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KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

SNAPSHOT

In Shy Matriarch, Community Finds Reluctant Hero

In her first job outside the home, an Osh woman provides health resources and builds peace with neighbors



Photo Credit: April Carman

Muhabbat (left) gives her client, who has recently had a baby, a newborn kit, which includes infant clothing, a hat, a blanket, eye ointment and a thermometer.

“[It] is a great pleasure meeting others and helping,” says Muhabbat after becoming an outreach worker in her conflict-affected community.

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Muhabbat almost didn't take the job offer. Her daughter, Shahnoza, had originally agreed to be the health outreach worker with a USAID-sponsored program for internally displaced persons in Osh, Kyrgyzstan.

When Shahnoza's work elsewhere prevented her from continuing, Muhabbat came to USAID partner CitiHope International's office to report the situation. While she expressed gratitude for the first humanitarian aid provided to conflict-affected homes in her community, it never occurred to Muhabbat to take her daughter's place. At 46 years old, Muhabbat had never worked outside the home.

Fortunately, CitiHope staff had other ideas. They recognized a unique opportunity to help empower a local woman to be a trusted resource in her community. After encouragement and promises of support from CitiHope staff, Muhabbat was convinced and started training to become a health outreach worker for the medical relief program.

Since the deadly violence throughout southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010, USAID has offered critical support in rebuilding healthier communities still plagued by ethnic tension. As a health outreach worker, Muhabbat leads mini-health sessions on reproductive and maternal-child health in her community, identifies pregnant women and encourages them to initiate antenatal care, distributes health kits and notifies CitiHope if there are women in her community with pregnancy complications or serious illnesses.

Muhabbat now says she likes being a “working woman.” Though she admits she doesn't always understand the medical information immediately, she has discovered a passion for health information and disease prevention. Her knowledge of home-based treatments and danger signs for common ailments is proving useful at home as well as in her daily work with internally displaced persons.

She is also making connections with her neighbors for the first time. Before becoming an outreach worker, Muhabbat admits to only knowing her immediate neighbors. Now, she is more familiar with her community and says it “is a great pleasure meeting others and helping.”

Through USAID's work in Osh, Muhabbat has found more than just a new job. She has found tremendous new opportunities to help build trust and healthier lives in her community. Her only regret is not having joined the health-related work sector sooner. If she was younger, Muhabbat says she would study medicine. Instead, she is now pondering learning how to use a computer.