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Afghan restaurant symbol of women's progress

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Suraya Pakzad, the founding director of Voice of Women Organization, greets people before speaking to approximately 100 people about a project to set up a restaurant in Afghanistan, run by women, teaching women to be self-sufficient. The project was announced in December, so this will be an update on progress. It will be funded primarily through supporters in NEPA.



HANDOUT PHOTO The sign outside restaurant in Afghanistan says "Scranton Restaurant" in both English and Arabic.

[Image Gallery for Afghan restaurant symbol of women's progress](#)



[Image Gallery for Afghan restaurant symbol of women's progress](#)

At a time when most foreign news is unremittingly grim, I have a good-news story to tell — about the first women-only restaurant in western Afghanistan, called the Scranton Restaurant.

That name reflects the fact that the restaurant is a joint project of a noted woman activist in Herat, Afghanistan, and her counterparts in Scranton, who raised \$20,000 to get the restaurant started. The Scranton Restaurant is a rare place where Afghan women, young and old, can socialize outside their homes in safety.

This project reminds us that those who care about the rights of Afghan women need to be vigilant as U.S. troops exit. Many cynics assume there is no way to help Afghan women retain the gains they've made, since the Taliban are making inroads. That's untrue. There are courageous Afghan women who will fight to keep those gains, as they have in Herat, especially if Western governments and citizens continue to help.

The Scranton Restaurant was the brainchild of Suraya Pakzad, who heads the Voice of Women Organization, which runs five shelters for battered or abused women in western Afghanistan. I have visited one of her shelters in Herat, near the Iranian border, and met her gutsy staff and the grateful women who have found protection inside its walls. It takes courage to run such a shelter, where the families of abused women may try to snatch them, or may threaten staff. Pakzad and her family have been threatened.

But she has continued her work, with her husband's support. She conceived of the restaurant, she told me by phone, as "one way to create jobs for the women in the shelter, who could come to the restaurant and learn skills." She obtained land from the city, and had help from the Finnish government in building a structure, but needed funds to equip, and start up the operation.

Enter the women of Scranton. Lawyer Judy Price was "enraged" when she saw a 2012 video of the Taliban executing a young Afghan woman. "I felt that we who are educated and empowered have to support those women," Price told me. She contacted Sondra Myers, a senior fellow at the University of Scranton, who, along with Sen. Bob Casey has a strong interest in Afghan women; both knew Pakzad, who had visited Pennsylvania and had won a State Department award. They made the Afghan connection, and Price organized two benefits that raised nearly \$20,000 for the restaurant startup. Voila! The women of Herat had a place to meet.

What's so important about this restaurant, says Pakzad, is that it gives young and old women a place to hold meetings, parties or other social gatherings. Women students can sip coffee between classes, safe from male harassment. (Men are banned, except for a small window where they can order takeout.)

The girls' mothers usually come to check the place out, but word has spread that it is safe and reputable. And the women from the shelter are now doing catering jobs out of the restaurant premises. Women from other cities are asking Pakzad if she can help them set up female-only restaurants in their towns, and she hopes to start a second one soon.

Pakzad worries about the future of Afghan women when NATO troops leave, although she is pleased that President Obama has delayed the exit of the last few thousand American troops. "This gave me hope," she says. "We also had more hope," she says, when the new Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani, gave approval for a small U.S. advisory force to stay on, something the previous president, Hamid Karzai, refused to do.

But Pakzad worries that Afghan government efforts to hold peace talks with the Taliban may sell out women. The international aid group Oxfam just issued a report that details how Afghan women have been systematically excluded from Afghan government efforts to start such talks. "This was our concern from the beginning," Pakzad says, "that women were not included."

The Afghan Higher Peace Council has 61 male members, but only nine females, who have been marginalized. "We should be at the table to see that they don't compromise women's rights," Pakzad says.

To strengthen women's voices, Pakzad wants to start a leadership training institute for women. Many Afghan women have extensive organizing experience, she says, but have never earned degrees and so can't rise up in government positions. She'd like to see older women get credit for five to seven years of experience and be able to graduate in two years.

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USAID, the State Department's aid organization, has just launched a five-year, \$216 million program to focus on the education and training of Afghan women. A women's leadership institute would seem to fit right into that program.

Such continuing U.S. government aid to Afghan women will be vital. But it is women activists like those in Scranton who can keep the government's attention focused on Afghan women when other crises devour U.S. attention; they can also establish links to help Afghan women directly. The Scranton Restaurant is a potent symbol of the difference such grass-roots efforts can make.

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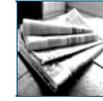
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