially, the girl’s father, who was a Pashtoon, did not accept the suggestion. After many meetings, though, the issue was finally resolved and the boy and girl got married.”

3. “A woman from Kohistanat District was tortured by her husband’s family and visited our office. She told us the story of her life and wanted a divorce. A Provincial Peace Committee member and I were advising both sides. After some days, I asked to see the husband. I told him a couple of things about women’s rights from the Islamic perspective and Afghanistan law. They

agreed and the issue was solved.”

4. “Vocational trainings were conducted for 500 families and job opportunities were offered for 250 individuals. Besides this, a peace publicity campaign was conducted in the province.

“I had many meetings with one of the insurgents named Commander Hassan and after many face-to-face meetings and much persuasion, managed to convince him to join the peace process. Now he is working as commander of the local police in Said District and is a good mediator for drawing others into the peace process.”



Hasina Nekzad

Based in Herat, Hasina Nekzad is an author, poet and teacher by profession. Her story follows, mostly in her words.

“I graduated from Kabul University Faculty of English Literature and for higher education I went to America via the Fulbright scholarship. I was one of the first recipients of the Fulbright Award in the year that it was revived after a gap of the 27 years that marked the war in Afghanistan. I chose to study language for the Fulbright scholarship.

“I also have leadership and management diplomas from the Morning Star Institute, USA.”

“For seven years now, I have been in charge of the Regional Office of the Afghan Women’s Network. Two women from this Network were selected as members of the Provincial Committee in the West Zone.

“In order to institutionalize a culture of peace and conflict resolution it is fundamentally important to include returnees and surely motivate people to make peace. To achieve this goal

and create awareness of the adverse consequences of war, we have employed various techniques reaching out to children and young adults from the general population.

“I strongly believe that women have special skills. Men should not underestimate and ignore these capabilities in the Provincial Peace Committee.

“For more than seven years, I have been involved with cases of family conflict and am proud to say I have played a critical conflict resolution role. We worked from a new office which did not have enough money. But we dealt with more than 800 cases with young people in the city and districts. We tried to establish a relationship with religious scholars who could authoritatively interpret the verses of the Holy Quran in an open way.”

“As a member of the Provincial Peace Committee, I have been motivated to reach out to wider circles of women. We made some of these connections through workshops and have taken

what we learned at workshops (like those by RIWPS) to villages and neighbourhoods across the province. We have made circles to teach Islamic civil rights. We held several meetings with the head of the High Peace Council and called for increasing the number of women members and strengthening their role.

“In our efforts to make peace, I have tried to learn from others. I have tried to have insurgents’ families in our workshops. We want to send the message that we are all Muslims and to build close relationships and trust.

“We created circles of learning for science and scholarship, even in villages. One such circle was named ‘Legal Scholars.’ They were assigned tasks and worked with collaborating institutions, some of which hired them on projects and others invited them to Kabul for meetings. Among the members of these groups were people who had never left their villages but knew Islam and its canon well. They could argue well with the Afghan Taliban about religious questions. As a

result of these efforts, several insurgent groups in districts like Oba, Chisht Sharif, Kashak Rubat Sangi, Karkh, Ghoryan, Zenda Jan, Gozra and Enjel joined the peace process.

“Every day, I hear about issues that are being reported in the districts across the province. They invite me to come.

1. “Arba bGul, one of the prominent insurgents in Adraskan district, was willing to join the peace process. However, he was afraid of how the government would respond and anxious about whom would guarantee his life and safety if he returned to normal life. We had an ongoing project with the help of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) that was nearly over but we got an extension and I hired him as Legal Advisor in Adreskan. Arbab Gul also brought ten other insurgents into the peace process. Now, he is currently advising women and other people about women’s rights. I have hired another insurgent in Oba to work for the Provincial Peace Committee.”

2. “Marzia was a 15 year old girl from Oba district whose father forced her into an engagement with a married man with many children who was also an insurgent. Marzia wanted to kill or burn herself. Upon hearing of the death of her uncle, Marzia’s family traveled to Pashtun Zarghun district. On the way, their vehicle was stopped by Gul Ahmad, her fiancé, and his cohort. The

girl was beaten and dragged up to the mountains. The family followed her.

“A woman from Oba rang me up to tell me that a family has been taken by the Taliban into the mountains. I called the Oba head of police, Shir Agha. He confirmed the story but said he needed to contact the Herat Chief of police for permission. The Herat chief was not answering his phone so I sent a text message that I want him to make contact with the Oba police head. He was very grateful when he called the next day. ‘Ms. Nekzad, be ready at 8 o’clock because we are going to Gozar district. Our forces have been tracking them since last night. They have found that these people are in a house in Soshyan district.’

“It is now going to be eight months. The girl and her family are living in a small house that has been donated to them, and the girl goes to school every day.”

3. “Ms. Masooda, a member of the Women’s Circle in Enjel district, came and told me about a fight over stream water between two people, one of whom lives up-stream from the other. She said, ‘Guide me. What should I do? I don’t want killing and homicide in my village.’ After some discussion, we decided that Masooda’s husband should call both parties to his house, and also invite me. After meeting twice in Masooda’s house, we understood the conflict: Mullah Qurban had three

lilac trees along the stream behind his house. Over time, the stream widened and the trees were now located mid-stream, restricting the flow of water to Salahuddin’s garden. Therefore, every other day, Salahuddin would pick up the axe to cut down the trees. Mullah Qurban and his sons would stop him and they would fight to the point of injury or exhaustion. We asked Mullah Qurban why he wouldn’t let Salahuddin cut the trees. He said the water flows rapidly and forcefully, and without the trees it would inundate and damage his home. We talked then to Salahuddin and he agreed to make strong, sustainable walls on both sides of the stream to secure Mullah Qurban’s home. Both sides agreed, reconciliation occurred and within one week, the problem was resolved.”

4. “We believe in providing all forms of assistance that we can provide to the community, either in form of inviting them for join peace process, access women to justice or other community work. The number of people addicted to drugs is growing daily and on the other hand, insurgents are trying to find suicide bombers. This case is that of a young graduate from Iran, Abdul Hadi and his brother. He was full of positive thoughts and ideas, but in Herat, with many young addicts around, it was easy for him to procure drugs and his addiction came back. His mother died, heartbroken and his wife threw him out of the house. We shared the story with the Women’s Council. We took him to the hospital and with help, after 90 days he had shaken off the addiction. In turn, he took his brother and other young boys there and they have recovered too. We are now trying to find them jobs and are sure they will not return to the habit.”

“Among our other achievements, we have built close relationships of the women's circles with Provincial Peace Committee, making it possible for them to describe their activities. This helps us to establish direct role and contribution of women in peace processes.”



Jamila Yousufi

Jamila Yousufi from Kandahar describes herself as a social and educational activist and a women's rights activist with professional experience for over twelve years.

Having completed her Associate Bachelor's degree in 1973, she has been a Master trainer for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (CHA) (Southwest area), a Master trainer for the Social Volunteer Foundation (SVF) office's education campaign and a trainer in conflict resolution and mediation.

She ran a literacy course for housewives during the Taliban regime in Southwest Afghanistan. She started her activism to protect women's rights in the Southwest region in the period of the transitional regime that followed the Bonn Conference. She re-established the Zarghoona Rana High School years after it was destroyed and now a thousand girls attend that school.

She has participated in several seminars and conferences related to peace and reintegration. Through the

Provincial Peace Committee, she has brought more than 100 insurgents to join the peace process through reintegration. As she says, "I have been contacting Taliban directly in order to convince them to take part in election and use their legal rights, especially during elections." She has encouraged women to participate in elections and campaigned for them.

Jamila Yousufi describes her peace outreach to insurgents.

1. "During my regular visit to different districts, I found a very usual and normal case that you would not imagine could have turned into family conflict. A young girl wanted to marry one cousin (son of her uncle) but she was engaged to another cousin (son of her aunt). Over time, this relationship, which was not acceptable, turned into inter-family conflict. They took up guns and started killing without any reason. Along with a group of women's rights activist and elders, we visited them several times and tried to find a solution. Finally, we made a decision and offered to cover all the expenses

of her engagement. That put an end to this conflict. She married her choice. We were able to do mediation to a level that stopped tribal conflict and disputes."

2. "Two young boys were brainwashed by the Taliban to carry out a suicide attack on 80 women working collaboratively in Naqelin village of Daman district. The boys had been working in the police forces but had been terminated from service for family reasons. We requested the security commander of Kandahar to review their cases and help the young men redirect their energy to the police force."

3. “A woman by the name of Parwin wanted to go to Khirqi-e-Sharif (a place of pilgrimage in Kandahar belonging to the Holy Prophet Mohammad Peace upon Him). Her suspicious husband stopped her from visiting and asked her to stay home. She could not tolerate his untrusting nature and therefore, she set herself on fire. She was immediately taken to the hospital but was in such a bad state that she was shifted to a hospital in Kujat in Pakistan, where she unfortunately died.

“When her brothers were informed about her death, they claimed it was homicide and filed a case against the husband. They swore to either send the husband to jail or kill him.

“To prevent the killing, we resolved the conflict by paying a gold brick and 100,000 Pakistani Rupees to the family of the wife. Also, we granted Parwin’s mother custody of her granddaughter, Lima.”

4. “While I was working in SBF as a Master Trainer, a woman was coming to us for training. She had a daughter called Zalasht. The classes were disrupted by security problems and the growing presence of insurgents and Taleban.

“We reopened the classes when security improved. At that time, I learnt that Zalasht’s father had died and her mother had remarried. Zalasht

was 13 years old and asked to stay with me instead of her mother. With her mother’s consent, I brought her home.

“Two or three years later, a young boy who was a wholesaler came to me with a proposal for her. After studying the boy’s background, his family and financial condition, I accepted, got them engaged and married. They are happy together.”



Mahbooba Saadat

Mahbooba Saadat has been a teacher, social and educational activist for over 21 years since her graduation from ShaikhZahid University. She has worked all over the country. She taught at Jamhoryat High School, Herat, and then at BibiHalema Girls High School, Khust. She has been the Head of the Kasiru-Reshtawee Girls'Institute. For her work, she has received an appreciation letter from Ministry of Education.

Mahbooba Saadat has worked for the Khust Central Statistic Department. Mahbooba Saadat has been a part of the election awareness campaign. She has also been fully involved in carrying out a poverty survey. Her many appreciation letters from local and international organizations, include two from the former Khust Governor and from former President Hamid Karzai.

She has worked as a trainer for both the National Solidarity Programme (working with women's councils in villages) and the Development & Humanitarian Services for Afghanistan

(DHSA) as a Teacher Trainer. She has worked as a Gender Officer with USAID in Moosa Khail and Qalandar and been a consultant with UNHCR.

Her work, in her words:

"I have been travelling to many insecure areas like Sabari and Sepera as a Provincial Peace Committee member, where we always come across anti-government elements or insurgents. We are conducting peace trainings, disseminating brochures to communities in different location. We always try to make them understand the importance of peace from an Islamic perspective. We are encouraging them to see how they can play a role in setting up High Peace Council projects. We are trying to convince them to send their daughters to school. We have successfully reintegrated 12 armed opposition groups.

1. "There was a family conflict that turned violent in Mandozai district, Khust. Stepbrothers took away a girl's marriage dowry (mahr), which she received from her fiancé. The mother

protested against the stepbrothers but their father defended them. They refused to return the money to the girl. The mother said, 'I will divorce you if you don't repay the mahr to my daughter.' Once I was informed, I went and discussed the matter with them, from a religious and Islamic perspective. At first, they threatened me and cautioned me against interfering in their family matters. However, I continued to try and convince them. Finally, the stepbrothers agreed to return the money."

2. "A young girl was sold by her cousin to a married man with children in return for a lump sum. She moved from Paktya to Khust. The man's first wife tortured her and made her life hell. Finally, the girl decided to run away and seek shelter in someone's house. I heard through someone and thought I would help her. I informed the criminal department of the police and they located her family. When her family came to Khust, her brothers rejected her. She too refused to go back with them to Paktya. With the help of tribal elders from her husband's tribe,

we started mediation to resolve the issue. Her brothers agreed to receive a lumpsum amount from her husband and they returned the girl to her husband's home.

3. "Two young girls were given in an exchange marriage to each other's families. While the couples were happy, both families faced problems at the time of the wedding. The girls were exchanged as a family decision and when the families had problems, they tried to separate the couples as a consequence. The wives asked me for help. I visited both families and discussed each side's problems. I recommended solutions to both sides and they finally found something acceptable. They regretted their actions and promised they will not victimize their daughters for their other problems.

4. "A married doctor with four children who was living in Tahni fell in love with a young co-worker. He planned to marry her. When his wife found out, she complained to the Women's Affairs Department. She wanted to divorce her husband. I was working there and I advised her not to. I advised her to speak with the girl and tell her about the story. The wife accepted my advice. When she spoke to the girl, the girl agreed not to marry the doctor and cause problems for the family.

5. "The Khust Provincial Peace Committee with the cooperation of the High Peace Council released 120-130 innocent political prisoners from Bagram Jail. We paid them 5000 AFN each month for the period of three months. I personally followed up with the Provincial Peace Committee for their compensation. On the instruction of the High Peace Council, a Guarantee letter is given to each of them by the District Governor. We are now working on 79 other cases. These prisoners too will be released soon from Bagram Jail. The Provincial Peace Committee will seek a guarantee from each of them that they will not join any insurgent group."



Masooma Anwari

A lawyer by training from the Tolo Aftab University in Kabul, Masooma Anwari has been Director of Women's Affairs in Ghur Province since 2003. She shares her journey with us:

"I consider that I play a very sound and positive role as a citizen and the head of Department Women's Affairs in Ghur province. I created awareness of the importance and existence of the High Council of Peace, and that it functioned in accordance to Islam. I have worked and will continue to work to promote security, stability and peace.

"I have regularly attended the routine and extraordinary meetings of the Provincial Peace Committee and taken note of their decisions. I have provided regular reports to the Committee on my Department's cooperation and enforcement of Committee decisions. This documentation includes photos from my activities as the Director of Women's Affairs, including meetings about peace with women and with men. As a representative of women in the Peace Committee, I have conveyed

women's perspectives to my colleagues and to other women. I have done so without sparing any effort.

"I have worked hard to create awareness about women's issues and gender equality in my province. My women's rights work has taken on cultural and social issues, and I have even referred incidents of violence and discrimination against women to the authorities, in the hope of getting them justice. I have been responsible for having introduced and got girls admitted to high school and women to literacy courses I have done considerable work for the improvement and development of crafts; professional and livelihood development; created agricultural farms, educational center and shopping malls exclusively for women."

Yes, I have resolved ten cases of family conflicts and differences. Some examples follow.

1. "A 16 year old girl by the name of Anisa was married to a drug addict by force in Tiora district of the Firoz

Koh province. Her husband was with Taliban for several years and then disappeared; no one knows where he went. She lived alone all for many years. I travelled to the mentioned district, helped her obtain a divorce by talking to the district governor and other authorities, and then got her married to a boy from a respectable family."

2. "A young lady by the name of Zarghona was forcibly engaged to an old man, in spite of her protests. She fell in love with a blacksmith boy and escaped to Badakhshan province. They could have been murdered for this but the Department of Women's Affairs intervened, and after their mediation, the engagement with the old man was terminated. The young couples returned from Badakhshan and were married."

3. “Khanom Gul Firoz, who was married for 15 years to a man called Fakhruddin from Dolatyar, returned to her father Abdulrahman’s home in Nar Koh due to domestic violence. This caused tension between Nar Koh and Dolatyar that could have escalated to murder. I intervened and mediated. As a member of the Provincial Peace Committee, I gathered elders from both villages. After many meetings and discussions, I convinced the husband to divorce his wife and the matter was peacefully resolved.”

4. “I learned that a girl from Herat, Siah Moi, eloped with a boy from Ghur, Nor Ahmad. The conflict between their clans resulted in the blockade of roads to Herat and Ghur. As an active member of the Provincial Peace Council, I intervened. I sent the girl to a women’s shelter, and held many legal consultations with both sides. Finally, the problem was resolved and peace prevailed.”

5. “Zakera, daughter of Sayed Emran, eloped with a boy, Nazir Ahmad. The girl’s family didn’t want her to marry Nazir. We mediated among them and sent the girl into a women’s shelter. After many legal consultations, both families were convinced about the marriage and now the problem is solved.”

Describing her work on tribal conflicts, she says: “I have worked to reduce differences of opinion between Sayed Shah, the son of Ahmad Shah of Take Teimor village, and Abdullah, son of Ismayeel, from Kashkak village.”

About her interactions with Taleban insurgents and their families, she says: “Yes, I met Abdullah’s group repeatedly. They were against the government, but finally laid down their heavy weapons and joined the regime.”



Parween Arifi

Parwin Arifi has a Master's in Russian Literature. She has worked for eleven years in Education and for twelve years in civil society organizations in Takhar province. She is a member of the Takhar Provincial Peace Committee, which has three other women members (Basira Sultani, Salehe Ghafari and Razm Ara Havash).

The female members of the Takhar Peace Committee are engaged in public education work on issues relating to peace and women's rights. They participate in seminars and events to talk about Islamic perspectives on women's participation in peace work. They speak on women's and children's rights, including women's health issues. The elimination of violence against women is an important part of their agenda. They work with civil society organisations and networks (like the Afghan Women's Network) on peace, reintegration and women's rights issues.

Parwin Arifi worked as a teacher in Ostad Khalilullah School in Kabul as well as in Bibi Maryam and Bibi Hajare

schools in Takhar. When the entry of the Taleban caused people to move to Rastaq, she worked for ACTED which was help the displaced. She worked as a trainer for the Joint Commission in the first Presidential Elections, and as a member of the Petitions and Complaints Commission.

Parwin Arifi has been a trainer in civil society organizations such as Empowerment Center for Women (ECW), Afghanistan Civil Society Forum and the Afghanistan Women Council (AWC). She trains on many topics including women in Islamic law, laws relating to women's rights and violence against women. Her training work has reached out to women in Kalgan, Farkhar, Baharak and Talegan. As an employee of Partnership and Technical Cooperation Office (PATCO), she has also done awareness work to explain the dangers of poppy cultivation to women in the north and to distribute alternative crop seeds. She is presently the head of the Women for Afghan Women in Takhar. She is also working as Provincial Manager with Violence against Women Organization

in Takhar province.

“As an active member of civil society and the Provincial Peace Committee, I am always trying to help my fellow citizens in an environment free from all forms of violence. I have achieved this goal either by myself or as part of a team, in the following instances.

“1. A girl ran away in order to marry a boy from a different tribe. This led to conflict between the two (Pashtun and Uzbek) tribes. After learning about the problem, we at the Provincial Peace Committee started visiting both tribes to make them understand the sensitivity of the situation. We pointed out to them that it could result in a bigger conflict in the future. After great effort, we solved the case.

“2. Azizullah, a man in Rastaq district, raped a three-year old girl, Nilofer. The Provincial Peace Committee, the Women’s Affairs Department and the Takhar Attorney’s office successfully filed charges and sent the case to court. We followed up and made sure the case was handled seriously. The final verdict is still pending and I am following the case both as a PPC member and as a VAW activist.

“3. I have strong connections with insurgents’ family members in Darqad and Khwaja Ghar districts. I have found them work in High Peace Council development projects in Takhar and they do send their daughters to school as well.”



Razia Baluch

Born in 1973 in Grishk District, Razia Baluch worked as the Principal of the Fatima Zahra High School. She is also a member of the Helmand Provincial Council. Her story, largely in her words:

“During communist regime of Dr. Najeeb’s, I lost my husband, right after an extensive civil war started in the country in 1371 Hijri Shamsi (1993) and we were forced to become refugees in a neighboring country, Iran.

“In the ten years we lived as a refugee in Iran, I was able to earn a limited amount through tailoring and become the financial backbone of my family. After 11th September attack and international community support to end Taliban regime, I returned to Afghanistan in 2003. I taught in a girls’ school in Grishk for one year.

Abbazan village had one of the large girls school in the area with 750 students. Students had to travel a great distance to reach the village and school. Noticing this, I suggested that we build a girls’ high school

in our area. We succeeded with the help of the Japanese government, and built a school called the Fatima Zahra High School. I served there as principal for two years. We keep struggling to bring more facilities to the school. For instance, we requested the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development-National Solidarity Programme (MRRD-NSP) to ensure the village had electricity.

“I have served as a deputy in the Helmand Women’s Council. In 2005, at the request of the community, I contested the provincial council election and won. As a Provincial Peace Committee member, I was involved in council’s security-related affairs and visited England as well. I contested the PPC election a second time in 2009 and got elected again. In my second term as a PPC member, I actively worked as Director of Women’s Rights Committee and established the organization, Supporting Afghan Women for Democracy (SAWD). We have 2000 registered members; we focus on the following areas:

1. Education empowerment
2. Tailoring
3. Needlework

“In 2013, I was reelected to the PPC for a third term.”

Razia Baloch describes her experience of handling disputes through the following stories.

1. “When I was District Attorney of the village, a family contacted me to bring back a girl who had run away from home. She had been forced into an engagement by them. Having run away, she had sought shelter in a stranger’s home but been asked to go back. I found out where this was and convinced her to go home, while also asking her family to let her continue her life without forcing her to get engaged.”

2. "A cemetery in Girshek District of Helmand that was used by seven villages was illegally occupied by a Malang. The Malang family was supported by the local authorities. People from these villages contacted me. I took the issue to the Independent Directorate of Local Governance provincial office, provincial councils meetings and other local organizations and resolved the issue."

3. "Nooria, a ninth grade schoolgirl, was invited by her aunt to her home, where she was forced to marry her cousin who has two children. The aunt threatened that if Nooria did not agree, she would be accused of entering the son's room. Intimidated and afraid she would lose the respect of her family, Nooria accepted. Her aunt was really a bad woman. She abused Nooria and brought senior officials to Nooria's room. This went on for a few months until the girl escaped from her aunt's home with a driver, begging for shelter in his house.

Nooria's family disowned her: "We don't have any daughter by the name of Noria!" The Provincial Council told Nooria's parents the whole story. Her father was angry that he had not defended his daughter. A month later, Nooria was settled Helmand's Children's Training Center.

Nooria's tribe, led by Maulavi Khoday Nazar, sentenced her to have a wall

pushed onto her. A representative from the Provincial Council, one from the Women's Council and one from Human Rights took the responsibility to send Nooria to a Safe House (Shelter) in Kabul, for which I was the representative from the Provincial Council. Huma Safi, the leader of the Safe House, took a lawyer to solve her problems. Nooria's husband's family did not show up in court. Nooria's family paid a large settlement to them to solve this conflict.

Now, Nooria is studying in the 12th grade."



Shahgul Gulzada

Born in 1969, Shahgul Gulzada graduated from Farah Province Girls' High School in 1987 and became a literacy teacher with the Education Directorate of Farah Province the next year. She went on to become the Director of the Provincial Women's Council, Farah.

Even as a student, Shahgul Gulzada has worked in Merlin organisation, in the Red Crescent Clinic in Nimroz, and for the Farah Provincial Government as a midwife and then as a health awareness worker for Ockenden International. She was Director of the Women's Council set up by Ockenden International in Farah Province. She has been a member of the Association for Support of Disabled Persons from 2012. This work made her aware of the problems of women.

As a civil society member, Shahgul Gulzada has been a leader in advocacy work, especially on women's issues, in Nimroz. She became a member of the Provincial Peace Committee in 2011. She participated in the Emergency Loya Jirga, and represented

her province in Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan and the London Conference on Afghanistan.

She is a member of the Kabul-based Afghan Women's Network, a Provincial Peace Committee member in Nimroz and a member of the Ham Ghagi Jirga.

Shahgul Gulzada has authored many books and was given the title, "Mother of Sistan," by President Hamid Karzai for her poems for women's voices, "De Sistan De Mor." She has been the founder and President of the Cultural and Literary Society of Women and the Pashto Literary Association in Nimroz. Her literary works for peace, including her poems on peace, have received recognition from national and international organisations.

"Wanting to solve the problems of women to achieve a peaceful society, my greatest wish, I am serving women. At the women's request, we formed an association with 10 active, experienced and educated women. We began with empty hands and no money. Now we are formally organised as 'Cultural and

Literary Society of Women,' with a Board and a charter.

"Through this community, I have held campaigns and rallies to create public awareness and we have held health programs, literacy courses, and vocational courses. We have also solved cases of domestic disputes, helped unemployed women find jobs and helped poor women and orphans. In addition, to keep alive the talent of educated girls and women, we held cultural and literary meetings and poetry reading in schools. We also published a literary magazine, "Bloom," with contributions by poets, scholars and educators, with a view to encouraging women and girls.

"The most important activities by Mermana Tolana (Women's Society) include:

1. Helping hundreds of destitute women access government and non-governmental subsidies.
2. Literacy courses that reached many illiterate women.

3. Helping unemployed women find jobs and helping women obtain alimony.
4. Holding health care campaigns to reach mothers and children.
5. Public awareness activities.

Shahgul Gulzada's experience with family disputes is extensive.

1. In 2011, the death of the head of household had left a family very impoverished. The eldest son was willing to steal or sell his kidneys. The mother was willing to sell her daughter to a rich man. The mother approached Shahgul Gulzada to lament that no one wanted to buy her daughter and that her son was getting desperate. Through her association, by contacting influential people, she was able to find work for the son as a shopkeeper's assistant and for the mother as a servant. She has got two other sons and a daughter admitted to school, and bought clothes and stationery for the daughter with the help of the members of the organisation.

2. An indebted father wanted to get his 20 year old daughter married to a 75 year old man in lieu of repaying a loan he had taken. The mother was against this and tried to protect her daughter, but the father had made his decision and was willing to enforce it by beating his wife and daughter. The girl decided to kill herself by self-immolation. Under the pretext of fetching water,

the mother left the house and shared her problem with a woman member of the National Solidarity Programme. The NSP member consoled her and promised to help, but the mother was concerned about breaking up her family. The NSP member approached Shahgul Gulzada, who decided to visit the house and talk privately to the father.

"At the end, by discussing and bringing examples from Islam, I could talk to both of them. I convinced the 75 year old groom that what he was about to do was sinful and against our religion. If he married the girl and she committed suicide, everybody would see it as his fault. I also convinced the father to give up the deed to their land as payment for the loan. I passed these on to the old man. I warned both of them that if anything happened to the girl, it would be their fault. 'You will be murderers in this world and murderers in the sight of God as well.'

"The old man asked me what my relationship was with these people—were they my family—and wanted to know why I was making such an effort. I replied saying I was helping them because I am an Afghan and a Muslim. This encouraged the old man to say, 'Just because of you, I will forgive my loan for now. When God gives him money, let him return my loan.'

"I was so happy I could not tell whether I was awake or asleep. I went

immediately to the girl's house and asked what she wanted. She said, 'My father is so poor. Today with your help, I escaped this, but I am afraid of tomorrow. I want to marry my cousin.'

"When I told the father his lands were safe, he became very happy and asked me what I wanted in return. I asked for his daughter. He said, 'I will kill her for you!' I said, 'Never!' What did I want to do with her? I said, 'I want to marry her to her cousin.' He consented and they invited me to the engagement ceremony.

"I count this as one of my biggest successes, especially because the father apologised to the wife and daughter."

3. "A family dispute followed from the arrangement of a forced exchange marriage. The bridegrooms were unwilling to get married, and this could have caused violence between them. While the families did not make a formal complaint, our association was able to mediate unofficially. We set up meetings for them, and after attending our meetings, they realised the true meaning of life. They were very impressed and cried a lot. I told them that the marriage of small children was not right and God does not look kindly at them. After many meetings, they were convinced, and the engagement was terminated. I got the girls admitted into schools. Peace came to their lives."



Zarghona Balouch

Zarghona Balouch is a social activist, student of Sharia and a member of the Kandahar Provincial Peace Committee.

1. “In 2014, two young men in Daman wanted to join the Taliban forces and were ready to carry out a suicide attack. Jamila Yousufi, I and other PPC members heard of this and went to meet them at their house, with their parents. We told them suicide attacks are totally against Islam and Afghanistan law. Finally, we successfully prevented their suicide attack.”

2. “A young girl from Naqileen village in Daman district fled her father’s house to escape a forced marriage with a rich man and went to live with her uncle. Someone else from the village contacted me to let me know that problems between the families are growing to the point of conflict. I discussed this with other PPC members and we agreed to send a representative team to solve the case. Jamila Yousufi and I went to Naqileen and discussed the issue with her parents and uncle. Finally, we convinced them and

prevented the forced marriage from taking place.”

3. “A young boy in Mirwais Mina, Kandahar city, killed his mother. The family accused the poor woman working in their house. The Criminal Police of Kandahar rounded up all the family members and the woman. The family had strong connections in the police and was soon released but the woman is still in jail. She is innocent. I am personally following up on this case by meeting the governor and other officials. I strongly oppose a verdict against her.”

Postscript: Lessons from the peacemakers' stories

Swarna Rajagopalan

The effort to make women's experiences in conflict visible has started and stalled at descriptions of victimhood. To speak of women is to speak of vulnerability, and to speak of gender sensitivity is to speak in terms of provision and protection—usually also visualised in very traditional terms. Traditionally, women's accesses to power and to opportunity are both limited; this limitation is compounded when it becomes an excuse for them to be excluded from the policy process, the corridors of power and the peace table. The stories in this booklet offer a forceful counter-argument to the view that women just do not possess the knowledge and experience to participate in policy and political decision-making.

Most of the disputes described by the twelve peace-makers take places within or between families. They arise from the way in which women and girls (and to some extent, young boys) are seen within patriarchal societies. They 'belong' to their families and as such, they are a reflection of what is considered family (or tribal) honour. Forced marriage is the most common source of family strife described here, but domestic violence is also a source of dispute. Even where girls abide by the decisions of a traditional family,

their lives are subject to upheaval—the stories of the sisters in an arranged exchange marriage and the stepbrothers who took away their sister's mahar are examples of this.

When a wife of fifteen years leaves her abusive husband, creating friction between their villages, the peacemaker's intervention is not just personal. No matter where the peacemaker was located, her process was similar. It involved talking to the families involved, and sometimes also to the village elders. In some instances, local religious leaders were invited to the discussions. In many instances, the peacemakers themselves cited religious strictures and laws to make their point.

In all instances, the peacemakers see what scholars write—that violence is a spectrum, and that domestic violence, workplace violence, public space harassment and political violence are all related. Societies living with conflict and a high degree of militarisation typically witness higher levels of gender-based violence as a function of many factors—people have been brutalised by their experiences, weapons are more easily available and young people have learnt that violence is an acceptable behaviour. You pick on someone more helpless to vent

your frustration. The peacemakers have made a point implicitly. Women's rights cannot wait for peace; peace is incomplete without women's rights. In their accounts, they repeatedly say, "As a Provincial Peace Committee member, I organised this/invited them." In their view (and this is clear in the agenda of the female members of the Provincial Peace Committee that one of them shared), work to end violence against women is peace work.

Apart from family disputes and family violence, the twelve peacemakers' stories show they have handled a wide range of issues, all of which to their minds are part of their peace work. Their understanding of peace includes livelihood security, resource management, access to health care and other community concerns. One dispute involves squatters in a cemetery shared by seven villages. Another involves the lack of provision of housing for a community of nomads, where the peacemaker did not just arrange for a place to stay but also arranged for a school to be run out of a local mosque. A third story is about a dispute between two people living upstream and downstream, over trees that choke flooding. Many of these issues require legal and technical solutions and they have successfully

been sought and found by listening and identifying the right resources. Lack of formal training or formal experience have neither deterred nor impeded their work.

The peacemakers featured in this booklet are able to see the connection between everyday solutions and extraordinary situations. They have found people jobs in order to help rebuild their lives, no matter what their histories are—abuse, addiction or insurgency. They have found a way to get people medical help or legal help. They have interceded with local authorities and police. In their effort to help, they show no hesitation about picking up the phone to make calls or visiting the most senior offices in the provinces, in order to make their case. Virtually all the cases narrated here end in girls completing their education, and this is no mean feat.

A common feature of the peacemakers' work is their ability to initiate transformative processes. They identify a need in the course of some work and then set about to address that need. For instance, noticing that women lacked maternity care and that child mortality rates were high prompted one of them to approach international agencies for community-based health care projects. The same peacemaker uses her routine access to insurgents' families to open the doors to dialogue in the hope of

encouraging them to reintegrate with the peace process. She also tells a story about having made the effort to meet an insurgent leader while traveling on work in his area. When she heard he was contemplating taking up arms, she did not hesitate to talk to him about it and persuade him to do otherwise.

Courage is, indeed, a hallmark of their lives and work. One peacemaker has survived seven suicide attacks but it has not stopped her; if anything, it seems to have reinforced her determination. Another one, in pursuit of a girl who was abducted by an insurgent leader, was unafraid to join in the search. From the stories they tell, it would seem that even those who are initially sceptical about their mediation are won over by the sincerity of their effort.

Drawing the community in seems to be something most of the peacemakers believe in firmly. The examples abound through these pages. There are the learning circles where people come into contact with new ideas. Among these are circles of those who may never have studied formally or travelled widely but have deep knowledge about the religious canon. The circles serve two purposes. They identify and encourage citizens who confidently engage the Taliban on religious questions. They also offer urban think-tanks and NGOs a pool of knowledgeable local people they can reach out to. Many circles are

constituted formally or informally by women with shared interests—either literary and cultural interests or the common experience of some kind of capacity-building training. To the complaint that women or people from distant provinces cannot be included because they cannot be identified, such grassroots initiatives offer a clear answer.

By the accounts included here, these twelve peacemakers alone were involved in processes that resulted in over a thousand insurgents laying down arms and entering the peace process. In some instances, this happens through a sustained interaction with their families, either in a routine setting or by including them proactively in public forums. In others, the peacemakers seek out insurgents and engage them in dialogue. They bring to the table arguments for disarmament and peace (too many people will be hurt) or from religious books (suicide is strictly prohibited), expressly in order to engage and persuade them. There is also sensitivity to the fact that recruitment to insurgent groups is easier when there is socio-economic vulnerability. Talking about a recovering drug addict, one peacemaker explicitly connects growing drug dependence to the drive to recruit suicide attackers. Peace is built by looking at all gaps and all weak links, not just conflict as it is played out in the public sphere.

Across the board, one characteristic of women's peace work is patience. In almost every case described here, there is an iterative process involved—many meetings, many discussions and many conversations. Sometimes dispute resolution takes a few days and sometimes it takes months.

The women are patient and tenacious. They follow up persistently and diligently, staying focused on the process. This has yielded solutions that favour everybody and solutions that have lasted.

While we invited them to share their stories with us, we also find that women downplay their input and leadership, choosing instead to tell us about what enabled them (being from the PPC or PC), who went with them (representatives from DOWA, for instance) or who they interacted with to get results (police chiefs or the governor). They stay focused on what needs to get done.

And yet, in every Provincial Peace Committee in Afghanistan, as it is around the world, women are present in very small numbers in the peace process. When we press for their presence, the usual arguments are about merit and experience being more important than “token inclusion.” The more sophisticated answer maybe a helpless, “But where

do we find these women?” The stories in this booklet offer an answer that cannot be ignored—here are some very competent women, and their stories themselves offer clues as to where others can be found.

Peace flows like water and women find ways to do peace work in the crevices and cracks of crises and constraints. Their work, like the flow of water, gradually erodes the apparently solid edifices of conflict, inundates its foundations and engenders a lasting transformation.

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