

Final Collective Document -- Flying our Kites in Strong Winds

Written by the Afghan and Iranian women and young people of the Winnipeg Kite of Life group, winter and spring 2023

The Kite is Like Life, Always Rotating, Always Changing

Kite flyers

We are a group of Afghan and Iranian mothers, grandmothers, and young people who are new to Winnipeg, Canada. Most of us have not yet seen spring here, though we are eagerly awaiting it! Together, we have been exploring the kite as a symbol for our lives, which are full of beauty and challenges.

When we think of kites, we think of celebration, togetherness, family, and freedom. It brings up memories of play with siblings and of kite racing in our communities. Memories of disappointment when the weather does not allow us to fly our kites, and memories that bring laughter of funny kite flying accidents!

For most of us women, kite flying was done primarily by our brothers or husbands. We were in the background, watching, until now, when we finally made our own kites. We started with creating our individual kites. In sharing these, we found connection in our shared hopes and values, most importantly, the values of living a good, peaceful life and reuniting with our families.

We put our new discoveries on paper, and from there, we started compiling the ideas of our collective kite that we would all build together. On this big kite, we added our shared dreams, and for the tail of the kite, we tied up different coloured ribbons representing our hopes (green), dreams, challenges (black), bits of joy, important people, memories, places and legacies. It was a beautiful process of coming together when we tied our ribbons and shared our hopes and inspirations with one another.

As kite flyers, we also talked about the weather. We need some wind so that our kites don't fall, but when the wind is *too* strong, it makes it difficult to fly.

Where We Come From: Holding On to the Strings of Home

Most of us in this group are from Afghanistan. A few of us are from Iran. We came as refugees and refugee claimants. It is important to name where we come from and to keep home, and the people still living there, in our hearts and our minds.

We know about difficult strong winds where we come from: winds of violence, repression, sirens, and danger. There are winds in Canada too, even though they are different: winds of poverty, culture shock, discrimination, and isolation. Sometimes it feels like the winds are changing direction every day!

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Most of the people in this group are women, and many of us experienced being treated differently because of our gender. Some girls were not allowed to go to school, while many girls were forced to marry at an early age to much older men.

It has been a blessing to have space to share together as women, especially as women back home continue to struggle and fight for their rights. While we have been meeting, women in Iran have been bravely protesting for their rights and capturing the attention of the entire world. The lives of women in Afghanistan have become harder, with new bans and limitations on their lives and well-being under the Taliban. Where there is violence there is always response and resistance, and we know that the women of Afghanistan are strong, and resilient, and finding ways to resist their oppression.

The first words written on our shared kite were “Women, Life, Freedom” by one of the young women in our group. It has become a slogan for the women of Afghanistan and Iran. It is at the top of our kite as part of our dream of peace, freedom, and a “good life” not just for us--but for everyone back home.

We feel lucky to be in Canada, where there are more opportunities for women and girls. But, we know the situation is growing worse at home. We each have family and people who we love that are still there. This hurts our hearts and we feel this pain every day. We want them to have the same freedoms we do. We want to be together.

One of us said that each one of our troubles could be its own book... but that is not the story we want to tell here. The story we decided to tell focuses on how we have sustained ourselves in the face of strong winds that threaten to topple us, and how we hold on to hope together.

These are some of the ways we are coping with the winds of our lives. We hope by sharing them, that they might help you navigate what you are facing too.

Watching the Weather, Watching the Ground

The first step to flying a kite is making sure the weather conditions are right for flying a kite. This is the importance of context and environment.

We can't control the weather! This means picking our battles: some days we might struggle to be in the wind and some days it means recognizing the wind is simply too strong. Those are days for resting, not flying.

You don't want to fly a kite when there's lightning, and if you forget to pay attention to your feet--you might fall off a roof!

Sometimes we choose to maintain peace at home or in our lives instead of fighting. Moving around the wind is easier some days than others. In life, perhaps not every challenge needs to be faced head-on, and sometimes time can heal and give us new ideas. Observing our environment and looking out for one another is smart!

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Flying Together: You Don't Fly a Kite Alone

One of us said we had never seen someone fly a kite alone. We fly kites with family and friends. One person holds the string and the other stands in front and directs the kite. Part of what was special about this group was our feelings of togetherness and belonging. Kite flying goes better when you do it with other people, and we all agreed that in life we need people to show us direction and guidance, people to talk to, and as one of us said “to wipe our tears”. Another added, “We also need an audience to cheer us on”

One of us said we need to not keep anything inside, because if we do this we can get isolated. Even on days when we can't fly our kites, we need someone to tell us that darkness and bad weather won't last forever.

One of us joked that you can't just show up unplanned here in Canada--you always need an appointment--and that people don't usually show up at other people's houses without an invitation. Many of us noted the importance of being part of a group where we felt understood, as many of us do not have as much community here.

Leaning In to Good Winds: Calling On Our Strengths

We need some wind to fly a kite. Our group has a lot of ways of creating the right conditions to fly our kites. We found many strengths here. Many of us speak multiple languages and we shared laughter together each week. Our creativity shone through when making our kites. Some of us spoke about the importance of other creative skills like dancing and music (whether that be traditional celebration music or k-pop).

One of us said “peace begins at home” and many of us found strength in how we care for others and continue to keep our families connected even when facing difficulty. As mothers and grandmothers, we all spoke about the value of our children, and how much strength we can summon in order to be there for them. We also spoke about working to be a soft person and practice forgiveness. We all agreed that we needed to have courage and bravery to “take the first step” when coming to Canada.

One way we lean into the good winds is knowing what brings us peace. Many of us spoke of the importance of going for walks and being in nature to ground us. One of us spoke about peace listening to “the sound of the wind through the trees” or “hearing water nearby” and many of us connected peace to seeing green all around.

All of us agreed that having access to education is a strength and talking about skills brought up feelings for some of us around missed opportunities which we could not pursue.

For many of us, faith was the foundation our strengths grew from. We turn to prayer to ground us and to find peace and strength in our lives.

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One of our guests that attended the group as witness reminded us of the idea that when we get together (as women, as young people, as newcomers), we can make our own wind.

Being Opposite of the Wind: Resisting Depression

One way we can fly in strong winds is to “be opposite the wind”, to lean back to resist it. There are many ways we resist the troubles in our lives. Gathering with other women and young people, talking about our stories, is one way we resist despairing. In this space we value the voices of women and young people.

Sometimes, the winds pull us in opposite directions and our strings can become easily tangled. One of us stood up and showed how we can adjust our bodies when the wind is strong to find balance. Another one of us noticed that when kite-flying, we “need to know when to give slack and when to pull the string tight.”

We are still adjusting to life here in Canada, learning where to pull tighter and where to let go. We are practicing finding balance through building relationships with our children where respect goes both ways. Some of us did not always experience this growing up, and it is a vision we have for our families’ futures.

We also show resistance by learning. Some of us are learning to read and write for the first time. Some of us are rebuilding careers after we left behind jobs we loved back home. Some of us are getting used to new schools and expectations here. Continuing to invest in ourselves through education is a way of resisting hopelessness.

One of us said, “Racism makes me want to hide myself. I feel I am being judged.” It is really important to us in the face of this strong wind to hold onto our own values, to have our feet strongly planted, and not to follow the kite up into the air. One of us said, “I want to stay who I am and be proud of being from where I’m from.”

Others among us talked about the importance of holding on to core values. Different people mentioned different values, like wearing hijab, being with family, speaking our language and never forgetting it, and staying connected to the country and the people we came from. For many of us, continuing to wish for and work towards freedom and peace for the people of our countries is part of staying who we are.

A Festival of Kites: Hopes for Spring

After so many weeks of talking about kites, we decided it was time to build one of our own together, a real one that could fly, even though the city is still covered in snow. Building a kite in the winter feels hopeful, because we believe that spring will come, even though many of us have never seen the trees of Winnipeg covered in green. One of us shared about feeling like they were entering the spring of their life, after passing through a difficult fall and winter season.

As we turn towards the spring, here are some learnings we want to share with you:

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We should try to resist depression. We all have a lot of problems that want to overwhelm us and despair is tempting. All of our problems piled up could melt all the snow in Winnipeg!

Some days the winds are too strong to resist. It is okay to rest, to cry, and to talk to people who will make you smile or wipe your tears.

But, it is also important to stay strong against the winds in our life. Sometimes that means leaning into the strengths we already have. Sometimes that might look like enlisting other kite flyers, helpers, tools, or medication to help us take on our difficulties.

Sometimes, our pains teach us a lot of things. One of us mentioned how beautiful the sound is when a kite whizzes and spins in the wind. It is almost like the sound of water.

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If the winds are too strong,
if you are floating away,
if you are flying your kite alone...
we hope this finds you.