



AWN Finds Its Voice in the New Afghanistan

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From the AP Editorial Desk

In the spring of 2002, following the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Advocacy Project and Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children received a request for assistance from the Afghan Women's Network (AWN), a group of women's organizations and individuals that was created in 1996 to work for women's rights on both sides of the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The AWN comprises over 25 different organizations, and its Executive Committee was hoping to strengthen its information and advocacy. This, they felt, would help them to lobby governments as they faced the challenge of ensuring that women's rights would be respected in the new Afghanistan.

Initially, the signs were promising. A ministry for women was established, and women's education was declared a national priority. Women were elected to the Loya Jirga, the national Afghan legislative council.

But by the summer of 2002, there were already signs that interest was on the wane and that many of the gains might be short-lived. The members of the Afghan Women's Network – one of the oldest and most respected networks representing Afghan women – understood that they needed to sharpen their skills as advocates if they were to keep the rights of Afghan women on the national and international agenda.

They had an additional problem: the network is working on both sides of the frontier – representing women in Afghanistan but also Pakistan. By the start of 2003, well over a million Afghans still remained in Pakistan, unwilling to return home until there was more security. Most were women and children. These refugees had become increasingly vulnerable as international agencies moved back to Afghanistan. They, too, had a story that needed telling.

The AWN's Executive Committee asked AP and the Women's Commission (which has supported the AWN since the 1990s) to find them an information specialist. They wanted to put up a website, issue published material, train their members, launch campaigns, and develop their contacts abroad.

Helped by a grant from the Open Society Institute (Central Eurasia Program) and East-West Management Institute, AP and the Women's Commission recruited a seasoned reporter, Mary

Moore. Mary worked with the Los Angeles Times for ten years, but she has never worked outside the United States.

Mary spent her first month getting used to her new surroundings in Peshawar, Pakistan, where the AWN is based. Her first tasks were to help the AWN organize an information unit, develop a budget and work plan, and prepare material for the new AWN website, which the AWN planned to launch on March 8 – International Women’s Day.

Mary worked with the AWN until June of 2003, when her contract expired. During that time she set in place an ambitious communications and advocacy program on both sides of the border. This was described in an interim report by the Advocacy Project to donors, which can be found in these pages. Another of Mary’s goals was to help the AWN develop the skills to develop and update the AWN website. This was quickly done and the website now serves as a showcase for the AWN’s publications and campaigns.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, the Advocacy Project disseminated information on the AWN, through the AP website and newsletter.

Since Mary Moore’s departure, the Advocacy Project continues to promote the work of the AWN from a distance. This has been helped by the presence in Washington of Sadiqa Basiri, head of the AWN Communications Unit, who is studying for two months in the United States. AP is arranging speaking events for Ms Basiri, and has put her in touch with donors who have expressed interest in supporting the AWN.

Meanwhile, Richard Blane, from the AP group, left for Afghanistan at the end of October, 2003, to assess the sustainability of Mary Moore’s work and also identify new directions for the partnership between AP and the AWN.

This year-long project has been AP’s fullest and most ambitious attempt to strengthen the advocacy capacity of a partner, and the following pages chart its progress. They open with Mary Moore’s diary. We asked her for an unvarnished account – for sights, sounds and impressions, as opposed to formal project reporting.

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