

**EVALUATION FOR  
PARSA'S HIGHER EDUCATION  
PSYCHOSOCIAL TRAINING**

**Prepared for**

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## **I. Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

From October 4<sup>th</sup> - 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009 I undertook an evaluation of PARSA's psychosocial training programme.<sup>2</sup>This is a pilot project which began in August, 2009 and is in the main targeting fourth year students at Kabul University. At the time of my interviews the programme was half-way through and some students were already engaging in practicums at the schools and orphanages supported by the organisation.

As elaborated elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> the "Train the Teachers" in Psychosocial Training was initiated in August 2009. Since the beginning of the programme thirty six students have been undergoing training, along with observing and co-teaching the teachers in each of the two school orphanage programmes. By alternating practical work with their curriculum materials students have had the opportunity to integrate their classroom learning with a more hands-on approach working with teachers and children in other settings.

My initial brief as discussed with PARSA Director Marnie Gustavson had been to interview as broad a range of trainers and trainees as possible in order to arrive at some understanding of the efficacy of the programme and to offer suggestions for improvement. Toward this end, the intention was to interview University student trainees and the Director of the Psychology Faculty, principals of the two schools in which PARSA trainers are working with teachers and children, a few teachers and children in these school / orphanage programmes, parents (if possible), and of course the PARSA trainers.

Two key concerns informed this evaluation. The first was to determine how student trainees were responding to the psycho-social training what they were getting out of it and, related to this, how they hope to make use of what their training in their post-university work. For teachers at the orphanage and school a central issue was to better understand what sustains them in engaging with the psycho-social approach: is their commitment informed by the bonuses they receive for work well done? Does it emerge out of their own appreciation of what this new methodology brings to their engagement with youngsters (and which is a far remove from the conventionally harsher approach that is used in Afghan classrooms)? In what, if any ways, has their exposure to the training changed (or is helping to change) the way they see themselves vis a vis their young charges - not simply as teachers but, in the lingo of the "Healthy Afghan Child Programme", enabling them to envision themselves as "good mothers/ good fathers" – in other words, also in compassionate mentoring

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<sup>3</sup>PARSA's September-October 2009 Report for Higher Education Training: "Train the Teachers" in Psychosocial Training, p.1

roles? A larger issue was to try to assess what might be needed in order to do away with the bonuses – a measure of the extent to which teachers have sufficiently internalised the messages the psycho-social training is endeavouring to impart.

Another issue initially discussed was to offer some assessment about the status of girls in schools versus their counterparts at the orphanages. This emerges out of a concern that, given the larger familial and societal contexts in which females' lives are embedded, girls living with their families may ironically be at greater risk of inculcating a sense of low self-esteem and confidence compared to those who, because of the 'benign' neglect they experience living in orphanages have to develop inner resources.<sup>4</sup> The hope was to see if there was some way of identifying aspects of the latter's experiences that may serve in some way to enable girls to manage for themselves, inculcating some measure of independence and responsibility that may be less likely to develop amongst girls living within the context of often constricted familial norms and value systems.

In the end, due to time constraints, scheduling conflicts as well as security concerns – a bomb blast occurred shortly after I arrived which limited movement around town - the scope of this ambitious evaluation had to be considerably readjusted. While I did make one school and one orphanage visit, interact with a few teachers and students, the main focus of my interactions was with the University students and the PARSA trainers. Nevertheless, what I was able to do, see and hear gave me a very rich sense of what PARSA is doing and the tremendous need for such a programme for adults and children alike. As an outsider, both to the training programme and to the life that inhabitants of Kabul have continuously to adjust to, the security situation also helped give me a deeper appreciation of the potentially important role that the psycho-social training can have in the lives of those it touches.

## **Methodology**

As a Social Anthropologist whose work has in the main been based on working with women in villages of the Indian Himalayas, I chose to work with a methodology that was both flexible and, within the limitations of my language constraints (I do not speak Dari and hence was largely dependent on the assistance of a PARSA staff member to translate for me), would enable me to develop narratives out of what I heard.

In order to ensure some measure of consistency the questions I posed **broadly** followed those used in an earlier evaluation.<sup>5</sup> At the same time I tried as much as possible to let the course of conversation take its own direction, although this to a great extent depended on the language being used. Speaking in English, Hindustani/Urdu, it was much easier to let those who had a great deal to say set the tone: often it was clear that without the time constraints we were working against

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<sup>4</sup> Discussions with Marnie Gustavson. Also see fn #3.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Newsbrander, An evaluation of the "Healthy Afghan Girl Programme" : Psychosocial training for Afghan Girls (April 2009).

they would have continued, there was clearly so much for them to say and for me to ask. This was also often the case with those with whom the interview was conducted in Dari, although here inevitably I missed out on the nuances of much that was said. Other interactions felt more stilted, and there was one interaction that, from the start, felt uncomfortable and I chose to end it sooner rather than later.

There were inevitable drawbacks to the 'go with the flow' approach. One of these was that I didn't consistently ask certain questions that I thought worth asking about. For instance, it would have been useful to see how students felt about the mixed gender trainings and whether there would be a value in periodically having single gender group work/interactions.

I visited the Allauhudin orphanage on two brief occasions and the Ghazi Ayub Khan School once where I met with the Deputy to the Principal. Unfortunately, poor scheduling (arriving at the orphanage at lunch time on one occasion and a fruitless engagement with the Director on the second – in which she complained of being sidelined by PARSA) resulted in my getting a very limited sense of the issues and concerns of the student trainers (who were engaged in their practicums at that time), the PARSA trainers, the teachers or the students. However, I was able to look around the compound, visit the handicrafts rooms where young children were being taught to sew, embroider and knit, and also talk with a few teenage girls who spoke surprisingly good English. I also briefly sat in on classes being held by PARSA's two main trainers for school and orphanage teachers.



**Figure 1: Teachers at a Focusing Training**

The greater part of my time was spent with the University student trainees, most of who are in their fourth and final year of study in the Faculties of Psychology, Education Teaching, Education Administration and Pedagogy (although several are Third year students). I was able to interview a total of 18 students; unfortunately I was unable to interview the Head of the Psychology Faculty and others who might have been able to share insights into the progress of student trainees and offer suggestions for how, given institutional realities, the programme could be modified, strengthened and taken forward.

As already stated, a major limitation to my work was my lack of knowledge of Dari. However, I was assisted by a very able translator (Palwasha), and on occasion was able to communicate with interviewees in English and/or Hindustani/Urdu. All my interviews with PARSA staff were conducted in English, although translation assistance was at hand. Inevitably, a great deal was ‘lost in translation.’<sup>6</sup> However, what I missed through lack of familiarity of language I believe was made up through a long-established understanding of the wider region and cultural contexts in which Afghanistan is embedded. In particular, many of the gender issues that foreground many of the issues in PARSA’s work in the Afghan context resonate, albeit often in different idioms, in other areas in which I have worked.

I did not capture as many images as I might have. This was largely because of my initial queries to individuals met with negative responses or because, at institutions, the perception that permission from absent higher authorities was required. Now, at some remove in time, all that I’m left with are mental images of the University students -- smartly dressed young women in hijab along with jeans or more formal clothing, men wearing salwar kameez or trousers - most them full of the energy and enthusiasm of youth.

## II. Evaluation of Focussing Methodology

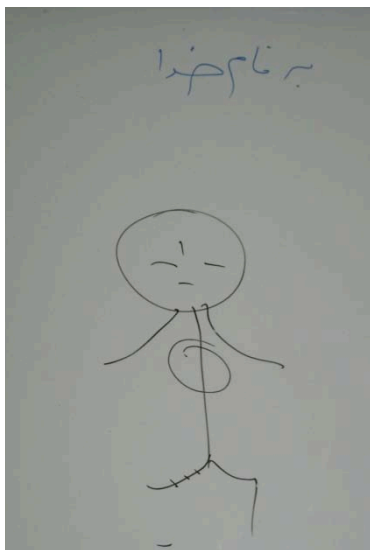


Figure 2: Focusing on the body

My overall impression of this training programme is highly favourable. Although this was my first exposure to the therapeutic method of Focussing it was intuitively familiar to me, resonating as it does with other practices of self-awareness such as Mindfulness meditation and Vipassana which, to paraphrase the words of one PARSA trainer, invite one to listen to and observe non-judgementally one’s body, feelings and thoughts.

Particularly impressive is the way this methodology has been adapted to take into consideration the specific cultural and religious contexts in which Afghan people’s lives are embedded. Concentrating on oneself in this context, I am told, is likened to performing Namaaz; that there’s a verse in the Koran that says if a person listens to himself then they will understand both themselves and God. Rumi’s likening of the body as a gift house for feelings also has resonance to a wider cultural area: the guest who must be received courteously and honoured in one’s home is a feature central to Asian cultures, and its extrapolation to accepting difficult or troubling feelings is rich and potentially rewarding. Focusing, as described to by a trainer, is a “helpful skill” that works for both the literate and illiterate, a process by which one is able to enter “peaceful” places to relate with often difficult emotions and feelings; as

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<sup>6</sup> The Appendix outlines the gist of the interviews, and notes which languages they were conducted in.

the trainer puts it, it offers a way “... to listen and understand the body” and which extends to being a “good person...”

Everyone I interacted with – the University students and a few teachers and students at the Ghazi Ayub Khan School -- was enthusiastic about what they had got out of the Focusing methodology. This sense came through notwithstanding the absence of being able to communicate in a common language, and was particularly true of the University students whose energy, enthusiasm for and commitment to participating in the programme was palpable. They are pursuing the training along with their regular courses, and seemed to be fully engaged in training, considering it highly relevant not just to their University work but in the activities they hope to pursue following their studies. As one woman put it, even though she begins her studies at the college all morning until Noon after which she comes to the trainings, she isn't bored and could easily go beyond 4 p.m.

## **2.1 “Talking to your Body”: Interactions with University students**

For some students Focusing is still at the level of dealing with practical concerns: scheduling their time, helping them to sleep, dealing with headaches and stressful situations of a day-to-day sort.

Others, however, are making the connections between this methodology and examining their own psychosocial issues. One woman says that the training has been useful in enabling her to connect with her body, to ‘talk’ with it, and to feel something that “we’ve never done before.” Another says that even though it’s only been six weeks, she’s already learned a lot about how this process can be used as a tool to reach inside herself and to address problems. A male student, talkative and thoughtful, says he sees the methodology as a tool by which people can begin to understand how to help themselves. He goes on to talk about how, in a larger context where there is a tremendous lack of trust, people need to know that their lives aren't just ‘written’ (he uses the astrology and palmistry analogies) and that they can help themselves.

Some express a desire to move beyond the relaxation component. One student refers to a training given by Marnie in which she shared her life experiences and through which he learned a great deal. He, and others, would like the possibility of being exposed to other experiences, countries and situations, even if this can only be offered in other languages.

### **“Listening is a good foundation”**

Several students speak of their experiences with Focusing in a manner that suggests that they are internalising the concept in a deeper way. One man says that Focusing has been especially helpful for him in dealing with controlling difficult emotions such as anger and developing his ability to plan ahead and use his time more productively. He ties what he is learning to performing Namaaz: “Listening is a good foundation” (in English). Another young man says “Focusing is ‘good for me’ (in English), and (in

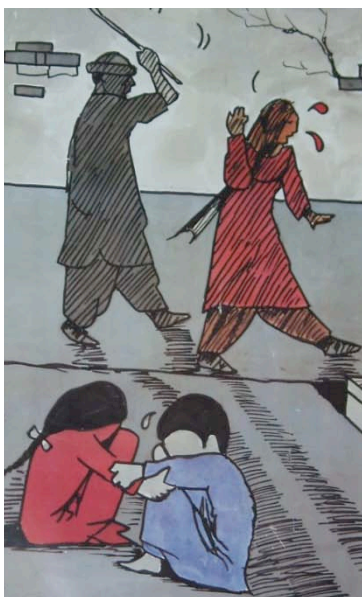
Dari) that it (the process) will be good for the future of young people because it provides a way to learn about one's own feelings: how, he asks, can one talk to others when one doesn't have self-knowledge?

One young woman says Focusing has helped her to examine and accept difficult feelings without judging them or herself. This has also helped her to develop a better understanding of her personality and her emotions. Now she feels she's not as judgemental about others as she was before: she respects differences, recognising that even the bad things that may come out of people come from their feelings and not from the essence of the person.

### **“Looking at the sky to find my destination’**

The extent to which violence, both in its overt and less obvious ways, threads its way through Afghan society, and has done so for decades, is the subtext that emerges not only through the interviews but in casual conversations with people. It crops up in myriad ways: the references to “the lack of trust” that permeates society, an oblique reference to the hard time Afghans (and specifically women) experience in their homes, the fact that education has been disrupted for many years due to war, people's experiences of emigration to neighbouring countries, displaced families, a parent rendered deaf as a result of U.S. bombing. One young man born and raised outside the country says (in excellent English) that he cannot reconcile what he sees all around him with his parents' memories of Afghanistan's rich culture, of close relations with family and neighbours: where, he asks, is it? “It's all destroyed.” There is no work, money, education, factories.....there are no morals or culture. Like others of his generation who realise that there is little that is concrete in their futures, he talks poignantly of “looking at the sky to find my destination.”

### **Going “to beautiful places’**



**Figure 3: Poster at orphanage depicting domestic violence**

These strands of images provide an outsider the tiniest of glimpses into what people have endured in the past and the stresses they continue to live with in the present. One man tells us that in his own life, Focusing has helped to make his nights, once so hard, much easier. He says that for some, praying is a form of Focusing whilst for others it can be looked upon as a ‘friend’. One woman who appears somewhat older than the other students, reflected in her slightly worn face and streaks of grey showing through her hennaed hair, reveals to us that she's returned to education after a gap of 15 years due to the war, and that her home life isn't very happy. Feelings were something she'd never paid attention to but now, as a result of the trainings, she sees Focusing as a way of going “to beautiful places,’ something that she'd not been able to do alone but has now achieved with the help of the



trainers. She now uses this method at home.

All students say that in one way or another they are sharing the process of entering these inner places with family and friends. One student says that while her mother doesn't think much of Focusing ("Allah will help") her brothers like what she's shared with them. Several students whose families are in the provinces and who, as a result, live in hostels, say that they've introduced Focusing to friends and have often been able to help them through difficult times. One man speaks of the problem all students will face once they have completed their studies: the absence of jobs or being overqualified for the ones available to them. In such a context, Focusing is one way of dealing with a stressful situation. His father, who is a teacher, and an uncle who is a doctor, both appreciate what this methodology is able to offer.

### **"Why has this situation come to our country?"**

Many students are remarkably thoughtful, linking what they have learned in the classroom (in this programme) and what they see and experience during the practicums in the schools and orphanages with larger issues facing Afghanistan. The challenges of – and an earnest commitment to -- nation-building and healing the country's wounds is a recurring theme. Several students, women and men, say they want to become psychologists or social workers, involved with both the young and old. Others say that working with children and youth is particularly important because they are the future of this country.



**Figure 4: Child at Orphanage**

One man talks for how hard life is here, and the way that those in authority have all the power. He'd like to use the knowledge he is acquiring through this programme to help rebuild his nation. Another thoughtful man he wants to teach psychology and has three questions he would like to pose to the Afghan people: why are you unhappy (is it due to war, or the economic situation, or hunger?) Why has this situation come to our country? And how can we find solutions? Maybe, he says, Focusing could play a role in making people more aware. Another student says he'd like to work with poor children, especially those living in orphanages; he feels sorry for them because they have no parents.

Another commonly articulated issue is that too many of the country's problems emerge from its leaders only thinking of themselves and their interests. Acknowledging that all Afghans have psychosocial issues and won't become healthy without examining what is inside them, one woman laughingly says that their leaders could benefit from



Figure 5: Training session

engaging in this process too. A man, when asked about his wishes for his future, replies with a smile that he'd like to be the Minister of Education or at any rate a good leader in order to do something about children and their welfare.

### **'Feel your legs/arms'**

A few students talk about the different ways in which Focusing is absorbed by those who are educated versus those who aren't. One example given to elaborate this point comes from a training when the trainer asked people to 'feel your legs/arms': this resulted in many people literally touching their extremities rather than

internalising the 'feeling.' The student who raises this suggests that it would be useful to explore whether different kinds of methodologies could be developed for working with different groups (educated/uneducated) of people, and to see if other 'languages' or approaches could be used to facilitate better understanding of techniques. Another student feels the techniques for introducing Focusing to uneducated people need to be simplified and more based on their lives and experiences.

### **"Everyone has their own vision" / "There are no rights or wrongs"**

The methodology of Focusing also invites considerable comment, all of it positive. One recurring theme is how different this methodological approach is from what students have been and continue to be exposed to in the conventional classroom. Contrary to being structured and hierarchical, now they have permission to ask questions, challenge the trainer, and the opportunity to engage in group work.

The lack of judgement, of realising that at least in this programme "there are no rights and wrongs" is also enabling students to appreciate a new way of learning. One woman says it has helped to bring a new dimension to her studies. A man says that the very different ways of teaching in this training, the possibility of asking questions and talking in groups was initially hard for him because it was so alien to anything he'd experienced before. Now he appreciates it, particularly the group work because it helps to make up for the lack of resources or libraries available to them (presumably referring to the peer learning that occurs in such groups).

The issue of hierarchy does however emerge in what some students (who have already begun their practical work) experience in their trainings of teachers at schools and orphanages. A particular challenge voiced by several students is how to deal with people who are much older and have so much more experience of life than they do. One young man talks of needing to find acceptable ways of engaging with

those of an older generation: he acknowledges that this takes time but feels optimistic that in time this training and approach will have an impact.

The “train the trainer” methodology is already enabling a number of students to reflect more critically on the types of interactions between teachers/staff and children at the orphanages and schools where they are doing their practicums. There is a sense of optimism amongst these young people that whilst the old pedagogical methods prevail (especially with the older ones), they are learning how to change what’s wrong and how things can be made better. One man who has recently been hired by PARSА to work at the orphanage at night talks of how he’s seen children being beaten by the staff and that now because of the trainings he feels better equipped to know how to address this, and feels that the approach needs to be spread to a wider area. A young woman (who is identified by the PARSА staff as being a good trainer (comparing favourably with PARSА’s staff), says that the programme has helped her to deal with situations where teachers speak in loud and angry voices to children: because of the training she has been able in an appropriate and respectful way to explain to the teacher why this isn’t good. She goes on to say that whilst the teachers seem to accept this, she cannot be sure whether it comes from the heart or not.

## **2.2 Encounters at Ghazi Ayub Khan School**

My interactions at the Ghazi Ayub School are far more limited than what I’ve experienced with the University students. Nevertheless here too I get a glimpse into the valuable foundations PARSА’s Focusing trainings are laying amongst teachers and students alike.

The three school teachers, including the Deputy Principal, I meet express enthusiasm about the programme. The Head Teacher, a handsome woman seemingly in her forties, talks positively about the training and how it has benefited both the teachers and the students who have gone through it. She wishes it could be introduced into all schools. She speaks eloquently about the wider socio-economic issues that affect the lives of her students: the weak economy that affects their families often to the point of not having sufficient amounts of food (how, she asks, can girls study when they are hungry?) and the lack of books.



**Figure 6: Teacher with her daughter in class**

### **“Crying to go to school”**

Larger socio-economic circumstances combine with cultural mores in ways that are particularly detrimental to girls and women. As noted in Nancy Newbrander’s assessment (April 2009) of the “Healthy Afghan Child Programme,” girls live in highly stressful environments, both within their

homes and in the larger society. Gender discrimination is rampant and, from an early age, females absorb the cultural lesson of devaluation. Although much has changed in the past few years in terms of girls' access to schooling, even that environment is not necessarily supportive of their ability to learn.

These issues thread through this teacher's remarks about the wider socio-cultural environment and familial contexts that affect girls' lives and which, from a very young age, structure their futures. One pressing issue is the assumption held by many families that girls should be married off at a very early age (even as young as between 13-15 years of age). This, coupled with families' limited resources, results in many students being removed from their studies even as they "cry to go to school." In such cases, she tells us, teachers try to serve as advocates for the children, making an effort to persuade families to keep their daughters in school and trying to convince them that an educated girl is an asset to the family. She admits this is difficult because even if families come in to talk to school authorities, often they claim they lack the money to keep their daughters in school and so there is nothing else they can do. The girls leave and are in all likelihood married off.

The other pressing problem they have to contend with is the lack of security: many families agree to let their girls come to school but ask what will happen once school hours are over and they are out on the street. Once a girl was abducted outside the school and inevitably the school authorities had to bear the responsibility. But, overall, she is optimistic. This is the first batch of girls who will go to university (there are 60-70 in their final year of school) and that is an important change.

### **Learning to be "naughty"**

Another teacher talks of how Focusing has benefited one of her students, a girl named Mobila who used to be completely silent in class. Now, with the training, she has opened up, is active in class and is learning more. Other teachers are noticing the changes that have taken place and are asking if they too can learn the process. There are many challenges, though: classes are too large, often with as many as forty students. Even so, she feels good about the process.

The two students I speak to, young girls of 12 and 14 years of age, similarly speak favourably (though shyly – they are in the midst of not only the Deputy Principal and her teacher but also two strangers). One says she's happy that she went through the six month training: now she's coming top of her class and that her family is very happy about the changes they see in her.





Figure 7: Students waiting for class to begin

The other girl says that everyone has noticed how she's changed, and her classmates now want to take the training too. Her mother in particular is very pleased with what her daughter has blossomed into, using the word 'naughty' – a word that I later realise has a special resonance in Afghan culture of being mischievous and playful – to describe her. A mother perhaps seeing in her girl child that which she once had and was forced to shut down.

After this school visit I begin to understand an interaction that was explained to me at a training session of teachers that I have recently attended. After the trainer has led the group in a relaxation exercise an older woman asks him why, if she is able to feel so relaxed here, it is hard for her to do the same with her students. This engenders a discussion amongst the group about what is similar and what is different between this session and what each of them confronts in their classrooms. Two issues emerge: (a) that perhaps they haven't internalised Focusing adequately so that they're not giving their students the right message(s) about what they should be striving for; and (b) that the room they're in is conducive to relaxing, spacious and quiet, whilst this not the case in their schools.



Figure 8: A class in session on the landing

Lack of space is abundantly clear: at the Ghazi Ayub school every available space is occupied: classes are held under and at the top of stairwells; tiny rooms are crammed with desks and students; the sounds of one class drifting through the closed door of another. The challenges of engaging with the techniques of Focusing suddenly become very concrete.

### 2.3 The Allauhudin Orphanage

My encounters at the orphanage are all too brief. Yet even here there are the glimpses into neglected lives and traumas that linger just below the surface. One encounter in particular speaks to the many-layered and easy to overlook aspects of trauma facing people, especially those who by virtue of their youth and gender are rendered vulnerable.

There is Zeenat, who looks about sixteen years of age, talks to me, her English surprisingly fluent, prefacing everything with an “okay”, doesn’t make eye contact, and says a propos of nothing that she’s dark. She tells me that she’s “very happy” here (at the orphanage), that she doesn’t have a mother and that, at home, there is a sister and an uncle. It is a simple statement of fact that may or may not mean anything, but I leave haunted by the shadow of a story that may lie beneath her words. What does this say about the lives of girl children in their own homes?



Figure 9: Zeenat

It is here, meeting some of the carers and teachers, that one is struck by the realities of all that has been lost through years of civil wars and foreign occupations. Here are women of another generation and, in terms of education, another class to that of the University students. Middle-aged women who lost out on years of potential education and career advancement or, from more modest backgrounds, possibly un- or minimally educated: these are the ones being trained to be the ‘good mothers’ (and, in the case of men, ‘good fathers’) for a new generation scarred by history.



Figure 10: A caregiver



Figure 11: Mentoring model

The Principal of Allauhudin orphanage, a bureaucrat from the Ministry of Social Affairs expresses certain reservations about the training that the four or five teachers have received. Her concern is that given their limited educational levels the level of training is too high for them to adequately convey what to the children. This clearly is

an issue. Nevertheless, as noted in the Appendix, there is a subtext to this particular



Figure 12: Children

Figure 13: Children, and a knitting class

encounter. She says a lot of attention is given to the children, more so that in the schools, although she doesn't substantiate this observation.

## 2.4 Interactions with PARSA Staff/Trainers

Interactions with PARSA's staff (I formally interview 6, three men and three women, in addition to informally talking with them over a period of days) mirror number of issues that have already been touched on as well as raising some new ones.

One of the young women trainers tells me that when she initially began working at PARSA she thought the work was 'too small', not 'big'; now she realises that its impact on the 40 teachers and 400 students that have been trained through it is 'big' and she's happy. She talks about how much she learns through her trainings, learning from the kinds of questions people. "When I train people and I see the results, I like that part. I'm helping people... If I have problems I ask my colleagues or turn to a book to solve them."

As a young woman she does experience certain stumbling blocks: because the teachers she trains are typically older than her sometimes the initial response is "what can this young girl teach me?" It is only later that they realise how much they have learnt. At a recent training in Bamiyan the people who came to pick the trainers up were quite dismissive. But then, after 10 days of training, they gave a big "thank you to PARSA."

She notices gender differences in the trainings: women are more likely to say all they are feeling, perhaps comfortable because she's a woman, whereas this is not the case with men who don't do this. But she also acknowledges that so far she's only had a few trainings with men, and feels that when she has more contact with them perhaps they will begin to trust her more and feel more at ease to express themselves in front of a woman.



Another somewhat older woman, involved with the psychosocial wellbeing programme in both the schools and orphanages, talks of the many challenge within the educational system (both her own observations and those of her mother who was a school supervisor for 42 years). She speaks of the complete breakdown of the system and, more poignantly, of the way in which older people’s professional lives have been on hold for so many years. Unable to work or to advance within their fields, this is the reason why even the better teachers lack knowledge of newer pedagogical methodologies. At the same time, she says there is some sort of system within the schools which doesn’t exist in orphanages.



Figure 14: Nahid

A conversation with another young social worker and school trainer is illuminating on a number of levels, moving back and forth the situation she sees in the schools and her own experiences as a young woman. As with so many of the other women I’ve spoken with, there is mention of the “dark time” of the Taliban years – “especially for women,” “we can’t go to school, get knowledge,” “pay attention to our rights” - during which time she and her family spent several years in Iran. She is an intense and thoughtful young woman, hungry for “knowledge,” who spends whatever money she has on books.

Her work entails working with orphans, boys and girls, up to the age of 13. She talks of the many psychosocial issues that need to be addressed in order to prevent them from damaging themselves. Her work has made her aware of the many differences between girls and boys which, she says, begins at birth: a girl “brings shame to the fathers,” shapes their position in their families and affects their ability to take decisions for themselves. Girls don’t know how to engage in discussions because of the lack of permission that permeates their home environments. They sit as though holding their bodies in shame (she illustrates this); boys are a “little better,” but also have “dark ideas,” (a phrase that crops up a few times in our conversation and which I feel ill-equipped to probe). The answer may lie is what follows: her remarks about there being so much violence against women. Women have to start supporting one another, to (not) “shame girls” or discriminate against females in family. Peace-building, she says, has to begin in schools.



It is the same with her: why, she asks, “I am a human....Day by day they (sic) lose self confidence, (unable to) express ideas, take part in decisions.” Like girls at schools, her desire to study more is thwarted by her relations, couched in concern about the security situation. She tells her parents that she needs to know about her rights, learn about her country and its culture.



Her mother, a doctor who now suffers from cancer and can no longer practice, was educated in 1970s, a time when education was still widely available to the middle classes, and is probably sympathetic to her daughter's concerns but there is little she can do. Her hopes for herself is "don't say I'm nothing" and to remove the "dark ideas" and, through her work show women that there are ways to be a good mother.

A male staff member, who is programme manager for the Healthy Afghan Child in two provinces, talks of the challenges in getting teachers to imbibe PARSA's trainings. Inculcating a sense of responsibility seems to be working through the introduction of a bonus system as an incentive for good work. But he says that at orphanages the issue is that some staff want self-improvement – the younger staff are better educated and, as in other interviews, the word 'knowledge' keeps coming up -- whilst others don't. This he ties to the country's recent history and the structuring of ministries where many senior officials have barely any education. This point resonates with the two main male trainers: younger people are more open, malleable and receptive to new ideas whereas older people are more set in their ways. In this context, some of the students (whom I've interviewed) are identified as doing an excellent job in their practicums.

Another senior trainer, who works both in towns and villages, has an interesting insight into the challenges of working with those who are educated compared to those who aren't. In his experience it's been easier to work with those who are less educated, that they tend to be more receptive to what Focusing is about whereas the more educated are likely to be distanced, more rational and less likely to practice. His take on gender also resonates with what has been noted above: although he hasn't found any big gender differences, nevertheless he finds that women are more able to engage with the process, perhaps because they are more vulnerable.

### **III. Next Steps**

The outcome of this short evaluation suggests that PARSA's pilot project in psycho-social training for professionals is highly successful and must be supported financially in order to be taken forward. Its many strengths include a culturally appropriate approach to dealing with complex issues that typically aren't given "cultural permission" to be acknowledged much less aired, strengthening trust amongst peers, enabling trainees to "find their voices" through questioning, talking and engaging in group work, and finally – particularly critical in this highly gender-segregated society – providing young men and women to work with and learn from one another.

Notwithstanding the many constraints the programme has had to adapt to (e.g. elections, demonstrations and the recent closing of the University for the purported swine flu epidemic), it is meeting its objectives in providing student trainees with solid theoretical and practical foundations in the Focusing approach. There is

enormous need and potential for this methodology in PARSA's on-going work (e.g. the Afghan Healthy Afghan Girl Programme) to be scaled up. In this final section I lay out some suggestions for moving forward based on my own observations as well as those which emerging from interviews and discussions with PARSA staff.

### **3.1 Recommendations**

1. Gendered issues, problems and their outward manifestations are likely to be (but not always necessarily) different for males and females. In this context, while the mixed group trainings are playing a vital role in helping both genders engage with one another (and especially men who, in their formative years were raised in madrassas); it might be useful to consider holding periodic single-gender groups. These could be valuable in enabling both women and men to open up in ways that may not feel possible in front of the opposite gender. Given the many constraints and hidden traumas in which girls' and women's lives are embedded, such groups would provide useful spaces for giving voice to difficult experiences.
2. Related to the above point, and also resonating with an issue voiced by some students about wanting something more from the content of the trainings, it would be helpful to think about tools for self-expression that could complement the Focusing techniques. These could include a combination of verbal and non-verbal approaches such as drawing/painting; movement, role playing/acting, and writing (poetry/prose). Each of these could be initiated in same-gender groups to become part of a broader process of sharing stories in a safe way.
3. Develop methodologies and 'languages' that more adequately meet the needs of those who are less or uneducated/uneducated. Here, it might be helpful to work with teachers in provincial schools where, possibly, needs and developmental levels, differ from those found in schools in Kabul.
4. Capacity building amongst PARSA staff, especially trainers, is essential. Given the paucity of resources presently available in Kabul, internet access as a learning tool could be considered. Computer training and English would also be valuable trainings. Another possibility, obviously highly dependent on financial underwriting, would be to support staff to pursue higher education.
5. Many students expressed a desire for the Focusing training to be much longer than the present three months' sessions. Would this be feasible (or even desirable) with additional funding? Related to this, it might be useful to consider whether trainings with school and orphanage personnel could be lengthened.

6. Expanding students' horizons by bringing in guest speakers, showing films, etc (this comes out of the great impact that Marnie Gustavson's training seems to have made, and students' desire to be exposed to different contexts and experiences).

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