



Inter Press Service News Agency

THE STORY UNDERNEATH

Wednesday, August 15, 2007 20:50 GMT

[Latest News](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Readers' Opinions](#)

[Search](#)

AFGHANISTAN:

Women Defy Tradition, Run Shops in Mazar Town

Tahir Qadiry

MAZAR-E-SHARIF, Aug 15 (IPS) - Women have stormed a male bastion in this historic city, capital of the northern province of Balkh, and traditionalists are clicking their tongues in disapproval.

For the first time, five women have opened shops in Mazar under an initiative promoted by the provincial Women's Affairs Department. The head of the department, Friba Majid, said a big market exclusively run by women will open here in the coming months.

The shops, some located close to the stunning, nearly five-century old Rawze-e-Sharif or Blue Mosque, stock mainly "women's things" -- lingerie, pants, t-shirts, cosmetics -- and some food items. "I bought underclothes and socks," said Zolaikha, 23, who came shopping with her friends.

"Women feel comfortable coming and purchasing from us," says Kamila who used to work with a non-governmental organisation before she opened the shop. "Some families are very strict and don't let their women enter shops run by men," she adds.

Mazar-e-Sharif is Afghanistan's fourth largest city with a population of 300,600 people, according to a 2006 estimate. It is linked by roads to Kabul in the south-east, Herat to the west, and Uzbekistan in the north.

During Afghanistan's tumultuous war years, between the Soviet invasion in 1979 and the fall of the Taliban in end-2001, Mazar was a theatre of bloody conflict.

A strategic air base for the Soviet Union, it was fought over by rival Tajik and Uzbek militias under mujahiddin rule in the 1990s.

When the Taliban emerged from religious schools in Pakistan to oust the warring mujahiddin factions from Kabul, they unsuccessfully tried to take Mazar, losing thousands of radical fighters in a massacre in 1997.

In retaliation a year later, the Taliban led a six-day massacre of majority Hazaras and other local people before occupying the city till it fell to the Northern Alliance backed by the U.S. in 2001.

The scars of the brutal war years are yet to heal, but Balkh province has made advances in restoring the rights of citizens. Women are back at the workplace and girls are in schools after years of being forced to stay within the high walls around their houses.

"Men and women have equal rights," asserts Majid of the Women's Affairs Department. "We want women to take part in political and social spheres. We want them to improve their economy. Women are not only for sitting at home and doing housework," she says.

Pointing out that the women-run shops will improve women's lifestyles, she asks rhetorically: "Why shouldn't they be allowed to deal with their own gender?"

For 34-year-old Nasima Jalal in Mazar the new shops are a boon. Her husband is very strict and religious, she explains. "I cannot buy my things from shops run by men. But now, I am very happy. I am free to do my shopping in these shops run by women," she says.

Afghan society is inherently patriarchal. Women's rights are ignored. Many are forced into early marriages, or live with

violent husbands who torture, beat and imprison them. "Women have suffered a lot in Afghanistan," rues Malalai Usmani, head of a Balkh women's organisation that defends women's rights.

Raqiba, 40, who runs a shop, says she has a lot of customers. "I am very happy to be a shopkeeper. I have always wanted to be one, but I thought it would be tough in such a strict environment. Today, I feel no fear and think we women can do anything", she says very optimistically.

Equally, she relishes her new found financial independence. "I invested 500 dollars in this shop. Now I make 10 dollars or more every day, which is quite good," this former supervisor of a community project says modestly.

Her only complaint, however, is about the attitude of men. "Some men come here and make fun of us. They say how is it possible for women to run shops?" she said, "I get pissed off and quarrel with them."

Indeed, traditionalists are shocked to see women enter a profession that has been an exclusively male preserve. Conservative religious scholars and clerics think running a shop is very inappropriate.

Mullah Abdul Nasir, a prayer leader, asserts: "Women are going beyond their limits. Not only are these women dressing up, but also they are in pants. They are encouraging other women to claim more freedom. They are misguiding women."

Fortunately, liberal voices are also being heard. Mawlawi Tahir Mofid, a prominent intellectual, remarks: "Islam has welcomed women taking part in business. We can cite an example of our prophet's wife who was doing business with the prophet."

He describes the initiative as a "good step" to encourage women to take part in social affairs.

Balkh's Women's Affairs Department is briskly proceeding with plans for the women's-only market. "We have laid the foundation stone," says Majid. "It will have more than 200 shops. It will be built very soon," she adds.

Maybe Mazar-e-Sharif is on its way to reclaiming some of its lost glory, mused a resident. Before the war years, it was a liberal place with a university that attracted students from all over the country. Most people who lived here were migrants from the neighbouring provinces, prospering on the local economy dominated by agriculture.

(END/2007)