



Women for Peace & Participation

Promoting Opportunities for Social Inclusion

Gender, Justice and Security Hub Conflict & Culture Project Impact Report – Afghanistan

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Background of the “Culture and Conflict Project”

This document discusses the "Culture and Conflict project" part of the Gender Justice and Security Hub in Afghanistan. The primary focus on this action-based research is to investigate the impact of conflicts in various regions by delving into the discussion of cultural aspect and impact of war and insecurity on people’s culture and needs. This research employed a cultural mapping approach to explore how women in diverse conflict-affected areas utilize both explicit and implied knowledge to rebuild their livelihoods. By employing cultural mapping techniques and conducting fieldwork interviews, the project aimed to produced policy papers and created a catalog that showcases the craftwork of women of Afghanistan. This reserch contributes to a collective of stories from SouthAsia and Afghansitan; including Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka.

The Project Intitiatives in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has consistently presented unique challenges for project implementation, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and after the events of August 2021. The "Conflict and Culture" project was carried out in two main locations within Afghanistan, namely Kabul and Kandahar initially, each with its distinctive and captivating history and rich cultural diversity. Locations changed to Kandahar, Mazar, and Quetta in our Cross-Border Initiatives" after August 2021.

In Afghanistan, the emphasis revolved around the significance of craftsmanship as an integral aspect of the culture and daily lives of its people. Artisan communities were organised primarily in two key locations, namely Kabul and Kandahar. Through skill mapping exercises, the project identified the three principal art and craft forms prevalent in Afghanistan. We delved deeply into the renowned embroideries of these regions and examined their importance to both women and their communities – and the history and culture that this form of embroidery depict.

These distinctive and well-known embroideries and crafts include charmadozi, khammak, and Afghan traditional Rug and Kelem/Gleem weaving. The project placed particular emphasis on the role of gender within this practice and delved into the significance that this craft holds for female artisans, as well as the values it conveys across generations. This comprehension contributes significantly to the broader cultural tapestry and identity of Afghanistan.



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⇒ Geographical Location of WPP Women Artisans Focus Groups in Afghanistan

The focus groups of women artisans were located in different locations in Kabul, Kandahar, Mazar, and Quetta, as shown on the map. The cross-border initiatives connecting women artisans from Kandahar to Afghan women refugees across the border.



General Culture and Conflict Impacts

The current circumstances in Afghanistan have significantly altered the initial impact plan, presenting numerous challenges and obstacles. However, WPP and its dedicated team, as well as the Hub management's flexible approach and understanding the situation we managed to successfully shift the narrative towards the potential continuation of the project. We continued to carry out project activities with the originally identified women artisan focus groups and new focus groups identified in various locations. These efforts involved connecting these groups, offering capacity-building opportunities, potential markets, and ensuring the provision of international-level "Product Design Training." The project aims to create a cascading effect, spreading learning and skills to local communities through WPP Artisans' focus groups.



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a) Adovacay for Sustainability

WPP has taken several initiatives for advocating the continuation and sustainability of the project in Afghanistan, across the border with Afghan women refugees, with stakeholders, present and potential donors, and communities. This commitment stems from the growing significance of maintaining and ensuring the sustainability of these projects and continuing support to women artisans on the move and who are forced to flee due to certain risks and political instability. The current circumstances have heightened the importance of the basic needs of women and girls, confining them to their homes and denying them their fundamental rights, such as access to education and employment opportunities.

WPP has used all possible platforms to advocate to stakeholders, donors, and communities the importance of sustaining initiatives that engage women in perserving cultural products and using these for livelihood which they need now the most. Additionally, one of the few safe space that provide women with agency and support.

The emhphasis of cultural aspect summarized here includes famous and rich embroidery of traditional crafts, including Khamak, Charmadozi, Rugs, Kelem, and many more. These artistic expressions, deeply rooted in the country's heritage, play a pivotal role in maintaining its cultural identity. Under the impact activities of the project, WPP's efforts have been persistent in conveying the value of these crafts, not only to donors but also to the communities they serve, in order to ensure their continuity and sustainability of the project.

b. Sustainable Livelihood Opportunities

The project has been instrumental in creating livelihood opportunities through cross-border initiatives. It has equipped these focus groups with essential skills, offering them supervision and mentorship in areas like fabric selection, patterns, colors, threads, and designs. Additionally, the project has provided a deep understanding of potential markets and customers, knowledge about raw materials, and guidance on product finishing. Furthermore, it has enabled these groups to harness the power of social media platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram, allowing them to showcase their products and reach international customers and markets. This multifaceted support has been a cornerstone in empowering these focus groups and expanding their reach and impact.

One of the key initiatives of the project aimed to establish a connection between women artisans from Afghanistan and Afghan women refugees residing in Quetta, Pakistan, through the



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formation of a women artisan focus group. This strategic move was fundamental in advancing the project's sustainability and its potential impact. By fostering collaborations between these two groups, the project aimed to explore regional markets and facilitate the exchange of skills and products. This endeavor provided the participating women with valuable opportunities to design and market their products in alignment with the specific needs of their customers. In essence, it aimed to empower these women by enabling them to create, market, and sell their products in a way that truly catered to their customers' preferences.

c) Sustainable Impact through Archives“Blog, Vlog/Videos, Stories and Images/Pictures

In order to protect/safeguard the project's significance, we have created a series of videos that delve into various aspects of the product. These videos encompass its history, origins, elaborate the process of its creation, as well as the incredible stories of the artisan groups involved in the "Culture and Conflict project."

Our dedicated team, committed to preserving the essence of this Afghan culture under the project impact, has gone to great lengths. The documented narratives of the artisans, capturing the essence of their craft, and have also compiled a visual journey through the rich Afghan culture. This visual journey not only showcases the breathtaking landscapes but also provides a glimpse into the daily life and the phases of transformation that have occurred both prior to and following the fall of Afghanistan in August 2021.

D. Social Media Platforms

We have also established a social media platform to highlight the profound impact and diligent efforts that emphasize the success of our project. Through this platform, we have collected stories, images, and videos and uploaded them to engage our audience and drive home the significance of our work. These captivating narratives and visual elements are intended to leave a lasting impression and inspire others.

E. Arts and Craft as Peace Building Tool/Medium

Arts and crafts serve as a potent medium for promoting peace and reconciliation within the cultural and conflict projects in Afghanistan. They are a versatile and inclusive means to foster harmony and understanding. The Culture and Conflict (C&C) project has made significant contributions to conflict resolution, reconciliation, and the creation of a more stable and peaceful society.

⇒ **Cultural Expression:** Arts and crafts provide Afghans with a platform to express their cultural heritage, traditions, and stories. Through their creative expressions within the



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"Culture and Conflict Project," artisans have reconnected with their cultural roots, fostering a sense of identity and belonging that bridges divides.

- ⇒ **Dialogue and Understanding:** Engagement in arts and crafts activities has facilitated dialogue and understanding among women artisans and diverse communities. When they come together to create and appreciate art, these artisans develop empathy and tolerance for each other's perspectives.
- ⇒ **Conflict Transformation:** Women artisans have learned how to employ art to address conflicts and their underlying causes. The project has empowered women artisans and related communities to explore issues related to conflict and methods for reconciliation.
- ⇒ **Healing Trauma:** Throughout the project, women artisans, as well as project staff and researchers, have embarked on a learning journey. They've come to realize that engaging in arts and crafts as creative outlets assists in coping with trauma, supports the healing process, and offers non-violent avenues for self-expression.
- ⇒ **Economic Empowerment:** The project also provides economic opportunities, particularly significant for those facing financial hardship. By supporting artisans and promoting traditional crafts, the project has contributed to sustainable livelihoods, thereby reducing the allure of involvement in conflicts.
- ⇒ **Cultural Preservation:** In the midst of conflict, preserving and promoting Afghan culture and heritage become essential. Through the project, the beauty and uniqueness of Afghan arts and crafts, culture, traditional skills, techniques, and knowledge have been captured and preserved, ensuring that these treasures are passed down to future generations.
- ⇒ **International Collaboration:** This project has created opportunities for international cultural exchange through the impact of using art and craft initiatives to build bridges between Afghanistan and regional and international countries. These collaborations foster goodwill, promote understanding, and support peace efforts.

Key Impacts of “Culture and Conflict Project”



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- Introduction and the successful implementation of the concept "Craft as a Tool for Peacebuilding" and "Conflict Resolution" in Afghanistan.
- Establishing networks and partnerships with regional and international collaborators for the exchange of knowledge and experiences related to arts and crafts and their role in promoting peace.
- Advocating for policies at the local, national, and international levels in Afghanistan.
- Providing sustainable livelihood support to female artisans.
- Introducing fresh designs and accessing new markets.
- Delivering international-level training and other capacity-building and awareness-raising sessions (Designs, Marketing, Social media use, Basic health trainings, Mother and child health trainings, Money Management, Importance of arts and crafts in the culture, building connections with potential customers etc) to empower female artisans, enhancing their skills.
- Incorporating a cross-border element to facilitate connections among women artisans, enabling knowledge exchange and market exploration for product continuity and sustainability.
- Raising awareness among connected communities about the significance of arts and crafts in the peacebuilding and conflict resolution processes, and fostering community connections through arts and cultural events.
- Fostering trust within communities.
- Attracting young and educated women and expanding their knowledge base.
- Shifting the perspective of the new generation towards the preservation of cultural heritage, arts, and crafts, generating their interest in learning and promoting these cultural traditions.
- Promoting the idea of small business enterprises led by women.
- Providing social media platforms connecting them with women traditional crafts business.

Project Challenges

⇒ Sustainable Livelihood

As the project is approaching its conclusion, the situation in Afghanistan continues to worsen on various fronts - socially, economically, and in terms of humanitarian conditions. Ensuring the ongoing sustainability of the project has become an urgent overbearing. Securing opportunities to extend the sustainability of the project and maintain the livelihoods of the current and potential women artisan groups, their families, and the communities is challenging.



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As a matter of fact, factors such as the worsening social and economic conditions and the dire humanitarian circumstances in Afghanistan have created a pressing need to take decisive action. This includes exploring innovative strategies and partnerships to safeguard the project's continuity, providing much-needed support to the women artisans and their families who rely on it, and strengthening the local communities that depend on the project for their economic well-being.

⇒ **Trust Building (Stakeholder, Local GOVT and Communités)**

WPP faced a significant challenge when trying to establish trust with community leaders, communities, artisans, and other stakeholders, especially in the southern region. To ensure the project progressed smoothly, the project team had to work closely with these stakeholders. One crucial aspect was building trust with women artisans to maintain their involvement throughout the project.

During the first two years and the initial phase of the project, women artisans had doubts about the project's sustainability and its future phases. Things became even more uncertain after everything was shut down in August 2021. The groups were dispersed, and we lost contact with our target groups. For several months, the situation remained unclear, and it required a considerable amount of time and effort to reestablish connections with women artisans and bring them back together.

⇒ **Implementing Capacity Building Programmes (Training and Awareness Raising Sessions)**

Given the current situation, it was quite difficult to organize training programs and awareness sessions. Families and local communities of women artisans often saw participation as risk. Furthermore, due to travel restrictions and visa denials for Afghans, our artisans couldn't take part in the crucial "Product Design Training." This posed a challenge for researchers in sharing the training knowledge with the artisans. It ended up being a lengthy process, where only one member of our organization could attend the training, and she had to put in a lot of effort to pass on the training to the artisans. Most of the sessions had to be done on a one-on-one basis.

The Charmadozi and Khamak artisans face significant issues due to their limited education, with many of them either being illiterate or having only completed primary school. One of the primary challenges has been elevating their skillsets and convincing them to embrace new techniques and designs. Equally challenging has been instilling the concept of promoting their products into new markets and opportunities.

Traditionally, these artisans have relied on intermediaries to manage the order and sales of their products. This dependency on middlemen further complicates their journey towards self-



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promotion and growth in the marketplace. Overcoming these challenges necessitates a comprehensive approach that not only advances their craftsmanship but also empowers them to directly engage with customers and explore diverse market avenues.

⇒ **Technology (Internet and devices)**

Connecting our scattered groups across various locations and provinces posed a significant challenge when it came to establishing communication with our protective partners through technology. A considerable number of our artisans lacked access to advanced technology and internet facilities, which hindered their ability to stay connected. This digital divide presented obstacles to our efforts in uniting and collaborating effectively.

⇒ **Policy Dialogues in Afghanistan**

"Given the current circumstances, we find ourselves in a challenging situation where it has become much difficult to integrate policy discussions regarding the influence and endurance of our project. The current government in Afghanistan is opposed to any efforts related to the education, skill development, and employment of women and girls, and they strongly resist any discourse on these matters at higher policy levels.

In this complex environment, it's become increasingly apparent that our ability to engage in constructive policy dialogue, particularly concerning the empowerment of women and girls, has been severely compromised. The existing Afghan government's resistance to such initiatives has forced us to reconsider our approach and seek alternative avenues to promote the impact and sustainability of our project. It is crucial that we adapt to these evolving circumstances and explore innovative strategies to address the unique challenges we face in this region."

⇒ **Budget/Resources Limitation**

The Culture and Conflict project has stretched over five years, during which we have faced significant challenges related to budget and resources. Budget cuts, both initially proposed and in 2021, severely affected our activities. Things became even more complex after August 2021, making it extremely challenging to adapt and execute activities within the available resources. The presence of groups in different locations, restricted mobility, risks, humanitarian crises, a lack of essential necessities, and limited access to healthcare. Despite these obstacles, we've persevered to sustain the project, meet its goals, and create a lasting impact.



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Key Recommendations

⇒ **Advocating the Role of Culture, Arts, and Crafts in Conflict Resolution and Peace Building:**

It is crucial to emphasize the significance of culture, arts, and crafts in promoting peace and conflict resolution, especially in countries like Afghanistan. This advocacy should occur at multiple levels, including the community, provincial, regional, and international. Utilizing cultural expressions, artistic initiatives, and traditional crafts can stand-in unity, mutual understanding, and reconciliation. At the community level, these forms of expression can be instrumental in bridging divides and promoting peaceful coexistence. At the provincial, regional, and international levels, cultural diplomacy and artistic projects can serve as vital tools for building peace and understanding among diverse groups.

⇒ **Identifying Funding Opportunities for Project Sustainability:**

To ensure the long-term sustainability of these projects, it's essential to identify and secure funding opportunities. This involves exploring various sources, such as government grants, international organizations, philanthropic foundations, and private sector partnerships. Diversifying funding sources and creating a strategic financial plan will enable these initiatives to thrive and continue their essential work in conflict-affected regions.

⇒ **Supporting and Sustaining Women Artisan Groups:**

Empowering women artisan groups and providing ongoing support is critical for their continued growth and impact. This support should encompass training, access to resources, and market linkages. Additionally, efforts should be made to promote their crafts on a larger scale, both domestically and internationally. Supporting these women not only ensures economic stability but also promotes gender equality and women's leadership.

▪ **Creating Sustainable Life Skills and Technical Courses:**

To enhance the financial stability of both women and men, especially the youth, there's a need to identify opportunities for sustainable programs focusing on life skills and technical courses. These initiatives can equip individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to secure employment or establish their businesses. Emphasizing youth involvement is particularly crucial, as it can pave the way for economic growth and stability in conflict-affected areas.

▪ **Advocating International Engagement with the Current Government:**



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Encouraging international communities to engage with and influence the current government is essential. This engagement can help ensure that the government places emphasis on providing opportunities for women and girls. International pressure and collaboration can facilitate the creation of policies and initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality, women's entrepreneurship, and social enterprises.

- **Supporting Women and Girls in Establishing Small Businesses:**

Providing opportunities for women and girls to establish small businesses and social enterprises is a powerful way to enhance their economic independence and contribute to community development. This support can include access to microloans, business training, mentorship programs, and market access. Empowering women and girls in this manner not only improves their own livelihoods but also has a positive impact on the overall economic landscape of conflict-affected regions.

By implementing and expanding upon these points, it becomes possible to create a comprehensive strategy for fostering peace, economic stability, and gender equality in conflict-affected areas.