1. Please share a brief description of what has been accomplished so far.

Between February, 2011 when we started our first Threads of Change (ToC) course at the Women’s Center in Jalalabad and July, 2011, when we completed our last one in Majburabadat, at our satellite center in Nangrahari Province, 450 non-literate women have graduated from the training program. Each month, approximately 75 women, (three groups of 20-25 participants) attended morning and afternoon sessions for three days per week. The teachers have been trained by master trainers in an “engaged learning” model of education centering on leader-facilitated conversations (rather than the usual lecture style), with visual curriculum as homework to reinforce lessons.

While participating in guided discussions with the aid of a skilled facilitator, these women have learned how to embroider illustrations of the lessons promoting family health and hygiene, women’s rights to education and voting, banning child marriage, and women as conflict resolvers. Embroidering these images introduces basic information that seclusion and illiteracy have blocked from their lives. For example, while embroidering a mother breastfeeding, women have heard about its advantages over bottle-feeding for their babies’ health; while copying a design of a woman holding a Koran above two fighting boys, the women have absorbed the importance of resolving disputes through peaceful means. While re-creating an image of children washing their hands – with soap, the women are poised to absorb the importance of using soap for good health and hygiene.

Targeted at non-literate women, “Threads of Change” communicates visually: some of them were hesitant to speak up at first, but by the last session, were comfortable speaking in the group and asking questions in their own words. Each participant received and brought home a booklet with a set of illustrations, each bearing a different message, such as hand washing, breast-feeding, immunization, voting rights and female literacy. The training course has also refined the women’s embroidery skill, a source of income for the women and their families.
We have not had a chance to formally study the impact of the DfW-funded training on women participants, but trainers and our Director in Jalalabad have gleaned the following anecdotal information:

- Women from three different ethnic groups, Pashto, Pashai, and Nuristani, have come together for the first time at the Threads of Change courses where mutual respect, trust, and tolerance are being modeled.

- Women who had not previously participated in voting chose to vote in the last election, presumably because of the ToC training combined with information workshops that our trainers held promoting civic participation. Women’s engagement in the practice of democracy was not limited to women registered in Threads of Change classes but influenced women relatives and friends further out in the countryside who also voted for the first time.

Nursing is healthier than Bottle-Feeding
2. Has anything changed with the goals and objectives of the program that DFW agreed to fund?

Our goal has broadened beyond our proposal «to create civic awareness including the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and appreciation for the rule of law in Afghan communities from the grassroots up» to include increased livelihood options leading to economic empowerment. In the course of the ToC training, we realized the importance of the income-generating component: the opportunity for women to gain a skill that will enable them to contribute to their families’ livelihoods is what convinces their male family members that leaving their responsibilities at home for the course is a worthwhile use of their wives’ time. Money in her own hands bolsters a woman’s standing in her family, her respect among her peers and decision-making power in the household.

One unexpected spin-off from the ToC training was the decision to hold workshops for men on the rights of women and children. By introducing men on special days to the Training Center in Jalalabad, we have built community trust and allayed male suspicions about what the women are doing when they attend the ToC classes.

In addition, we have widened the geographical scope of our project, thanks to the «windfall» we received from DfW chapter members who contributed
$32,955, $9805 more than the $23,150 we originally budgeted. By expanding the training beyond Nagarahar Province, as we originally proposed, to Farah province, we will be able to the Threads of Change curriculum to more women.

We plan to reach 300 more rural women at our new implementation sites in four districts of Farah Province: Jowin, Farah City (Markaz), Posht Koh and Anardara.

Have you experienced any significant challenges or obstacles in implementation? If so, how are you addressing them?

The biggest challenge for our project has been our inability to monitor the project through site visits due to security risks. No members of Rubia’s American staff have visited Jalalabad over the past year because our Executive Director there has been unable to guarantee our security. In spite of the risks, two American anthropology graduate students were able to visit the training center in Jalalabad in early 2011. Well-protected female engagement teams from the US Military’s Provincial Reconstruction Team in Jalalabad were able to overcome the security problem and visit the project. Rubia staff in Afghanistan has overcome this formidable obstacle by staying “below the radar screen,” as we have done over the past decade working in Afghanistan. Rubia’s approach does not threaten traditional cultural norms: women are trained in the company of other women – and do not encounter males outside of their families during our training sessions.

4. Has the timeline for the program changed from the original funding application?

In accordance with our expansion to Farah province, we have adjusted our timeline as explained below.

Upcoming Project Activities: September 15-December 15, 2011

Training of Trainers and ToC Classes in Farah Province In the second half of September, we will train the 14 trainers who have been leading HOLD’s training over the past year in ToC at HOLD’s office in Farah City. Starting in October, the ten female trainers will each meet with their class of 25-30 rural women twice a week for 10 weeks. Our training will build on the community’s trust in HOLD that has developed over the past year in the course of a training program in Civic Education and Community Participation in which 300 rural women have participated. We plan to train all 14 local trainers (10 female, 4 male) who led this program in the ToC curriculum.

While it is critical that males are included in training in order to learn the lessons of women’s rights and life skills, it is not likely that the four male
trainers will facilitate discussions: respecting cultural norms, the women who may be reluctant to speak up in their presence. (We have observed that gender-focused projects in Afghanistan tend to backfire if males are excluded from participating: the most sustainable gender projects include men.)

*Traveling Exhibit (in US and Afghanistan)* The most exquisite sets of embroideries will be included in a traveling exhibit about Rubia, Threads of Change, and the power of the needle in 2012. In Nangrah, we will try to benefit from the gains of the completed training by buying the ToC embroideries and selling them in conjunction with the exhibit, online and thru special auctions.

*Program Evaluation in Nangrah* We plan to hold post program evaluation with input from participants (through a survey and focus groups) and trainers (through individual interviews) to identify mechanisms for improving the curriculum and its implementation to better address the needs of women in Afghanistan.

5. Has funding changed for this program? For example, have you received unexpected funding from another source?

Our original proposal did not budget an allowance for participants, a necessity that we have had to add to the budget. The unexpected surplus of DfW funds, combined with a grant from the Afghan Women's Empowerment (AWE) grant from the US Embassy allowed us to do this. The $20/ per woman stipend has reinforced attendance, imparting responsibility and sense of self-worth for the participants.
Washing Hands with Soap Prevents Illness