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February 24, 2009

Afghan Women Struggle to Be Heard

February 10, 2009

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WASHINGTON, Feb 10 (OneWorld.net) - Afghan women who choose to speak out for their rights, go to school, or pursue a career are frequently assassinated or chased out of the country by Taliban members, who at times are offered bounty for each woman or girl attacked. But that's not stopping many of these women, writes journalist Alisa Tang.

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- The world had high hopes for Afghanistan following the ousting of the Taliban in late 2001 but the country remains in crisis, despite significant aid spending. Though some improvements have been made in terms of basic liberties, education, and health, Afghanistan's development is undermined by escalating conflict, pervasive poverty, the impunity of warlord culture, and the country's status as the world's biggest opium producer. It remains one of the least developed countries in the world. For more information on human rights and development in Afghanistan, visit [OneWorld UK's Afghanistan country guide](#).
- A major report from [Human Rights Watch](#) in September warned that ramped-up U.S. and NATO airstrikes in Afghanistan were causing an increase in civilian deaths and raising concerns about the fallout on the military effort against the Taliban insurgency.



Girls at Oruj Learning Center in Afghanistan.
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LIVES ON THE LINE

Facing a resurgent Taliban, Afghan women have had to cover up and take cover. Yet many still press bravely forward for their rights.

From: [Ms. Magazine](#)

By Alisa Tang

Winter 2009

Last September, Malalai Kakar, a police officer who headed the department of crimes against women in Kandahar -- the former Taliban stronghold in the south -- was fatally shot while on her way to work. Less than two months later, several girls were walking to school in Kandahar when two men on a motorbike sprayed them with acid. At least two of the girls were blinded. In late November, 10 Taliban members were arrested for the crime, with some reportedly confessing that a high-ranking Taliban member had offered a large sum of money for each girl burned.

In 70 percent of Afghan provinces, the Taliban is back, accompanied by a skyrocketing death toll across the country and an increase in attacks targeting women and girls. "Four years ago, when I visited Kandahar, the security situation was very good...everything was normal. Everyone could work, and women could move around freely," said Mehbooba Qasimi, a 32-year-old poet who left Iran to move back to Kandahar nearly two years ago. "Now the situation for women in Kandahar feels the same as during the Taliban times."

The lives of Afghan women improved dramatically in the first few years after the fall of the Taliban. They were allowed again to leave home unaccompanied, without the burqa, and to go to school and work. However, the struggle for change has faltered, as old attitudes -- fueled by the worsening conflict and resurgent Taliban -- attempt to quash these new freedoms. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has said that he wants to negotiate with the Taliban -- and has even offered Taliban leader Mullah Omar a guarantee of safety if he agrees to enter peace talks -- putting women increasingly on edge that the samepeople who oppressed them so severely will return to some form of government influence.

The growing Taliban-led violence has had a huge psychological impact on everyone in Afghanistan. When I first landed in Kabul i November 2006, expatriates were already nervous in the wake of antiforeigner riots earlier that year. Since then, the security situation has taken a nosedive, with Taliban attacks and criminal kidnappings -- targeting foreigners and especially wealthy Afghans -- on the rise. These days, I rarely venture out by foot much farther than a few blocks, and when I do I try to blend in as an Afghan by wearing a head scarf, walking with my shoulders hunched and avoiding eye contact with men. Most organizations have barred their international staff from walking altogether, while some have pulled staff from the country.

Manizha Naderi, an Afghan American who runs the Women for Afghan Women aid organization and shelter, used to go out with her hair uncovered, but now she always covers her head and wears an ankle-length black overcoat as well. "I want everyone to think I'm a local," she said. "I used to drive myself, but I don't anymore because there aren't a lot of women driving, and if I drive people know that 'she's not from here.' I don't go out at night anymore. It's not worth it. I think a lot of women are like that now."

Afghan women have suffered tumultuous changes over the past three decades. Prior to Soviet rule, women -- primarily affluent urbanites -- enjoyed basic rights, access to education and employment. It was a time when fashionable women walked around Kabul in miniskirts. Then came decades of political instability and civil war, followed by the Taliban takeover in 1996. For the next five years, the Taliban beat women on the streets, publicly executed those accused of adultery and denied them a life outside the home. After the Taliban, a number of women's liberties were restored, but since early 2006 a Taliban comeback-accompanied by attacks against women and girls-has renewed fears among women and their families.

The strategy behind these assaults seems clear: A day after the acid attacks in Kandahar, 1,500 students at the girls' school stayed home. As a forthcoming Human Rights Watch report shows, teenage girls in Afghanistan must often trek for hours to reach the nearest secondary school.

According to UNICEF, from January to November 2008, there were 256 school attacks that left 58 dead and 46 wounded. In 2007, arsonists set fire to 236 schools, and in one of the worst incidents that year, two girls were shot to death outside their school in Logar province, near Kabul. Overall, nearly 1,000 school attacks have occurred since Sept. 11. In provinces where the Taliban exerts influence and power, girls' access to education is extremely limited. Yet, reports Human Rights Watch, national surveys show that many Afghan families wish to educate their daughters, if only they can do so safely.

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Meanwhile, assassins are targeting women activists. Before Kakar, others murdered include Zakia Zaki, the owner and the manager of a radio station north of Kabul who was gunned down in front of her infant son in 2007, and Safia Ama Jan, the Kandahar provincial director for the Ministry of Women's Affairs, who was killed by gunmen on a motorbike in 2006.

"This kind of violence puts more women at risk, and naturally their families restrict their movement," said Sima Samar, the chair of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission who served briefly as the country's first minister of women's affairs and as a deputy president under President Hamid Karzai. "There were some women activists in Kabul who had to leave the country."

More Afghan women have become educated about their rights through public media campaigns and are daring to come forward and demand justice, but the few perpetrators who are arrested still manage to get out of jail free. In one recent case, two men involved in the gang rape of a woman in the northern province of Samangan were sentenced to 11 years in prison, but then it was discovered that Karzai had pardoned them. The two men moved back to the neighborhood where they had raped the woman, where she and her family still live.

"Even according to Sharia law, those people who commit rape have to receive severe punishment, but they are released because of whatever kind of relationship they have, and they are released by the signature of the president," Samar said.

Norah Niland, the chief human-rights officer for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, wrote in a statement that the Samangan case was "clearly an injustice against the victim, the victim's family and all Afghan women. ...This sends the wrong message to other perpetrators of violent crimes against women, that they will not be held accountable for their actions."

As a result, many families decide it is better to keep girls and women safe at home. Women censor themselves and scale back their activities out of fear, while many back away from their goals and dreams:

-- Mehboba Ahdar, a 19-year-old runner who was the only woman on the Afghan team heading to the Beijing Olympics last summer, had granted seemingly innocuous interviews to some male journalists. After camera crews visited her home in Kabul, neighbors accused Ahdar of prostitution -- a common accusation hurled at women who allow male strangers into their homes. During training in Italy, Ahdar fled and sought asylum. She did not participate in the Olympics.

-- Pop singer Farida Tarana moved out of her home into a Kabul hotel and then fled to Iran for three weeks after receiving threats for what was deemed shameless, racy behavior: singing and appearing on TV in music videos, including one in which she did not wear a head scarf. "Our culture can't accept this, a girl singing," Tarana said. "In Herat, one year ago, [a mullah] said if you kill a woman singer, that is a good deed for Islam, you will go directly to paradise."

-- Three years ago, Rangina Hamidi, an Afghan American businesswoman, and eight other women formed a problem-solving committee to help women in Kandahar. They originally planned to make themselves known in the community as a place to come for help. "But when the security started deteriorating, none of us wanted to risk ourselves by being out there," she said. "We held back because we didn't want to be targets. The insecurity generally has put a stop to any progress we want to go forward with."

The struggle for progress is also up against a male-dominated society that is resistant to change with regard to the treatment of women. One of the country's few English-language newspapers, Kabul Times, wrote an editorial in March laying out the reasons that women essentially deserve to get beaten: "There are numerous obstinate, groggy, nagging, quarrelsome, stingy and arguing women in this country who disturb the peace in their families." Such rationalization is widespread. When I was talking to Afghans about Shaima Rezayee, a popular host of an MTV-style program who was shot to death in 2005, men and women alike spoke to me in hushed tones about the racy, un-Islamic way she dressed and behaved on TV, as if this justified her death.

Some men's attitudes are particularly outrageous. I have met with Afghan men-lawyers and community leaders -- who sneeringly mention "women's rights" as the reason more women are seeking divorce and girls are running away from home. As they see it, the fabric of Afghan society is being shredded by women's demands.

Even seemingly progressive and liberal men will make comments like "My wife likes wearing the burqa" or "She does not want to work." One photojournalist friend boasted to me that his clever fiancée is at the top of her high school, but that if she asks to continue her studies beyond the 12th grade he would surely say no. His justification was thick with nuance and innuendo: "We've all heard, we've all seen and we all know what happens at universities." Once an Afghan girl is engaged, even at a very young age, she is usually taken out of school. Of the nearly 6 million students enrolled in Afghan schools, only about 35 percent are girls.

Karzai's proposed talks with the Taliban, meanwhile, concern human-rights officials such as Samar. "I hope there will be no compromises with women's rights while talking to the Taliban," Samar said. "As half of the population who are going to be affected by these negotiations, we would like to know the conditions. It's not enough to say that they [the Taliban] have to accept the constitution. Under the constitution, they can still put many restrictions on women."

And the constitution only goes so far. Most disputes in Afghanistan are brought before the informal justice system -- that is, a group of male religious and community leaders who deliberate based on Islamic law and Afghan customs, which essentially override the constitution. It is a system that discriminates against women, handing down jail sentences for adultery in cases based on little other than a man's jealous accusations. Honor killings remain a problem, while many disputes and debts are settled using girls as a form of currency, and almost all divorces or custody battles are resolved by handing the children over to the father.

Shinkai Karokhail, a lawmaker from Kabul, said her husband took away their 15-year-old daughter after he married a second wife. He tells her children that she only cares about politics, but not about them. She has not seen her daughter since December 2007. "If someone takes this, the most precious person in your life, this is the worst trauma," she said, crying and kneading a crumpled tissue in her hands. "It's a male-dominated society. Even MPs can suffer. Even as an MP for this country, my husband can treat me like this."

The atmosphere for women has become so bad that last year the country's lawmakers debated shutting down the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Only after women leaders worked six months to convince parliament of the need for the ministry did it survive the lawmakers' vote. Several women MPs have suffered mudslinging from conservative lawmakers across the aisle.

"They call me an extremist, they call me a feminist. This is a sort of threat," Karokhail said. "For them, a feminist is someone who is against religion, against traditional values, or too influenced by the West."

Nonetheless, Afghan women have made some social and political advances. As the new post-Taliban government was formed, women fought for and won the right to hold a quarter of the 249 seats in the lower house of parliament. Karzai's Cabinet includes one woman -- the minister of women's affairs -- and women's participation in sectors such as health care, education and media has improved. Many women are now breadwinners -- repairing mobile phones or selling baked goods, solar-powered lamps and handicrafts -- and can thus assert themselves more strongly.

"When you're an income contributor, then that gives you decision-making power at home," said Hamidi, who runs Kandahar Treasure, a company that trains women in embroidery and sells their goods in the United States. One woman who works with Kandahar Treasure has three daughters toiling alongside her. "Her husband is old and lazy and doesn't want to work," Hamidi said. "Because she's paying the rent, paying for the food, and providing for medicines when they're sick, she has made a rule: 'You're not allowed to sell the daughters in marriage because they're helping to bring income to the family.' If she weren't bringing in any income, he would probably sell them and live off that for a couple of years, so this is the change that this small income opportunity has brought to this family."

Still, most women face hardship at home despite any professional success. One 27-year-old woman journalist -- who asked not to be named because she did not want to jeopardize her work--told me that in the seven years since the U.S.-led invasion toppled the extremist Muslim Taliban regime, she had finished high school, studied journalism in college and landed a job at a national television station. All this took place after her husband had been killed, just two months before the Sept. 11 attacks, leaving her with three children to care for. Now her in-laws want her to stop working, threatening that they will take away her children otherwise.

"In the Taliban times, I was a housewife. Now I'm an educated woman with a career. I never thought I would be able to go to university and get a job," she said. "But my in-laws tell me, 'Stop working. Pray to god to help you.' They say it's not our culture: women don't work."

There are many brave Afghan women who continue to fight for their rights. Some like Samar are vocal. Others surreptitiously push forward women's rights within a male-dominated society. There is a sense of urgency among them, because with the Taliban back in strength and potentially at the negotiating table with the government, their lives are on the line again.

The solution, said Hamidi, is incremental changes that do not blatantly disturb the status quo, especially in the south where she is based -- an area where the Taliban is strong and almost no woman leaves home without the burqa for fear of attacks. Hamidi permits her female employees to make their embroidered goods in their homes so they don't anger their families by working in the outside world.

"I don't expect change in this lifetime, but if I can bring change to their daughters' lives then I know I've been successful. With these slow changes, I know that there's not going to be a backlash."

Even men who would never allow their wives to work admit they have great hopes for their daughters. One man I know who works at a women's-rights organization told me that his parents arranged his marriage to an illiterate woman and that in his home province of Logar -- the same place where two girls were shot to death in 2007 -- "people don't like their daughters to go to school." What about education for his daughter? "Of course! I want my daughter to be a doctor."

As the Afghan government and international community are fighting to quell the worsening insurgency, the struggles for Afghan women are not the top priority they were seven years ago. But women here believe that to defeat the insurgency, the international community needs a long-term strategy that also focuses on improving Afghans' lives.

"We cannot achieve equality and human rights only through military means," Samar said. "With any policy or strategy, human rights should be in the center if we really want to promote democracy in this country. We need more economic development and creation of job opportunities for the men and women of this country."

Naderi hopes U.S. President Barack Obama will commit more money for infrastructure development, factory construction and employment: "Give people jobs and no one will go to fight with the Taliban. If you help families, it's going to automatically help women. If you just focus on women, people are going to resent it."

However, many activists say that if the government and international community really want peace, they need to empower Afghan women.

"I've given up on men, not because they're incapable of changing, but because they have so much blood and hatred and animosity over the last 30 years," Hamidi said. "Women have not killed anyone. They have not actively participated in the war. I think it's only women who will change Afghanistan."

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