



Capacitar Letter from Afghanistan—March 2016

From Under the Burqa—Women in Afghanistan

Dear Friends,

Greetings from Afghanistan, where George Horan and I are completing a 10-day visit hosted by the Borderfree Nonviolence Community and Dr. Hakim Young, who founded Borderfree in 2011. Our time here has been rich and full as we meet with and learn from the resilient Afghan people.

Today we offered a workshop to 40 Afghan women who are members of the Borderfree sewing co-op that makes duvets and scarves. The duvets are donated to poor families for warmth during the freezing winter months. Turquoise Borderfree scarves are produced and sold as an income-generating project and as a sign of solidarity with the nonviolence community. Over 60 women seamstresses participate in the sewing project that is coordinated by Ali, a 17-year old youth. Ali's leadership is greatly respected by the women who are very poor and who come from Kabul and surrounding areas.

As we waited for our workshop to begin, the first woman to arrive was clad in a powder-blue burqa that covered her face and entire body. One by one 40 women walked in, bent and tired, old beyond their years. Most of the women wore the traditional blue burqa, and several wore the niqab, a long black dress and a veil that covered the entire face, showing only the eyes. After a few minutes, some of the women began to flip back their burqas so that their faces were revealed, while others clung tightly to their veils, probably because of the presence of three men, George, Ali and Hakim, who served as our Dari translator.

The Burqa is constructed of about ten yards of fabric with an embroidered mesh face piece that limits airflow and the woman's vision. It conceals the entire women's dress ensemble of pants, overdress, and headscarf. The burqa was once a symbol of urbanized Afghan women. According to one source, the impracticality of the billowing blue veil was a sign that the wearer was free from the toil of the fields. Village women would only wear the burqa to visit towns where they would be free from the gaze of unrelated men. With the wars, the burqa was adopted in refugee camps for the privacy of women, and this was gradually enforced with the rise of fundamentalist groups. With civil war, the burqa became essential to guarantee anonymity and protection of the women against harassment and abuse. The Taliban formalized the wearing of the burqa as a sign of their anti-woman policies. Currently the majority of rural Afghan women still wear the burqa. Many educated city women fear the return of the Taliban and Sharia law that would again enforce the burqa and the abuse of women.

Women's lot in Afghanistan is most challenging. In the UNDP Gender Inequality Index, Afghanistan ranks at the bottom—147 out of 148 nations. The literacy rate of females 15 and older is 22%. In 11 out of 36 provinces the literacy rate is under 10%. 87% of the women of Afghanistan have experienced at least one form of domestic abuse. 62% have experienced multiple forms of violence (physical, sexual and psychological). Female land ownership is 2%. The percentage of females in the workforce is 16% as compared to 80% for men. The US Institute of Peace (USIP) 2015 research report on women opens with the quote: "Ongoing conflict, high maternal mortality and domestic violence rates, limited access to health care, and near total lack of economic rights combine to make Afghanistan the world's most dangerous country in which to be born a woman."



Ali serving tea to the women at our workshop



The burqa



Mother and daughter at the workshop

As we began our workshop, the women sat in lotus position reclining on cushions around the room. From our experience with a similar group in 2015, the key to connecting with these women is to give them simple tools, like acupuncture, to manage their poor health and physical pain. With Hakim translating into Dari, we asked, “Who has headaches? Stomach pain? Shoulder pain? Back pain? Insomnia? The response to each of these questions was a unanimous, “YES!” From Capacitar’s trauma healing work in over 40 countries, most of these pains are related to trauma and stressful lives, as well as to poverty and lack of health care. With soft music playing, we demonstrated a variety of acupuncture points, inviting the women to close their eyes, breathe deeply and



Pat Cane and George Horan with the Borderfree seamstresses



The women enjoying a cup of tea at the Capacitar workshop

let go of the stress of the moment. It was touching to see many of these women relax, letting go of the burdens of their lives—just for the moment. When we asked how they felt, some of the women said: “I feel peaceful, relaxed and my pain is gone.” As we led the practices, we watched the participants, especially the women fully covered in their burqas. At first it seemed as if they weren’t doing the practices. But then we saw slight movements under the burqa. They were holding the points under their tent-like covering!

After teaching about 20 acupuncture points, we then showed the women some hand positions

to develop a sense of inner safety and protection. Driving through the streets of Kabul where there is utter chaos and no sense of safety, all the participants in our workshops have appreciated these ancient practices. Hand positions have been used for several thousand years in India to develop physical and spiritual qualities within oneself. One position is for protection against outer dangers and disasters. This position is so needed in Kabul where everyone is alert to the possible danger of suicide bombers. Two days ago, a man dressed in military garb, blew himself up in front of the Ministry of Defense, killing 10 and injuring over 20 people. Another hand position is for safety against the negative energy of people who speak badly against you or who attack you. Many women have to deal with the negativity of gender abuse or shame. A third position is for protection against one’s own negative thinking and poor self-esteem. All of the women in this group had low self-esteem, most are illiterate, and many are in abusive relationships. Our organization “Capacitar” means to empower and to awaken. So these hand positions are a simple way for the women to begin to develop an inner sense of self-worth and strength for their challenging lives.

When we ended the workshop, the women asked for materials in Dari so they could learn more. Almost everyone wanted copies of the Dari Capacitar Emergency Kit of Best Practices, even though most of the women could not read. When we asked Hakim about this, he said that their children will be able to read the practices to them. As the women left, they were happy to know that we are scheduled to return to Afghanistan in October 2016. We promised to teach them more and to walk with them in solidarity and empowerment.

With peace and blessings,

Pat Cane, Capacitar Founder/Director

George Horan, Capacitar Afghanistan Team

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Dr. Hakim Young translating for the workshop



Afghan Peace Volunteers



Fingerholds for Afghan women

