Arguments

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

The strength of Afghan women

The participation of women in Afghanistan's parliament and media gives hope to this troubled nation – but real change will require real commitment

KHORSHIED SAMAD

FARZANA WAHIDY, AINA PHOTO

Camerawoman Mehria Azizi, shown filming inside a bakery in Kabul, is an example of the emerging role of woman in all facets of Afghan life. But most Afghan woman still have a significantly degraded quality of life, and Afghanistan has the highest maternal mortality rate in the world.

When I first met Asma, I was struck by her heavily lined face, her sunken cheeks, and her eyes that showed deep sorrow and fear.

Though in her early 40s, she appeared much older from years of hunger and stress. She had come looking for work, and I hired her as our housekeeper in Kabul. She wasn't very good at first, and I showed her how to use the cleaners and organize each room. After a while she got the hang of it, and the look of discomfort disappeared from her face.

Asma is one of millions of war widows in Afghanistan, a country that still suffers from nearly 28 years of war and destruction, where women have suffered the most of all. She asked if she could bring her small son, Milat, with her on workdays and I consented. He sat and ate in our kitchen, slowly drinking Coca-Cola like it was nectar from the gods.

Asma told me stories of her life, how her husband had been killed during the Soviet occupation, and how she had lost her job under the Taliban. They had forbidden all women from working, attending school, and receiving medical care from male doctors. They couldn't leave their homes or travel without a male relative, and once, Asma said, she received a brutal whipping from the steel rod of a Taliban across her legs and ankles; apparently her shoes had made too much noise in the market streets.

Life had been very cruel to Asma and her family, but she had hope, now that the Taliban had been driven out by the Coalition forces. Now, she could work again instead of being forced to beg on the dusty streets of Kabul.

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Asma was a high school graduate who, unlike nearly 96 per cent of Afghan women in the rural areas of the country, was literate and had worked in a government office for several years before losing her job. She admitted that times had gotten so tough for her and her family after her husband's death that she was forced to push her daughters into early marriages at ages 14 and 16 because she could not afford to feed them and her younger son. It had been a tough decision, but she felt lucky that they were safe now and had babies already within their first year of marriage.

I met her teenage daughters and saw their tiny babies; they seemed too young to really know what to do, but that was the reality for the majority of young Afghan girls. Many of them are married between 12 and 14. Although the law states that the legal marriage age is 16, tradition dictates otherwise, and this has contributed to Afghanistan having the highest maternal mortality rate in the world. A 2006 United Nations report states that an Afghan woman dies every 30 minutes from childbirth or other related causes, and 87 per cent of these cases are preventable.

When I first arrived in Afghanistan with my aunt, who is a gynecologist from New York City, we visited several hospitals and maternity clinics, and shock cannot describe the horrible conditions and lack of equipment and medication that these facilities had.

One young mother had just delivered twins by herself in her home, and had been brought into the maternity hospital by her relatives because she was hemorrhaging to death. They did not have the $10 U.S. it cost to pay for a blood transfusion, but we happily pulled out money from our pockets to cover her medical expenses.

She was one of the lucky ones that day. I noticed that a new ultrasound machine lay in a corner, unplugged. When I asked why the machine was not being used I was told that no one knew how to use it, and electricity was too unreliable to use such a fancy machine. Three out of five incubators did not work in the baby unit, and all of the children born that day were underweight, a few were stillborn, and the one who had spina bifida would surely die within a few days.

Other statistics are just as grim. One in four children does not reach the age of five. Fifty-three per cent of the population in Afghanistan lives on less than a dollar a day. Only 6 per cent have access to electricity and 13 per cent have access to safe drinking water. Life expectancy is around 45 years of age for women and 47 years for men; that is 10 years less than neighbouring countries. Seventy per cent of the population is illiterate.

Afghanistan is considered one of the poorest countries in the world with some of the worst human-development index indicators, according to a 2005 United Nations Development Programme report. These statistics are staggering to most westerners,

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and rightly so because they are simply horrible and unacceptable to any of us lucky enough to be reading this article.

The bright developments on the horizon of Afghanistan's emerging democracy are Afghan women's participation in the political and media sectors of their society. Without a doubt these women show tremendous strength and courage to stand up for social change, respect for human rights, and equal participation in the reconstruction and renewal of their country. Nearly 60 per cent of the population is female, and without their significant involvement in the historical transformation of post-Taliban Afghanistan, one has to wonder how much change would really occur.

That is why Afghan women's participation in the parliament and in the media is so vital to bringing about positive change; they can be seen, heard and read about in various media, and their presence provides positive role models for other Afghan women and girls to observe and hopefully learn from. But, they also need security and stability to bring about necessary change.

Last time I saw Asma, she proudly showed me her voter registration card and flashed me a beaming smile. She was about to participate in the historic 2005 parliamentary elections where 27 per cent of the lower house's seats were won by women.

Asma said that this was only the beginning. Real change was slowly appearing on the horizon, but we all needed to have faith and remain committed because it might take a long time to materialize. For Asma's sake and many other Afghan women, I certainly hope we all do.

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THE EVIL THAT MEN DO LIVES AFTER THEM

BY SHEILA SISULU

Annie's life was good — she had studied agriculture at a university and her husband was a gold and diamond trader. Together, they lived with their children in a four-bedroom house in Bukavu, which lies on the eastern border of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Yes, they had lived well. That is, until her husband was forced to flee for his life and she was gang-raped by five of the government soldiers looking for him. When they returned, they told her, they would kill her.

She didn't wait — she took her children and went in search of peace and safety. But before she found it, she was stopped by a rebel ambush and sexually violated with bottles. Only then did she make it to a refugee camp, where for the past year she has been living in a mud house and sleeping on the ground with her nine children.

Annie's story is all too familiar. The faces may change, the details vary and the language in which it's told may be different, but there is always one constant — the violence that specifically targets women and girls.

Gender violence can be found in every country, in every continent. But in developing countries or countries involved in conflict, violence toward women is rife. Its perpetrators do not consider age or status. They only consider the fact that their victims are female.

Women and girls, identified as the mothers of future generations in a community or ethnic group under attack, are intentionally targeted for violent acts. During Liberia's 14-year civil war, 40 per cent of the female population were raped. Nearly half of Liberian women now live with lasting injuries due to the force and the objects used against them, not to mention deep, psychological scarring. Many are now supporting themselves by the only means they have — transactional sex — which exposes them to more violence and increases their chances of contracting diseases like HIV/AIDS.

Systematic rape, torture or sexual enslavement has been used to suppress, terrify and destabilize communities all over the world, from Haiti to DRC to Burma (officially Myanmar.) During Sierra Leone's long and bloody civil war, thousands of women and girls as young as seven were kidnapped into sexual slavery. Others were forced to become soldiers, to kill and commit atrocious crimes. Many had to do both.

Sadly, violence against women and girls is not confined to times of war. For many girls, it begins at birth, with female infanticide. Or, for some 6,000 girls every day, it begins with female genital mutilation, a cultural practice found in many parts of the world, particularly in Africa. This early experience often heralds a longer line of abuses and violations. At some point in her life, at least one in three women has suffered physical or sexual abuse: forced childhood marriage, kidnapping and trafficking, forced prostitution, domestic violence, legal discrimination, exploitation of widows. If they are pregnant or very young, the risk of severe, sustained and repeated attacks is greater still.

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How is it that seven years after the new millennium, when mankind has reached such dizzying summits in science, technology and rational thinking, that such appalling and primitive abuses continue, with no end in sight?

Ending gender violence also means ending impunity for those who commit it. And yet, in many places, rapists and abusers roam free of punishment and vilification. In order to change this — for it must be changed — societies must alter. Cultural norms, politics, economics, religion, conflicts must all be examined and the resulting understanding used to convey the unacceptability of violence against women and girls. Initiatives specifically aimed toward the protection of women's rights, bodies and futures need to be formed, and existing ones encouraged.

But most of all, factors that contribute to gender violence — poverty, ignorance, hunger — need to be rooted out and eradicated.

The United Nations World Food Programme is working to this end. Its long-standing practice of putting food aid directly into the hands of women not only empowers them, but also helps ensure nourishment will get to those who need it most, as experience has shown.

WFP also provides food to accompany training and education for women and girls. In Bangladesh, women learn about their rights as well as new skills that will make them less dependent and therefore less vulnerable. With such skills women are also less likely to resort to transactional sex.

In Liberia and the DRC, WFP provides food to survivors of gender-based abuse who can then stay in hospital for the full recovery time. In Afghanistan and elsewhere, girls who go to school for a set number of days receive school meals as well as take-home rations for their families. Education helps girls — and boys — break out of the trap of ignorance and poverty where physical abuse festers.

With the help and support of the international community, governments can be held accountable to implement policies and practices designed to protect women, and efforts of local women's organizations, police or security forces can be co-ordinated. But more importantly, attitudes can be changed. An unfortunate sense of resignation toward gender violence is pervasive, a sense of "these things happen." But in its most basic form it is permissiveness; resignation fosters impunity for perpetrators and only puts more women and girls at risk.

Yes, these things do indeed happen. But they needn't and they shouldn't. Now is the time to take action.

SHEILA SISULU is WFP's deputy executive director. Today is International Women's Day; the theme this year is Ending Impunity for Violence against Women and Girls.