

Feedback from local staff

Experiences that changed my life: the story of an Afghan woman working with a psychosocial project

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In this report the author, an Afghan woman, describes her personal and professional development while working with an international nongovernmental organization in her country. In 1996, under the Taliban regime, she started to work on a project battling malnutrition with the Action Contre la Faim (ACF). She later took part in a psychosocial project to assist women and children. Her professional experiences and personal life are strongly interrelated. The psychosocial work has profoundly changed her situation and her outlook on life.

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I am an Afghan woman who grew up in Europe. During my life in Europe I always dreamt that I would complete my education and have a professional career. All of my dreams were destroyed when my father was transferred and, unwillingly, I had to return to Afghanistan. I wanted, very much, to stay in Europe but faced strong opposition from my family. I was scared to death when my family, according to Afghan traditions, arranged my marriage. Even though the burden of a household had fallen on my weak shoulders at the age of only 16, I was still able to continue my education and complete a bachelor degree in Law at Kabul University but never had the opportunity to develop

my profession. I am also a woman who had lost hope and was disappointed in humanity, but finally found the strength to believe again in new opportunities through helping others.

I would like to share some of my life and experience. This is my real story.

In 1996, the year I graduated from the university, I started to work as a surveyor for Action Contre la Faim (ACF), an international nongovernmental organization (INGO). It was the era of Taliban and women were not allowed to leave their houses. Everyday, I left the house with the fear that I would face the Taliban and they would beat me for not wearing a proper *hijab*¹ or for working with an NGO.

I still remember the day when I left my house to go grocery shopping in *Froshgah*² Bazaar and the *Amerbel Marof*³'s police stopped me. Even though I was wearing a blue *Burqa*, my face and feet completely covered, they still beat me with *Qamchen*⁴. I screamed and asked about my crime, in reply they said how you dare you come to Bazaar while you are pregnant. My main concern at that time was how and where my daughter and my nieces could study. My family's economic situation was very bad; there was not enough money to feed the children. My oldest son, who is now

15 years old and studying in 9th grade, was malnourished. I went to the supplementary feeding centre of the ACF, located in the area of Kabul where I was living, to get help for my son. They provided that help and my son recovered.

I was impressed with the ACF's work and how they were helping children. I wanted to work with them and asked if there was a vacancy for me. Eventually, I was appointed as a surveyor for three months. Although I was a university graduate and this was only a temporary job, I considered this to be a golden opportunity to support my family economically.

The survey included house-to-house visits to collect information on malnutrition, and referring malnourished children to supplementary feeding centres. In the beginning, I realized that most people were unaware what malnutrition was and that was not the only problem. I also realized how vulnerable they were, living in very basic conditions, trying to keep their families alive. It was very difficult for me to see people in such living conditions and often I thought:

'Why has God created us? Why, do these people have to pay for the destruction of the country through a civil war they did not start and never wanted?'

ACF was, at that time, the only organization working in the field of malnutrition. Step by step, I learnt about health and nutrition and how to help my people. When I referred a malnourished child to the feeding centre, I felt very satisfied and happy. I started to feel useful to my community, worked hard and motivated myself to continue learning. After the initial three months, ACF offered me a one-year contract as a home visitor. As well as referring malnourished children to

the feeding centres, my new responsibilities included providing health and hygiene education.

This required wearing a *burqa*, not an easy task. In fact, I had never done it before. Initially, it was really difficult. I could not see properly and sometimes I fell flat on the road. It made me angry:

'This is not possible! I am not even able to see my path! I have to wear the burqa to make those happy that I hate in my gut!'

Many times I wished to uncover my face and enjoy the fresh air, but I was afraid of being beaten. It was not easy to live through my days under the *burqa*, but because of it, I was able to go into the houses of vulnerable families to offer my help.

After the fall of Taliban, many people, particularly in rural areas, suffered from what I now recognise are psychological problems. All kinds of psychological problems were presented in the country: people felt anxious, depressed, and had posttraumatic memories. My community had faced terrible times of war and insurgencies, and had seen so many victims of war. In fact, they were also victims. Almost all families, including mine, have been face-to-face with death, lost one or more relatives, faced violence, abuse or attacks.

Our lives were completely out of our control for years. These aberrations had become common to us, just a normal part of our daily life. During home visits I realized how a sense of empathy in my community, of feeling grief for the others, had been lost. With pain, I noticed Afghan people enjoying the sorrow of others. Working with the communities, I realized that people had lost their trust in everyone, and could no longer differentiate between enemies and friends. Everyone was a

potential threat. They had lost hope and were only counting the days and night until they died.

In 2003, the ACF initiated a mental health pilot project in Afghanistan to address mental health problems presenting in women and children. I was selected as a psychosocial worker and began to work with this project. In my career, this has been the most challenging position I have held. I had to fight against my own thoughts, my own behaviour and against my cultural rules and barriers.

Also at that time, in my personal life, I went through different stressful situations. While I was working with the project, the Taliban arrested my father. The loss of my father was very hard for me. When he disappeared, my brothers emigrated and my younger sister stopped her education. My father-in-law, who had been a source of great support for me, died. The future of my children was at risk.

Moreover, I was being seriously affected by the horrible conditions of the women I worked with in the rural communities.

In Afghanistan, the cultural context does not allow women to speak of any violence they face at home. Women are considered inferior beings, useless and have no rights. I was very upset when I saw mothers encouraging their sons to beat their sisters for disobeying. I was also a part of this society, but I could not believe what I was experiencing at work and in my personal life. My self-esteem was very low and, looking back, I can say that I had lost all hope.

The start of the psychosocial project provided the light at the end of my tunnel of hopelessness. I learned how to behave, how to face my fears and sorrow, and how to find hope for life again.

The six selected psychosocial workers, including me, went through a comprehen-

sive capacity building programme which included principles of counselling, mother and child relationships, care practices, and home based treatments. This created changes in my personal life. For the first time, I realized the real position of a woman in the society as a mother, as a sister and as a wife.

My horizons widened. The person who had lost herself under the *burqa* was reborn. The project offered opportunities to participate in trainings, inside and outside the country, as well as professional development opportunities. More importantly, it gave me a new perspective on life. The things I learnt and the cooperation with international expatriates brought visible changes into my personal life. I found myself and realized the importance of continuing to strengthen and develop my professional life and skills. Continued promotions within the ACF have finally stabilized my life financially.

Based on my experience, but having no statistics to support it, I can say that almost all Afghan women are subject to some type of violence, whether physical or verbal. Sometimes it is very difficult to discuss women's rights with men and sometimes, even with other women. Understanding of cultural sensitivities is very important. Afghan families live in a joint family system, in which 'confidentiality' is fundamental. Neither male nor female members of the family are allowed to share the secrets of the family with outsiders.

To some extent this may prevent the escalation of domestic conflicts, but it also creates barriers for psychosocial counselling when the victim does not discuss what has happened to him/her. The concept of mental health care, particularly psychosocial counselling, is very new in Afghanistan and there are very few professionals in this field in the country. Many Afghans still think that

psychosocial programmes are aimed at *crazy people* and thus many are not willing to attend trainings or workshops. Cultural barriers in the Afghan context do not allow women to sit together with men in trainings, nor allow male trainers to provide training or treatment, thus making it more difficult to produce qualified female psychosocial trainers.

Currently, I am working as an acting project manager and my horizons are wider than ever before. I am now even thinking of working in other developing countries where ACF is working for poverty reduction; to utilize my long experience to make a difference in the life of other people in need.

Sometimes I am still surprised that a woman in Afghanistan, like me, came out from under the *burqa* and is thinking of working abroad. Working with international staff I realize that women and children are an important part of the society and they should be provided with equal career and development opportunities. At to my

personal life, I have also learnt how a life can change if we only understand the psychology of the person behind the *burqa*.

¹ *hijab* is an Arabic word meaning 'head cover and modest dress for women' In Afghanistan, women wear a scarf all the time both in the house and outside. The Taliban made it obligatory for women to wear the *burqa*, which covers the entire body and has a grille over the face that the woman looks through.

² Main grocery bazaar in Kabul city.

³ Special police enforcing Hijab and other religious requirements.

⁴ A half metre strip of leather used for beating animals, particularly horses.

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