

## Family Guidance Centers and Women's Shelters

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### Organisation

Women for Afghan Women

### Country

Afghanistan

### Provinces

Kabul, Balkh, Saripul, Nangarhar, Badakhshan, Faryab, Kunduz, Kapisa, Takhar, Herat, Samangan, Jawzjan, and Kunar

### Length of programme

Ongoing

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## 1. Project summary

Women for Afghan Women is working to address the issue of child marriage in Afghanistan through the provision of Family Guidance Centers and Women's Shelters. Women and girls who are affected by this practice are referred to the organisation to receive legal aid, counselling and mediation services. Those who are in serious danger or have nowhere to live are referred to a safe and confidential shelter.

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## 2. What are the anticipated outcomes as identified in the *Girls Not Brides* Theory of Change?

- Girls are increasingly aware of their rights.
- Increased access of married and unmarried girls to health, education, economic, and legal support.
- Increased access to safe, quality formal and non-formal education for girls.
- Families, communities and young people are increasingly aware of the harmful impact of child marriage and alternatives available.

### 3. What are the key activities of the project?

Women for Afghan Women is working to achieve change by providing the following services and support to girls, women, their families and communities:

#### Legal aid

Girls who are survivors of child marriage or are at risk of becoming child brides can access legal aid to help them annul their marriages or receive a divorce through the Afghan justice system. The provision of legal aid accessed via Family Guidance Centers enables girls to take their cases to court which contributes to protecting their rights and strengthens the justice system through law enforcement.

#### Safe housing and shelters

Girls who are survivors of child marriage or are at risk of becoming child brides often need safe accommodation and access to protection services. Girls are referred to Women for Afghan Women's shelters if their lives are at risk or if they have nowhere else to go while their cases are being worked on. Clients who require long-term housing are referred to a halfway house or onto a Children's Support Center programme. In addition to safe housing, girls and young women receive nutritious meals, medical and psychological care, and educational opportunities.

#### Family mediation services

Families of girls who are child brides or are at risk of becoming child brides can participate in mediation services via Women for Afghan Women's Family Guidance Centers. During these sessions families learn about the rights of girls and the negative consequences that child marriage can have on their daughters and her wider family. Mediation supports families through the difficult process of ending their daughter's engagement or marriage by annulment or divorce.

#### Community outreach sessions

Aim to educate the wider public and influential stakeholders about the rights of women and girls. These sessions aim to transform cultural attitudes towards harmful practices such as child marriage. In turn, Women for Afghan Women hope that families and the wider community can become powerful advocates for change.

**Girls, women and their families are referred to Women for Afghan Women services via a variety of channels including:** the police, government ministries (such as the Ministry of Women's Affairs), doctors and health facilities, family members and the courts. Women for Afghan Women has built strong relationships across sectors and with relevant government agencies, the media and civil society to ensure that victims of human rights violations, including future or current child brides, are referred for support.

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### 4. Has the project been evaluated?

Women for Afghan Women's Family Guidance Centers and shelters have been monitored internally as well as by the Ministry of Women's Affairs and numerous funders.

- On a daily basis, hundreds of women and girls receive services from Women for Afghan Women.
- To date, Women for Afghan Women has served over 21,000 women and children, and trained over 280,000 men and women on women's rights.
- In 2015 alone, Women for Afghan Women provided life-saving services for 4,040 women and children, and trained 35,141 men and women on women's rights.

## 5. What are the challenges in implementing the project and how are they overcome?

- **Cultural:** persistent cultural attitudes that condone violence against women and girls is the greatest challenge to implementing this work. For example, some government officials have publicly condemned the work of women's shelters, as have community elders and high profile media personalities. In many of the provinces where Women for Afghan Women operate, staff have been threatened by family members of clients who argue that the work is culturally inappropriate. While there has been a significant positive shift in public attitude and perception toward the rights of women and girls since the first Family Guidance Center opened in 2007, conservative attitudes remain a barrier. Working to overcome these challenges involves building public awareness through community outreach trainings and mediation sessions with families, as well as continuing to work with government leaders, local mullahs, community elders, and other key partners to transform and shift attitudes.
- **Security:** has been a major challenge in implementing this work. In October 2015, the Taliban overran the province of Kunduz. During the attack, they looted and raided Women for Afghan Women facilities, made threatening and harassing calls to staff members and set fire to a shelter. Women for Afghan Women swiftly reacted by evacuating staff and clients out of the province before the Taliban arrived at the facilities. While staff and clients escaped injury, the incident in Kunduz highlights the precarious nature of this work. Furthermore, in provinces throughout Afghanistan, security prevents girls and women from leaving the safety of their homes to seek services and also challenges the ability of Women for Afghan Women's staff and partners to conduct outreach and awareness, which is pivotal to empowering the community and informing them of their rights and the services available to them.
- **Rule of law:** Afghanistan has yet to establish a robust justice system that impedes violence against women and girls. The system remains reactionary and impunity for crimes against women and girls is rampant. Strengthening the rule of law is critical to ending child marriage.

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## 6. What factors are important to the success of the project?

- **Partnerships:** with local and national government institutions and local police are instrumental in ensuring girls who have been victims of child marriage, or girls at risk of child marriage, are referred for support and services. Women for Afghan Women work closely with the Ministry of Women's Affairs and its provincial departments, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Health, and other agencies to resolve cases and provide clients with support. Furthermore, strong partnerships with the Ministries help to keep them abreast with the types of cases arising and the challenges women and girls are facing; information which helps to inform policies and laws.
- **Legal structures:** in 2009, then President Karzai issued a presidential decree to pass an Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law. This ground-breaking legislation criminalizes numerous forms of violence including; child marriage, forced marriage, the selling and buying of women for the purpose or under the pretext of marriage, the practice of ba'ad which involves the giving away of a girl or woman to settle a dispute, forced self-immolation and 17 other acts of violence including rape. The legislation also specifies punishment for the perpetrators. Although not yet passed by the Afghan Parliament - primarily due to conservative lawmakers who argue the EVAW legislation is against Islam - it is slowly changing legal standards at the level of the judiciary and serves as an important tool for women and girls to access their rights. For example, in October 2014, lawyers evoked this legislation in the case of a 10-year-old girl who was raped by a prominent mullah in the

province of Kunduz. As a result, the court made a landmark decision, ruling to imprison the mullah for 20 years.

- **Community buy-in:** building trust within communities has also been critical to the success of this work. As more people are learning about the rights of women and girls, the more they are referring their sisters, daughters, and neighbours to Women for Afghan Women to receive services and stop child marriage.

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## 7. What pieces of advice would you give other civil society organisations considering implementing a similar project?

1. **Hire local people.** They know their communities and know how far and how fast to push for change. All of Women for Afghan Women's 600+ staff in Afghanistan are hired from their local communities in each province. Hiring people who know the needs and desires of their community has been instrumental to building trust, gaining community buy-in and driving change.
2. **Make men and boys part of the solution.** Educating and empowering men and boys to understand that women's rights are human rights is an important part of changing attitudes and behaviours. Women for Afghan Women does this through outreach and awareness training in communities and schools. In 2016 a men's movement will be launched which aims to engage more boys and men on issues relating to women's rights and teach them how to advocate for change.
3. **Train female clients to become agents of change.** Women for Afghan Women does this through their empowerment courses which are provided to all clients in shelters, as well as through outreach at local schools and in communities.

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Find out more about the work **Women for Afghan Women** are doing by visiting their [website](#).