

Glamour - December 2002

In Afghanistan, the Women Speak Again – to Old Truths

by Rachel Louise Snyder

It has been more than a year since the Taliban, called by the United Nations the most misogynistic regime in the world, was ousted from power by U.S.-led coalition forces after a six-year rule in Afghanistan. It was a regime that denied women and girls the most basic rights: education, work, medical care (women were forbidden to see male doctors and few female doctors were permitted to work), and even the freedom to leave their homes unaccompanied by a male relative. The Taliban had promised women safety and peace after two decades of war and violence; what they got was prison.



Afghan Woman (Photo: Don Rutledge)

The current government, led by president Hamid Karzai, has promised to build an Afghanistan where women are guaranteed their rights returned and more. \$4.5 billion in foreign aid has been pledged to help Afghanistan rebuild, \$850 million of which has been disbursed so far. Another \$174 million in U.S. aid has been pledged by President Bush, but as Glamour went to press, the proposed funding was held up by budget wrangling in the Congress. Meanwhile, scores of Afghan refugees who fled from nearly a quarter century of continuous war have returned, at the rate of 7,000 to 10,000 a day according to the U.N. High Commission for Refugees; the majority try to settle in Kabul where 20 years of war has destroyed most affordable housing, but where the few opportunities in the country's battered landscape exist. Afghans are relying on foreign troops to provide security until their own army is established, and on foreign aid to bring their nation into the 21st century. But most women have found that their vision for a new Afghanistan is far from being realized. Agents of change are battling a centuries-old patriarchy that has only become more entrenched in the country's long history of war and the few women who've managed to return to their careers or start new ones often find themselves as sole voices among their mostly male counterparts. Still, they say, they will learn, once again, to shout.

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1) We're Still Subject to Patriarchal Law

"I am afraid," says Rahima, 35, (like most Afghan women, she refused to give her last name), as she fingers her white veil and tries to pull her twin toddlers--both girls--together onto her slight lap. "I am afraid we'll be in here a long time." The "here" that she refers to is the Kabul jail for women, where she spends her days with 28 other Afghan females, including her sister, and their children, who are typically jailed with them. Rahima says she was jailed because she refused to marry her brother-in-law after her husband, a former detective, passed away--a practice that is customary in Afghanistan. She fled her husband's family and her brother-in-law promptly had her arrested.

The women at the jail sit a dozen to a room on dirt floors with tiny barred windows that look out on Kabul's mountains, where terraced houses in monochromatic color are built into the mountainside. Plastic bags suspended from nails in the walls hold bedding. A single light bulb dangles from the ceiling in the long hallway outside. There is nothing beyond this dank room, no playground for the children, nowhere to walk. At mealtimes the women's relatives slide food and clothing through a small open window in the main door of the jail.

This might be fitting punishment for violent criminals, but almost all of the women here are being held for matrimonial misdeeds--what Western women would call, simply, love. "Many eloped or ran from their homes with a man and under an Islamic government this is a big crime," says Khatol, the female warden, who has worked at the jail for 10 years. "I'm sad to see them here because they are female, but they did make mistakes. They should have real marriages, not love marriages."

Even in the relatively cosmopolitan city of Kabul, some of the Taliban's most repressive rules are still being followed by women, out of fear or simply custom. Many continue to wear the burqa, a shroud-like veil that covers a woman head to toe. Most women still need their husband's permission not only to see a doctor--and will likely not be allowed to see a male doctor--but they still go through the formality of asking to simply leave their homes alone. Outside of Kabul, women are even more restricted: Ismael Kahn, the notorious warlord of the Herat Province in western Afghanistan, recently issued a decree requiring women in his province to seek permission before working for any foreigners and forbidding women from sharing cars with male aid workers.