

TRANSFORMING WOMEN'S LIVES

AFGHANISTAN PROJECT UPDATE

SPRING 2014

This project, with Christian Aid partner Afghanistan Women's Education Centre (AWEC), has now been working with women and young people in communities across Afghanistan for a year. In this update, we meet two women from different generations to hear their hopes for the future and how this project is transforming their communities.

Nothing short of life-changing

In Afghanistan more than 87% of all women suffer from domestic abuse, making the country one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman.¹

Theoretically, women's rights now have legal protection in the Afghan Constitution and there have been some incremental changes because of it. But centuries-old and deep-rooted perceptions of the role and worth of women take more than a few years to change. Afghanistan is a huge country where many communities are isolated and their links to the state are weak. Before this project started, the constitution was, for many people, little more than a piece of paper lying in a desk in a faraway city; little has changed in most women's daily lives.

Afghan women are still subject to widespread discrimination. Many don't have access to education, cannot seek employment and are indeed forbidden to do so by their families, leaving them dependent on their fathers or husbands. Violence against women is widely accepted and most perpetrators go unpunished. This project enables women to be elected as representatives on a *shura* (the Dari word for council) – an opportunity which is nothing short of life-changing.

'Through the *shuras* women can now communicate directly with government departments, attend monthly meetings and conferences – huge achievements which would have been unimaginable previously.'

Adela Rahimzadeh, Christian Aid's Programme Funding Officer in Afghanistan.

Thanks to your support, AWEC continues to work in the provinces of Herat, Faryab and Balkh, ensuring women and young people are at the forefront of local

decision-making. Since the project began, 1,200 women and 360 young people have been attending training workshops to help them develop their monthly *shura* meetings. This training is vital for community members who have not previously been involved in local politics, helping them tackle and resolve issues that affect their community.

The training provided by AWEC has brought communities together to share learning and resources, including books that have been purchased for research centres in each province. The project also fosters a sense of mutual respect and trust between different generations, which is vital in healing a nation deeply scarred by sustained conflict.

A clear vision for the future

Behshta Ahmadzai from Balkh Province is 18 years old and like many young adults around the world, she is passionate, politically engaged and has a social conscience. She first became aware of this project through her district governor and saw it as a great opportunity to make a difference.



Behshta is able to speak up on issues that affect her community because she's been elected to the local youth council.

She explains, 'In Afghanistan there has been war for so many years and because of this people have lots of problems – especially in my village. There is a lack of job opportunities for women and limited access to healthcare. I wanted to support women in my community, which is why I wanted to be involved with AWEC's work.'

Behshta was surprised and very happy to be elected to the local youth council, and to have the opportunity to become more involved with decision making in her village. She has a clear vision for the future of her country – a future in which everyone is fully aware of women's rights and there is access to justice, improved healthcare, a good education system, and increased employment opportunities for young people.

Now an active women

Zebinsa Sulimanqul, 47, is from Faryab province and has three children: a son called Sakhi Muhammed who is 21, and two daughters, Norya aged 15 and Zahra aged 18, the same age as Behshta. Although all her children are studying, she fears for the younger generation as continued instability has led to a weak economy with high levels of unemployment across the country.



Zebinsa wants young people to enjoy a future free from war and full of opportunity.

The lack of opportunities for young people means day-to-day existence is about survival, rather than enjoying life. Young people, particularly men, are travelling to Iran, Pakistan and other nearby countries to seek work. The journey can be dangerous and Zebinsa explains that many become addicted to drugs and die prematurely, leaving their families

alone and vulnerable. Zebinsa's dream is to see Afghanistan rescued from war and a decrease in the economic problems this has caused.

Being a member of a women's *shura* is helping her to realise this dream. She describes the personal journey she has been on: 'This project has changed me – from a calm, inactive woman to an active woman.' She now encourages other parents in her community to send their children to school.

By attending workshops Zebinsa has learned about peacebuilding, problem-solving and women's rights from an Islamic perspective. This has improved her relationship with her husband, children and community because she is able to find solutions to problems that she once felt powerless to resolve.

Her message to you is this: 'God bless you. Thank you so much for your free and honest help. Please continue your support for the Afghan people – the women, widows, children and students.'

Please join us in prayer:

The sustained increase in political participation is encouraging. But despite these gains, the overall security situation in Afghanistan is still precarious. Since the previous update, there has been an increased presence of anti-government groups including the Taliban in Qaysar district, Faryab province (where Zebinsa lives).

AWEC staff members believe this is because of the forthcoming election. Some families in nearby districts have left their homes in response.

This has made it necessary to restrict AWEC staff members' travel to this area on occasion, though fortunately the project is largely unaffected. AWEC staff are consulting with the government and monitoring the security situation.

Please pray for families affected by conflict in Afghanistan, and our partners who work – often at great personal risk – to support those in need.

Thank you for your continued support of this project, which is transforming the lives of thousands of women in Afghanistan.

If there is any way we can help your group, please contact your local Christian Aid office, email cpartnership@christian-aid.org or visit christianaid.org.uk/partnerships

