

AUTOS

ADVANCING WOMEN'S RIGHTS | AFGHANISTAN

Studio Kabul

Published: October 21, 2010

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Suddenly Zarafshan was on a roll. She wanted us to know just how bad things could be. Three years ago, the women's prison was still part of the main Kabul prison at Pul-i-Charkhi. Habibi and her husband were both locked up there. During visiting hours one day, Zarafshan heard people shouting, "Habibi is dead!" Then she saw Habibi bloodied and her husband running away, Zarafshan recalled. "I grabbed him and began to beat him so blood came from his mouth, and I shouted, 'Do you see how she feels?' All the females attacked him and beat him, and the male police said, 'Please don't kill him or we will be responsible.' The women wanted to kill him. We slapped the police. 'Why didn't you do your job?' And what happened to those policemen?"

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"They lost their salary for a week," said a guard, who laughed uncomfortably.

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As Afghanistan Turns

Habibi was by now crying. She was still terrified of her husband, even though he was miles away. Apparently that day in the Pul-i-Charkhi courtyard he had tried to have sex with her, and then insisted he was going to give away their 10-year-old daughter, Gullabo, to the father of the man he had killed; he thought this might settle the debt and get him out of prison. "I told him I'd scream if he tried to touch my daughter," Habibi said. He hurled an enormous rock at her. She fell into a coma for three months.

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Twelve new prisoners had just arrived at the prison.

Zarafshan got up to help them settle, and in walked Nasima, the heroine and bully of the prison. A tall, physically agile woman with green eyes, a long, light brown ponytail and a raspy chain-smoking bark, Nasima was clearly the ward's jester: "Hey foreigner foreigner," she called out to me. "Why am I here? Murder. He had to kiss all the ladies in front of me? Bring bad ladies to the house? Why? I had everything they did. And he was beating me. So I killed him. I don't talk rubbish." She demonstrated by digging her toes into the floor as if crushing her husband's head. Apparently her husband was abusing her children too. She cut him up, Zarafshan said, and buried him under a tree.

Outside, at the gate, the new prisoners were being welcomed by the older prisoners. The mothers among the new arrivals were clutching their children, all of whom were crying.

There is now an oasis for some of these kids. In a quiet neighborhood, in a pastel three-story house with columns and a terrace, Women for Afghan Women, run by Manizha Naderi, has created a fairy-tale home, the Children's Support Center, with 49 children currently in residence. Naderi is one of many Afghans who left the country as a child, grew up in America with the benefit of an education and returned to give something back to women who had had no such luck. The afternoon I arrived, some of the children were outside playing badminton and jumping rope, others were in language class, others were at the monitors in the new computer room. On the terrace was a small library with children's books and a prized nesting bird. Upstairs, girls were watching a National Geographic

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program on chimps. Downstairs, the boys were watching Disney's "Aladdin." All the bunk beds were neatly made. I'd never seen such a beautiful, clean institution in Afghanistan. Shahbibi Halimi, the director, was a kind mother of six who had been working as a program manager in various women's organizations for years. She was married to an army general and joked that as long as she kept up her housework, he supported her. When the kids first arrive from the prison, she said, they are disoriented, depressed, sometimes violent: "One 4-year-old told me, 'I can kill you,' and when I asked how, she said, 'Just like that I can bring my hand up and kill you.' I try to work like a servant and be patient and slowly get them into a routine and teach them how to solve problems without violence. These kids are the future."

Whatever her formula, it was working. Gullabo, Habibi's 10-year-old daughter, was thriving. Her hair was cut short. She wore a red sweater-dress with a zipper and collar. She said she would never go back to the prison. "The ladies were fighting so much and the kids were fighting I wanted to die," she told me. "I hated my life. Every day was boxing, boxing. They were all crazy." And so might she have been. Years ago, back in her village, she went up the mountain to watch the stars when suddenly she saw her father carting a body in a wheelbarrow. He had murdered his cousin. Last year in the prison yard, she saw her mother lying in blood after her father stoned her mother and told Gullabo that he was going to give her as *baad* — blood money. Now she hated to look at herself in the mirror because her face reminded her of her father. The orphanage was the first school and the first speck of hope she'd seen in her short life. She studies hard, writes poetry, plays sports and takes care of her little brother and sister. What did it cost to run such a place? According to Naderi, all of \$230,000 a year.

In addition to the Children's Support Center, Women for Afghan Women also runs a shelter for women and children. Naderi, the organization's executive director, says she worries that all its work will disintegrate if the ongoing negotiations with the Taliban earn them a seat in government. "The first thing they will want to do is close the shelters," she told me. It's possible: even conservatives in Karzai's own government want them shut down, considering them sinful. But if the Taliban do find a way back into government, they face a very different kind of Afghan woman this time around. The new generation that has grown up in the last decade has access to media. They see women as parliamentarians, lawyers, judges, professors, actresses, film directors, policewomen, even a governor. It is these new realities of women's lives that will force the reinterpretation of the meaning of honor — the most radioactive ingredient in any discussion of cultural change.

Or at least in Kabul. In Kandahar and elsewhere in the Pashtun half of the country, the relationship between the family's honor and society is hardly changing. In fact there's a counterassault against women there. And it's not hard to see why. Afghanistan missed 30 years of globalization. Now Afghans wake up assaulted by the Internet, Iranian culture, Indian TV, Pakistani mullahs, [NATO](#) bombs. Their culture and honor and lives are under siege from every direction. So who takes the brunt of the resulting frustration? The weakest, of course. But the weak can hit back. Girls are running away from forced marriages. Women have demanded a place at the peace *jirga*. They've forced passage of the first law criminalizing violence against women. They have been killed and maimed trying to change the world they were born into. And now they have taken up the pen and the camera, writing memoirs and novels, shooting documentaries, feature films and even a soap opera, to transcend their reality by seizing control of their own narrative.

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Elizabeth Rubin has reported extensively from Afghanistan for the magazine since 2004. Her last article from the region was a profile of Hamid Karzai.

A version of this article appeared in print on October 24, 2010, on page MM40 of the Sunday Magazine.

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