

Afghan Diary

Issue 4: March 1st to 29th, 2003

From the Editorial Desk: On March 6, Mary travelled to Kabul, Afghanistan, to help the Afghan Women's Network organise a press conference. It turned out to be a huge success. The event was timed to take place two days before International Women's Day. It allowed the AWN to publicise the results of a long survey that it had conducted, in Pakistan and Afghanistan, on improvements that need to be made in the new Afghan Constitution. Mary returned to Kabul in high spirits, and began to make plans for the next few weeks of her assignment. Then on March 20, she was told that she was being evacuated to Bangkok within a day. The International Rescue Committee, which has assumed administrative responsibility for Mary, had decided that it was too risky for her to remain in Pakistan with a likely war looming. In her latest diary extract, written from Bangkok, Mary reflects on what it means to be a woman in Afghanistan. It starts with wearing the burqa.

I was evacuated from Peshawar and moved to Bangkok with less than 24 hours notice. Not enough time to think, react, process or prepare. I suppose that, in some way, I had been preparing for the possibility that I would have to leave in the event of the U.S.-led war against Iraq ever since I arrived in Peshawar. But thinking about proved to be far different than actually having to do it.

The evacuation has left me feeling conflicted. On the one hand, I'm grateful to be somewhere considered safer on the scale of security standards. On the other hand, I feel regretful about being yanked from the Afghan people I have befriended and a project I care about completing. Relocating to Bangkok has delayed me in writing about my 10-day trip to



Afghanistan earlier in March. The images and perspectives, however, have stayed firmly implanted in my head.

What I noticed first when I arrived in Kabul is the large number of women who still are wearing a burqa. Anyone who believed media reports that Afghan women had thrown off their burqas with joy in 2001 is simply wrong. One of my colleagues estimated that 80 percent of the women in Kabul are hidden by burqas. That figure would seem about right.

Wearing the burqa is not an overriding concern for women in Afghanistan. They say they feel more comfortable about covering up and more secure about their safety. They do not necessarily love it, but they see it as the accepted dress code and what is expected of them.

Yet the burqa does symbolize the oppression that Afghan women face at home, in the streets, at their places of work. The fact that they feel more comfortable and secure hidden behind yards of cloth wraps is indicative of their loss of self-esteem, their lack of opportunity and their fear.

I heard a story when I was in Kabul that captured for me the value that Afghan women hold. The story goes like this: There was a man walking along the road with his wife, his children and his sheep. They were walking in a line – the wife first, the children behind her, the sheep behind them and the man in the rear. When asked why the wife walked at the front of the line, the man said, “If there are landmines, she will walk into them first and die. The sheep will be spared. I can get a new wife. I cannot afford to buy new sheep.”

The stories told by women in Afghanistan about the humiliation and physical abuse they endure at home – from their husbands, their fathers, their fathers-in-law and their brothers – are heart-wrenching. Of course, the circumstances differ. Some women are allowed to attend school, for example, but are humiliated at home. Others are not humiliated, but are not allowed to pursue an education. Regardless, the underlying issues are similar.

There are those who are beaten when they try to leave home to attend a workshop or training class. There are those who are berated if they cannot have children or, more particularly, if they cannot bear sons. There are those who are humiliated when their husbands marry a second wife, and another, and another. There are those even more humiliated – those who become social outcasts and, in some cases, victims of abuse by their neighbors – when their husbands seek a divorce.

The women are disempowered because they cannot forge their own paths in life. They are depressed because they cannot freely seek an education. They cannot decide whom to marry. They cannot decide to not get married. They cannot decide to leave a bad marriage. They have no choice.

I had lunch one afternoon in Kabul with one woman – I will refrain from using her name to protect her identity – who opened up to me about her personal life. She brought her six-year-old son with her to lunch, and it was clear he is the pride of her life. He was the only child this woman was able to have after eight years of marriage. And that was the root of her problems at home.

“I hate my husband,” she said. “I absolutely hate him and yet I cannot leave him. I am stuck.”

She explained that her husband had abused her, mentally and physically, for years because she could not have children. “Cruel” was the word she used to describe him. This is a woman who was educated in a university and who teaches in Kabul – the sole breadwinner in the household.

Things with her husband improved when she got pregnant and had a son, but the residue of the abuse has stayed with her. If she divorces him, this woman will become a social outcast, despite her degree and her job. The pain and shame of divorce is worse than existing in a hurtful marriage. So she stays. And she has her son.

The oppression of women is widespread in Afghanistan, but there is also growing optimism among women that their situation is improving. Indeed, there are signs that change is on its way. I witnessed the positive energy during the festivities related to International Women’s Day, celebrated worldwide on March 8.

The premiere, and more inspiring, event in Kabul was a massive gathering of women under one tent at the city’s Polytechnic Institute. The half-day event drew 1,500 women or more who gathered to hear speeches from various women leaders. The line-up included Habiba Surabi, the Minister of Women’s Affairs, Sima Simar, Minister of Human Rights, and Afifa Azim, executive director of AWN, who spoke on behalf of Afghan NGO’s that are working for the rights of women.

The speeches centered on a similar theme: Women are gaining more rights in Afghan society but a lot more work needs to be done. Addressing the audience, Surabi talked about the re-building of Afghanistan and the importance of women in that process. “We want our freedom,” she said. “The reconstruction of Afghanistan is not possible without the participation of women.”

Surabi stressed the need for women to participate in Afghan politics, to help draft the new Afghan constitution, and to be guaranteed their social and cultural rights. Without education, she said, women will continue to struggle. “Our society needs knowledge and education,” she said. “A community cannot improve without education. Likewise, we need to educate our women.”

Simar focused on men and women as equals in Afghan society, and argued that they will be unable to defend their rights if they are not aware of their rights. She called for a new Afghanistan, a country in which women are treated as humans. “We should respect the rights of humans in Afghanistan,” she said. “We’re trying to improve the situation of the past. We want to create a situation where every human is respected.”

The basis of a reconstructed Afghanistan, Simar said, is the granting of equal protection to everyone. That, she said, starts with the new Afghan government and the new systems it creates. She applauded President Karzai’s transitional government for agreeing to abide by the standards set by the International Criminal Court.

Those same standards for the peaceful implementation of human rights, she said, ought to be met in Afghanistan. “Laws should be enforced in Afghanistan and no guns should be allowed to rule the country,” she said. “Let’s introduce democracy.”

The same irony marked the chaotic distribution of food. Boxed lunches were provided to attendees, but the hand-out became a free-for-all about five minutes after it started. Food workers started throwing the boxes at the hungry crowd. Not surprisingly, the strongest, fastest got the most. I saw dozens of men jumping up to stretch over the heads of women and snatch the lunches in mid-air. I saw these same men stuff two and three boxes under their shirts and then go outside to eat with their friends.

International Women’s Day was meant to honor women, but clearly not until the men were honored first.

For all the talk about women’s rights, I was faced with a glaring irony at the Polytechnic event. Seated in the very first row of the tented auditorium, on the softest, most comfortable couches in the house, were about 25 men representing official functions in the Karzai government. The women were seated on hard chairs, behind the men’s cushy couches.

The Afghan Women’s Network was among several local NGO’s that had celebrated International Women’s Day a few days earlier. More than 120 women turned out at AWN’s Kabul offices on March 6 for speakers, entertainment and a news conference. The conferences was called by the AWN to highlight its recommendations to a Constitutional Commission that is collecting views on the new Afghan constitution, which is in the process of being written. The AWN would like to see more women’s rights.

AWN also unveiled its new website, www.afghanwomensnetwork.org, which has quickly become a clearinghouse of information on the Constitutional drafting process and other information about issues effecting women and children.

A healthy debate emerged during the AWN news conference about the rights of women under Islamic law. The discussion made it clear there is a lot of confusion – or willful misunderstanding.

One woman asked whether Islamic law requires girls who are younger than 16 to marry, even if they do so against their will. AWN has recommended to the Constitutional Commission that the new Afghan Constitution specifically prohibit marriage for girls until they reach the legal age of 16.

While several people in the crowd said they believe under-age marriage is not a requirement for Muslim girls, Nafisa Habibi, executive director of the Afghan Cultural Institute, reminded the audience that one of Mohammed’s wives was aged nine. That, she said, shows Islam’s real position on under-age marriage. Others quickly disagreed with Habibi. They pointed out that Mohammed’s young wife freely chose to marry him, she was not forced. In addition,

Mohammed was considered a “complete man,” which made marriage to him different than to an average Muslim man.

The conversation ended without a definitive answer. This sort of confusion about women’s rights under Islamic law is likely to slow progress toward achieving equality for women. At the very least, it will limit their options. Largely illiterate, Afghan women do not know what to believe.

“Women don’t know their rights under Islamic law,” said Humaira Popals, 27, who is a program manager for the Afghan Women’s Welfare Department and who previously has been an assistant lecturer on Islam at a university in Pakistan. “If women knew their rights, they would now how to live. But only one percent of us women are qualified to teach them. That’s not enough. And Christians and foreigners are not going to fund us to teach Islamic law, I’m sorry to say.”

AWN’s goal in working on the Constitution is to find the right balance between Islamic law, international human rights law and civil law. This has already has left me wondering how many rights Muslim women truly will be able to demand in the new national document.

When I challenged members of the AWN committee that has been working on the recommendations, they pointed out that there are certain rights that Muslim women will never be able to achieve, but that Western women take for granted. These include equal marriage and divorce rights, for example. And there are certain restrictions – such as styles of dress – that Muslim women willingly must accept as a religious and cultural norm. And they do.

The recommendations submitted by AWN to the Constitutional Commission are not nearly as far-reaching as I had imagined. I had expected AWN members to be asking for the moon. I discovered they are only asking for a tiny piece of it. And when I factored in the constraints of Islamic law, I understand why.

The scene on March 6 was more festive at an event that was organised around the corner from AWN, by the NGO Women for Women–Afghanistan. Women for Women focuses on providing economic opportunities for women, helping them develop income-earning skills. Wow, do those women know how to throw a party. Music, dancing, and more food crammed onto one buffet table than I think I ever have seen.

Women for Women is just one of many NGOs in Afghanistan that is paving the way for women to gain more opportunities. I could write volumes about all of them. The passion of this celebration epitomized some of the successful NGO efforts that are underway.

Women for Women started a bakery a few months ago in Kabul that has become, in some ways, the talk of the town for the amazing chocolate and carrot cakes the women are making. I admit that I love bakeries – anything to do with desserts and sweets are my downfall – and so I simply could not resist checking out this place. Located in a separate building at the back of the Women for Women offices, the bakery that is causing a stir is a single open brick oven with three women trainees and one master chef.

Their teacher is Masood Rasoli, 28, an Afghan who has worked as a chef at several Islamabad restaurants. He refers to his three students as family. “They are like my sisters, my mother,” he said. “I’d like for this to become bigger, much bigger. I would like them to be making 100 pies, 200 cakes, that all go for sale outside. And I want my ladies to be happy.”

One of them is Habiba Rashidi, a widow. As she finishes up with a carrot cake, I can tell how happy she is to be something productive.

“I just want there to be all days, no nights, so I can come and do this work,” she said. “This is good work and it’s good for my future.”

The women are learning to cook cakes, pies, muffins, focaccia bread and other baked goods in a fireplace. I have trouble baking an edible pie in a precise gas oven, never mind trying to gauge the temperature of an open flame. They are beginning to take their skills public, selling the cakes and muffins to several guest houses and hotels in Kabul.

The future of women in Afghanistan was the focus of a two-day leadership training on March 9 and 10, organized by the non-profit V-Day and facilitated, in part, by AWN’s Afifa Azim. At the end of the two days, V-Day made a substantial commitment to the future of Afghan women. Eve Ensler, founder of V-Day, who was in Kabul for the training session, agreed to fund three public awareness campaigns to highlight issues that emerged during the discussions. One campaign would highlight violence against women, one would work toward the disarmament of civilians, and one would increase women’s political power.

More than 50 women from Afghan NGO’s met in a small room at the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul to talk openly and honestly about the issues they face every day – from men, from the norms of Afghan culture. Their stories had several similar themes: oppression, abuse, lack of freedom, lack of opportunity, and the struggle to survive.

Facilitators asked the women in the group to finish, in their own words, the following sentence: “If violence against women ended today...”

Here were some of their answers:

“I would be able to live without fear.”

“I would not be beaten by my husband and my father-in-law.”

“I would not be extra baggage.”

“No woman would be sold like an animal.”

“Young girls would not be forced to marry.”

“I would be able to realize all of my hopes.”

“I would be able to promote myself, my future, my life.”

“I would be able to go to university with no obstacles.”

“I would feel free.”

“I could buy a bicycle and jog.”

“I could participate in the reconstruction of Afghanistan.”

“A woman could be the owner of her house and no one could tell her to get out of her house.”

“No one would grieve at the birth of a daughter.”
“Women would not be harassed in the workplace.”
“I would be equal with men.”
“I could choose my spouse.”
“I would be just like a bird, flying.”

Even as they discussed what is wrong with their lives, many of these women were also clearly aware of what was going right. Shukria Barakazi, for one, is the chief editor of the Women’s Mirror Weekly and one of the participants in the V-Day workshop. Barakazi, 30, had been a teacher throughout the Taliban regime – at great risk to her life. The situation for Afghan women has improved dramatically since the Taliban fell, she said, and the future is brighter than ever.

“They could have killed me then and I would not have cared,” she said. “Life during the Taliban was like death. And if they had killed me, it would have been no different.”

Similarly, Khalda Saqui, 19, has a dream and she plans to follow it. “After even the darkest time, there will come a light time,” she said. “Now I can go to university and study. That was my dream.”

Working in groups, the women in the leadership training listed their priorities, the goals they would like to achieve first if they were given a choice. Their wish-list was broad:

- Choose a husband.
- Live without fear.
- Have equal participation in Afghan reconstruction.
- Make education available and accessible for women, particularly in villages.
- Prohibit forced marriages.
- Remove harassment from the workplace.
- Stop the trade of women to settle debts and scores between men.

They identified the obstacles blocking them from their goals and devised solutions that would help them overcoming roadblocks.

Obstacle: Women are illiterate and do not know their true rights under Islam and need to be educated.

Solution: Prepare literary courses in villages.

Obstacle: Women do not have economic security.

Solution: Provide work for women. Take advantage of the skills being taught by international NGOs.

Obstacle: Women do not have personal security.

Solution: Remove guns from men in Afghanistan. Work on eradicating ethnic discrimination.

Obstacle: Cultural norms prevent women from getting ahead.

Solution: Find elders or moulahs in village and mosques who are willing to help improve the status of women and support efforts to educate them.

These were just some of the ideas that emerged in what was perhaps the first open and honest discussion most of them ever had. **One woman said she always had been scared that word would get back to her family if she voiced her frustrations – so she always had remained silent.** For two days, the women put aside their fears and safety concerns and took a chance that maybe, by organizing together, they may spawn lasting change.

“These are dreams right now,” said Orzala Ashraf, 26, founder and director of HAWCA. “If we can implement 30 percent of what we’re talking about, we’ll be a success. We’re not expecting to change things overnight. We know there are strong roots in our culture.” Added Farzana Saber, 30, “In sha Allah. We are optimistic. We have hope.”

This hope was shared by 10 other women, whom I trained at AWN’s offices in Kabul on the basics of journalism. They were quick to mention the cultural obstacles they knew they would face in trying to report stories, but they were even quicker to talk about their desire to publish information, particularly for women.

“I want to be the first to get the information out there,” said Beheshta Hassen, who recently began working as a reporter for the Woman Mirror Weekly magazine in Kabul. “Because that’s what reporters do.”

On that wave of optimism, I flew back to Peshawar filled with hope that I could play a role in helping these women stay empowered and connected. A few days later, I was told I would have to evacuate to Bangkok. After a final wrap-up meeting with the staff at AWN, I said my quick good-byes, making an uncomfortably quick exit, not knowing when or if I would return.

And so I am here, in Bangkok, working on any parts of the project that I can. But my mind still is back there — in Peshawar, in Kabul, where these Afghan women are trying so hard to make a difference for themselves and for others. In the midst of Bangkok’s consumptive and self-indulgent environment, I have had a chance to reflect on the work they are doing and under such difficult circumstances. What lies ahead of them is daunting, no doubt, although the progress they already have made is inspiring.

The challenge they ultimately face is not about the burqa; it is about everything deeply embedded underneath.

*** Mary has been authorised to return to Pakistan and Afghanistan. She expects to resume her assignment in ten days, after a short holiday.**

Posted by Laura Jones on Oct 12th, 2006