



Women bear the brunt of conflicts, but are too often ignored in constructing the 'peace'

By Barbara A. Frey | Friday, March 13, 2009

Daring to educate girls continues to be dangerous business in the villages of Afghanistan. Ask Fahima Vorgetts, director of the Afghan Women's Fund, whose teacher friend was kidnapped at gunpoint last August. The gunmen were looking for Fahima, who serendipitously had stayed home that day to wait for the teacher and three volunteers to arrive. Instead, the armed men settled for beating up everyone in the car and holding the teacher hostage for 26 days.

Vorgetts, who grew up in Afghanistan, is a U.S. citizen who is a whirlwind of energy working to open up educational and work opportunities for Afghan girls and women. Despite reported political shifts in the war-torn country, Vorgetts notes that — whether Taliban or warlords are in charge — women continue to suffer. Her organization works to support girls and women to achieve self-sufficiency through literacy and small business initiatives. In a society where women's voices are stifled, Vorgetts provides hope and cover. After her recent run-in with the gunmen in Afghanistan, Vorgetts vowed, "I am more determined than ever to continue my work and to not let these few criminals win."

Women too often the losers

No matter which side is "winning" in countries like Afghanistan that are plagued by armed conflict, women are too often the losers. Only by increasing women's roles in shaping the peace will the whole community's needs be addressed — including sustainable development through education and women-led businesses.



Fahima Vorgetts will be one of the keynote speakers at the International Women's Day Celebration, "[Transforming the World through Women's Voices](#)," on Saturday, March 14, starting at 9 a.m. at Coffman Memorial Union on the campus of the University of Minnesota.

The decision to feature Fahima Vorgetts was an obvious one for the organizers of the annual women's rights event.

Shoulder box:

"Given the increased involvement of the U.S. military in Afghanistan," notes Cheryl Thomas, one of the IWD event organizers, "we think it is important to understand the ongoing challenges facing women and women's advocates in the conflict there. Fahima will give us a window into that little known world."

Women's issues frequently sidelined

Vorgetts will be joined on the keynote panel by professor Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, an international legal expert on women and war, who is a professor at both the University of Minnesota Law School and at the University of Ulster's Transitional Justice Institute in

The 14th annual International Women's Day celebration is co-hosted by the Advocates for Human Rights and the Human Rights Program at the University of Minnesota. It is modeled after the 1995 World Conference on Women, held in Beijing. Students and community members can stroll the Great Hall, where more than 60 organizations will offer information for potential volunteers. A dozen smaller workshops will be held simultaneously throughout the building. For the full schedule, click [here](#).

Belfast, Northern Ireland. In Ní Aoláin's experience working with various international communities in resolving armed conflict, she has witnessed the exclusion of women in the "deal-making" phase. Negotiators — almost exclusively male — effectively "neutralize or sideline women's issues and interests in order to achieve certain types of masculine objectives."

Women's roles in conflict and post-conflict societies run the entire spectrum, from perpetrators of armed violence to witnesses, to victims, to healers and rebuilders of communities. Women therefore need to participate in all phases of policymaking to prevent further violence. It is women who assume the work of maintaining and restoring communities affected by violence. It is time women are fully involved in helping to create and implement solutions to violence.

Barbara A. Frey is the director of the Human Rights Program at the University of Minnesota.

Fahima Vorgett's talk is being sponsored by the [“Meeting Minnesota’s Muslims”](#) project, coordinated by the University of Minnesota's Institute for Global Studies. MinnPost is a media partner for the project. The project’s other media partner, KFAI-FM, this month is presenting a [special series](#) on Muslims in Minnesota.

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