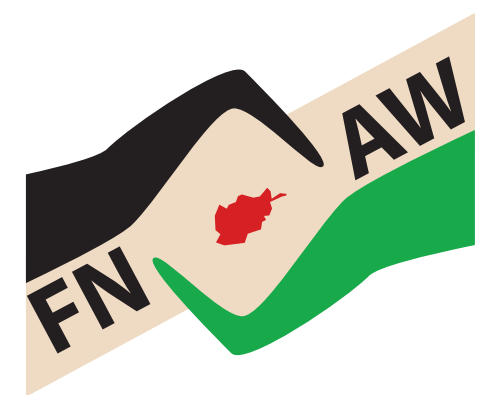


Unsung Heroes

The People behind Peacebuilding in Afghanistan



A Photo and Narrative Exhibit
Researched and designed by



The Funders' Network for Afghan Women (FNAW)

The Canada Afghanistan Solidarity Committee (CASC)



Introducing... Our Unsung Heroes



Since 2001, Afghanistan has heralded on the pages of newspapers and on the screens of televisions across the Western world, as its plight began to come to the attention of mainstream audiences as their governments began sending troops to Afghanistan. The harsh treatment of women and girls under the Taliban regime came to light. The destruction of the country was shown. People watched as an emergency interim government came to power in 2002, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was established, and the Taliban picked up arms as insurgents.

Now, more than ever before, outsiders have awareness of Afghanistan, and know that there is a war there. But there still remains little awareness of the diverse roles being played by Afghans and their efforts in securing peace in their country. Alongside the contributions of different players in the international community, there must also be an acknowledgement of the agency of Afghan civil society, media, intellectuals and activists; as well as the frontline workers who are sowing the seeds for a future peace, like teachers, professors, nurses and new entrepreneurs.

This project aims to profile a small list of “movers and shakers”, working through diverse means to make positive, lasting change in their country. Ultimately, they are contributing to laying a foundation for a lasting peace. These Afghans are largely unknown to the Western world. Away from the limelight, they work day-in and day-out for a better future for Afghanistan. They come from a variety of different civil society communities and are the backbone behind different social justice movements in Afghanistan: for human rights, for gender equity, for poverty relief, for cultural revitalization, for healing and health, for the right to education, for a free media, and for a vibrant, independent civil society.

Against the odds:

In a city of orphans, Omid means 'hope'

Afza

The Omid-e-mirmun orphanage is hidden away behind high walls and a sturdy metal gate down a dusty backstreet in the Koshalkhan district of Kabul. When you arrive for a visit, you are ushered into a courtyard and up the stairs. A flock of girls will hurry to greet you at the door.

The girls are bold, and each of them offers a broad smile and a firm and hearty handshake. Good morning. How do you do? Salaam.

Afza Hosa, the 45-year-old housemother, is quick behind them, and she shoos the older ones away to make tea and to clear a place among their toys and their books in the living room.

"Around Eid, it is really hard," Hosa tells me as about a dozen of the girls clamour around the room to find a place to curl up and visit. "They want shoes and underwear and bangles and socks. 'I need the kind of scarf that I saw at school! I want this! I want that!'" Hosa laughs at herself, and the girls laugh along. "They drive me crazy."

The girls of Omid-e-mirmun defy all the odds that are spelled out so bleakly in all the relevant statistics assiduously accumulated by the United Nations and its various departments and agencies since the Taliban were driven from power in 2001.

The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) reports that even by 2008, one out of every four babies born in Afghanistan wasn't expected to live to the age of five. Half of Afghanistan's 28 million people are under 18. Close to half the country's children are still not in school.

Child labour is ubiquitous. More than a million Afghan children are their families' main breadwinners. Even schoolchildren are not safe from harm: between May, 2007 and February, 2008, the Taliban attacked and burned 98 schools, killing 147 teachers and schoolchildren.

More than two million Afghans are orphaned children – enough to populate a huge city, all on their own.

There are 29 orphans here at Omid-e-mirmun, all girls, all in school, all healthy. The youngest is Zarina. She's about 18 months old. Zarina was a



newborn abandoned at Kandahar Hospital, and Hosa heard about her and arranged to take her in.

Strictly speaking, Zarina is not a resident here. She lives with Hosa, who wants to adopt Zarina – but Islamic law prohibits adoption. Afghan law allows only a form of guardianship that isn't recognized by many countries.

Five million Afghans are returned refugees – more than twice the number of the country's orphaned children. Many returned Afghans, like Hosa, have dual citizenship. Like Hosa, many would be happy to adopt an orphan, but mere guardianship is insufficient to qualify as adoption in most countries. This puts Hosa and Zarina in a predicament.

Hosa is an Afghan-American, but she can't return to the United States with Zarina. At least not yet. There's hope: a new adoption law is slowly making its way through the Afghan legislative process.

That's the thing about those statistics. For all the ghastly conditions that still haunt Afghanistan all these years after the Taliban's fall, at least now there's hope. For the 29 girls of Omid-e-mirmun, at least there's Afza Hosa. In the Dari language, "omid" means hope.

Hosa's own story is extraordinary, but as Afghan stories go, it's quite ordinary. She met her husband at Kabul University, and after the mujahedeen wars caused them to flee to India, they ended up in the United States. They lived for 11 years in Fort Worth, Texas. Hosa and her brother ran a convenience store and a gas station. Later, in Arlington, Virginia, Hosa worked at the Nordstrom's department store.

All those years, Hosa and her husband were possessed of the same homesickness you'll often hear Afghan émigrés talk about. So, in 2004, Hosa's husband got a job as an interpreter in Kabul, and Hosa took on the job of house mother at Omid-e-mirmun. For now, she is the mother of 29 children.

"I don't have children of my own," Hosa said. "God never gave them to me, so I am happy to adopt these children for my own."

A brave girl with a big dream

Majabeen

Majabeen is a dark-eyed, raven-haired and 17. She's the oldest of the 29 girls at the Omid-e-mirmun orphanage in Kabul. She is going to go to university. She is going to be doctor.

When Majabeen was small, her father died in a car accident, her mother remarried, and the new husband wanted nothing to do with Majabeen or her younger sisters Qamaria and Zamaria. So the girls were abandoned. That was six years ago, and that's how these three sisters ended up here.

You would have no inkling of this sad story upon meeting Majabeen or her sisters. You would not know, either, that the two-storey brick house where they live is an orphanage.

There used to be a bright blue billboard outside: Omid-e-mirmun, Funded by Afghan Women's Counseling and Integration Community Support Organization. The reason it was taken down involves Raisa, a girl of 13 years, delicate features and a beaming smile.

Raisa came to Omid-e-mirmun after running away from home. Her parents had decided to sell her as a bride to an old man, and if they found her here, they would take her and sell her. If she defied them, they would kill her.

Most Afghan marriages still involve girls under the legal marriage age of 16. Girls are routinely married off by their parents to secure loans, to pay debts, to trade for livestock, or to obtain favours of one kind or another. Girls who rebel are commonly put to death.

From the time I arrived at Omid-e-mirmun to the time I left, I didn't see Raisa stop smiling, not once.

Majabeen also smiles a great deal, but she is also given to the utmost seriousness. When she talks about her future, she speaks emphatically.



Before she came to the orphanage, Majabeen had never been to school, so even now, she is only in Grade 6. But she is determined.

"I am going to school, and I need a good education. I will pass," Majabeen declared in that matter-of-fact way of hers. "I will become a doctor."

Of the 48 girls in her class, at a school just around the corner from the orphanage, Majabeen had come in fifth in the last year-end tests. She said she was not satisfied. "I have to work harder. I am decided."

For her medical training, Majabeen expects to attend a university in Canada. The Omid-e-mirmun orphanage was more or less founded by the Afghan Women's Organization in Canada, and it operates with support from the Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan organization. CW4WA has established a scholarship fund to bring prospective university students from the orphanage to Canada.

"I am not scared to come to Canada," Majabeen said. "I would like this. It is a little bit cold, and there are many big cities, but I am not afraid."

Why choose to be a doctor?

"I really like to help people. I like to do this very much. My other sisters" - this is the way the girls of Omid-e-mirmun refer to one another - "they tell me that to become a doctor is good for me, and good for my life. Or to become an NGO director or a teacher. But my sisters tell me that it is best to become a doctor."

In the meantime, Majabeen studies hard. She spends four hours every afternoon studying mainly English, but also the Koran, which is expected of Afghan students. She likes tailoring, and gardening, and playing volleyball at school.

"I like to talk with Canadian people and I would like to be invited to Canada, but I will come back and support my Afghan people," she told me. "There are not enough hospitals and good doctors here. There are many people who are sick. If I was a doctor, I could take care of these people."

Two sisters, a soccer ball & a cultural revolution



For Yasameen and Raziea Rasoul, the whole thing began more or less as a lark. The next thing they knew they were international celebrities, greeting U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at Kabul Airport, having lunch with ambassadors, and entertaining visiting journalists. The world moved on, but something unexpected happened along the way.

Yasameen and Raziea fell in love with soccer. Soccer fell in love with them. Nowadays, the Rasoul sisters are playing out their parts in a cultural revolution that's quietly transforming Afghanistan. Yasameen, 19, is the star forward of the Afghan National Women's Soccer Team. Her 18-year-old sister Raziea, a mid-fielder, is the team's captain. Yasameen is also the coach of the Kabul Tornados. It's a boy's team.

The big story about Yasameen and Raziea is far from over, and the place it really begins is in a bombed-out neighbourhood of Kabul a short walk from the once-glorious 16th-century Babur Gardens, in the shadow of Sher-e-Darwaza Mountain.

One way of starting the story is with Duaine and Barbara Goodno. Duane was with the Peace Corps and worked as a Defence Department bureaucrat, and Barbara was a U.S. army major. With their own four children grown, they retired early and took up a new calling, coordinating development projects in Afghanistan.

Yasameen

On his first visit to Kabul, in 2002, Duaine wandered away from a tour of the Babur Gardens and found himself invited in for tea with a family in a collapsed two-storey house nearby, where the Rasoul family had settled as squatters. Back then, the only way to tell Yasameen and Raziea apart was that Raziea parted her hair on the right, Yasameen on the left. They were 11 and 12, but they'd grown up so malnourished they could have passed for seven-year-old twins. You would not know that to see them now.

You could say the Goodnos ended up adopting the Rasouls, or the Rasouls adopted the Goodnos. Either way, over the years, it was Yasameen and Raziea who would end up at the heart of the story, and it really started to take off when the Goodnos tried to give Yasameen and Raziea a break from the grind of Kabul, with a holiday in the United States. The visa rigmarole was a nightmare. The trip had to be cancelled. But Duaine had an idea.

Back in the States, there was the Afghan Youth Sports Exchange (AYSE), set up by Awista Ayub, the Afghan-American founder of the women's ice hockey team at the University of Rochester. There was also the Sports Leadership Academy set up by Julie Foudy, an Olympic gold medalist and the former captain of American national women's soccer team. They didn't seem to have difficulties getting visas for kids from faraway places.

Duaine had noticed that Yasameen and Raziea were always kicking around a basketball outside his offices in Kabul's quiet Karte Se neighbourhood, and their girlfriends would often join in. The Goodnos put two and two together, came up with five, and with the help of the ASYE and Julie Foudy, the Rasoul girls and their friends were a soccer team at the July, 2004 Children's Olympics in Cleveland, Ohio. U.S. President George Bush was there. He'd heard about the Afghan soccer players, made a fuss of them, and voila - fame.

For a while, the news media just couldn't get enough of the story. It was a story about proud and plucky Afghan girls, defying their country's brutally misogynistic conventions, all for the love of soccer. Defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld had the girls around to play a game on the Pentagon lawn, even. But after the dust had settled, Yasameen, Raziea and their friends were the same rambunctious Kabuli girls they'd been before all the hubbub, except for one thing. They'd become well and truly mad about soccer. And they weren't going to let anyone get in their way.

The Unsung Heroes of Afghanistan Exhibit Opportunities



Marzia

"Now the husbands in the villages are getting to have a chance to take part in decision making," she said.

Mahbooba Hashmi is 38. She is the facilitator of the project in Balaghat. She bore nine children, but her son Abdolhamid, a translator, was killed in a suicide bombing in Kabul three years ago. The boy's death was such a blow that Marzia's husband became dependent and could not work, so Mahbooba moved back to her home village of Balaghat and got involved with *Through The Garden Gate*.

"Now, we have learned this new system of life, so things can be better and better," she said.

At first, the men of the village were suspicious of the project, but after seeing the results, even the most conservative men have begun to come around, she said.

Sharifa is village facilitator for the project in the village of Tashir. She told a similar story: "I had to tell the men 'I am not taking your wives and daughters away. They will be with me,'" she said.

Before she joined *Through The Garden Gate*, Sharifa's husband wouldn't even allow her out of the house, and she didn't even know where her husband's farm fields were. Nowadays, her husband supports her work, and she is included in the farmers' men-only community development councils. "I am happy because the men listen to my suggestions now."

"My dreams are coming true. We are going to friends' homes and relatives' homes for a party, and to tell what we are doing. We are showing that women can be independent and can have things of our own. Now I can see and I can feel that I am alive and that I have a life. We are working, and we are supporting our children and also the husbands are now happy with us."

Marzia is the mother of eight children. She is also a "lead farmer" with the project, in addition to her role as a widow. "The Taliban killed my first husband. They just killed him without reason. He had a simple life. He was raking a horse. They took him away and they killed him."

After her husband's death, she ended up living with relatives in Iran, working for slave wages in a factory for 12 hours a day. Marzia fled home after the fall of the Taliban, but she was then forced to marry another man according to a primitive custom distilled from sharia law.

In the end, her second husband abandoned Marzia and her children. On her own again, she survived as best she could as a seamstress, until AEDG's *Through The Garden Gate* project arrived in the village.

"It is very profitable for us," Marzia said. "We are doing our housework and at the same time we are out working in the kitchen gardens. Now we have a savings box and we are hopeful." Marzia has invested her small profits in a shop for her sons, and intends to expand her small farming business. Opportunities like that are opening up for women all across Faryab.

Sharifa

A project of the Funders' Network for Afghan Women and the Canada Afghanistan Solidarity Committee

The Unsung Heroes of Afghanistan is also available as an exhibit, consisting of 21 lightweight foam boards (24" x 36") with folding easels. The Heroes boards can easily be displayed in venues during special events such as fundraisers, lectures, film screenings or other events, and may also be displayed for longer periods in:

- Libraries
- YMCAs, YWCAs or recreation centres
- Museums
- Galleries
- Festivals or shows
- Art venues
- Hotels

If your group is interested in hosting the Unsung Heroes of Afghanistan exhibit, please [Contact Us](#) to inquire into availability.

FAQ

Is there a cost for hosting the exhibit?

There is no charge to host the Unsung Heroes of Afghanistan exhibit, however your group will be asked to sign a contract taking responsibility for any loss or damage to the exhibit while the exhibit is in your care, and your group will be liable to cover the costs of replacing or repairing any lost or damaged pieces.

As a host, is my group responsible for paying the shipping costs of the exhibit?

During 2010, hosting groups are only responsible for paying for shipping costs for the exhibit to be returned to one of its home bases (New York, NY in the US or Vancouver, BC in Canada). You will not be responsible for shipping costs to receive the exhibit.

How long can my group keep the exhibit for?

Some groups borrow the exhibit for a few days only, to show during a one time event. Others host the exhibit in a space for up to several weeks. We will loan the exhibit for a maximum period of six weeks at a time, except under special circumstances. Most groups have the exhibit for an average of two weeks.

What kind of groups can host the exhibit?

The exhibit creators will consider all requests. Hosting groups can be service clubs, community agencies, charities or non-profit organizations, schools, corporations, museums, libraries, municipalities or government agencies, or a group of individuals organizing an event or festival. Exhibiting opportunities are subject to availability and appropriateness of the event or venue.

Is there any help with promoting the exhibit?

Hosting groups are responsible for organizing publicity for their event or exhibit. The exhibit creators, FNAW and CASC, will advertise the event or exhibit on their websites if requested.

What does the exhibit come with?

The exhibit comes in two boxes. One contains the 21 foam boards and another contains 21 foldable chrome easels. There is also a guest book, and some take-away information about the exhibit for visitors.

The Unsung Heroes of Afghanistan Exhibit was created by the Funders' Network for Afghan Women and the Canada Afghanistan Solidarity Committee.

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