

# Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan Stories

Saskatchewan School Library Association

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## Saskatchewan School Library Association

A group of teacher librarians from Regina Public Schools learned of the work of CW4WAfghan at the Kaleidoscope Conference in Calgary in November 2008. They saw an enthusiastic presentation about the work of these dedicated, energetic volunteers. After hearing about the Breaking Bread potluck program, they planned a gathering of this type the following spring in Regina. A member of the group hosted the event in her home. Because the gathering was both an enjoyable evening and a financial success, the group repeated the potluck again in the spring of 2010. The generous contributions of participants have paid the annual salary for a teacher in Afghanistan for the last two years.



*Teacher librarians with Regina Public Schools enjoying an evening of fellowship  
at a Breaking Bread potluck fundraiser for CW4WAfghan*

Thanks to CW4WAfghan Executive Director Janice Eisenhauer for her permission to reprint the following articles from *Hope in Motion: Education for Afghan Women & Girls*, May 2010, a newsletter produced and distributed by the CW4WAfghan volunteers.



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Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan (CW4WAfghan) is a volunteer not-for-profit organization founded in 1996 with twelve chapters across Canada. The goals are to advance education and educational opportunities for Afghan women and their families; and to educate and increase the understanding of Canadians about human rights in Afghanistan. CW4WAfghan is a registered charity (#887718203RR0001).

Donor funded projects are implemented and managed in partnership with Afghan non-profit organizations. These projects include a number of community schools, village libraries, an orphanage, as well as teacher training, literacy, English, and computer classes. The projects are funded mainly from individual donations from Canadians and 100% of funds donated go to women-centered projects in Afghanistan. Special projects are also undertaken with the financial support of the Government of Canada provided through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan members were honoured with the YMCA Calgary Peace Award in the International category for their long-standing contribution to supporting peace and human rights for Afghan women and their families.

**Values:** CW4WAfghan members believe that individuals, as global citizens, working in solidarity and with integrity of purpose and action, can affect positive change in the world through education and the promotion of social justice and human rights.

**Mission:** Canadians taking action, in partnership with Afghan women, towards improving conditions of human rights, ending women's oppression, and providing opportunities for Afghan women to live their lives with dignity, certainty and purpose.

**Purpose:** to alleviate conditions of poverty in Afghanistan through programs that advance education and educational opportunities for women in Afghanistan and their families; and to educate and increase the understanding of Canadians about human rights in Afghanistan.

**Goal:** To ensure effective long-term sustainable education programs for Afghan women and their families and to engage Canadians as global citizens.

# From Readers in Canada to Readers in Afghanistan: The Story of the Dara Village Library

*The story of Dara Library is one example of a project that exists thanks to the support from royalties donated by Canadian award-winning author, Deborah Ellis. In March 2001, Groundwood Books published three inspiring novels by Deborah Ellis for young adults called: The Breadwinner, Parvana's Journey and Mud City. These stories have helped thousands of Canadian youth and adults find inspiration and humanity through the adventures of young Parvana in her homeland, Afghanistan (see page 26). And now they have also helped nurture readers in rural Afghanistan, giving the gift of literacy and books. This gift has truly changed lives and will continue to positively influence life in Dara village for generations to come.*

Nestled in a green valley in eastern Afghanistan, sits a cluster of villages that take advantage of the shade and breeze offered by the surrounding mountains. The area is unusually lush for Afghanistan, and a rich array of fruits, nuts, herbs and vegetables grows there, from apricots and almonds to wild sage and green apples. It is a beautiful place, and the people who live there have long harboured a dream. They want a school for girls.



After much lobbying, the government finally built a boy's high school for their area. The villagers felt it would take another lifetime before they would ever win a girls' high school. In the meantime, they had a 0% literacy rate among the girls and women in their villages. They knew this was crippling not only to the women and their families, but to the entire community.

When two women from CW4WAfghan ended up in the area for a picnic with an Afghan friend who hailed from the valley, they found themselves in an impromptu brainstorming session with the village elders. Standing in a circle under the shade of a mulberry orchard as the plump berries fell all around and children climbed in the trees, the issue of the low literacy rates came up. Discussing the problem, an alternative to a high school was proposed: a community library. One man, who owned some land and had just built a new house there, offered the first floor of his home for the library. CW4WAfghan offered to provide funds to buy the books and to support a salary for a literacy teacher.



Two months later, the library in Dara village opened (*Dara* means 'valley' in Dari). Shelves were up, lined with books. An Afghan women's organization based in the capital of Kabul, which runs small libraries for girls, was invited to come to Dara village and train a local woman in basic librarianship. A woman from a nearby village was recruited to be a literacy teacher and 17 girls and women enrolled in the valley's first ever literacy

class for women and girls. The number of students grew and it wasn't long before the village saw a sharp rise in its literacy rates. Impressed, the men of Dara soon came to CW4WAfghan with a proposal: they wanted their own literacy class. Shortly thereafter, a men's literacy class was launched in the boys' high school in the evenings.

On any given day, over 100 books are usually signed out of the library in an area where the entire surrounding population barely exceeds 1,000 people. A group of mullahs is often found reading there, and they have been known to praise the library in their Friday sermons at the -local mosque, encouraging people to use the library.

Access to books and literacy learning is, and will continue to have a profound impact on all aspects of life in Dara village. Women who are literate can open small businesses, apply for micro-credit loans, and read about ways to improve livestock and agricultural practices. They can teach others how to read, learn about good nutrition, health care and child-rearing practices.

When adult women are literate, their daughters tend to go to school, halting the cycle of girls' illiteracy, early marriage and lack of power. Literate women have more influence within their households and communities. And as we have already seen in Dara village, literate women can inspire men to be literate too!

**“I have never witnessed a commitment to education that -powerful anywhere else on earth, or a will as strong as -Afghans' to overcome the past. It's something worth defending.”**

**Lauryn Oates**

Editor's note: Lauryn Oates is the CW4WAfghan Project Director and manages the Excelerate Teacher Training Program.

## **F**akhria Ibrahimi: CW4WAfghan Stories from Afghanistan

Fakhria Ibrahimi is a young Afghan photographer and documentary filmmaker with a special interest in capturing the stories of the lives of Afghan women. CW4WAfghan commissioned Fakhria to visit a project funded by Canadian donors.

Fakhria met with 20-year-old Parwana who is a teacher at the Chilsitoon Library. The Chilsitoon Library is in an under-resourced community of Kabul and is managed by our partner organization, the Afghan Women's Resource Centre (AWRC).

Here is an excerpt from the interview:

**How did the partnership begin with your community and CW4WAfghan?**

*It began with the people's need for a library.*

**Describe what an average day is like for a teacher in Afghanistan?**

*Teachers are part of the poor strata in Afghanistan. The life of Afghan -teachers is very difficult. We have seen teachers who do not have enough food to eat themselves. Nevertheless, they still come to teach their students.*

### **How do you see the students being impacted by this project?**

*CW4WAfghan's support has led to a higher level of achievement among the students, by growing their knowledge. It has helped them access and study books, health care and many other issues. Some of the younger students come to read storybooks and that has helped expand their knowledge.*

### **How has it affected the students' lives, their families, and the community?**

*Once one person in a family knows something, they can convey the idea to others, like everyone in their family. For example, once we had some reading and talking about how to clean the environment. Afterwards, we found all the students were talking about this with their families and making others aware.*

### **What successes have you seen as a result of this project?**

*I am so happy to work with this program, because I wish to serve my people. There is only one public library in the center of city, which is not near for many people. But this library helped people of this district to access books too. We have a lot of book readers. We have 150-200 readers coming to the library regularly. These include children, high school students, and university students (from both private and government universities). We even have some books that are not found in Kabul university's own library.*



### **What challenges are you still facing?**

*One problem is the very small space of the library, and another problem is the modest number of books on hands. Most people cannot pay membership fees to access the library, so supporting the library is hard.*

### **What message would you like to send to Canadians who are supporting women in Afghanistan?**

*My message for Canadians is to ask them to keep helping Afghan women so we can become independent. In this situation, widow women with 7 or 8 children managing their life with so many difficulties, student with low level of economy and so many other issues suffer Afghan women. They are in need of help.*

### **What can we Afghans do to make a difference?**

*We Afghans should have unity, make ourselves independent, and build our identity.*