

November 2020 Sustained Grantee Spotlight: Bond Street Theatre (Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Malaysia)

Delayed but not deterred – that’s the message from Bond Street Theatre as it works toward completing its DFW-funding projects in Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Malaysia despite the pandemic. The primary adjustments to the projects are in scheduling, according to Artistic Director Joanna Sherman.

At this time (late September), Afghanistan has no restrictions on entry, while Myanmar and Malaysia are both closed to nonresidents. The tentative plan (subject to health and safety measures and concerns) for 2021 and beyond includes:

- Afghanistan: June 2021 – continuing work in the Herat prison or Anna’s Education Center
- Malaysia: October 2021 – working against the custom of child marriage with Rohingya refugees
- Myanmar: February 2022 – assisting women and girls who have been trafficked to China.



From Bond Street Theatre:

The first-year project in Afghanistan is aimed at continuing our program for incarcerated women in the Herat Women’s Prison, Juvenile Correction Center, and shelters for women and children who can no longer return home after their release. The women and girls in the prisons have, almost to a person, suffered abuse at the hands of their husbands or in-laws to the extent that they resorted to killing them. Self-defense is not a valid justification in the Afghan justice system, and the testimony of a woman is still, after two decades since Taliban rule, only worth half of a man’s. Suffice it to say, most of the women have been incarcerated due to some degree of injustice. Similarly, those girls under 18 who end up in the Juvenile Correction Center have run away from forced marriages or domestic abuse.

Our project was scheduled to start up in June 2020 with the same wonderful team of artist-trainers that we had worked with before: Masoumah Adel and Fariba Baqeri of Simorgh Theatre. They both were eager to return to the Prison where they had established warm relationships with many of the inmates. They wondered how many of the women were still imprisoned, how many of the women and girls from the shelter had found a new life and jobs, and how many of the children were now back with their mothers in better situations.

The Covid-19 crisis hit Afghanistan in the spring as migrants in Iran returned to their homes in Afghanistan to avoid the critical rise in cases in Iran. Iran was one of the first countries to be inundated with the virus as early as February and spiking around Naw Ruz in March as families got together to celebrate. As of mid-March, 90 percent of the 18,000 coronavirus cases in the Middle East were in Iran. Afghanistan, among other countries, quickly closed their borders with Iran at the end of February, but it was too late, with seven cases already reported in Herat, which shares the longest border with Iran. Herat quickly became the epicenter in Afghanistan.

At that point, we considered working with other women’s groups in Kabul instead, far from Herat and still virus-free. We contacted our colleagues at AWEC – the Afghan Women’s Educational Center and especially Anna’s Education Center that works with widows, orphans, homeless women and street-working children. We

have a long and wonderful relationship with the Center and they hosted one of the first performances of our all-women's theatre troupe in Kabul with their show, "Rights Are Not Given; They Are Taken."

Unfortunately, the virus quickly spread across Afghanistan, and our plans had to change again. We are now waiting for the situation to become safer, health-wise and security-wise, as the country also suffers from renewed attacks by the Taliban despite supposed aims at peace talks and peacebuilding... hardly to be believed. The Taliban are not displaying any attempt as being trustworthy, and optimism is at a low. We remain in constant contact with our colleagues.

To date, we have corresponded with our local partner, the trainers, and some of the prison officials and staff. We have reviewed the progress we made last time and outlined our schedule and approach for the new phase of the project.