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In Poverty and Strife, Women Test Limits

By [CARLOTTA GALL](#)

BAMIAN, [Afghanistan](#) — Far away from the [Taliban](#) insurgency, in this most peaceful corner of Afghanistan, a quiet revolution is gaining pace.

Women are driving cars — a rarity in Afghanistan — working in public offices and police stations, and sitting on local councils. There is even a female governor, the first and only one in Afghanistan.

In many ways this province, Bamian, is unique. A half-dozen years of relative peace in this part of the country since the fall of the Taliban and a lessening of lawlessness and disorder have allowed women to push the boundaries here.

Most of the people in Bamian are ethnic Hazaras, Shiite Muslims who are in any case more open than most Afghans to the idea of women working outside the home.

But the changes in women's lives here are also an enormous step for Afghanistan as a whole. And they may point the way to broader possibilities for women, eventually, if peace can be secured in this very conservative Muslim society, which has been dominated by militia commanders and warlords during the last 30 years of war.

In a country with low rankings on many indicators of social progress, women and girls are the most disadvantaged.

More than 80 percent of Afghan women are illiterate. Women's life expectancy is only 45 years, lower than that of men, mostly because of the very high rates of death during pregnancy. Forced marriage and under-age marriage are common for girls, and only 13 percent of girls complete primary school, compared with 32 percent of boys.

The cult of war left women particularly vulnerable. For years now they have been the victims of abduction and rape. Hundreds of thousands were left war widows, mired in desperate poverty. Particularly in the last years of Taliban rule, even widows, who had no one to provide for them, were not allowed to work or leave the home unaccompanied by a male relative.

Fear of armed militiamen left women afraid even to walk in front of the police station in the town of Bamian, recalled Nahida Rezai, 25, the first woman to join the police force here. "And I came right into the police station," she said, admitting to some fears.

At the beginning, she had some problems. "I received some threats by telephone," she said. "But now I am working as a police officer, I think nothing can deter me."

Nekbakht, 20, joined the police force, too, and now helps her father, a casual laborer, support the family. They live in a single room tucked into the cliff face of Bamian valley, where homeless refugees have found shelter in caves inhabited centuries ago by Buddhist pilgrims.

“It was very difficult to find a job,” she said. “We had economic problems, and with the high prices life was difficult. Finally, I decided if I could not find another job, I should go into the police.” After joining nine months ago, she likes the job so much she says she is encouraging other women to join, too.

Indeed, growing economic hardship has helped drive some women to join the work force or to take other bold steps as they try to help their families cope with a severe drought, rising [food prices](#) and unemployment.

That was the case for Zeinab Hussein, 19. Her father, with seven daughters and no sons, says he had little choice when he needed a second driver to help at home.

“I like driving,” she said, seated at the wheel of her family’s minibus. “I was interested from childhood to learn to drive and to buy a car. I was the first woman in Bamian to drive.”

But over all, it is the return to relative peace here that has allowed for women’s progress, said the governor, Habiba Sarabi, a doctor and educator who ran underground literacy classes during the Taliban regime.

“If the general situation improves, it can improve the situation for women,” she said. She pushed to have policewomen so they could handle women’s cases, and there are now 14 women on the force, she said.

Some of the changes in Bamian have been echoed in more conservative parts of Afghanistan. But even the success stories sometimes end up showing the continuing dangers for women who take jobs to improve their lot. In Kandahar Province, one of the most noted female police officials in the country, Capt. Malalai Kakar, was gunned down on her way to work on Sept. 28.

In Bamian Province, Mrs. Sarabi, 52, has been the driving force behind women’s progress in public life. Her appointment by President [Hamid Karzai](#) three years ago as governor of Bamian was a bold move when jihadi leaders were still so powerful in the towns and countryside.

Some opponents are still agitating for her removal, Mrs. Sarabi said. “It is not only because they are against women,” she said, “but they do not want to lose power, so they make trouble for the governor.”

She mentioned her problems to Laura Bush, the first lady, who visited Bamian in June to show support for education and women’s projects in Afghanistan. Mrs. Bush’s visit prompted Mr. Karzai to make a visit of his own to Bamian to inaugurate the construction of a district road.

The people of Bamian say they accepted a woman as governor in the hope that an English-speaking, development-oriented technocrat like Mrs. Sarabi would deliver jobs and prosperity.

In fact, the success of women’s Community Development Councils here has caught the attention of the [World Bank](#), which has been a major donor to the programs and is looking to develop them further. Around the country there are 17,000 such councils, which choose local development projects and could be expanded to work on district and regional levels, said the bank’s president, [Robert B. Zoellick](#), who visited Bamian this

year.

“They are very effective,” he said of the councils in a recent interview. “People feel they have an influence in the future.”

The quiet work being done by women on the councils and in other jobs has helped turn things around for many in Bamian.

Najiba, 48, is a woman in Yakowlang District who lost her husband in the notorious massacre by Taliban forces there in the winter of 2000-1.

The Taliban fighters came on horseback, forcing the villagers and townspeople to flee in the night, leaving everything behind. Their shops and homes were set on fire while they sought refuge in the mountains.

After the American intervention in Afghanistan and the fall of the Taliban in late 2001, they returned home to nothing, not even a roof over their heads.

“I just had one skirt, and I was always patching it,” Najiba said.

As the government began development programs in the provinces, Najiba was elected head of a newly formed women’s development council, representing her village and the neighboring village. Its job was to plan how to spend a government development grant.

The men’s council decided the area needed a road, and flood barriers to save the farming land near the river. The women’s council wanted instead to buy livestock for each family, traditionally the women’s domain in Afghan households, to improve the food supply for families.

The men won that debate. “We did not get the farming project,” Najiba said. “We are still suggesting it was valuable; we are trying to work on our projects so we don’t have to depend on the men.”

The women got their way with the next project: solar panels to provide light to groups of four houses. That project has opened up all sorts of ideas, for computers, televisions and educational and election programs, she said.

Women have participated in literacy and tailoring training programs, too. Najiba laughed as she explained: “We have changed our way of life. Now I have lots of skirts.”

She added, “It all comes down to the council.”

Now, women are taking courses run by nongovernmental organizations, getting educated and learning ways to improve their family incomes. Most important, the women have won over the men, she said.

“Their minds have changed,” Najiba said. “They want to share decisions, not too far, but they want to give us some share.”

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