



As Burqas Lift, Oppression Remains

Although More Women Are in Positions of Power in Afghanistan, Old Conventions Still Reign

April 9, 2007 — - Although women in Afghanistan don't have to cover themselves with a burqa anymore, the outfit, along with other conventions of the past, remains present in everyday life.

In 2001, after the Taliban's reign and mandate on covering the female body ended, women in Kabul threw off the burqa as a symbol of freedom. But today, even though 25 percent of the legislators are by law female, the law cannot handle what the culture does.

Take weddings: One-third of women in Afghanistan are forced into marriage. The law says women must be at least 16 years old to wed, yet human rights watchers say as many as 57 percent of those who marry are younger than that, sometimes as young as 4 years old.

In the countryside, young girls are sold for thousands of dollars to pay off debt. Throughout Afghanistan, women are beaten so badly they are driven to suicide, sometimes setting themselves on fire. There are only three safe houses in this country of 30 million people.

"The woman's status or position in the family is very bad. She's always under threat. She's always under insult. She's always under severe, verbal violence. And of course, sometimes physical violence," said Orzala Ashraf, who runs a women's safe house called HAWCA, or Humanitarian Assistance for Women and Children in Afghanistan.

Afghan Women Fight for Power

Hope comes in tiny increments. Shukria Barakzai, one of 91 female members of Parliament, fights for those who do not have a voice.

"I'm lucky, because I got the opportunity to say something for the future of my daughter. My grandmother and my mother, they never talked about my rights. They never talked about their rights, so we're responsible to bring about change," Barakzai said. "We are responsible to teach our child to grow up with this mentality to respect each other, never think that somebody can be my property."

The women of Afghanistan frequently recall the story of Malalai, a 19th century Pashtun hero. As British guns fired, she helped her country stay strong by raising the Afghan flag. For Barakzai, the story is a prediction of female rule that she believes is inevitable.

"If this process is going on to be continue, I'm 100 percent sure, one day we will have elected president, woman," she said. "Soon very soon, not later. I'm sure about it."

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