Her name is Hawa or Khadiga, or Fatiah. In her vividly colored tobe, she is strikingly beautiful, even elegant, amid the desolation of her neighborhood, a camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Darfur.

She has lost her father or brother(s) or husband to murder or soldiering. Her home was torched to ashly ruin. Violence drove her from the land she once farmed to feed her family. She hasn't eaten a normal meal in years. Her children are malnourished. She has watched some of them die from diseases that medical intervention easily could have cured because there are no primary health care services for hundreds of miles. She must forage daily for potable water, firewood and food. And, in all likelihood, she has been raped.

The women of Darfur -- and their children -- have been the primary victims of the conflict that
has ravaged the western region of Sudan for seven long years. They comprise at least 80% of the 2.7 million people displaced within their homeland. The “temporary” camps established in 2004-2005 have mushroomed into sprawling shantytowns with insufficient water, sanitation, shelter, food supply or security. It is impossible to overstate these women’s needs in the face of cumulative traumas and massive deprivation. It is also impossible to overstate their resilience. That’s the “good news” in Darfur – and the wellspring of a successful-against-odds program.

Darfur Peace and Development Organization (DPDO) opened its first women’s center in Kassab IDP camp in July 2007. The goal was to provide integrated services to support women’s recovery. It quickly became apparent that many of the resources to do this were exceedingly hard to access. We focused on what we could do: develop income opportunities, deliver training, and provide a safe environment where women could support each other.

The women’s first priority is to earn sufficient income through legitimate means to feed and clothe their families. Their traditional craft of basket making offered the first avenue for accomplishing this. Some of the weavers are masters, producing baskets of breathtaking beauty. That their genius survives to be expressed in such a desolate place is a miracle. Some of the less experienced weavers have produced what we call “desperation baskets” – crudely wrought in the endearing way of summer camp crafts. They were bought for DPDO by a manager eager to help desperate “newbies.” We sell these less-than-perfect baskets as “seconds” because we feel no good-faith work should go unrewarded. And, we must recoup our cost to keep the program operating. Meanwhile, we talk up mentoring as a way to improve weavers’ skills and repeatedly reinforce quality standards... We’ve opened channels to sell their crafts in the U.S. through a growing group of retailers. (www.DarfurPeace.org/baskets). We also are surveying the women to determine what else they could and want to do to earn regular income.

Early in the process, I was keen to promote the women’s ownership of the weaving enterprise as a business. I had a vision of a micro-finance initiative that would spin off cooperatives run by members. On one of my early visits to the Center, I
conveyed this message to the assembled women through a translator. One woman shyly raised her hand and asked: “Could you please send someone to teach us to read and do math.” God bless her, she knew what she didn’t know – way ahead of me.

This was the genesis of a literacy-training program. Sixty women gather two hours a day, five days a week to learn to read and write in Arabic. They found teachers in the camp. We foraged for blackboards, pencils, notebooks and basic textbooks. Our first group of newly literate women graduated in March 2010. We are working to provide a second “tier” of education while a new group begins at square one.

First aid training workshops have been held with the cooperation of the Sudanese Red Crescent Society. We’ve provided first aid kits; the women become the de facto local health “practitioners”, a position with rightful status in an environment where minor injuries can escalate into fatal conditions. Soon we will begin workshops focused on women’s health and reproductive issues.

We’ve conducted three-day trainings in the use of solar cookers. This simple cardboard-and-foil technology focuses heat from the sun on cooking pots. All commons foods can be cooked – though more slowly – in this manner. Solar cooker use enables women to forgo some of the firewood-gathering expeditions that expose them to rape and assault.

We’ve discussed a way to take some control of community security – a “ring the bell” model using whistles - but it is slow to take root.

DPDO opened a second Women’s Center in September 2009 in Abu Shouk IDP camp near El Fasher (capital of North Darfur). The Center’s programs follow the model we developed in Kassab camp. The Abu Shouk women added day care/preschool so the moms could work and/or learn in peace while their kids got a head start in education.

We forage for and deliver blankets, tobes (the light outer wrap women wear in public), tarps, soap, flashlights, hand cream and every little thing that helps a woman feel better about herself, more in control of her situation. This is the milieu of their recovery.
Our “ambition list” for the coming year includes new funding for a midwife-training program. Sudan has the 15th highest rate of maternal mortality in the world. The deployment of qualified midwives in local communities would considerably reduce preventable mother and infant deaths. We also need funding to outfit and staff a mobile clinic that would serve the Women’s Centers on a regular basis.

The two Women’s Centers currently serve 305 women -- and many more would like to join. Our capacity is limited by funding. We work so that a sufficient number of women will develop as competent managers and agents for expansion. The programs can be replicated and adapted now to local needs in camps throughout Darfur (there are at least 150 camps), and in villages when improvements in security allow the women to return home.

In Darfur, bad roads, poor communication links, banditry and harassment threatened to derail every positive initiative. Funding arrives unpredictably. Each step forward feels like a baby step – but we do move forward. Our continuing operation of the Centers is fueled by our faith in the women. Their wisdom, imagination, energy and fortitude are essential to peacemaking and to the development of prosperous communities. They need all the help they can get. Right now.

We, the privileged women of the West, have a unique opportunity to give a “hand up” to our sisters in need – to answer their initiatives with generous hearts. It is the most important work that the global sisterhood can do.

Susan Burgess-Lent is the Program Director of Darfur Peace and Development Organization, a non-profit NGO based in Washington, DC. www.DarfurPeace.org. Email her at Susan@DarfurPeace.org