



visit their homes, which was very unusual. I was overwhelmed by the love and respect I received from them.”

Those early choices to cultivate welcome, belonging and invitation regardless of race, religion or background have been repeated several times in Noreen’s life – often in the face of resistance. Her story is one of being present, of noticing patterns; it’s about sensing a next step to take; and, of course, it’s about courage.

### **Attending a Wedding as an Act of Welcome**

After marriage as a young woman, Noreen noticed a pattern of disparity in the village she had moved to with her husband. This time it was between landowners (which she had married into), most of whom lived in the city, and their tenants, who worked the land. “No women from our homes were allowed to visit our tenants’ homes,” Noreen recalls.

“After that conversation, I started believing more in my cause and was far more determined to educate the village folks I knew.”

It was the difference in how these two groups supported one another during significant life passages – for instance around the death of a family member, or a wedding – that struck Noreen most. While the landowners would mark an occasion in the lives of the tenants with an invitation to their homes, prayers and some financial donations, the tenants essentially gave of themselves when the tables were turned. “Our tenants used to work tirelessly at our weddings, deaths, and other special occasions, performing various duties including cleaning our houses, taking care of the guests and cooking,” Noreen says.

Increasingly bothered by this obvious discrimination, Noreen decided one day to break the cycle by attending the wedding of a young girl in the village who had helped her family with house chores. Her father-in-law was uncomfortable with her decision and noted that Noreen would be seen by other men if she did this. (Where she lived at the time, it wasn't considered appropriate for women from Noreen's family to be seen by other men in the village). “However, I reminded him that we go to shopping malls and schools etc. in the cities, and that while doing so, we interact with other men as well,” says Noreen. She attended the wedding, helped the young bride with a beautiful make-over and took photos.

Image



*A conversation about the importance of literacy. Photo courtesy of Noreen Mahmood*

## **Fostering Literacy as an Act of Social Justice**

Eager to do more to promote social justice, Noreen pursued a master's degree in international community development. She then formed a small non-profit organization, Social Justice and Rural Development Program (SJRD), with a view to creating social change through education and awareness. She created an Adult Literacy Centre (ALC) in her village for women and young girls, in collaboration with a Pakistan government department, the National Commission on Human Development (NCHD). Again, she faced resistance from a family member. Her husband's uncle, a well-educated person working with a rural development agency, was against the idea of educating the villagers. "According to him, after getting education (and awareness), the children of those tenants would not opt for working in the fields. He suggested providing sewing machines to women and girls instead of making them literate," Noreen says. She, of course, refused to give in to his



argument, and even was able to help him see her point of view.

Image



*The first women's community organization created by Noreen Mahmood in her home village in Pakistan. Photo courtesy of Noreen Mahmood*

“After that conversation, I started believing more in my cause and was far more determined to educate the village folks I knew,” she says. Following the success of her first ALC, she and her team established seven more ALCs in the surrounding villages. In this way they were able to introduce literacy and other skills to more than 200 women and girls.

## **A Grassroots Women's Support Group for Welcome and Belonging**

In the spring of 2013, Noreen moved to Canada along with her husband and two children. She quickly began expressing her commitment to community and belonging in her new home in Calgary, Alberta after noticing certain needs among new Canadian women.

“People feel more comfortable, that this is ‘our’ group and we are coming here to participate based on what we need and want.”

Noreen had been active at the centre in Calgary’s northeast, helping with translation services.

“I used to wear a headscarf, so women from areas like South Asia... used to come and stop by. I looked like them, so they came to me and asked about different things,” Noreen recalls.

“And what I realized is that while they were very skilled women, many had no information about the resources available in the community.”

Having felt it herself, Noreen understood the hesitancy that many of the women felt about approaching professionals such as settlement counsellors or employment counsellors with their questions. Both language and culture differences created anxiety.

With her background in community development, Noreen was also keenly aware of the importance of social capital – and could see that this was a lack.

“So I thought of this informal setting where women can come and benefit from networking and gathering information,” Noreen says.

In October of 2013, the Women Support Group’s first meeting took place. Four were present, but the group grew very quickly from there. Women would exchange contact information so they can connect outside of the group meetings. They would also identify topics they wished to learn about and then hosted guest speakers. In some cases, those guests have been employment and settlement counsellors. This allows the women to be introduced in the informal group setting. They then feel more confident about following up with the counsellors later.

The group has organized several social gatherings – a picnic in summer and anniversary celebration in October, with families, food and fun included.

“Keeping this within the community is our strength,” Noreen says. “People feel more comfortable, that this is ‘our’ group and we are coming here to participate based on what we need and want.”

She is proud of the group’s inclusive spirit. “If we want to enjoy the diversity of Calgary, we should be collaborating,” she says.

Four years later, group members still continue to support each other as well as others in their neighbourhoods.

## **The Next Call: Welcome and Belonging in Social Service Workplaces**

As someone who’d done so much to address social injustice in the community setting, Noreen found herself facing similar disparities in the work environment once she began working full-time in the social service industry in Canada. Over a period of years, Noreen says, she experienced workplace harassment and bullying as well as racism to some extent. “I also observed that happening to my co-workers.”

Image



*Noreen in Chitral Valley in Northern Pakistan. Photo courtesy of Noreen Mahmood*

Following her lifelong refusal to just sit by, Noreen began studying about workplace harassment and injustice and how to appropriately respond to and deal with it. She discovered that even in the social services sector, employees are too often not aware of what constitutes bullying and harassment or how to address it. In other cases, they may be aware but refuse to step up due to a lack of trust in management to ensure a fair and appropriate response. “What happens in the end is that the organizations lose valued employees,” she says.

Noreen notes that this pattern of workplace harassment is very similar to the cycle of oppression and class structure within the communities she grew up in.

She is now hoping to be accepted into a program in leadership in human services, with a view to preparing herself to create what change she can in this realm.



“Community exists for the sake of belonging. It takes its identity from the gifts, generosity, and accountability of its citizens.”

Peter Block, *The Structure of Belonging*

“Throughout my career as a community development professional, I’ve been working from an asset-based/strength-based approach within the communities,” Noreen says. “By taking (the leadership in human services program), I’m hoping to learn more in-depth about social work values, ethics, theories and practices that would enhance my skills in identifying the underlying factors of the issues impacting society at large and human behaviors specifically. Also, I would be in a better position to understand various aspects of the life of a social worker as well as the social service agencies where they perform their duties, as I believe social workers play a central role in providing services to the community. My concern is that if they are not provided with a better work environment, where they continue to develop professionally, this may negatively impact the work values of social workers as well as their relationship with the community and the individuals they serve. In my point of view, this would be a clear deviation from the very purpose of the social service

agencies they're working for."

## **Calling for Quiet Radicals**

From Noreen's story it is clear to see that we can notice social injustice almost anywhere – in rural villages, yes, but also in bright metropolitan cities and even in the very places that are dedicated to addressing social injustice and related causes.

Noreen is a first-class noticer. Of course, noticing is just a first step in the work of welcome and belonging. There must be a refusal to sit by. And it seems inevitable that there will be some encounter with resistance. Running deep beneath any action there must also clearly be belief in the crucial necessity of welcome and belonging; and a wide-open belief that change in that direction is indeed possible.

With notes from, ["Keeping It In the Community Is Our Strength"](#)

*If you have feedback on this article, please feel free to comment below or email [michelle\(at\)resonancecentre.com](mailto:michelle(at)resonancecentre.com).*