

The Philadelphia Inquirer

June 12, 2005

Report from Afghanistan, by way of Manhattan
Fashioning a future
Afghan women visit N.Y. for an American-style business boot camp.
By Miriam Hill
Inquirer Staff Writer

NEW YORK - They had lost loved ones and homes to war, but the Afghan women gathered around a table at the Seventh Avenue studio of designer Cynthia Steffe were determined to rebuild.

And so one day last week, they got a lesson in American fashion and capitalism from Steffe, a Vivien Leigh look-alike and Donna Karan protégée. The session was part of a three-week trip to New York organized by the Business Council for Peace, or Bpeace, a nonprofit that helps women in troubled parts of the world start and expand businesses.

The program aims to give the 12 women ideas they can use in businesses back home, which will create jobs and help jump-start a moribund economy.

"This would have worked wonderfully in my last collection," Steffe said, fingering a shirt embroidered by one of the women. "To put a collection together, customers and stores want what's fresh, and we're constantly looking for new designs."

The idea of selling ideas - a beaded flower or an unusual crochet design - and not just final products, was foreign to the Afghan women.

"Back home, everybody can copy," said Latifa, 28, who sells embroidered shirts in Kabul. She said she had picked up many useful ideas on the trip, which included advice on networking and understanding profit margins and other concepts.

Bpeace requested that the women's full names not be used, out of concern for their safety. Despite the fall of the Taliban, local custom still prevents women from leaving their homes in some parts of Afghanistan. Kidnappings and bombings also have increased security concerns.

Many of the women chosen to participate run their own companies. Some are their family's primary breadwinners.

"Each woman is a survivor. They're really amazing because they've each achieved so much," said Gwendy Feldman, cochair of the Afghan Action Team for Bpeace.

Suria, 51, had watched helplessly as mujaheddin guerrillas put a gun to her head and dragged her husband out of their home 26 years ago. She says they killed him because he continued to work for the government even after the Soviets took over. They also said he wasn't faithful to Islam.

"I kept showing them the Koran and saying we are believers, but they closed the Koran and took him," she said, nearing tears.

Today, she runs a company that sells crocheted baby clothing and employs 15. She hopes the trip will help her hire more women where she lives.

Rangina Hamidi's family fled Afghanistan when she was 10 because her father refused to become a communist. He also wanted his daughters to be educated. She grew up in the United States and graduated from the University of Virginia.

After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, she decided to return to Afghanistan. She works for a nonprofit that employs 300 women who embroider in their homes in Kandahar, a conservative city where women rarely leave their homes. Working out of their homes is the only way to earn money.

"Being an Afghan woman, I knew these Afghan women had suffered so much," she said. "I could have been the same person had I not had the chance to leave. I saw this as a calling."

Her status as an American enables her to go out while others do not. When local people challenge her, she tells them that her parents would not have supported her decision to return to Afghanistan if they did not approve of her behavior.

Many girls are not educated in her part of the country, so they take up embroidery and become skilled at a young age. That creates a steady supply of workers whose earnings, though small, can make a big difference in a country whose per capita income is \$200 a year.

But even with a reliable, inexpensive labor force, Afghan products struggle to compete with those from China and India, said Toni Maloney, chair of the Business Council's governing council.

Each woman gets an American mentor and must develop a business plan. Bpeace plans to work with them for several years.

The New York visit, which began May 22 and wrapped up late last week, mixed American holiday with business boot-camp. The women attended classes at the Fashion Institute of Technology, got a bird's-eye view of Manhattan from the top of the Empire State Building, and scoped out such American consumer temples as Target and ABC Carpet.

At Public School 3 in Greenwich Village, the women read passages from a book of Afghan folk tales, *A Key to the Heart*, that included drawings from the children at the school. It was the first time the children had heard the Dari language.

The children at P.S. 3 have raised \$50,000 since Sept. 11, 2001, through dance-a-thons and other events. The money allowed a school in Afghanistan's Ghazni province to reopen.

The women's visit spurred question after question.

"Before you got the right to vote, what was it like? Did you struggle?" one girl asked.

Laila replied: "At the time, women in Afghanistan, they struggled. Some of the men in Afghanistan, not all of them, they don't want women to go to work."

She now sells jewelry to Kabul shops. After 13 years in exile in Pakistan during Taliban rule, Laila returned to Afghanistan in 2003.

She told the children she wouldn't live anywhere else.

"I like my children to go for study to other countries to learn to be professionals for the future," Laila said. "But I want them to work in Afghanistan, for our people."

Contact staff writer Miriam Hill at 212-757-2295 or hillmb@phillynews.com.