

NEW SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE PROVIDE HOPE TO SURVIVORS OF VIOLENCE

• STORIES OF CHANGE SERIES

“Some nights I was afraid to move. I was afraid I would wake him up and he would beat me. And when he left, I never knew how he was going to act when he came back. Should I be quiet? Should I be happy? I would ask myself, ‘What would set him off?’”

That was Zarmeena* a year ago. At 16 she was pulled out of school to marry a man she didn’t know, and his abuse left her so desperate that she made multiple attempts to take her own life. It’s a situation that is far too typical in Afghanistan, where women face staggering levels of violence in public and private spaces, as well as entrenched discrimination and harassment.

Breaking the cycle is not only about ending the violence these women and girls suffer, but also about helping them feel empowered to create, and take advantage of, social and economic opportunities that will help ensure

they live healthy and productive lives.

Doing so involves creating and maintaining a complex web of support services, education, legal reform and enforcement, all of which, at this stage, requires the combined dedication and support of the Afghanistan Government, local and international NGOs, UN agencies and donors. Many donors have also placed particular focus on strengthening human rights and gender equality through their development support for Afghanistan, providing essential funding that ensures organisations such as UN Women can help women and girls like Zarmeena.

In fact, Zarmeena was able to escape her situation and access help through one of the 24 Women’s Protection Centres operating across the country, 11 of which are supported by UN Women. Today, she is back at school;

UN WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

Location: Office in Kabul, active country-wide

Programme sectors: Normative support; violence prevention and protection; national planning; economic empowerment; leadership and participation.

Key donors: The governments of Australia, Belgium, Iceland, Italy, Korea, Norway, Netherlands, and Sweden.

Women’s Protection Centres: UN Women supports 11 centres in nine provinces, which in 2015 provided more than 2,860 women children affected by violence with a

safe haven, legal support and vocational training.

Survivors Empowerment Journey: This programme takes a holistic approach to empowering women survivors of violence through survivor-centric protection services and economic empowerment, while also fostering an enabling environment for community-level prevention and legal reform.

her continued education will not only give her more options for her future, but is also likely to prevent her ending up back in the same situation.

Women's Protection Centres provide essential emergency shelter for women and their children, but they also act as a safe portal to access free support services and vocational training.

"This is a secure place where we can support the woman physically and psychologically," explains Fatima*, a staff member at one of the Women's Protection Centres in Kabul.

While staying in the centre women have access to literacy, computer and awareness classes, weekly doctor's visits, legal aid, a library that includes books for different literacy levels, peacebuilding, cooking and baking classes, and psychosocial services. There are also weekly art therapy lessons where the clients are encouraged to express and let out their emotions through writing and drawing, expressing their pain and their hopes.



“Whenever clients say they feel safer here than in their house, I feel proud. We are hoping that if they face a similar situation in the future, they will know their rights and how to defend them.”

Fatima, Women's Protection Centre staff member*

In 2015, UN Women's support for these Women's Protection Centres through its Ending Violence against Women Special Fund has helped more than 2,860 women and children affected by violence. It's not just about the immediate support that the women need when escaping from violence, but also preventing it from happening again.

In Zarmeena's case, as well as receiving support and training herself, her family in-law received mediation support and education about Zarmeena's legal rights, as well as the causes and consequences of violence and abuse. Counselling and discussions led to her husband accepting his behaviour as wrong and making a promise to change. The Centre continues to check in with Zarmeena to ensure that her husband is holding to his promises and that she is still in school.

"Whenever clients say they feel safer here than in their house, I feel proud," says Fatima. "Whenever cases are solved then the family calls and thanks us for the changes they see, and that she is happier and knows her rights and can read. We are hoping that if they face a similar situation in the future, they would know their rights and how to defend them."

*Names have been changed to protect identity.

87%

of women in Afghanistan experience some kind of violence during their lifetime. 62% reported experiencing multiple forms of violence.

26%

of the 2,299 incidents of violence against women reported to the Human Rights Commission in the year ended 21 March 2011 had cases opened.

57%

of brides in Afghanistan are under the age of 16. Often girls are forced into marriages at an early age to settle financial and political debts.

SOURCE
Governance and Social Development
Resource Centre, *Violence against
women and girls in Afghanistan*, 2013

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