



## *Afghan Diary*

**Issue 7: June 1<sup>st</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup>, 2003**

**From the Editorial Desk:** Mary Moore left Pakistan and Afghanistan in mid-June, after working with the Afghan Women's Network (AWN) for five and a half months. In this, her final diary excerpt, she reflects on some of the results to emerge from the project. The Advocacy Project is preparing a web page on this site which will summarize AP's work with the AWN. It will include photos, Mary's diary excerpts, and an interim assessment of AP's support for the AWN. As part of its support for the AWN, AP will also be sending out an AP official to Pakistan and Afghanistan in October/November to assess the impact of Mary's work, and discuss follow-up with the AWN's management. AP will also continue to promote the AWN's campaigning work in the United States.

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*Mary Moore in Kabul*

As I am approaching my final days working with the Afghan Women's Network (AWN) and I contemplate the past five months working with the women there, I am amazed at how much we have accomplished. It is a testament to the energy of the women at AWN, how excited they are to bring the organization to a different level and to get out more information about Afghan women.

We have created a Media Unit within AWN that handles a variety of different media: a monthly magazine called Ertiq, a website ([www.afghanwomensnetwork.org](http://www.afghanwomensnetwork.org)), radio programs, and a monthly newsletter. We have created a press outreach program that links together the issues we are covering through our various media with AWN's advocacy and lobbying efforts. And we are training aspiring women journalists in Kabul and Peshawar, who write news stories for the magazine and the website.

The plan is to expand the Media Unit as AWN opens a new office in Jalalabad. By expanding the journalism training into Jalalabad, AWN will be able to develop correspondents who will work in new areas of Afghanistan and cover stories about women's issues that are different from those

in Kabul or Peshawar. Security issues for women are more pronounced for women in Jalalabad, for example, than in Kabul. The timing for AWN to open the new office is not yet fixed, but the planning is underway.

Sadiqa Basiri, AWN's Director of External Affairs, went to Jalalabad a week ago to figure out the role that AWN could play there. Her fact-finding mission turned into an unexpected advocacy campaign for women's rights, and she demonstrated how she has grown in five months into a young leader.

Sadiqa spoke in front of several audiences of university students, asking them about the conditions of education. And then she broached a more sensitive topic: the place of women in the classroom. She challenged the students – one audience was comprised of approximately 200 men – to accept women as equals in class and emphasized the importance of educating Afghan women to be part of the country's rebuilding process. According to Sadiqa, most of the men remained silent when she spoke – except for one of the students, who said the others were too uncomfortable to speak their minds for fear the others would turn on them.

During her visit, Sadiqa demonstrated her own also challenged the mayor of Jalalabad to be a trailblazer on women's rights. When he told her that he would like to allow his wife more freedom, but he worried about the criticism that would ensue, Sadiqa told him that others would learn from his example. Although she apologized to him for sounding rude, she was not afraid to speak her mind.

Listening to Sadiqa tell the story of Jalalabad, with such excitement, I am struck by how much she and others at AWN have come into their own, have blossomed with the opportunity for leadership and growth. When I started at AWN, the three women who now work closely with me on the Media Unit – Sadiqa and Halima in Peshawar and Heba in Kabul – did not share their ideas. They did not seem to have the confidence for this. Perhaps they just needed someone to believe in them. Now these three women are brainstorming ideas and sharing their visions for the Media Unit. I have no doubt that when I leave, the AWN media project will carry on just fine.

### **The Sha'ria Comes to Northwest Pakistan**

Sadiqa and Halima tracked down an interesting, but tragic story, about an 18-year-old woman in Peshawar who burned herself nearly to death to escape the mental torture of her mother-in-law and the emotional neglect of her husband. Stories are common about women who are miserable – with their roles in society, their roles in their families, the hardship of their lifestyles. The fact that this young woman, who is the mother of a young baby, was willing to burn herself to escape the trauma of her life is an extreme example of the unhappiness of some Afghan women.

Apparently the mother-in-law of the young woman played a critical role in all of this, a critical older woman who picked apart the faults of her daughter-in-law. Add to that a young husband, who had not spoken to his wife in nearly a year and a half. He ignored her, although they lived in the same house and had a child together. Taking care of the baby is what stopped the young woman from killing herself earlier.

*Waiting for the Sha'ria: women and children at a refugee camp in the North West Frontier Province*

One night, it became too much for her. And when everyone else went to bed, the girl doused herself with gasoline and lit herself on fire, waking her husband with her screams. Her body is severely burned – the skin charred and black – from her chest to the tops of her legs. When Sadiqa and Halima went to see her, she was lying in a hospital bed in Peshawar, with her husband and baby nearby. Her attempt to kill herself left her in



limbo – not dead but not really alive either. There is, perhaps, a positive aspect to this sad story: the husband began paying attention to the young woman, feeding her chicken and mango one evening. This was the first time in more than a year, the young woman said, that her husband had bothered with her.

Maybe the drastic nature of her suicide attempt left him wondering about his own mortality. “If I was sick, would you take care of me?” he asked her.

I continue to have a sick feeling in my stomach as I read stories in the local Peshawar newspapers about the introduction of Sha'ria law in the North West Frontier Province. The law, which is being compared with the Taliban rule in Afghanistan, prohibits music, will require women to wear the Purdah (veil), and will introduce the Shalwar-Kameez as national dress.

President General Pervez Musharraf has assailed what he calls the Talibanization of NWFP, and has said it will send the wrong signals abroad about Islam and Pakistan.

Liberal Pakistanis had hoped that Musharraf would be able to prevent the MMA Party, the Islamic Fundamentalist Party that controls politics in the NWFP, from acting on its conservative inclinations. But he failed to stop Sha'ria law before the MMA imposed it and, now that it is a law on the books, there is little Musharraf can do to stop it from being enforced. The enforcement issue is the next big question about this law: will the police and courts crack down on this or is the law merely symbolic, meant to illustrate the conservative nature of this region?

Musharraf's ability to curtail the enforcement of Sha'ria law is complicated by the fact that he is under siege by his opposition to remove his uniform and serve in his Presidential role as a civilian. He already has this fight on his hands and Sha'ria law in NWFP may not be an additional battle he will have the energy – or the political clout — to wage.

So that leaves women in NWFP without any strong defenders and I have not yet heard of any women's groups taking a stand against such Talibanization. AWN had considered taking a position against the Sha'ria law, but has decided to take no action out of fear of reprisal by the Pakistani government.

I completely understand the reluctance of women to confront the situation head-on. And I understand that, at home, women probably would face abuse from the men in their families if they tried to fight the system. On the other hand, I wonder whether it will require women to take a stand against such laws, regardless of the consequences, to put an end to such oppression.

### **Women in Jail, Orphans Alone**

I met with two Afghan women who were part of a delegation that visited with women prisoners being held in Pakistani jails. There are 11 Afghan women serving time in prisons in NWFP, most of them for drug trafficking.

In the Peshawar Central Jail, 68 women and 19 children from ages one month to 12 years old live in a hall that is shorter in the length than a basketball court and about half the width. The toilets and the women's health unit – whatever limited medical care is provided – also are housed in the same room. There are no beds; the women and children sleep on concrete floors. There is no yard; the women almost never step foot outdoors. They have no jobs and no activities to keep them busy. The children are allowed to go to school, but must return to the prison and stay with their mothers. When they reach 12-years-old, the children must leave the prison and find somewhere else to live.

The sentences these women are serving are as long as 25 years and they will have to serve most of that time. The bail amounts range from 20,000 rupees to 100,000 rupees — \$350 to \$1,700. Even the lowest amount is more money than any of them have ever seen.

I visited Our Home, a new orphanage in Peshawar that is available to Afghan or Pakistani children, run by 15 Pakistani businessmen who decided they wanted to put some of their money to good use. The orphanage is located in a large, beautiful house, tucked onto a small, quiet street in Peshawar.

“There's something in you that tells you that you should do something for the less privileged,” said Amjad Arbab, Director of Enterprise Development for Aga Khan Rural Support Programme. “There are so many children who need support. There is only so much someone can do.”

So far, the orphanage is home only to boys – seven of them to start. The orphanage is big enough for 20 youngsters, Arbab said. Next year, he said, a second orphanage will open for girls. Our Home is not the first orphanage in Peshawar, but it is unique because it is the first private orphanage in the city run by businessmen. With such a high number of street children and orphans living on the streets in Peshawar, this orphanage provides one more hope for them. Our Home officially will be responsible for the children until they are 18-years-old, but Arbab said he is prepared to be family for the youngsters even after they reach legal age. To give the

youngsters a financial start as they head out on their own, Our Home will open a bank account for each one.

“In our society, these are the people who are deprived,” said Arbab. “Others don’t look at them as their own children. That’s why we named it ‘Our Home,’ so these children would always have a home to go to. But this is a responsibility you take on. It’s not a joke.”

The boys go through an intensive review process before the directors of Our Home accept them, to make sure the limited number of beds go to the neediest children in the area. If a child has other sources of support – an uncle, for example – this is factored into the decision of whether to accept the child.



*Dinner Time at Our Home, an orphanage in Peshawar*

Our Home is more than just the place these boys live. They go to school there, too. A teacher comes every day and the boys are required to follow a rigorous study schedule that includes religious and academic classes. On the evening I visited, two of the boys had not done their homework for the day’s classes and they were indoors, studying, while the others were outside playing soccer in the yard.

One thing that struck me during my visit to the orphanage is that, until then, I had not seen children playing during my entire five months in the region. Playing like children. If they had not been living in Our Home, these boys would not be playing either. They would be working – sewing, gathering sticks, selling vegetables or whatever they could do to bring home a few rupees. That is what most of these boys were doing before they moved into Our Home.

One boy, who is living in Our Home, had been cleaning buses for two rupees each, the equivalent of about one and a half cents. The doctor comes often. The teacher is there every day.

I spoke with Saeed, 8, and Asadullah, 9 – the two boys who were studying the Koran instead of outside with their friends. They were dressed in their identical Shalwar-Kameez, crisp and ironed, and were studying from their identical school text books.

Saeed's father died of a stomach illness. His mother is alive but unable to feed him and his five brothers, three sisters.

"Our Home is this much beautiful," said Saeed, stretching apart his hands to indicate something large and wide.

He did not need to say anything else.

*Posted by Laura Jones on Oct 12th, 2006*