The “Afghan Women Leaders Speak: Conflict Mitigation and Social Reconstruction” conference took place Wednesday, November 16 – Saturday November 19, 2005 at the Mershon Center. Organized by Professors Sally Kitch (OSU, Department of Women Studies) and Margaret Mills (OSU, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures), the conference brought together seven Afghan women, as well as many U.S.-based scholars and students, who have actively assumed responsibilities working for social change in Afghanistan. The conference was composed of an opening reception, which was attended by OSU President Karen Holbrook and other university administrators; a luncheon keynote, which was given by Marzia Basel (head of the Afghan Women Judges’ Association and affiliated with the UNDP) and attended by over 150 scholars, students, and local American political and social leaders; and seven panels addressing the role of women in political and social development in Afghanistan.

In the first panel, “The Current State of Affairs for Afghan Women,” panelists Masuda Sultan, Jamila Afghani, and Aziza Ahmadyar and discussant Cathy Rakowski (OSU, Department of Women Studies) addressed women’s situation in the current post-Taliban and post-war reconstruction period. In the course of their comments, panelists repeated the messages that international aid groups need to study Afghan culture to make their efforts helpful in Afghanistan, and that these aid groups should not leave the country preemptively, before their work is done. Panelists emphasized that they do not want a repeat of the situation in 1992, when aid groups abandoned Afghanistan to warlords. They said that what they need most of all is security, and they noted that a period of suppressed conflict is not the same as peace.
In addressing how women can become involved in Afghanistan’s development from a period of suppressed conflict to one of peace, the panelists discussed the current electoral quota, whereby at least two women must be elected from each province (25.6% of seats) to the lower house of the Afghan parliament. Marzia Basel commented that not the number of women in government but their qualifications and motivations should be discussed. Many women who were elected to the current parliament are neither particularly politically minded nor independent, Basel said, but they are instead supported by special interest groups that use the women as puppets. The panelists agreed that women parliamentarians in Afghanistan, especially, need help from NGOs and aid groups, in order to build networks. They said that until women in government find a way to unite, women’s presence will not make any difference.

In the second panel, conference participants described their ongoing projects. For example, Farida Azizi described her work as the special advisor for Afghanistan and the Middle East in the Washington, DC-based nonprofit organization Vital Voices, which supports income-generating projects for women. Aziza Ahmadyar described her involvement with the Afghan Women’s Resource Center, which she established in 1989, working to replace math textbooks that used militaristic word problems with more peaceful educational tools.

Marzia Basel, who also described her work in the keynote address that she gave on the second day of the conference, discussed how she focuses on the political and societal issues of upholding security and the rule of law. She works on these issues in her capacities as both a UNIFEM Afghanistan project coordinator and the head of the Afghan Women Judges’ Association.
Marzia Meena established Peace and Cooperation for Afghanistan, and she most recently worked on networking with government organizations in order to get her platform for action, which focuses on peace and democracy, involved in the commission for planning the constitution. Jamila Afghani has focused mostly on providing educational resources for women through the Noor Educational Center. She said that she hopes to improve the current educational situation of women in creating a peaceful and educated Afghanistan.

Lisa Sorush, a third year medical student at the University of Kabul, is the executive director of Cultural Center for Girls in Kabul. In her work rebuilding girls’ schools, she said she has learned that in order to help women, you need to make them into decision makers.

Masuda Sultan, an Afghan American, started an organization called “Women for Afghan Women” after 9/11. She said she sees herself as a bridge between Afghanistan and America, and that the U.S.-based organization is able to coordinate resources outside Afghanistan.

[[should I include all of these women and their work, or just a “sampling”?]]

In the third panel, “Afghan Women and Democratization,” the panelists (Marzia Meena, Farida Azizi, and Aziza Ahmadyar) emphasized that democratization in Afghanistan requires educational efforts to re-define the term “democracy” as it is understood there. They said that democracy is associated negatively with communism in Afghanistan, and that because of this association people reject the word without understanding the concepts behind it. The panelists also emphasized the need for
democracy at the family level, saying that both men and women need to be educated in
democratic values.

In the fourth and fifth panels, “Women as Agents of Conflict Resolution” and
“Women as Agents of Social Reconstruction,” panelists discussed the role of women in
resolving social conflicts and their participation in the political and social development of
Afghanistan. Panelists and discussion emphasized that democracy and development for
Afghanistan must be thought of in Afghan terms, not in terms imposed from the outside.
They said that there are many ways in which women can use traditional means to exert
influence on political and social change.

In the sixth panel, “American Experience with Afghan Projects,” Professor Anne
Brodsky (University of MD, Department of Women’s Studies) and Rachel Lehr (an
organizer of Rubia Handworks, a non-profit group that helps Afghan women use their
traditional handwork skills to make marketable goods) led a discussion about what they
have learned from their efforts to help empower women socially and politically. While
this panel was underway, the Afghan participants were meeting in small groups to
brainstorm their own ideas for projects, and the reports these women gave of their
brainstorming sessions dovetailed with the themes of panel 6. They said that projects to
help make women more financially independent must take care not to encourage them to
remain in dangerous work environments. Rug-making, for example, can potentially be
very profitable, but it takes a long time to craft just one rug, and this may not ultimately
empower women.

One of the brainstorming sessions yielded plans to address child marriage. The
participants said that this problem is fairly common in Afghanistan, because the civil
code prohibition on child marriage is not enforced. They said that forced marriage is common for numerous purposes, including the use of the exchange of women to resolve disputes, the practice of selling women for money, or even simply getting rid of another mouth to feed when a family is poor. The solution to this problem, they said, is a combination of implementation of the law and clear consequences for disobeying. To achieve this, the participants described organizing a study of existing laws and international agreements in order to draft specific legislation regarding consequences for non-compliance.

The final panel, “Women’s Leadership and Religion,” featured personal narratives from panelists regarding their own development as scholars and activists. Jamila Afghani, for example, described how she persuaded her highly traditional family to allow her to continue going to school. She and the other panelists emphasized that westerners should not blame Islam, itself, but rather Afghan culture and standard interpretations of the Koran for women’s current situation in Afghanistan. They said that groups such as the Taliban should not be confused with Islam, and they repeated their optimism that education of men and women, alike, could correct cultural confusions that subjugate women. In this vein, discussant Dorry Noyes argued that women can gain power through access to cultural resources. For example, women who are educated can read the Koran, and interpret the texts, for themselves.

Professor Ara Wilson (OSU, Department of Women Studies) provided closing comments, reflecting upon the four days of the conference. She noted that much of the discussion had centered upon the struggle and destruction that women face in
Afghanistan today, but that the conference had provided a lot of inspiration for the potential resources within their reach.