



Afghan Diary

Issue 1: January 22 to February 10, 2003

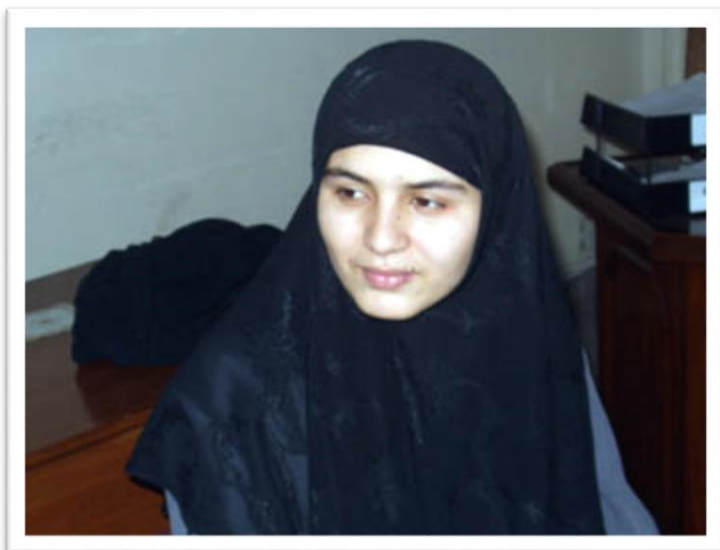
From the Editorial Desk: Mary Moore is an experienced writer, and she was keen to record her experiences of working with the Afghan Women's Network in Afghanistan. We asked her for an unvarnished account – for sights, sounds and impressions – as opposed to formal project reporting. This is her first excerpt.

Mary Moore (right) talks media with Basia Ahmadi, at one of Mary's early journalism seminars in Peshawar.

ARRIVING IN PESHAWAR

My impressions of Pakistan have already changed dramatically in the three weeks since I arrived, from the day I stepped off the plane until I began training young Afghan women who want to work as journalists. As I sit down to finalize the first entries for my journal, I find myself wanting to re-write portions – because I realize now how wrong I was initially about so many things. Yet, at the same time, I realize that some of my initial impressions were spot-on.





Sadiqa Basiri, 23 – AWN Director of External Relations

I was right that the poverty, lack of opportunity, smog, pollution and filth of Peshawar is overwhelming. I was wrong in wondering whether I would find any beauty. Indeed, I have found many gems. And many reasons to feel inspired.

As I drove from the airport in Islamabad to Peshawar on January 22, 2003, my heart sank. I kept thinking: ‘It has to get better than this.’

First, there was the chaotic mess of vehicles all over the road. Cars and trucks seemed to follow no rules, or at least none I could figure out. Then there were the large vehicles chug-chugging along, painted bright colors and decorated with intricate designs – fish, flowers, eagles. These were either gaudy public buses, I decided, or transport for circus performers. But wait! People were clinging onto the side and some of them had crawled on top. Could this really be public transportation?

The pollution was so heavy in the air, I could see it. I could feel it when I took a breath. The cars and trucks were mainly older models — ‘beaters,’ as we call them in the States — and were spewing black puffs from their tailpipes. In California, most of these cars would fail miserably the state-mandated smog test. Later I learned that very few NGOs in Pakistan work on air and water quality. Most focus on health and education (and women’s rights). Meanwhile, the air and water get more and more polluted.

Many of the shops that lined the side of the main road looked more like mud hut stalls than actual buildings, constructed to the standard of something built temporarily even though I knew they were permanent. Their shoddy condition contrasted with the green plush grass and modern buildings in the military compounds. It is one thing to hear that Pakistan spends such a large percentage of its budget on the military compared to social programs for its people. It is another thing to see the discrepancy in person — so clearly and within an hour of arriving in the country.

The side-of-the-road shops seemed to feature one of two items: either slaughtered meat, hanging on hooks out front, or used tires and auto supplies. I am still confused by the fascination in Pakistan with slaughtered meat and car parts. They are everywhere.

As we headed off the main road from Islamabad to Peshawar, turning onto a side road, I was heartsick to see that, at every stop light, four or five people, mainly children, would walk right up to the car, knock on the window and plead for money. Some pressed their faces up against the

car window and their noses made little fog marks on the glass. One little boy put his hand on the side-view mirror as he peered inside, and I prayed the car would not rip off his arm as we drove away. The driver appeared not even to notice.

Finally, we pulled into the driveway of the house in Peshawar that would be my home for the next six months. All I could think about was the chaos of the streets, the throb of a country that seemed to move very fast and yet make little progress.

Getting Used to the Stares

I spent my first few days in Peshawar adjusting. It did not take as long as I expected.

In the chilly January air — chillier still inside my concrete-floor house — I longed for heat and hot water. An attack by an anti-government separatist group near Sui, in the North West Frontier Province, destroyed two of the main pipelines and left most of the region without gas for nearly four days. No gas heaters, no hot water. I bathed in a bucket with water heated on the stove and hoped fervently that this would not last much longer!

Even without the heat working, the house is warmed naturally by the charm of Mohammed Rafiq — or Mr. Rafiq, as he likes to be called. He is the cook and man-around-the-house — the ‘go-to’ guy if you will. His English is limited, but with plenty of hand gestures we get along just fine. Mr. Rafiq picked up quickly on one of the most important words in my day: coffee. He makes an excellent cup of frothy Nescafe.

My first taste of life as a woman in Pakistan came the morning after I arrived, when I went for a run along the driveway that leads from the road to my house. For me, it was just a jog. For the men who clustered at the end of the driveway to watch me, it was a freak show.

One of the men started jogging up and down the driveway behind me, clearly mocking my exercise routine. Since I was not sure whether to be amused, offended or unnerved by his boldness, I decided the best course was to ignore him. Good decision. Soon enough, he and the others got bored and moved on. I have run every morning since then and I can count on at least a dozen men stopping at the end of the driveway to stare at me as they cycle or walk to work. While I am getting accustomed to being watched, it is difficult to not feel self-conscious.

This sort of staring is constant and invasive. Men stare at the car as I drive by in the back seat. They stare when I get out of the car, when I get in the car, when I walk into a store, when I walk around the store. Everywhere I go, men are staring. Muslim women say the same thing happens to them, too. Nor surprisingly, I notice it directed more intensely at Westerners.

An interesting argument broke out one evening when I was having dinner with two other expatriates — let’s call them Barbara and John. Barbara called the staring ‘sexual harassment.’ Willie disagreed because he thought that most men in Peshawar are too confused about sex to sexually harass anyone. A rather crass comment, I thought, but then it might have a ring of truth. Willie was referring to the fact that, in Peshawar, boys and girls have virtually no contact with each other before they marry. They know their brothers, sisters and cousins, but boys and girls

do not attend the same schools and they are not allowed to touch each other. (I am told that homosexual experiences are common and accepted.)

To me, the staring does not feel like ‘sexual harassment’ as much as ‘gender harassment.’ Men in Peshawar believe they have the right to stare at women however they want, whenever they want. The staring reflects an overall lack of respect from men to women. Yet, I do not sense sexual manipulation.

Regardless of the stares, when I found a gym that would allow me to work out at any time of the day or evening — alongside the men — I was ecstatic. Most gyms in Peshawar, including the one at the swanky Pearl Continental Hotel, reserve a few hours a day for women. Otherwise, it’s men only.

The gym I have joined is an experiment, really. And I am part of the project. The owner is a former bodybuilder who has pictures of his glory days decorating the walls. He agreed to test the idea of co-ed workouts when one of his newer members, an ex-pat who works for UNHCR, challenged him to take a chance. The equipment dates from around 1970 and seems to come straight out of Arnold’s movie ‘Muscle Beach.’ But I am happy for anything resembling a leg press and a weight bench.

The gym, it seems, is a great equalizer of the sexes. The men treat me like one of the guys, as I lift weights and do sit-ups right next to them. In fact, the men seem to enjoy admiring images of themselves, shirtless, in the mirrors, more than looking at me. Frankly, I am happy for some time to myself.

Waiting for War

The possibility of a U.S.-led war on Iraq has created tension in Peshawar. Perhaps the tension is only in my own mind, and not in the minds of the locals I meet. Regardless, I sometimes read into their stares a hatred for what they see as U.S. aggression in the Middle East.

During my second weekend in Pakistan, I drove with two other ex-patriates to a spot near a small lake, located about an hour outside Peshawar. As we were eating lunch, a girl of about 10 came over to our table on the lawn outside the restaurant. Her English was nearly flawless.

‘Are you American?’ she asked me.

‘Yes, I am,’ I said, uncertain whether it was the right or wrong answer.

She paused. ‘You must know what America is doing to Muslims,’ she said. ‘That is why many people in Peshawar don’t like Americans.’ I remained silent. What could I say?

‘Are you sad that the Space Shuttle crashed?’ she asked.

‘Yes, it’s tragic and I’m very sad about it,’ I said. ‘Are you?’

‘Not really,’ she said. ‘Muslims die in Kashmir every day and no one seems to care about them.’

One conversation with a ten-year-old summed up the tension for me.

Of course, the English-language newspapers in Peshawar have been following the story of Iraq on the front page. While I have been impressed with the balanced coverage, I also realize that this is not the newspaper the average person in Peshawar is reading. If I could read the papers written in Urdu or Pashto, I wonder what information I would glean about local opinions of the war.

I realized last week that I was getting only half the story in the English-version newspaper, so I asked the women who were coming to my journalism workshop at the Afghan Women’s Network (AWN) if they had heard that the local government was considering the creation of a Ministry of Vice and Virtue. (The name sends a little chill up my spine as I recall that the Taliban operated a Ministry by the same name in Afghanistan that was linked to so much of the oppression of and aggression against women.)

The women said they had heard rumors, but had no specific information. Later that evening, I received a phone call at home from one of the students in the workshop, who had read in the Urdu-language newspaper (‘Peshawar’) that meetings had been held in a local mosque to discuss the creation of the Ministry.

There had been no such stories in the English-language paper I had been reading.

New Dress Code

The current restrictions on movement make it incredibly difficult to be a Western woman in Pakistan, and the restrictions that are enforced with greater scrutiny in Peshawar. The local government in the Northwest Frontier Province (NFWP) is conservative. This means that whereas I would not think twice about walking a few blocks at home, stepping foot outside my own gate here becomes a security issue.

A simple trip to the store to buy some bread or milk requires coordinating with a car and driver. Taxis and rickshaws – any form of public transportation – is considered an unacceptable risk. One’s energy for such errands begins to flag when they require the logistical coordination of a fact-finding mission. So I find myself asking Mr. Rafiq to pick up things for me when he is at the market – or simply doing without anything that is not essential.

Western women who are not the only ones who are constrained. Local women are expected to follow certain cultural norms when it comes to getting around. They rarely walk alone, almost always in a group. Imagine trying to organize a group of women in the U.S. to move together, like a gaggle of geese, every time they need to get somewhere! It would never happen.

One of the oddest scenes along a Peshawar road is seeing a large group of women walking at a fast clip, dressed from head to toe in flowing cloths that flap wildly in the wind. They remind me

of my days in Catholic school when the nuns would march from the convent to the playground, their heads down and their steps determined.

But now I, too, am wearing long, flowing clothes, which is way out of character for me. I went shopping in a local boutique that is about as Western as you can find – including the pulsating dance-beat music playing inside. The oddest part of this shopping was my total ignorance about what styles are ‘in’ and ‘out.’

Everything on the racks looked nearly the same to me – baggy and long – differing only in color and material. My housemate and colleague, Ouahiba, saved me by picking out a few things she found fashionable. And so I walked out of the store that day with four new outfits, all costing about 890 rupees (about \$13 each.). I was trying on a pair of pants, which were much too big in the rear end, and Ouahiba asked the store clerk if he would tailor them for me. When she pointed out that the pants were sagging off my body, the clerk smiled and, in English, he said, ‘She has nothing in the behind.’ And then he laughed.

It was pretty funny. I despise shopping in the U.S. – the rush of the malls, the high prices, the never-ending selection that makes the process much too confusing. Now, I find shopping a joy. It gives me a reason to leave the house. Plus, once I am inside the store, I can walk around freely.

Second, I have been pleasantly surprised to see that most of the products I would ever want are available. That gives me a sense of comfort. Sure, there is only one brand (or flavor) of many items available. Crackers, for example. The stores sell a box of something called ‘Salties’ that taste very much like Ritz. Not my favorite, but at least there is some sort of cracker to put with my cheese. It took me one try to figure out that local cheese is processed beyond recognition. I have found excellent spices and jams, cookies and bread. And, of course, outstanding rice and vegetables. I bought enough vegetables for several meals – cauliflower, beans, potatoes, tomatoes, pepper, carrots – . I am proof that a vegetarian and a picky eater can survive just fine in Peshawar.

Suffer the Little Children

What touched me profoundly in Saddar, the main shopping district in Peshawar, were the crowds of people begging in the streets. The vast majority are crippled or maimed, and I will never forget one little boy, who was sitting on the ground and his stick-thin legs were lifeless. He was about 10-years-old, and had a leg draped over his arm and another draped over his shoulder. I started to cry – discreetly, I thought. I realized later that almost everyone around me could see I was in tears.

My driver assumed that I had been assaulted and he was distraught until Ouahiba pointed out the little boy and explained that it was disturbing for me. The driver looked confused. To him, this was a normal part of life. To the little boy, who probably had waited all day for a soft-hearted American, I was a potential gold mine.

The ex-pats I have met in Peshawar seem hardened to such sights. I realize that adopting a tough edge is a survival skill, a coping mechanism. Yet, it is difficult for me to understand their lack of

empathy when my own sensitivities still run so high, so consistently. When I recounted my experience in Saddar to some of the Germans, Croats and Australians in Peshawar, they warned me not to get taken advantage of by the street beggars. ‘Be careful about opening your wallet,’ they said, ‘or the beggars will flock to you like pigeons.’

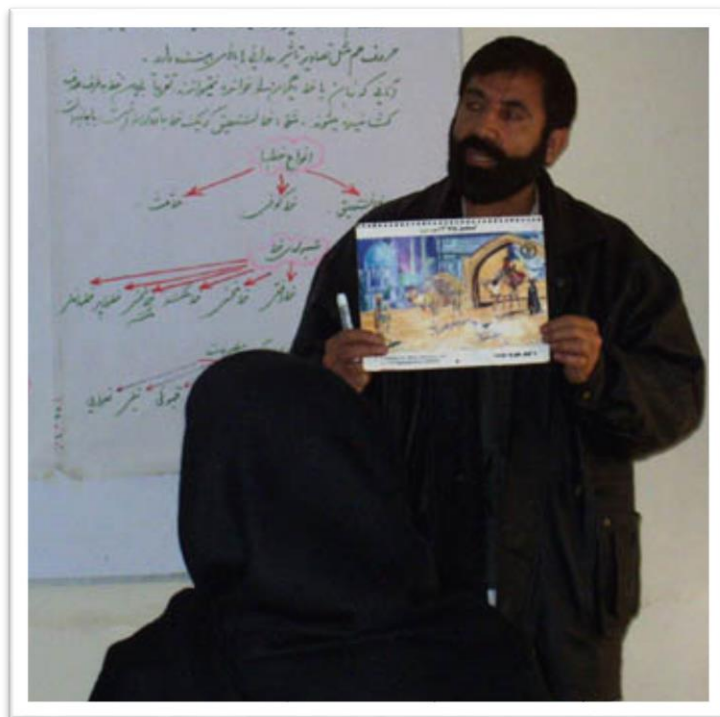
What is commonly known is that the children who are begging — boys and girls — often are being sexually exploited and abused. The money they take in goes directly to a pimp-type figure. This is particularly acute when it comes to the Afghan refugees. The depravity and poverty of life in Pakistan’s refugee camps has torn apart the social code and value system that was central in Afghanistan. Prostitution, sexual abuse, drug and alcohol addiction are rampant. And, of course, the level of poverty is astounding.

‘Do not let it get inside your heart,’ said one woman, who has been in Pakistan and Afghanistan for years. ‘Because if you do, the intensity will eat you up.’

In some ways, I keep thinking, it already has.

The Strength of Women

The gems of beauty I have discovered in Peshawar have nothing to do with the city, but from the women I am meeting at the Afghan Women’s Network (AWN). These women have more drive than most I meet in the U.S. They are ambitious to better themselves and the community of Afghan refugees in Pakistan.



Left: Abdul Haq Danishmal trains AWN members in journalism

I felt this most strongly during the first monthly meeting of the AWN, when more than 40 women of all ages showed up for a four-hour meeting. I cannot remember the last meeting I attended in the U.S. that drew 40 women in the middle of an afternoon. The attendance at the AWN meeting — and I was told the number who attended this meeting was low in comparison to previous meetings — is an example of the passion of these women to organize and make a difference. Many of the attendees were women who are leaders of Afghan NGOs — focusing on education or health or training, for example. Since there was no

translation from Dari to English, I was left throughout the meeting trying to piece together the conversation. While I missed out on much of what was being said, there was no mistaking the strength of these women.

At this meeting, AWN unveiled plans for their website, which I am helping them to launch. They nodded their heads vigorously and murmured to each other, which I took as a sign that they were eager for the world to see their work.

Sadiqa, the assistant to the director of AWN, is one of the amazing women I have met. I have always believed there are bright lights in every group, and that they are easy to spot. Sadiqa is one of those. She is smart and knowledgeable and decisive. She is charismatic, although a quiet leader and not someone who needs to be the center of attention to move people. I mention Sadiqa, in particular, because I have a feeling I will be writing quite a bit about her and her role in AWN.

Passion for Learning

More gems emerged during my first four-day training for journalists in Peshawar. A dozen aspiring women journalists gathered in the AWN office. Many had studied journalism for a year or two at Afghan University. AWN has published two issues of a magazine focusing on issues affecting Afghan women and children, and these women are volunteering to write stories for upcoming publications.

Their stories echoed those I heard from other young women, who explained that they had no options for higher education. The Pakistani government does not allow Afghans to attend most universities in Peshawar. Yet, many Afghans who live as refugees in Pakistan do so because their homes were destroyed in Kabul. They have no place to live while attending university in their own country. It's that simple. They have no housing in Afghanistan and, thus, no college education.

Sadiqa is a perfect example. She attended 12 years of school and two years of technical training for computers and management training. But she wants more than anything to attend university on a full-time basis and graduate with a real college degree. At one point a few years ago, when it finally hit home that she may never be able to attend a university, Sadiqa said that she lapsed into a deep depression and went on psychological medication for six months. 'When you told me you had two masters degrees, I could only think that you are the luckiest person in the world,' she told me.

The women who attended the journalism workshop displayed a similar passion for learning. We spent four mornings discussing such fundamentals of journalism as fairness and balance, story structure, interviewing skills and the elements of a story. Imagine a discussion about the rights of journalists and the right to free speech with women who are still trying to figure out what their own rights are under civil and Islamic law!

Then we discussed some of the issues facing Afghan women and children, ideas that might make good stories for AWN's magazine.

It was lively discussion. One woman mentioned that she had come across a family that survives by begging for money, and seems to have made a profession out of it by hiring others to beg. Another talked about a recent strike among bus drivers in Peshawar that left women standing on the street, waiting for lifts to work or home, while alternative transportation immediately was arranged for the men.

Yet another woman said she had heard that many Afghan refugee widows have been living in camps outside Peshawar for years, waiting to get help from UNHCR. She secured an interview with the UNHCR staff person who deals with the widows, and asked me to go with her.

We went to UNHCR together and it was an eye-opener. We were told that that 1.5 million refugees live in the entire Peshawar area, and that about 47,000 refugees live in Peshawar's newest camps – the ones requiring the most attention. But there are only two UNHCR staff members to process applications and provide community services. Little wonder there is a backlog of widows needing help.

I am sure that over the next six months, I will find plenty of other examples where the resources are not sufficient to meet the needs. I already feel the pressure. I am just one person and I can only make a small difference in the overall scheme.

But to these Afghan women, my friends, I feel that I can make a difference.

Posted by Laura Jones on October 12, 2006