

Afghan Small Businesses Are Harbingers of Change

Wall Street Journal

05/08/2006

By Kate Buggeln

As an American who volunteers for a business development organization in Afghanistan, I am responding to Ann Marlowe's April 26 editorial-page commentary "A Virgin Market."

The Business Council for Peace (Bpeace) has visited Afghanistan on numerous occasions in the course of our work with Afghan businesswomen. I agree with Ms. Marlowe that the changes in the country are nothing short of stunning. The glare of glass on rising new buildings, dinner at Kabul's first luxury hotel, the constant ring of mobile phones and a ride on the first escalator are among the most obvious clues of change.

Meanwhile, the doomsayers rail about the drug trade and poor security; they probably view those glass towers as smoke and mirrors, and the armed guards still at the hotel's door as proof that newly registered businesses are doomed to fail. But countering the gloom of the cynics is the Afghan small-business sector. Small- and medium-size entrepreneurs are emerging in Afghanistan. If nurtured, these local business owners will create the economic platform that opens the door for big international business. Some of these entrepreneurs are women, who are even greater proof of the cultural transformation. With little to lose and everything to gain, such women are stepping beyond the Taliban's legacy. Some of the first to open businesses after the fall of the Taliban were beauty salons -- businesses by and for women. Afghan women in Bpeace's programs are running retail shops, health-and-fitness facilities, day-care centers and apparel manufacturing. And as they have taken their places at the business table, they are demanding a place at the political table as well. One of our associates was elected to the Kabul Provincial Council this past year while another intends to run in the next election.

Without doubt, Afghanistan has serious challenges. It continues to rank near the bottom of most economic and social development measures. But change is occurring. At Bpeace, we believe this demonstrates an environment that is increasingly ripe with opportunity for big and small business investors, an environment that can produce lasting peace. Now that is always a good investment.

Kate Buggeln
Governing Board
The Business Council for Peace
New York