Some 6,500 miles away from home, Mahsa Khatibi sits on the patio outside Dana Hall one early-autumn afternoon, talking about an Afghanistan of the future: a peaceful place with a thriving educational system, a reliable infrastructure, and a government capable of keeping its people safe.

Khatibi intends to play a role in building that new Afghanistan when she returns home in the spring. With a master's degree in civil engineering and a certificate in architecture from the University of Hartford, she will become the first female member of the engineering faculty at Herat University in western Afghanistan.

One of a group of 16 Afghans, including three women, she has come from Herat University to pursue a master's at the College of engineering, technology, and Architecture (CETa) through a program that is revitalizing civil, architectural, and mechanical engineering education in her war-weary homeland.

"Afghanistan needs a lot of civil engineers to rebuild our country," Khatibi says. "We have come here to be trained. We are rebuilding our universities, and new universities are being established."

Khatibi might seem surprising to some. Her goals and accomplishments don't fit the image of women that emerged from Afghanistan under the Taliban's strict social order between 1996 and 2001.

But there is a history of public life for Afghan women before the Taliban, when they made up half of the government workforce, the majority of schoolteachers, and 40 percent of doctors in the capital city of Kabul. The same year the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law, Afghan women were enfranchised in a constitution that also guaranteed their right to education and freedom to work.

While the status of women in other parts of her country may continue to make headlines and the percentage of women in engineering is low throughout the world, Khatibi is adamant that her accomplishments and goals are not unusual.

"In Herat City there are many women in the university," explains the 21-year-old, who received her bachelor's degree in civil engineering from Herat in 2007. "In my class there were 11 women. Every year the number increases."

Indeed, there has been an influx of women attending Herat's engineering school. Of the 400 students currently enrolled, 50 are women.

"Mahsa represents a new Afghanistan," says M. Saleh Keshawarz, an associate professor of civil, environmental, and biomedical engineering at the University of Hartford who is responsible for creating the partnership between the universities. "Her experiences have been different than her parents. In 10 to 15 years, maybe things will be different in Afghanistan."

In the seven years since Keshawarz, who was raised in Afghanistan and returns often to teach at Herat University, began groundwork for the program, "a lot has been rebuilt," he says. "You can see the progress. Security is still a concern, however."

As the current state of Afghanistan has NATO leaders debating strategies to make the country stable, secure, and capable of looking after itself, Keshawarz is training the country's next generation of engineers.

"Before 2008, none of the engineering faculty at Herat had master's degrees," Keshawarz says. "By the summer of 2010, all will have them."

With the program's last student expected to receive a master's from CETa in 2011 and grant money running out, the hope is to continue the collaboration through distance learning. Keshawarz concedes, however, that the cultural-exchange aspect will be greatly diminished. It is that part of the program that Khatibi appreciates most.

"The master's is good," Khatibi says. "We couldn't get a master's in Afghanistan. But our purpose is more than getting a master's. We all hope to become familiar with another culture. It's always good to understand all kinds of people. We will then pass on what we have learned to the next generation."

by Karen Hunter

Mahsa Khatibi will receive a master's degree in civil engineering and a certificate in architecture from the University in May. She will return to Herat University in Afghanistan, where she will be the first female member of the engineering faculty.

Built at the end of the 13th century, the Friday Mosque in Herat is covered in mosaics made of mainly blue glazed tiles.