

SOUNDS OF WOMEN REPEATING WORDS FROM AN INSTRUCTOR

Meghan Mast: *Those are the sounds of women in a classroom learning to read.*

Around twenty women gather in a small, sun-filled room sitting shoulder to shoulder on an area rug, hunched over their notebooks.

This audio was gathered just a few weeks ago from an MCC partner in Afghanistan.

Today on the show, we check in on this partner teaching women to read in country where that's become increasingly difficult since the Taliban took control of the country's government.

I'm Meghan Mast and you're listening to "Relief, development and podcast," a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

It is estimated that only 29% percent of women in Afghanistan above the age of 15 are literate. Forty years of conflict disrupted attendance at school and the Taliban's regime in certain areas prevented girls from attending school.

There are so many benefits for women who know how to read.

They have better access to information and services for their health and their children's health. They are more knowledgeable about their rights. They're more likely to encourage their daughters to become educated.

They're more likely to have access to income-generating opportunities. They're more likely to feel empowered to make positive changes in their own lives. They're more likely to take part in decision-making and peacebuilding processes in their own communities.

An MCC partner in Afghanistan recognizes the value of teaching women to read. And they're working hard to make that happen in their country, in spite of the challenges.

Here with me now is the executive director of the partner to tell us more about this program. We aren't using his name or the name of the organization, for security reasons. He joins me from Kabul where the internet is a bit choppy sometimes, as you'll hear.

Welcome. Thanks for joining us.

Partner: Good morning, Meghan. I'm really happy to have the time to discuss and talk with you.

Meghan: Can you start by telling me a little bit more about this program?

Partner: Yes. We have a package of learning for woman, which we call life-long learning skills. We started with literacy and numeracy. And then we have peacebuilding trainings. We have child protection trainings. Yeah, it's a full package of learning for women, one hour a day, for three years long.

At the very beginning of the program, women do not know how to read and write and they do not know the letters but as they go on the classes and they learn how to read and write. So, normally in the mornings when they come and get together and after greetings, the facilitator asks them to repeat the yesterday lessons. They show their homework. And after homework, they start the new lessons.

Meghan: And who are the women who attend this program?

Partner: The women are from Hazara community. These women are a poor community, who were working on carpets, making carpets. And they do not have chance to study, go to school, to go to universities. So in 2010, we surveyed this community, and we saw that more than 60% or 75% of women are illiterate. So, we started our program in that community. From that time, I can say that we graduated like more than four or five thousand people from the same community. Every time before we finish the cycle, we have like, more than 100 people on the waiting list. So, people trust us. I mean, the trust, the trust is there.

What makes our program different than other program is that those people who are women who are coming to this program, you can see that they have the desire to learn, they do not come for anything else to get, they come to get the education, get to learn.

We have we have a girl right now at the moment in the class, who got married and living one hour and 15 minutes walk from the center. So, every day she is walking from her community to the center for one hour and 15 minutes. And she's in the class for one hour and walking back to her home for one hour and 15 minutes. So, these things you can see that they really have desire to learn.

Meghan: Can you talk about how things have changed since the Taliban takeover?

Partner: So we have an MOU with the Minister of Economy and also Minister of Woman's Affairs. But after the collapse, there is no Ministry of woman affair anymore. So, the program is shut down. Then, on that time we went to Ministry of Economy that okay, we have this program. What should we do.....

Meghan: He proceeds to tell me all the administrative hoops they had to jump through. Part of the challenge of navigating the Taliban being in power is how disorganized everything is. Each authority figure seems to be saying something different. And there's no consistent policies or approach. Finally, they had had enough of trying to go through the official channels. And despite the uncertainty, the partner decided to re-open the program.

Partner: After eight months, we decided that okay, what we do, we take the risk and we change, we change the center location from one location to another location. We resumed the program with the same participants. Then the community people requested that okay, since there's no men involved in the center, if the Taliban came to the center, we will tell them that this is a center, from woman in the community for woman in the community. So, there is no organization involved, there is no men involved. So, it's a program for woman and community woman are running this. We decided that and we started the classes. And it's like, May, June, July, August, September, October, November, December, January, February, March it's like almost 11 months that the program is running. And we did not face any problem.

Meghan: Wow. Um I'm curious, like, I mean, that sounds very brave and very courageous, and also very creative. And I'm curious if there's risks involved with that. And, you've talked a bit about the precautions that you take, but what are what could some of the consequences be if the Taliban were to come?

Partner: Hopefully, I mean, the first hope is that they will not come to know that it's run by an organization, because all the community are supporting us. And they do not want the Taliban to know

that about this project. But if they know, I mean, they promise that they will stand with us and not allow Taliban to do anything.

Meghan: I think that maybe our listeners will be thinking, wow, but he's sharing with us what's happening. Do you have any security concerns about sharing this information? A little bit publicly, at least with Canada and an audience?

Partner: I don't think so. Afghan people are kind of really living with risks. They really enjoying living that have some risks (*laughs*).

Meghan: And is that is that kind of the worst that could happen is that they close down the program?

Partner: Actually, yeah, yeah. If they know, they will close the program. They may come to me and they may cancel our license. But there's always some ways we can open in other places (*laughs*).

Meghan: I love the innovation and how you seem like you're very light on your feet in terms of how you can adjust and you've been through different iterations of this before.

Partner: Yeah, I'm here to help my people. That's all. I'm here to stand for my people. That's all.

Meghan: Well, it's so clear that you are helping your people. Now you and the community members are willing to take significant risks to make this program happen. Why is this training so important to the women who participate and also to the community? What are the long-term impacts of educating women and girls in Afghanistan?

Partner: As I see, it's really important. If, if you want to educate that generation, you have to educate a woman, because women are like, especially in Afghanistan, woman, are like all the time with their children. Men are going out, working outside of the house, but woman are inside the house. So educated woman can really encourage or push their children to study, to learn, to get educated, or to help them with their homework with everything—their life situation. But men are normally out of them, they are just out of home. And in this kind of community, men are only at home for dinner and sleep in early morning, they go out for working. So they do not have time to work with their children. This program is very important, personally, for me and for women.

Meghan: And I'm so curious, like why it's so important to you? You know, I'm curious, like, did you see what it was like for your mother? Or is there a woman in your life whom you've sort of seen how things are for them, and you want better for them? Curious, like, where does that personal motivation come from?

Partner: I don't have that kind of example. But when I see the behavior change, the relationship change. So that's kind of things that gave me energy to work with this project. As I see human being is to help humans to help someone, show them how they can use their God-given gifts. So, these are the things that it's really kind of important for me personally, that I really love this project, and really want to have this project.

Meghan: I love that answer. Because you're saying, I don't need to have a specific woman in my life who I've seen struggle, like who's been close to me, but I'm a human being and I can see that all human beings benefit from learning. And that's a beautiful thing.

Can you tell me a story about someone who's come out of this program, who has really made an impact on you?

Partner: There's lots of stories. For example, in 2010, we had a student, her family were not allowing her to come to the center. They said that if you go and do not learn something, you will lose the time and it's better to work on carpet. So she said that, no, I really want to go and learn. So, she came and started working, she started learning. After three years, she did not stop, she went to the governmental adult schools. So, she went there and started from eighth grade after our program. After four years, she finished the school, high school. And she didn't stop on that place as well. She went to private universities, and she is studying nursing course right now. So, in half a year she will be a nurse.

Meghan: Wow, that's an incredible story. I can see why you feel proud. I'm curious if there's any other organizations in the area that are offering the same support as this program?

Partner: There was some organizations before [the Taliban take-over] in the community [that] offered literacy classes, but at the moment, I mean, I can say, fortunately, or unfortunately, we're the only program to have literacy. I mean, this life-long learning skills for a woman. We're the only organization. I mean, I'm not sure about all Kabul, but I'm sure about lots of parts of Kabul. There was lots of program before in the previous government. But right now, there's no.

Meghan: How does your experience in Afghanistan differ from what you're seeing covered by the Western media? I would say our impression here is that there is no women in Afghanistan who are able to receive an education right now. It seems to us in the West like that's impossible.

Partner: They have lots of news that they focusing only in Kabul. And they, the Taliban are really focused in Kabul city because all the media's all the organization, international organization, UN offices are based in Kabul city. So still, I know some schools, government schools and private schools and other provinces that they're running. Still, I know some universities in Kandahar that girls are participating. In Kandahar, which is the main focus place of Taliban. So, yeah. But Western media's are getting the news, the source from Kabul. And they're right, in some cases. But if you're inside Afghanistan, you can see different things in different provinces.

Meghan: It sounds to me like the reason why women are still receiving an education is because of really creative and clever resistance on behalf of the Afghan people who are finding workarounds and finding ways to still provide education to women.

So, people here in Canada in the United States, have been paying a lot of attention to what's happening in Afghanistan. And, of course, people were very upset to learn that the Taliban took control of the country. We recently sent out an appeal to our donors, asking for money as it connects with Afghanistan and the literacy program.

So, kind of the cool thing about the podcast is that you can say a message that's heard directly by listeners. And it may even reach the ears of some of the people who've donated to the program. So, what would you like to say to some of the people who might be listening who support the program either through prayer or through donations?

Partner: First of all, I really appreciate their help, as they did and they're doing right now. Afghanistan and we Afghans are in a very bad situation at the moment. And we don't we don't know how long it will

be—this kind of government or this kind of situation. And don't leave us alone. Also, we have lots of people who really want to work for our country. I accept this challenge, I accept this situation. I want to help my people. I will face challenges, but I will not leave my people alone and I will stand with them. Even if I go to prison for a while or anything. But if I came back from prison, I will keep my work. So, I don't want to stop helping people. So, my suggestion from donor agencies, especially MCC, that they do not let us alone. I want their support. So, if I feel supported from other people, then I will do better work. But if I do not feel support from outside, I may work, but long-term I could not feel that energy.

I remember a poem from Saadi. He says that, human beings are a member of a whole, and the creation of one essence. And so, if one member is affected, with pain, other members uneasy will remain. If you [do not] have sympathy for human pain, the name of a human you cannot retain.

So as a human being as a creation of one God, so we're really have to support each other in these kinds of situation. So my suggestion is that they keep their prayers for Afghans, for Afghanistan, and also support and help those Afghans who wants to work for their country and wants to work in this hard situation.

Meghan: That's a beautiful challenge for us here, for listeners, and people watching what's happening in Afghanistan. Thank you.

Partner: You're welcome. You're welcome.

Meghan: Well, thank you so much for your time. And thank you for the good work and the courageous work that you're doing in Afghanistan.

Partner: You're welcome. You're welcome.

Meghan: Take good care.

Partner: Yeah, you too.

Meghan: Bye.

Partner: Bye bye.

Meghan: *That was an MCC partner in Kabul, Afghanistan. We didn't use his name or the name of the partner, for security reasons.*

If you'd like to support MCC's response in Afghanistan, please visit our website. I'll include a link to the page in the show notes.

This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was recorded and produced on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

This episode was produced and hosted by me, Meghan Mast. The head producer is Emily Loewen.

You may have noticed we have new theme music. This was composed by Luke Litwiller and mastered and mixed by Stephan Angello.

A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.

Thanks and take good care.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

SHOW NOTES:

Many of you have been advocating alongside Canadian NGOs like MCC Canada for nearly two years for legislation that will allow humanitarian relief to be sent to Afghanistan. In Canada we welcome the [introduction of Bill C-41](#)! The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate so we continue to advocate that the government will quickly turn the bill into concrete policy.

Due to the way sanctions are managed in Canada, Bill C-41 is one step forward to save lives in Afghanistan. It does not, however, address the challenges faced in other contexts, and we continue to encourage change that allows organizations like MCC to easily support our global neighbours, no matter the government of their country.

While many women and girls are still banned from education in Afghanistan, your donations can now help our partners to deliver things like literacy classes to help women read and write. [For \\$23, you can cover a month's worth of classes for one woman!](#)

To support MCC's work in Afghanistan, please visit our website [here](#) if you live in Canada. And [here](#) if you live in the United States.