

**Mightier Than the Sword:
Women journalists and filmmakers and their impact on gender
perceptions and gender equality in Afghanistan**

by
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Abstract

In Afghanistan, a significant advance since the fall of the Taliban has been the entry of women into media as reporters, anchors and producers. Media, in essence, have become a battleground for Afghan women fighting to overcome a culture of silence and invisibility following years of oppression. Be it TV, newspapers, radio or even music, media allow for the dissemination of stories that speak to women's social, economic and political realities.

Mightier Than the Sword is a two-part project exploring this social advancement. The first component is a 47-minute documentary, shot in Afghanistan in 2015, analyzing how the work of female journalists has affected gender perceptions and gender equality.

The written portion of *Mightier Than the Sword* is a more in-depth examination of the history of the media in Afghanistan and the effect mass media have had on gender perceptions in Afghanistan. First-hand interviews, conducted in 2015, are included.

Keywords: Afghanistan, women's rights, media, Taliban

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Mightier Than the Sword

Women journalists and filmmakers and their impact on gender perceptions and gender equality in Afghanistan

Introduction

This dissertation is a supplemental account of the issues and themes that are presented in the documentary *Mightier Than the Sword*. It provides historical background while detailing the impact that Afghan female journalists and filmmakers are making on gender perceptions and gender equality in Afghanistan. Neither the dissertation nor the documentary version of *Mightier Than the Sword* explore the theoretical basis for the project, although Immanuel Kant's and Jean Jacques Rousseau's theory of enlightenment and equality theory, respectively, as well as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, were significant influences. In lieu of philosophical discourse, this dissertation focuses on providing key contextual information and empirical elucidation of the longstanding cultural, religious and societal challenges that Afghan women face in their journey towards gender parity, providing an overview of contemporary Afghanistan society in a way that the documentary film could not. By its very nature, a documentary aspires to transport viewers into a different world and elicit emotional connections with the nonfiction characters. Such objectives preclude a documentary from providing appropriately rigorous in-depth analysis, which this dissertation endeavours to make up for, providing a pragmatic look at how the principles of modernity and liberalization are moulding a society that is steeped in traditional, ultra-conservative values as well as ongoing insurgent violence. It is difficult — if not impossible — to try to understand contemporary Afghanistan by placing it within classic modernization or liberalization frameworks (both of which hold a diversity of definitions). Nonetheless, Afghanistan is undergoing changes that can be considered modernizing, including the development of new political and cultural behaviours that are being undertaken by non-traditional players, specifically women. The term liberalization in this dissertation defines societal

changes that allow for a more expansive expression of cultural behaviours. Within the Afghanistan context, this might include public discussion of a woman's divorce rights, which was a taboo topic until just a few years ago. It also includes the rights of women to participate in a place of employment where job responsibilities necessitate that they engage with men who are non-family members, whether as colleagues or customers. This is another historical taboo defying traditional values, indicating liberalizing trends within Afghan society.

Methodology

I have been a journalist all my working life, first as a daily newspaper reporter then a magazine editor and freelancer. I have been undertaking international reportage from countries around the world for about a decade, mostly from post-conflict and conflict zones. My first reporting trip to Afghanistan was in 2012, covering education, culture, health and women's issues for several magazines. During my three-week stay in Afghanistan, I realized, while observing the number of stations available on television, the ubiquity of radio, the number of magazines and newspapers in English, Dari and Pashto, as well as the youth surfing the Internet on their cell phones, that the media sector warranted a focused investigation.

The 2012 trip to Afghanistan also clarified for me how Western media tend to be fixated on the burkas-and-guns trope, which still prevails today, due in part to a diminishing pool of foreign journalists in Afghanistan who focus on reporting violent incidents such as suicide bombings, rather than complex, in-depth stories. (*The New York Times* has been an exception to this.)

Yet, despite insurgent attacks and other challenges related to development, the nation is undergoing continuous social, political and economic progress. When I was there in 2012 — only 11 years since the Taliban ruled the country — the streets were full of school children walking to and from classes, curricula for primary school and post-secondary school as well as teacher training was well underway, police and army troops were being professionally trained to take over security responsibilities from Western forces and Afghan women held 27.7 percent of the seats in the National Assembly

(Afghan Parliament).¹ Seeing women on television as reporters and anchors was a clear signal that the culture of silence and invisibility females had endured under Taliban rule was changing. This seemed a significant advancement — media were creating platforms for women to express themselves and be present in the public eye, thus helping nurture gender equality and the growth of democracy.

My idea to undertake a documentary as part of my final Graduate Liberal Studies project also reflected changes in the media landscape where I work. The dominance of the Internet has meant that more people obtain their news from online writing, video, film and podcasting, rather than from conventional sources like magazines and newspapers. If there was to be any hope that the information I intended to record in Afghanistan about women in the mass media would be disseminated beyond a strictly academic audience, it had to be presented in a visual format.

There was also an aesthetic motivation for shooting a documentary. The beauty of the country: its evocative human and geographical landscapes, demands a visual storytelling format. Afghanistan is breathtaking. Kabul, a city of six million-plus people inhabiting a broad valley in the Hindu Kush mountain range where most of the documentary was shot, is an urban sprawl that blends modernity with the traditional. I shot extensive B roll (non-interview footage) often beginning at 4:30 a.m. when dawn illuminates the smog-filled air, turning it misty gold. The evocative images are endless. Women in burkas negotiate the sale and purchase of goods in the open-air marketplaces, uniformed students scamper to and from school clutching books, bony horses and donkeys pull carts along congested roads, homes that were destroyed by the Taliban await resurrection from the rubble, an outdoor music concert turns a war-weary audience jubilant, red marble mosques gleam in the sun, men prostrate themselves during Ramadan prayers, an Afghan band rocks out a night club, kites are carried aloft by dusty winds, antiquated presses churn out newspapers, child beggars swing cans of burning herbs in the streets and deep-chested, brown-and-white speckled birds attack each other in surprisingly bloodless cockfights.

Before going to Afghanistan in 2015, I sought advice from Vancouver-based,

Afghan-Canadian filmmaker Brishkay Ahmed, who filmed her 2012 documentary, *Story of Burqa: Case of a Confused Afghan*, in her home country. Ahmed directed me to a media company in Kabul that hires out camera and sound technicians. I also employed Ahmad Shuja Momuzai, the fixer I used in Afghanistan in 2012 (fixers are the workhorses of international reporting and undertake translation, driving, the setting up of interviews and security detail for foreign journalists) to help organize the daily shoots and communicate with my two-man film crew, neither of whom spoke English. I bought the equipment I would need while in Canada: a theatre-quality GH4 camera, zoom recorder, lens, microphones and related paraphernalia.

The documentary was shot *cinema verite* style, which describes realistic, straightforward filmmaking that eschews artistic or special effects. Permission to use additional footage from my cameraman Nima Latifi, who had recently finished the dramatic film, *Qamar*, which had an anti child-marriage message, as well as *ITV* and *ToloTV*, was obtained. I interviewed some of Afghanistan's most influential people, including MPs, poets, journalists, a newspaper publisher, the program director of *Tolo* (meaning Dawn), which is Afghanistan's largest, 24-hour-news television network, fashion designers, authors, university students and civil rights activists. Some were men. Most were women. All these interviews took place in Kabul due to time constrictions as well as safety concerns: Taliban were monitoring Afghanistan roadways outside the capital and kidnapping was a real risk.

Upon my return to Vancouver, I enlisted the services of local film producer Jonas Quastel to oversee visual and sound editing. I wrote the script and selected and coordinated the image-to-narrative complement of B roll to taped interviews. The process was time-consuming, taking 16 months to complete. All the interviews that were completed in Afghanistan were sent to a professional transcription service and it is from these texts that the information presented in this written portion of the GLS project is taken.

Chapter I

A Rocky Foundation

“They will kill me but they will not kill my voice, because it will be the voice of all Afghan women. You can cut the flower, but you cannot stop the coming of spring.” **Malalai Joya, *Raising My Voice*** ²

Tales of bold and courageous women pepper Afghanistan history; their thwarting of convention has made them figures of inspiration for many modern Afghan women who endure oppressive controls and limitations imposed upon them by conservative, often misogynistic, traditional cultural mores. One of the most enduring stories is that of 15th century Goharshad Begum, wife of Sha Rukh, Emperor of the Timurid Empire of Herat in western Afghanistan.³ Under her patronage, Persian language and culture were elevated, with Begum and her husband leading a cultural renaissance, becoming patrons of the arts and attracting artists, architects and philosophers, as well as illustrious poets like Jami and the female poet Mehri Herawi, to their court.⁴

Earlier, in the ninth century, lived Rabia Balkhi, believed to be the first woman to have written poems in modern Persian.⁵ (Dari is the name of the Persian language in Afghanistan, often referred to as Afghan Persian.)⁶ Legend tells that she was murdered by her brother for falling in love with Baktash, a slave of the kingdom. Through the years, her daring to love, and write poetry about it, made her a symbol of justice and equality in Afghanistan.⁷

A more contemporary heroine is Malalai of Maiwand, who became a national folk hero following the Battle of Maiwand during the Second Anglo-Afghan War on July 27, 1880. It is said that Malalai was a rallying force at this historical clash in Kandahar province between Afghan troops, led by Ayub Khan, and British and Indian troops, commanded by Brigadier General George Burrows.⁸ Malalai’s reputation was cemented when she took up the flag from a fallen Afghan flag bearer and, shouting words of defiance, strode into the fray from the sidelines where she had been tending the wounded.⁹ Today, to bear the name Malalai is to denote a fighting spirit, even though 19th

century Malalai's role as a rallying figure may be overstated. British and Indian forces were outnumbered 10 to one: 2,500 against at least 25,000 Afghans.¹⁰ Viewed through the telephoto lens of time, the slaughter of British forces was likely inevitable, with or without Malalai's courageous actions.

Nonetheless, the name Malalai has stature. Malalai Joya, the youngest person to be elected to Afghanistan's parliament in 2005, describes in her biography, *Raising My Voice*, that she was given the name as a tribute to the flag bearer, "one of the great freedom fighters from our country's history."¹¹ Despite Malalai's death on the battlefield that day in 1880, her act of bravery meant that she played an important part in "our country's struggle for independence," Joya states. "My parents named me Malalai because my father was a strong supporter of democracy and human rights at a time when these values were under siege," writes Joya, who was born just days after the Soviet Union invasion on Dec. 25, 1979.¹²

That such female role models are still revered today signals that there is historical precedence for Afghan women when it comes to self-expression, self-actualization and participation in nation building. Under the occupation of the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) coalition, hosts of Afghan women have become flag bearers themselves, entering sectors like education, politics and the media, becoming power brokers, economic participants and opinion makers. But it is media that have given women, especially the younger generation, a platform to disseminate information and express opinions of relevance and importance to their lives as newsgatherers and storytellers, participating in their nation's grindingly slow and challenging evolution towards democratic statehood.

In landlocked, mountainous Afghanistan, however, ancient traditions run deep — a buttress against the forces of modernization — especially when it comes to women's role in society. One of the most pervasive and entrenched of these is the custom of *pardah*, a cultural — not religious — edict segregating men from women.¹³ *Pardah* means that men take on public roles while women are relegated to private-sphere roles; more than three decades of violence has caused this idea to dominate the modern cultural

landscape. Woven into this idea of separation are the concepts of shame and honour that take on even greater importance during times of war or exile, when men's role as protector comes to the fore. A woman's modesty — manifested by her absence from public life — is intertwined with the public perception that a man is capable of protecting her.¹⁴ If individuals like Goharshad Begum, Malalai of Maiwand and Rabia Balkhi represent the scant handful of historical figures that modern Afghans look to as examples of valorous womanhood, it may be because so few have broken down the wall of purdah to make a mark in the annals of Afghanistan's past.

It is worthwhile looking at several seminal 20th-century shifts that laid a foundation — albeit an uneven one — for the easing of purdah under NATO occupation following 9/11. Throughout the 20th century — before the chaos of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) 1979 invasion and the ensuing civil war — Afghanistan had been on a bumpy road towards modernization. This included educating women and allowing them to participate in civil society and pursue careers. The seeds of 20th-century female emancipation were sown by King Amanullah Khan, who ascended to the throne in 1919 following the assassination of his father, Habibullah Khan. The royal son declared independence from a World War One-weary Great Britain, which had first invaded Afghanistan in 1838.¹⁵ (The invasion kicked off the “Great Game” — the geopolitical power jockeying between Britain and Russia to control Afghanistan and other parts of Central Asia.)¹⁶ Khan pushed through Western-style reforms while his well-educated wife, Queen Soraya Tarzi, promoted women's rights and championed education for girls. Not only did she open the first girl's school in Afghanistan, she also created the country's first women's magazine, called *Ershad-I-Niswan* (Guidance for Women).¹⁷

Some of Khan's measures empowering women were controversial, including the right of divorce and property ownership.¹⁸ But such changes weren't simply the outcome of a singularly ambitious and enlightened couple working in unison. At the time, Muslim intellectuals were engaged in debates over traditional Islam versus modernity. This included the Young Turk movement, which advocated a progressive, reformist Islam.¹⁹ Khan's enthusiasm for reform, however, had limited support. When the royal pair returned from a trip to Europe in 1928, planning to unveil even more modernizing

measures, including the creation of a constitutional monarchy, an elected assembly and compulsory, co-educational schools, Muslim religious leaders, called mullahs, rebelled. The ensuing revolt sparked a civil conflict and Khan was disposed by the Tajik bandit Bacheh Saqqaw.²⁰

This situation highlights a pattern of advancement and pushback in Afghanistan between traditional, reactionary Islamists and modernizing forces, bringing to mind the catchphrase: one step forward, two steps back. For the first two-thirds of the century, it could be said that the nation inched forward. A modernizing trajectory always seemed to maintain a toehold and the country evolved, resulting in a new constitution in 1964 that gave women specific rights, including voting rights. Girls' schools were created and young women attended post-secondary training in nursing and administration.²¹ Such advances were not seamless, encountering, at various times, the inevitable conservative backlash. For example, the iconic photos of young, 1960-70s Afghan women in short skirts and dresses can't truly be declared Afghanistan's golden era — not when some of the more modern-garbed female students at Kabul University became the target of acid attacks for donning such daring styles.²²

An understanding of Afghanistan's polarization between modernity and conservatism is aided by addressing the geographical basis of the nation's frequent civil conflicts. The founding date of modern Afghanistan is considered to be 1747, when Ahmad Shah was elected *amir* (commander) of the Pashtun tribal confederation, based in Kandahar. Eight years later, his successor, Timur, transferred the capital to Kabul in order to reinforce his power base, which was being challenged by tribes in the south of the country.²³ This created the foundation of a persistent division within Afghan society — “city versus countryside” — something that prevails today, resulting in uneven social and political progress and conservative-fuelled clashes.²⁴

Afghanistan was pushed back more than a few steps — you might say flung backwards — following the Dec. 25, 1979 invasion by the USSR, which sparked mujahedeen (Islamic guerrilla fighters) resistance followed by all-out civil war between these competing fundamentalist groups. (The Soviet invasion was to support its

communist allies: a ruthless puppet regime led by two Marxist-Leninist political groups, the People's (Khalq) Party and the Banner (Parcham) Party. Not only tribal mujahedeen but urban groups opposed this leadership.)²⁵ The invasion and civil war locked the nation into a cycle of violence that lasted more than two decades, decimating it socially, economically and politically. An entire generation was devastated and demoralized and altogether six million people fled, making Afghanistan the largest refugee-producing country in the world.²⁶ Most ended up in refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan. Ironically, it was here that women encountered, many for the first time, pre- and post-natal care and immunization for their children. The scourge of childhood diseases, high maternal and infant death rates, and the agonies of childbirth that they and their families endured during these dark decades of war were not, they realized, inevitable fates.²⁷

Education for youngsters was introduced at these camps too, although embraced with less enthusiasm than the medical care, due in part to the presence of conservative mujahedeen jihadists in exile. These fundamentalists were a chilling predictor of what life would be like for women in Afghanistan after the Taliban rose to power. Exiled mujahedeen imposed restrictions upon female refugees that, later, were associated with the Taliban: women had to veil their entire bodies, not speak to strangers or foreigners or wear perfume or bangles. Any woman who was too vocal was threatened, beaten and even killed.²⁸

Yet, schools for both boys and girls were established, mainly at the primary level. Even though education was limited, the years spent in refugee camps established new expectations for Afghans. Often, returning refugees, rather than travel back to their villages, moved into urban centres, which were regarded not only as more secure but offered education and health-care services.²⁹

It may seem misplaced to identify rudimentary health-care and education services at refugee camps as modernizing forces. Yet to illiterate women whose lives revolved around simply surviving, even a rudimentary grasp of reading transformed them, as the Afghan saying goes, from being blind to having sight.³⁰

A key factor in helping further widen Afghans' worldview has been the more recent development of media in Afghanistan, which was nurtured following the October 2001 invasion, ordered by then-US president George W. Bush to oust the Taliban. The Taliban were accused of harbouring the Islamic militant group Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, who was held responsible for the Sept.11, 2001 hijacking and crashing of planes on American soil.³¹ Although media development has been strongest in urban centres, it also expanded into less populated areas of Afghanistan. New ideas — as well as new possibilities and opportunities for women — opened up as a result. Today Afghan media are viewed as one of the few success stories of foreign intervention in Afghanistan, having a relatively free press corps of about 9,000 journalists, 2,000 of them women — not all of whom are found in the large, more liberal urban centres.³² When technicians and managers are included, there are 12,000 members of the media — 2,400 of them women — working in Afghanistan, says Abdul Mujeeb Khalvatgar, managing director of the Kabul-based organization NAI- Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, which offers a two-year journalism diploma program. (Khalvatgar was interviewed on camera in Kabul.)

It should not be a surprise that, alongside the country's often-stymied and erratic journey towards modernity, Afghanistan has experienced an ebb and flow of various forms of media since the 19th century. Traditionally, ideas and information in Afghanistan have been, and often still are, disseminated through tribal and village meetings as well as the *Jergah*, an advisory council that was commonly seen in the refugee camps that allowed individuals to address issues relating to their wellbeing.³³ Among the country's literate citizens, however, media influenced public opinion in Afghanistan as early as 1873, when the nation's first weekly newspaper, *Shams-al-Nehar* (Sun of the Day), was published by Islamic reformer and leading intellectual Jamal-al din Afghani, a strong supporter of European progress in the humanities and social sciences.³⁴ The paper boldly pointed a finger at what it called a lack of leadership by the nation's ruling and religious classes, citing this as a reason for Afghanistan backwardness.³⁵ The paper also covered international, local, scientific, cultural and government news and announcements. It lasted five years until the start of the second Anglo-Afghan War, from 1878 to 1880.³⁶

Media also became a voice of liberation against British rule in 1902. This was the year that Mahmud Ber Tarzi founded *Jawan-e-Afghan* (Young Afghans). Considered to be the founder of the modern Afghan press, Tarzi's paper advocated for national independence from British control, causing it to be prohibited.³⁷ Later, in 1911, Tarzi published the bimonthly newspaper *Seradj-ul-Ahkbar Afghanieh* (Luminary of Afghan News). It linked "modernization, patriotism and Islam together as indivisible and intrinsic elements of Afghan society," establishing a foundation for future journalism in Afghanistan. It also highlighted how Islam can be a cultural force that advances progress and new ideas.³⁸

Twelve years later, under the reign of King Amanullah Khan, Article 11 of the 1923 constitution gave citizens the right to free speech. Joining Queen Soraja's *Ershad-I-Niswan* magazine were nearly two dozen private and government-owned newspapers.³⁹ Khan also purchased two radio broadcasting systems.⁴⁰ The media continued to evolve over the ensuing decades, with the creation of a news agency in 1939 called Bakhtar, which opened the country up to news from around the globe via Reuters, Agence France-Press (AFP) and Associated Press (AP). In 1940, Radio Kabul, with technical support from Germany, was established. It had the capability of transmitting all over Afghanistan. Broadcasting in Pashto as well as Persian, programming was created by the independent Office for Media Affairs.⁴¹ Later, in the 1950s, under the rule of Mohammed Zahir Shah, the last King of Afghanistan, opposition papers appeared, run by political groups.⁴² (Zahir Shah introduced the 1964 constitution, free elections, universal suffrage and civil rights.)⁴³ Around this time, formal training in journalism was also offered.⁴⁴ Zahir Shah's rule (until July 1973) was the last time an independent media operated until the Taliban were expelled by the West.⁴⁵

Under Zahir Shah's authority, Radio Kabul was renamed Radio Afghanistan.⁴⁶ Technical advances and new infrastructure and expansion into the provinces meant that radio broadcasting became the dominant form of mass media in the country. During the decade-long occupation of Afghanistan by the USSR, the Soviets brought in modern technical equipment that allowed additional local radio stations to spring up throughout the country.⁴⁷ By the end of the Soviet occupation, an estimated 12 million people were

tuning in to radio.⁴⁸ With the descent into civil war, rival mujahedeen groups capitalized upon the media infrastructure, using it to broadcast their propaganda, something the Taliban carried on when it took over Radio Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, renaming it *Shari'a Zhagh* (Voice of the Shari'a), which broadcast religious teachings and calls to prayer.^{49, 50}

Later, on April 18, 2005, the Taliban commandeered the airwaves once again in Kandahar. The opening statement of its first two-hour broadcast, by an announcer reading in Pashto, began: “*Shari'a Zhagh* radio raises the voice of the Islamic brotherhood against the superpower, United States of America, and its associates who have been insulting the honour of the Muslim world and its religion and who [have] harmed Islamic rule.”⁵¹ Not coincidentally, the year 2005 was one of resurgence for the Taliban in Afghanistan. By 2004, the US was ensconced in the Iraqi war and had pulled resources and troops from Afghanistan. The Taliban exploited this by expanding its terrorism tactics and introducing suicide bombings. In 2004, there were six such attacks, in 2005 there were 21 and in 2006 141 suicide bombings shook the country.⁵²

Being media savvy, it is no mistake that one of the Taliban's first targets when it attacked and briefly held the northeastern Afghanistan city of Kunduz in Kunduz province in late 2001 — the first major city it had seized since 2001 — was Radio Roshani.⁵³ On the day it was attacked, the station had scheduled, as part of its afternoon broadcast, a segment encouraging Afghan women to partake in politics. Radio Roshani was known not only for its focus on the promotion of women's rights but programming that embraced peace building and understanding of the law, while encouraging discussion about religious issues and cultural taboos.⁵⁴

But why did media flourish following the invasion by US and NATO allies in response to 9/11? And how was a largely illiterate nation of shell shocked and war-weary souls able to, in such a relatively short period of time, embrace mass media and cultivate a coterie of dedicated and enthusiastic news gatherers?

A little more than a month after the US began its military campaign on Oct. 7, 2001, called Operation Enduring Freedom, with the logistical support of nations like Canada, France, Germany and Australia as well as the Northern Alliance (a coalition of Afghan militia), the Taliban were driven out of Kabul.⁵⁵ By early December, the capital of Kandahar was overtaken and the Taliban's leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, fled.⁵⁶ During its control over most of the country, the Taliban had followed an ideology that amalgamated local customs with Salafi Islam (an ultra-conservative branch of Sunni Islam) and Pashtunwali (an ancient tribal cultural code).⁵⁷ Under this crude ideological umbrella, entertainment, such as television and music, had been banned. The fall of the Taliban spelled freedom and a resurgence of media, carried out under a Western mandate of reconstruction and nation building.⁵⁸

From an information paucity consisting of *Shari'a Zhagh* and a few print publications, the mass media grew to encompass dozens of television stations and radio stations. By 2014, there were 68 private television stations, 22 state-owned provincial channels, 174 radio stations and numerous Web-based outlets. Hundreds of written publications existed, sponsored by NGOs or owned by private and foreign interests or government.⁵⁹ The dominant source of news and entertainment was, and continues to be, the Afghan private television, radio and print conglomerate Moby Group, which owns *Tolo TV*, the country's most popular television station.⁶⁰ Such dramatic growth happened in large part because of the aid and development money that poured into Afghanistan to support nation-building objectives, such as the creation of democratic institutions, which a raft of foreign journalists helped nurture.⁶¹

One of the key drivers to the burgeoning sector was that it was privatized, a concept that took root during the Soviet occupation, when Western transnational radio broadcasters like BBC and Voice of America (VOA), which politically supported the mujahedeen groups, began transmitting into Afghanistan. (Before that, media were largely state controlled, except for a few publications run by intellectuals and government opponents whose audiences were limited to the literate.)⁶² Following the American invasion, private television, radio and newspapers, owned by businessman, ethnic leaders

and nongovernmental organizations, populated the media landscape alongside BBC Persian, BBC Pashtu and VOA.⁶³

Women also began entering the media. It was a bold advancement, as the idea of women moving freely outside the home, and interviewing strange men, contravened conservative traditions. But such were the new expectations and freedoms for women in a nation going through the pangs of rebirth. As George W. Bush said in early 2004, shortly after the Constitution of Afghanistan officially became the country's supreme law: "Today, the Taliban regime is gone, thank goodness. Girls are back in class. The amazing accomplishment, though, is that Afghanistan has a new constitution that guarantees full participation by women. All Afghan citizens, regardless of gender, now have equal rights before the law."⁶⁴ Hamid Karzai, who became, initially, Afghanistan's interim president, then was elected to a five-year presidential term, also promised a new (if slightly pessimistic) reality for women: "I have no doubt that there will be more Afghan young girls and women studying and getting higher education and better job opportunities. Even if the Taliban come, that will not end, that will not slow down."⁶⁵ The foundation had been laid and rough blueprints drawn. But who were the people — both men and women — behind the development of media? And what — if anything — have members of the media achieved, especially in terms of women's rights?

Chapter II

A Breath of Freedom

“Media are enabling women to participate more, to disclose their ideas, their thinking, their visions for society. Especially TV, there are programs, for example, about domestic violence and abuses and sexual abuse. This discourse is challenging society and challenging our history and traditions.” - **Sanjar Sohail, owner and publisher of *Hasht-e-Sobh* (8 AM), an independent secular newspaper and Afghanistan’s largest daily. Interviewed in Kabul on June 16 and June 23, 2015.**

Sanjar Sohail had just graduated from high school in 1996 when the Taliban seized the Afghanistan capital of Kabul. Like other Afghans, Sohail’s main focus was simple survival during the five tumultuous years of Taliban rule until the military might of Western coalition forces was unleashed following 9/11. In 2002, Sohail “was in love with writing and with poetry and slowly it became a habit to write on politics and on social issues.” He became a student at Kabul University, recalling the sense of freedom and opportunity. “Everything was new,” Sohail says, seated under a shady tree outside the Kabul offices of *Hasht-e-Sobh* (8 AM), Afghanistan’s largest newspaper, which has a daily print run of 30,000 copies. “After a long period of war and destruction in Afghanistan, it was a time to breathe a little bit freely.”

It was a surreal freedom. Afghans now had the luxury of looking around their devastated country to assess the damage. Sohail had joined a university, which turned 70 the year he entered, with teaching standards and dormitories blighted by war. “I decided to mobilize and to build the Afghan Students Movement to improve educational standards. We had a big conference in 2003 with almost 450 students from all across Afghanistan talking on the issue of youth and politics.” One of the achievements of the Afghan Students Movement was working with the university to establish a women’s dormitory. It took several years but one was eventually built. This meant that women from across Afghanistan could come to study at Kabul University without a male guardian. Another challenge was convincing female students to cease wearing the burka

at school. Again, the movement succeeded. “I think that the students’ movement was one of my great achievements in terms of politics,” Sohail says.

Sohail, who today divides his time between Afghanistan and Vancouver where his wife and children live, decided to become a journalist as a way of combining his love of politics and writing. He started off as a cub reporter at *Good Morning Afghanistan* radio, then worked his way up to senior adviser and chief news editor with the national broadcasting organization Radio Television Afghanistan. Sohail’s first media job, *Good Morning Afghanistan*, was a daily, two-hour breakfast radio show created with € 235,000 from the European Union, part of a €4.9 million package for development projects. Eighty percent of the country could tune in to hear reporting by Sohail and 19 other young Afghan journalists who worked out of the old Kabul Radio building, using second-hand radio equipment donated from Europe.⁶⁶

In 2007, Sohail opened his own newspaper. He wanted, he says, to initiate investigative reporting that upheld “rule of law, human rights, governance and anti-corruption [in the interests of] trying to introduce fair, balanced and professional journalism.” The paper undertook several investigative reports “that resulted in the dismissal of ministers and the questioning of ministers in Parliament.” There was a backlash, in the form of threats and warnings, from “warlords and powerful figures,” Sohail says. One story resulted in anonymous gunmen coming regularly to the back office door after nightfall, asking for Sohail or his colleagues. Another time, in 2015, in the city of Herat in central Afghanistan, following a story where *Hasht-e-Sobh* publicized the names of prominent Afghan drug lords, the offices went into lock down and staff stopped reporting for a week due to the threat level, Sohail recalls.

At the time of our June 2015 interview, *Hasht-e-Sobh* was distributed to half the country and had offices with printing presses in four major urban centres, including Kabul. In the southern and eastern regions of Afghanistan, the paper is printed in Pashto. A Dari version is distributed in the northwest and central areas of Afghanistan. Altogether, *Hasht-e-Sobh* employs two dozen journalists; six of them are female. Every year, the paper also mentors two, fourth-year female journalism students on internships.

They work out of offices in Kabul, Herat or Mazar-i-Sharif in Balkh province, which is in the far north.

The female reporters are assigned their own beats. These include the environment, a section that is also edited by a woman. Another female covers the court beat, focusing on the problems that women have with Afghanistan laws as well as problems with the judiciary. Another woman journalist explores the plight of street children in Afghanistan, focusing on young female vagrants. She interviews them over a period of about a week then writes feature stories about the factors that led to homelessness. One area where female journalists are starting to develop skills is political reporting, says Sohail. Women reporters, however, are excluded from covering stories about conflict and bombings. “It’s not acceptable to send a female reporter to a war zone.” Cultural and religious restrictions also prevent women from working late in the office. Therefore, *Hasht-e-Sobh* has no female proofreaders or page designers, since these jobs are carried out in the evening, when it is inappropriate for a woman to be working or returning home late.

However, even outside of the big urban centres, in rural areas where women still wear the burka, *Hasht-e-Sobh* female journalists are working. In these more conservative areas, when travelling to their destination, the reporters don the burka — especially if their identity is known, perhaps because their photograph has appeared in the paper. At the interview, they remove the burka, then put it back on to navigate the streets on their return journey to the office.

Shohail says that women reporters help to ensure a balanced and objective media, thus paving the way towards equality within the nation. “If you don’t have a female journalist, you may not have access to half of the population; because of social, cultural and traditional barriers, males are not allowed into their world. With female journalists, we open the way for the unknown — the untold histories of half the population. These stories are amazing.”

But what will it take for the country to accept women being out late at night to help design and lay out the paper, or work as proofreaders? Sohail shrugs. Maybe the next generation will experience such freedoms. But who looks that far ahead, when a

more immediate problem is a lack of security and an emboldened Taliban, which have retaken swathes of territory that it controlled from 1996-2001?⁶⁷ “We have a very brutal war going on,” says Sohail. “The enemy is actually killing, destroying and is not recognizing any of those rights and responsibilities that the constitution of Afghanistan is guaranteeing for men and women.”

Chapter III

Dodging Stones

To the Man with Rapist Eyes

You stare and your eyes

Are nothing but a frustrated man's genital part in the format of dirty eyes,

Your eyes tear me, and all the other women apart.

And every time you talk to me, you condemn rape

But you rape me with your eyes

And in my mind, I battle to survive, in my mind, I fight

They ask what is my problem,

They don't see

That you are my goddamn problem....

Cause you inject fear and hatred in my organs

And

Try to fight and survive...

Sahar Fetrat, Kabul, Interviewed June 11-13 2015

When Sanjar Sohail refers to the “untold” and “amazing histories of half the population,” he is speaking about people like Sahar Fetrat, who, although only 21, has

already overcome many formidable life challenges. As an emerging documentarian, she is also recording and disseminating the harrowing experiences of other Afghan women.

Fetrat was born on Dec. 1, 1996, barely two months after the Taliban seized control of Kabul, which was in a state of ruin due to years of mujahedeen conflict. Her family, father, mother and older sisters fled the country to Iran, where other family members had already settled — part of the ongoing exodus of Afghans since the Soviet invasion.⁶⁸ Fetrat, who was interviewed on several occasions in June, 2015 in Kabul, recalls snippets from her childhood: she was an “over-confident little girl” who, at eight or nine years of age, tackled complex Iranian novels and kept a diary. “I was one of those kids who wouldn’t stop talking. My teachers were so much annoyed by that and I was always punished for talking a lot.” Another thing that she recalls — more disturbing than the bemusing memories of vexed teachers — was how poorly her mother, Nafisa, and her aunts were treated in Iran. “They did a lot of work at home and there was no appreciation for them. They were always being treated bad in our big family. And that’s when I realized my mom was sad; she wasn’t enjoying her life. That made me feel not good about this as a child.” Nafisa wasn’t allowed to make decisions related to the running of the household, raising questions in her daughter’s mind, “Why not my mother, why not my sisters, why are the women all following and not leading at all?”

The family eventually moved to Pakistan, however, Fetrat’s father, Sayed Mir Aqa, wasn’t allowed to work. They returned to Afghanistan in 2007 where Fetrat’s siblings, three sisters and one brother: Fatema, Milad, Mina and Sadaf, could benefit from an education system that was expanding thanks to foreign aid. Before Fetrat’s return to Kabul, UNICEF, in partnership with the national Afghanistan government, initiated a Back-to-School-Campaign that saw three million Afghan children — one third of them girls — have access to 3,000 schools by March 2002.⁶⁹ By 2011/2012, 7.5 million children: 5.2 million boys and 3.3 million girls, were in primary school. This increased to 8.5 million youngsters in 2012/2013.⁷⁰

Fetrat’s co-educational primary school offered both English and French classes. It was here, in Grade 7 and Grade 8, within a dynamic where the two sexes began to

interact within the emotionally charged setting of adolescence, that the cultural condescension towards females became glaringly apparent. “People saw us as inferiors because we were girls. So I was always fighting. For me, I felt it was something that I should do to bring about change, by writing, poetry — by doing *something*.”

In 2011, when she was 16, Fetrat became involved with a short film called *Kabul Cards*. It was produced under the umbrella of a cooperative project that was started by two Norwegians: Anders Sømme Hammer, who had been working as a journalist in Afghanistan for five years, and Christoffer Naess with Global Video Letters, a group that supports international participatory media projects.⁷¹ Fetrat teamed up with two teenage female friends, Sadaf and Nargis, to make the 17-minute documentary in 2011. The trio filmed their daily lives with handheld cameras, wanting to show the world that their home nation was more than just a war zone. *Kabul Cards* was shown at the Mumbai Film Festival and the Nobel Peace Centre in Oslo, Sweden in 2012.⁷² Fetrat had found her voice. “Our people are not really educated, they don’t read, so the best way to target people and tell them our stories is to do filmmaking and make videos,” she says.

Fetrat’s third project, a nine minute, English-subtitled documentary *Do Not Trust My Silence!*, came about thanks to a different initiative. Harder hitting than *Kabul Cards*, *Do Not Trust My Silence!* opens with one of the filmmakers, Kubra, speaking into the lens as she looks over a busy, noisy Kabul street filled with men. States Kubra, “We came her to shoot a video and they are throwing rocks at us.” Fetrat was savvy enough to open the documentary — about ubiquitous street harassment of women by men — with this irony-heavy scene.

Fetrat was motivated to create the anti-harassment documentary not only because of the widespread problems affecting girls and women in Afghanistan but “because of the problems I was facing every day.” Harassment, she says, is rooted in the disrespectful treatment of women by men in the home, something that she became acutely aware of as a girl. It stems from the idea — even among some educated males — that “women are inferior,” says Fetrat. Males, from young boys to old men, absorb a sense of entitlement, the notion that they have the right to “touch you.” The idea is, explains Fetrat, since “you

are a woman you deserve to be harassed. They blame you and say you're not dressing properly. Many women get harassed to the level that they don't want to go out of the house."

In 2013, Human Rights Watch exposed the plight of Afghan policewomen, who were being harassed and even raped on the job due in large part to a lack of female bathrooms.⁷³ This caused one government branch, the Independent Directorate for Local Governance, spearheaded by 26-year-old deputy minister Matin Bek, the son of a mujahedeen leader from Takhar province, to draw up anti-harassment guidelines. These defined harassment as verbal or physical intimidation, including drawing attention to an employee's sex appeal, as well as unnecessary physical contact. According to the guidelines, employers should be obliged to initiate disciplinary action against perpetrators.⁷⁴

One year later, Human Rights Watch published a statement calling upon Afghanistan's newly elected President Ashraf Ghani to "take urgent steps to combat sexual harassment of women in education, employment, and public life."⁷⁵ Although the country had previously enacted the Elimination of Violence Against Women law in 2009, it is rarely used as the basis for investigation and is unevenly implemented in the courts. The Anti-Sexual Harassment Law addressing street harassment was passed in 2016 but is viewed by women's groups as being largely unenforceable.⁷⁶

Another solution, says Fetrat, is to "fight back," which she did with *Do Not Trust My Silence!* In order to show the extent of street harassment, she walked the streets of Kabul with a hidden camera. If an individual spied the camera, they would sometimes threaten Fetrat, who would counter with the retort that if they tried anything they would see themselves on the *Tolo TV* evening news. In Fetrat's hands, the camera became a shield as much as it was a sensory vacuum, sucking up examples of abuse that she and other females endured daily. "In my films I am trying to be a voice, first for myself and then the women around me," she says, seated on a couch in her parents' sunny apartment in Kabul, overlooking a schoolyard of noisy children. "I want to tell the untold stories of Afghan women. I also want to show that it's not only problems or bad things but good

things that are happening.” Fetrat believes she has contributed a little bit to gender equality as a result of the film. “I have been part of a change.”

That change, says Fetrat, includes a slightly diminished threat on the streets of Kabul. She recalls, back in 2008-09, men touching her on the street. If Fetrat chastised or challenged the molester, he would react violently. In this way, Fetrat says, positive change has infiltrated society. “They don’t touch that much like before.”

Fetrat’s short film was shown on television in Afghanistan and garnered awards at international film festivals, including a first prize at the Universocorto Elba Film Festival in Italy. Her work was featured in a radio documentary broadcast in Kabul and a German television station came to Afghanistan to do a feature on her. The general response at home was mixed. Fetrat received many accolades but there was also a backlash from males, who would send threats via Facebook or insult her at the American University of Afghanistan, where she studies business. Epithets, like “bitch” and “whore,” were flung and some accused her of having a hidden agenda: trying to create a crisis in order that she might be granted refugee status by a sympathetic Western nation for challenging and exposing Afghan men’s depravities. The accusations “make me feel bad — that is not my aim,” says Fetrat. Her sole motivation, she adds, is helping advance the rights of women and to help men understand that discriminating against females — ridiculing, abusing and assaulting them — is not the way to create a society that benefits all citizens socially, politically and economically. The camera, adds Fetrat, is a tool for positive change. Certainly, it gives her the courage to endure threats, while buttressing her determination to help the women of Afghanistan. “I would give people cameras instead of guns. You can protect yourself with a camera. Telling women’s stories — that makes them more powerful. If I can make people more aware of what’s happening, and more aware of their rights, then that gives power to everyone.”

Chapter IV

Changing Culture Through Media

“It is not sufficient that there are a good number of women working with the media in Kabul. It has to go beyond that. We have women working in the media in the provinces as well. It’s not as good as it should be but it’s Afghanistan; we have to keep in mind that 14 years ago a woman was not allowed to even go out of the house.”

- Dr. Najib Sharifi, physician, journalist and president of the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee and Afghan Voices. Interviewed June 20, 2015, Kabul.

Fetrat’s short documentary, *Do Not Trust My Silence!*, was supported by Afghan Voices, a content development program created in 2010 that trains youth in their teens and early 20s to develop skills in various forms of media, including photography, video and writing.⁷⁵ Because of low literacy rates and a tradition of oral storytelling, the focus of the program, which creates content in both Dari and Pashto, is video. It is funded by the Embassy of the United States, Kabul and run by the Afghanistan New Generation Organization (ANGO), a civic and social group founded in 2011 by young Afghan activists. More than two-thirds of the country’s population is under the age of 25 and ANGO seeks to empower youth to take on a leadership role in helping create a progressive, democratic future in Afghanistan.⁷⁷ Or, as Afghan Voices president, Dr. Najib Sharifi says, “the best way to guarantee security, prosperity and progress is for the youth to basically take matters into their own hands. There are different reasons but the main one is: our parents are stuck here in ideological allegiance or political allegiance and they don’t have a huge stake in a peaceful Afghanistan.” (Sharifi trained as a physician at Kabul University during the time of the Taliban, then became a correspondent for the *Washington Post*, a producer for *National Public Radio* (NPR) and worked with the *BBC* post 9/11.)

Do Not Trust My Silence! was one of several short documentaries that was submitted not only to film festivals around the world: London, Amsterdam and Australia, but broadcast on Afghanistan’s two most popular television stations: *Tolo TV* and *ITV*,

Sharifi says. (Both stations are partnered with Deutsche Welle, Germany's public international broadcaster.)⁷⁸ The topic of street harassment in Afghanistan is one of many taboo subjects that is inappropriate to address in civil discourse. However, Fetrat's show "created a huge debate in the country about street harassment and it not only brought in politicians and other civil activists but it also led to many other youngsters to start anti-street harassment campaigns." This included the creation of the organization Young Women for Change — Fetrat was a member — committed to gender equality and determined, from the outset, to confront street harassment. The group created a campaign that included the first-ever march to protest the harassment of women. Protestors carried signs that read: "Islam and the law forbid the harassment of women," "I have the right to walk in my city safely," "These streets belong to me too," "I will not keep silent the next time you insult me," among others. Numerous men joined the group's first walk through the streets of Kabul, on July 14, 2011.⁷⁹

Change in society, says Sharifi, comes about, firstly, through debate. *Do Not Trust My Silence!* initiated a "very serious discussion about women's rights, about street harassment itself and by extension women's rights in this country." Change does not come easily, however, because "people are so conservative and the war and conflicts have created so much suspicion and distrust."

One of Young Women for Change's co-founders, Noorjahan Akbar, describes how street harassment impacts women's ability to partake in civil society. It "discourages them from leaving their houses, and feeds the sadistic and discriminatory motivations of the assaulter by objectifying women, which leads to rape and sexual assault. The frequent harassment of women in public spaces in the cities of Afghanistan is a mirror of how the society views women and what it considers to be a woman's job or place," Akbar writes.⁸⁰ Harassment is more prevalent in urban centres such as Kabul and Herat where women are more actively integrating into work, school and politics, Akbar continues. This is where they are subject to physical assault as extreme as acid attacks, as a means of "discouraging women from publicly participating in society."⁸¹

Ultimately, media are limited in effecting change. Despite widespread dialogue about the topic of street harassment, *Do Not Trust My Silence!*, and similar programs, did not prompt an immediate societal shift, Sharifi says. Still, “it brought together a large number of activists — and it’s just a 10-minute documentary produced by a trainee.” Change may not occur right away but at least the seeds are sown. “The first step for change is the beginning of a debate about a subject — about a taboo subject.”

It is possible, nonetheless, for new and unfamiliar ideas to foster culture shifts, especially when carried along on a wave of technological innovation. Media are crucial to this, helping sidestep a criticism often levelled at well-intentioned ex-pats who parachute short-term into countries like Afghanistan to try to impose Western ideals and ideas on to a vastly different society.⁸² In Afghanistan, media are a factor in helping nurture growth in literacy, exposing people to writing, even through simple public service announcements or newspaper ads, introducing new ideas from outside into isolated areas, says Lauryn Oates, an international development worker and the programs director for Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan (CW4WAfghan), which advances education and educational opportunities for Afghan women and their families.⁸³ Oates says that it is impossible to change people’s attitudes towards gender simply by telling them that it is the “ ‘right thing to do — accept this.’ People will roll their eyes at you.” However, if a community sees situations, be it via news programs or dramas, where women are engaged, active members of society — especially if they are contributing to the family’s welfare as well as the broader society — then greater value is placed upon women and girls. This helps, ultimately, to begin tackling traditions like *baad*, when a girl’s or woman’s value is reduced to mere property, to be given to another family to resolve a dispute or as compensation for a crime.⁸⁴

Even in more remote areas of Afghanistan, there is a diversity of media programs available on television or radio, something that is unique in Central Asia, says Oates. “You can watch a show with very conservative viewpoints but you can turn that off and watch something that’s very liberal. You can watch a variety show with song and dance or a soap opera, or a serious news show or a comedy show.” Some of the most popular shows in Afghanistan in 2015 were United States crime dramas, says American ex-pat

David Fox, the CEO and founder of Afghanistan Monitoring Research, which is the country's first comprehensive market research and advertisement tracking agency. (Fox was interviewed on camera on June 17, 2015 in Kabul.)

Oates says that seeing women represented in so many different settings where they have rights, equality and higher status establishes role models for females, especially among younger viewers. It also shows conservative parents and older members of the family that a community — even one that is fictionalized — benefits from women's improved status. "The sky doesn't fall; people actually live better," says Oates. "They'll just come on board with that."

Oates points to the popular Turkish and Indian soap operas and Indian shows (bare arms and midriffs are often pixelated out, says Fox) with strong female characters who are "heroic and courageous, smart and interesting." Female television anchors and broadcasters have also become more common on Afghan television. Viewers "develop a rapport with them and they see that women are capable. Without even thinking about it, you accept that into your thinking. So this is one of the greatest ways to change the way a society thinks — and it's happening through the media."

Oates' position is supported by The Asia Foundation, a non-profit international development organization supporting governance, human rights and economic growth in 18 Asian countries. In a sweeping survey report released in 2016 that looked into all aspects of Afghans' lives, it found that television viewers who are exposed to women onscreen involved in "non-traditional roles" and working in mixed-gender environments are more likely to support women's rights. This was regardless of whether the respondent lived in an urban setting or a rural one. "TV viewership appears to increase support for women's voting rights, women in positions of leadership, equal access to education, women's rights to work outside the home, more liberal attitudes towards appropriate dress for women in public, a higher ideal age for women to marry, and women's legal right to inheritance."⁸⁵

Chapter V

Pushing Boundaries

“I was getting a bigger audience and the show was getting more successful so we shifted a little bit from children towards domestic violence. We started out pretty mild, discussing how domestic violence would affect the children and the family in general. If I had aggressively gone after this issue, the men would probably stop the family from watching the show.” - Mozhdah Jamalzadah, interviewed in Kabul on June 15 and 16, 2015 and in Vancouver on April 4, 2015 and Sept. 6, 2015.

Mozhdah Jamalzadah was born in Kabul on Dec. 7, 1979, 18 days before Soviet tanks rumbled into Afghanistan. The family: father Bashir, a poet and professor, mother Nasrin, and two younger brothers fled the country when Jamalzadah was five. Jamalzadah recalls an idyllic and peaceful early childhood, even under Soviet occupation. “Neighbours would just walk into your house and borrow some sugar. My mother would take me to the rose gardens and we would have picnics. My entire family was there: uncles, aunts, cousins.” But people, some of them Bashir’s colleagues and friends, were disappearing. One day, while teaching, Bashir — “acting on a warning from one of his students” — excused himself from the classroom. Three days later, Nasrin received a secret message to gather the children and flee — while trying not to arouse suspicion. At 3 AM, Nasrin gathered the children and — leaving everything behind — got into a truck parked near the home. Packed in with five other families, Jamalzadah, her brothers and mother endured 475 kilometres of roadway into Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan. Luckily for the Jamalzadah family, they had relatives in Islamabad who were able to provide one bedroom for all five family members. Eventually, they came to Canada as refugees and ended up settling in Vancouver. Jamalzadah learned English, bike riding and took vocal lessons in Dari. But it was her academic studies that she focused on. “From a young age I wanted to do something for the country that I left behind.”

In post-secondary, Jamalzadah studied music, political science and philosophy. With Western coalition forces pushing the Taliban and al-Qaeda out of her home nation, it struck Jamalzadah that journalism, specifically broadcast journalism, would “better prepare me for a career in Afghanistan to try to make a difference.” Because of her music

— a melding of traditional Afghan music and Western pop — Mozhdah was becoming well known in Afghanistan. (Her hit single “Afghan Girl,” which was recorded in Canada, was voted best song of the year in Afghanistan in 2010. It is an anthem to the young female victims of acid attacks in Kandahar City.)⁸⁶ A new Afghan television station, *ITV* (sometimes spelled *OneTV*) offered Jamalzadah a prestigious gig as host of a US-knockoff singing show. But Nasrin, who operates an eponymous hair salon on Main Street in Vancouver, in addition to managing her daughter’s music career, had a better idea. At a meeting in Kabul with a *ITV* manager, Nasrin told them, “If my daughter is going to leave her safety and her friends and family behind in Canada to come here, then I would like her stay to be worthwhile.” What did Nasrin have in mind? She responded, “Have you ever heard of the *Oprah* show?” *Oprah* didn’t air in Afghanistan but Nasrin had come to Afghanistan with a DVD of the talk show, whose charismatic host addressed topics such as self-growth and positive change as well as education, literacy, human rights, addiction, physical abuse and sexual abuse.⁸⁷ “You have some homework to do,” Nasrin told the manager, who came in the next day, brimming with excitement, exclaiming, “I love this woman!”

Jamalzadah would become Afghanistan’s *Oprah* as host of *The Mozhdah Show*, which aired for one hour every Thursday and Friday night starting in 2010. The *Oprah* format had to be refined, however, due to Afghans’ reticence to discuss family issues in public. Instead, the television station brought in professionals, including psychologists, and had actors carry out scenes. Although Jamalzadah was eager to address domestic abuse, her father cautioned her, saying, “get into their hearts’ first, then start getting into their minds.” So, “we started off very mild,” says Jamalzadah, first addressing child abuse, creating skits of parents reacting in various ways to a youngster’s behaviour, in order to discuss alternatives to physical discipline. The show’s popularity increased and entire families would drive into Kabul from the provinces to sit in the studio audience. There would be lineups of up to 250 people who the television station would accommodate by setting up extra chairs. Clearly, Jamalzadah was having an impact. “One day, one of the moms took me aside and said, ‘We drove here from Mazar-a-Sharif’ and I said, ‘Thank you so much for coming,’ and she started crying and got emotional

and she hugged me and wouldn't let go. She explained, 'My husband doesn't beat our children any more and I want to thank you and your show.' ”

Eventually, Jamalzadah felt her audiences were ready to hear discussions about domestic abuse. These dialogues were, as Jamalzadah puts it, “mild,” addressing, first, the “affect on the children and the affect on the family in general.” After the show, women came up to Jamalzadah and asked her to “please continue what I’m doing and please don’t stop talking about these subjects.” The men of Afghanistan didn’t discuss the show with Jamalzadah. “It is very difficult for them to approach a woman and tell her they’ve been enlightened or that I was doing a good job.”

But some Afghan men’s reaction — especially those from the diaspora — were, Jamalzadah recalls, “spectacular.” They would say, “ ‘good for you, I’m glad you’re doing this. Women deserve to be treated like human beings and deserve equality and we’re so happy that you’re representing them in this way.’ ”

By 2012, the popularity of *The Mozhdah Show* was soaring and Jamalzadah had agreed to move the program to a larger television station with a broader audience. Meanwhile, however, clerics and extremists were threatening to attack the *ITV* station if the show wasn’t shut down. Then, Jamalzadah did a program on divorce. During the show, she argued that since young Afghan women were increasingly self-immolating as the means to escape lives of abuse, divorce should be granted in such circumstances. During the duration of Jamalzadah’s show, a medical centre in the province of Herat — the only facility in the country that specifically treats burn victims — was reporting increasing cases of self-immolation. In October 2010, for example, 75 burn cases were admitted, mostly self-inflicted, up 30 percent from the previous year.⁸⁸

Jamalzadah had been advised not to do the show due to deeply ingrained opposition to divorce. She forged ahead anyway, despite the strong possibility of “alienating people in Afghanistan — the extremists.” After the show on divorce aired, she instinctively knew that “I had pushed it to my final limit.” Jamalzadah received death threats — something that she had become used to. However, the Canadian Embassy in Kabul contacted Jamalzadah, stating it had received “intelligence saying that your life is

in direct threat.” Not wanting to be made “an example” of by extremists, Jamalzadah ended the show. Since then, she has received offers from Afghan television stations to revive it. While tempted, Jamalzadah has decided — at least for now — to focus on communicating her message about women’s rights as well as non-violence through her music.

There can be little doubt that broaching the topic of divorce in this forum had some influence in Afghanistan, at the very least encouraging a shift in attitudes. In 2015, for example, Maulavi Keramatullah Sediqi, the head of Islamic studies at the Ministry of Haj and Religious Affairs, which oversees religious affairs in Afghanistan, blasted popular culture for causing Afghanistan’s rising divorce rate. He was quoted as saying: “The broadcast of vulgar foreign serials on private television channels has had unpleasant impact on Afghan social attitudes. People consume these soap operas unthinkingly. The messages they send go against the culture and tradition of our society, and this leads to family breakdown.”⁸⁹ Sediqi listed the reasons why a woman may divorce her husband under *sharia* law. (The Afghanistan constitution, which was approved on Jan. 4, 2004, does not explicitly reference *sharia*, or Islamic, law. The constitution does state, however, that no Afghan law “can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions” of Islam.)⁹⁰ Sediqi’s grounds for divorce were: if the husband agreed to his wife’s request for one, if he couldn’t provide for his wife, if he was chronically diseased, if he forced his spouse to perform immoral acts, if he took a lengthy trip and didn’t provide for her welfare while away, or if he hadn’t slept with her for four months.⁹¹ Sediqi did not identify abuse as grounds for divorce.

Sediqi was right in pinpointing modern culture as a factor in shifting attitudes. A study, published in the *American Sociological Review* by the University of Michigan’s Rachael S. Pierotti, analyzed women’s attitudes towards domestic abuse in 26 countries. The study found that women who were exposed to “global cultural scripts through urban living, education, or access to media were more likely to reject intimate partner violence. Overall, each of the mechanisms for diffusion of global norms has a substantial, independent effect on the odds of rejecting intimate partner violence,” Pierotti wrote.⁹²

Where did Jamalzadah get the courage to challenge deeply entrenched conservative traditions, all the while living under a cloud of threatened violence? Her determination had been nurtured in part by a Western upbringing, where the rights of women, as well as human rights, are enshrined in constitutional and civil laws that are upheld by a publicly funded complement of courts, police and politicians. It might even be said that her childhood had imbued her with a sense of entitlement, in terms of women's rights. As a Canadian, she had inalienable rights, so why shouldn't the women of her homeland? Despite cancelling her show, Jamalzadah refused to stop fighting. Her messaging, though, would be channelled into her music. "There's definitely a link between my singing and *The Mozhdah Show*."

When Jamalzadah was interviewed on June 16, 2015, the day after she sang two new and particularly provocative songs at an open-air concert on the grounds of Khurshid TV in Kabul, she was slightly shaken. The concert had featured her and several other women singers. They all wore glamour makeup and elegantly coiffed hair, some without hijabs, stilettos and long, elegant dresses that modestly covered arms, chests and legs yet hugged the figure. Jamalzadah sang her hit song, *Afghan Girl* (Dokhtare Afghan) but also debuted two new tracks: *I Am A Sister* and *Tribute to Farkhunda*, a dirge for 27-year-old Islamic scholar Farkhunda Malikzada, who was beaten to death and burned by a mob of men only three months earlier on the streets of Kabul, after being falsely accused of burning the Koran.⁹³ "I knew that the people were expecting a lot of fun songs, a lot of pop songs, upbeat songs but I managed to fit these two controversial songs in the mix." Malikzada's death, says Jamalzadah, was simply an extension of street harassment. (Malikzada had protested a shrine guardian's sale of amulets to the poor, in addition to Viagra and condoms, causing him to retaliate with the false accusation, which sparked the attack.)⁹⁴ "The reason that this happened was because she was a woman standing up to a man. The reason she got beaten the way that she did was because she was a woman. Our culture says that men can do this, that they have the right to do that." Malikzada's slaughter, says Jamalzadah, was legitimized by the notion of honour, which is linked to purdah. In this case, the burning of the Koran — if it had been true — would have been a

dishonourable act. A mob mentality, fuelled by ancient tradition, called for an “honour killing,” Jamalzadah says.

The tribute song reflected the horror of Farkhunda’s brutal demise, featuring lyrics that speak in the murdered woman’s voice: “I’d rather be six feet under and I’d rather be in a hole covered with dirt than to be among those monsters.” The song also included lines intended for a man to sing, condemning this brutal aspect of Afghan society. “If killing a woman is a part of our culture, then I’m ashamed of being a man and I am ashamed of our culture,” the lyrics read.

The chorus for *I Am A Sister* also denounced men’s behaviour with lyrics like: “Don’t stone me to death, don’t chain my feet to the ground, don’t cover my eyes. I’m alive, don’t hold me back.” Such boldness did not ingratiate Jamalzadah to some of the mainly male crowd of about 1,000 people. (Several dozen women, seated with their families, sat in chairs in front of the stage.) “When I sing, I pay very close attention to people’s facial reactions,” she says. “I could see the reaction of the men and I thought, ‘what was I thinking; what have I done?’ I thought they would attack me on the spot.” They didn’t, but numerous men sent Jamalzadah Facebook messages afterwards angrily stating that her songs caused them to walk out of the concert.

Jamalzadah contemplates her influence on Afghan society. More Afghan women are now singers and are on televised music shows, she says. She also observes Afghan female journalists “who are really speaking their minds and wearing smaller and smaller hijabs (head scarves).” As for Afghan men? “There are the men who say I’m a bad influence on the new generation of women growing up and [saying] I’m going to change women’s minds and make them more Westernized and start acting like me and listen to the lyrics of my songs and rise up. And I say, ‘yeah, that’s my point.’ They fear that; they’re scared.”

Chapter VI

A Dangerous Profession

“When a journalist is asking for information, he faces verbal insults from the government of Afghanistan. When a journalist wants to cover an incident — a security incident — then the security personnel of the government of Afghanistan are the people who are making violence against journalists. When you’re working on a story that relates to the government of Afghanistan, you will be faced with some kind of violence.”

- Abdul Mujeeb Khalvatgar, interviewed on June 14, 2015 at the NAI offices in Kabul.

It isn’t just bold talk show hosts and singers like Jamalzadah who live with a fear of violence — or even losing their life. Journalists can find themselves under threat simply for doing their job. Abdul Mujeeb Khalvatgar, the managing director of NAI Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, which works to empower independent media and promote freedom of expression in the country, recalls one of the biggest stories of his career. On Oct. 9, 2004, a national democratic election was held to replace the Hamid Karzai-led transitional government, which had been in place since December 2001.⁹⁵ In that 2004 election, Hamid became president, garnering 55.4 percent of the votes.⁹⁶ But a scandal broke out on election day, thanks to Khalvatgar’s keen journalist’s eye. Assigned with covering the voting process, Khalvatgar noticed that that ink used to dye voters’ thumbs to prevent multiple voting easily washed off. He consulted with his editor and within “an hour or so it was an international story,” says Khalvatgar. (Fifteen presidential candidates declared the election invalid due to the ink debacle, claiming multiple voting.)⁹⁷

Khalvatgar believes that fraudsters were indeed behind the ink scandal. But he had another revelation that day: the press could be an effective tool against the forces of corruption. “I saw how journalists could change the big plans of people who are working to do something wrong.” Understanding — and wielding — the power of the press can be a heady experience — as well as a heavy responsibility. As *Chicago Evening Post* journalist Finley Peter Dunne famously wrote on Oct. 7, 1893, “The job of the newspaper

is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”⁹⁸ In Afghanistan, however, those who are “comfortable” — and on the receiving end of an article or broadcast they perceive as critical or antithetical to their interests — can also be keen on retaliation. Few sectors, except for the police and armed forces who are often Taliban targets, feel this more than Afghanistan’s journalists.

Every year, dating back to 2001, NAI’s Media Watch Team has compiled data that record violence against journalists. NAI details which gender was targeted and who was (or most likely was) behind the attack. At the end of December 2016, NAI released its annual report on violence against Afghan journalists for that year. Attacks were at an all-time high, with 415 reported cases of injury, death or threats. This included 14 dead, 23 wounded, three temporarily detained, 292 intimidated and/or the recipient of death threats and 43 assaults. Three female *Tolo TV* journalists were among the dead — killed by the Taliban in Kabul — and a woman *Maiwand TV* reporter was threatened by the group. The rest of the victims were male. In 2015, there were 95 acts of violence, with five journalists killed. All told, this was a 336 percent increase in violence from 2015 to 2016.⁹⁹ Although the Taliban were largely responsible for violent acts, journalists were beaten up, threatened and insulted by a range of perpetrators: security forces, police, the President’s Protective Service (PPS), provincial governors, a university director, attorneys and street protestors. One reporter from *Sada-E-Jawan* FM radio in Herat received a beating from a local group of footballers when he tried to interview a member of the country’s Olympic team.¹⁰⁰

Statistics from the early years of data collection indicate few attacks on or deaths of journalists; however, these were the formative years of media development in Afghanistan, with few professional national reporters. In 2001, for example, NAI recorded six deaths — only one of which appeared to be an Afghan — a reporter from the weekly newspaper *Aftab* (The Sun). (The other deaths were Reuter, freelance or “unknown” journalists.)¹⁰¹ A UNESCO report, however, indicates that Afghan journalists were very much on the frontlines — and suffered as a consequence — during the early years of NATO/Taliban hostilities. Civilians were fleeing the war zones and Afghan stringers, equipped with photography equipment and hand-held video cameras, threw

themselves into the fray. From November 2001 to February 2002, UNESCO recorded eight Afghan journalist and photographer deaths.¹⁰²

According to NAI data, the years 2002 and 2004 saw one freelance death and one Kabul-based *Radio Salam Watandar* journalist threatened, respectively. There were no statistics for 2003, however, this was the year that Hamid Karzai's government came under fire from the United Nations, international diplomats, national politicians and groups like Human Rights Watch for abrogating the right to free expression after two Kabul newspaper editors were arrested and detained on the approval of the president. The editors, Sayeed Mir Hussein Mahdavi and deputy editor Ali Reza Payam Sistany of *Aftab*, were arrested after the paper published articles raising questions about Islam's place in politics. They also criticized Afghan religious leaders. The pair was charged with blasphemy, even though Afghanistan's laws do not define blasphemy. (Karzai stated that the editors had insulted Islam and the paper was shut down.)¹⁰³ At the time, a new constitution was being drawn up and preparations were underway for the 2004 national elections, leading to fears that such censorship would stifle debate about the drafting of the constitution.

The 2004 Constitution of Afghanistan codifies freedom of the press and free speech while prohibiting government censorship in Article 34: "Freedom of expression shall be inviolable. Every Afghan shall have the right to express thoughts through speech, writing, illustrations as well as other means in accordance with provisions of this constitution. Every Afghan shall have the right, according to provisions of law, to print and publish on subjects without prior submission to state authorities. Directives related to the press, radio and television as well as publications and other mass media shall be regulated by law."¹⁰⁴ This is countered by restrictions on content deemed un-Islamic or a possible threat to national security, creating, in essence, a loophole for abuses.¹⁰⁵

Karzai's government continued to bully journalists in 2005, beating up a male *Tolo TV* presenter for appearing on television in a "new style."¹⁰⁶ A male journalist with *Women's Rights Magazine* was arrested by the government for "publishing an article about apostasy."¹⁰⁷ The year 2006 saw a jump in violence-related incidents against

journalists. It was also the first year that Taliban-related incidents began to surface in the form of threats, beatings and one death in Kandahar in a suicide attack. However, in 30 NAI-recorded incidents, most threats, assaults and arrests were carried out by government offices or police throughout Afghanistan. The year 2010 was relatively quiet, with only 26 reported incidents. However, female reporters from radio stations in the northern provinces of Kunduz and Balkh came under Taliban threat. Only eight violent incidents were directly connected to either police or government malfeasance. From 2011-2016, incidents against journalists continued a generally steady incline, with Taliban-related incidents increasing.¹⁰⁸

Then, the Taliban declared war on the media. In an official announcement on Oct. 12, 2015, the Taliban accused Afghan television networks *Tolo TV* and *ITV* of being propaganda networks, singling them out as legitimate military targets due to their “disrespectful and hostile actions.” This came on the heels of the two networks covering Taliban atrocities, including the raping of women at a female hostel and the dispatching of death squads to homes after the fundamentalist group overran and occupied the city of Kunduz starting on Sept. 28. “All the reporters and associates of these channels will be deemed enemy personnel, all of their centres, offices and dispatched teams will be considered military objectives which will be directly eliminated,” the Taliban media release stated.¹⁰⁹

The next day, journalists from all major media outlets issued a counter statement, “Any attack against *Tolo* or *ITV* would be considered an attack against Afghanistan’s media [and on] the country’s press freedom, which is one of the key achievements of the past 14 years.” They also issued a somewhat toothless ultimatum, “If you come after us, we’ll stop reporting on you.”¹¹⁰

Australian-Afghan entrepreneur Saad Mohseni, who is chair and CEO of Dubai-based MOBY Group, which owns *Tolo TV*, among an array of media outlets, wrote a furious response to the Taliban that was published in *The Wall Street Journal*. “With each passing democratic milestone, we are seeing a better-informed electorate, thanks in great part to improved levels of journalism, independent reporting and election debates on

television. No wonder the enemies of democracy are now increasing their efforts to silence the Afghans who work to bring such information to their fellow citizens.”¹¹¹ In his essay, Mohseni pointed to journalism’s role in helping shift attitudes towards gender equality, while enhancing early childhood literacy (and hence the literacy of mothers) by bringing *Sesame Street* to Afghanistan, where it is called *Baghch-e-Simsim* (Sesame Garden) and features a strong female character named Zari.¹¹² Mohseni also pointed to *Tolo TV*’s extensive coverage of the mob killing of Farkundha Malikzada as being an “instrument in turning public opinion against the murderers.”¹¹³

But what do women journalists themselves think about the violence? And is the journalism sector focused on helping cultivate and nurture gender equality for its female members, as well as society in general? A March 2016 report by the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee (AJSC) titled “The Reporting Heroes - A Study on the Condition of Afghan Female Journalists,” shows that women face daily struggles in the newsroom for two main reasons: rising danger from the Taliban and harassment from men, not only on the streets but from colleagues. (AJSC describes itself as an independent structure working under the umbrella of the Afghanistan New Generation Organization that is dedicated to enhancing the safety and protection of Afghan media workers and international reporters. It was created as part of a recommendation that came out of the March, 2009 Kabul Conference on Freedom of Expression.)¹¹⁴

For “The Reporting Heroes,” AJSC surveyed 100 women journalists from eight areas in Afghanistan where female reporters are most prevalent. These included the city of Kabul as well as the provinces of Balkh, Herat, Kandahar, Nangarhar and Khost. The report determined that two main obstacles hinder women in their working lives: gender discrimination and sexual harassment, which are rooted in decades of war as well as ancient, patriarchal customs.¹¹⁵ Carpeting this landscape is hostility towards the free media itself. Before they even enter the field, females must overcome a huge challenge: they must convince their immediate and extended family that they can enter this traditionally male-dominated work sector that will place them (and by extension the family) in the public eye. In the survey, one respondent from Herat said that she went on a hunger strike in order to get permission from her parents to become a reporter. Another

stated that she had to promise her family that she wouldn't appear live on television.¹¹⁶ The difficulties facing young women are often reflected in the liberal — or conservative — attitudes where they were based. For example, just 25 percent of budding female journalists in Kabul faced family opposition whereas in Balkh province, which is in the far north of Afghanistan bordering Uzbekistan, 50 percent of female reporters faced opposition from family.¹¹⁷ Some families set conditions, including returning home at a specified hour and avoiding verbal contact with men in the workplace as well as audience members during live entertainment shows.¹¹⁸ Such restrictions, of course, make it difficult — if not impossible — for women journalists to do their jobs, since employers cannot send female staff to cover stories that will cause them to break family curfew. It also prevents them from covering things like conferences where they will have to communicate with males.

This was one of the motivating factors behind the creation in early 2016 of Sahar Speaks, founded by British-American Amie Ferris-Rotman, who has covered Afghanistan as a foreign correspondent and is now stationed in Russia as a senior correspondent with Thomson Reuters. Her organization trains emerging Afghan female journalists. They are linked with mentors from around the world who help them structure their stories and polish them to ensure they are suitable for publication in global news outlets. (Full disclosure: I have been a mentor with Sahar Speaks.) As Ferris-Rotman points out, there are “no Afghan female reporters at the foreign news outlets in Kabul. Not at the *BBC*, *The New York Times*, *Reuters*, *Associated Press*, etc. This has been a systemic failure by the international press during one of the most important periods in Afghanistan's recent history. It's absolutely outrageous.”^{119, 120} Unfortunately, there is a crevice between a rock and a hard place where female journalists who want to report for international outlets tend to fall. “Reporting Heroes” states: “As far as international media is concerned, it is on the tip of their tongues to say, ‘you are a woman. You cannot travel to the provinces or participate in the conferences so we cannot offer you a job.’”¹²¹

Another deterrence for aspiring female journalists is the level of sexual harassment in the workplace, with 69 percent experiencing touching, overt sexual comments, or harassment by phone or the Internet.¹²² The study found that the more

females present in the broader workplace, the more the scale of harassment increased, suggesting that the reality of accepting women's growing role as economic and social equals is proving hard for men to handle. Female journalists also experienced harassment from the public, with 41 percent of respondents citing rude comments, insults or touching outside the office setting.¹²³

Such deplorable behaviour is often protected by the concept of honour; many women, if harassed, keep silent in order to preserve their own as well as the family's reputation. As one respondent said, "I try to solve the issue myself, because if I report it, I myself will end up with a bad name and reputation."¹²⁴ Nonetheless, 75 percent of female journalists state that, if harassed by a co-worker, they will report it to their boss. A hindrance to this, states one respondent, is that "those high up in the media commit most of the sexual harassment themselves."¹²⁵ Another form of harassment involves accusations that, since a woman is working in media, she and her family have no religious faith and are immoral and corrupt. Said one young reporter, "Ever since I started working in the media, our close relatives called us *kaffir* (disbelievers) and cut relations with us."¹²⁶

Another area where women journalists experience gender discrimination is wages — less pay for the same work. One employee in Herat stated that her male co-workers receive double her salary. This is due in large part to a lack of contracts between employers and employees, which diminishes job security.¹²⁷ Yet despite such roadblocks, humiliations and threats, many women soldier on in the newsrooms of the nation.

Chapter VII

On the Frontlines

“I did a report from Nangarhar province. A terrorist killed many people in a bank with his gun. Later on, he said he enjoyed it. I reported this to the public. Normally, when this type of incident or a suicide attack happens I go and interview the victims’ families. After that, the Taliban were threatening me that my reports are too strong and provokes people against them... I fear the Taliban and I am scared of them, but I cannot close my eyes to victims’ rights by not reporting their stories. I will continue to report on the victims no matter what.”- Shakila Ibrahimkhail - Tolo TV news reporter - Interviewed June 21, 2015 in Kabul. Translation by Hadi Mahmodi, Vancouver.

Shakila Ibrahimkhail remembers living in Afghanistan during the time of the Taliban and tuning in, like 70 percent of the country, to the *BBC World Service*, which broadcast in both Dari and Pashto.¹²⁸ The BBC was a lifeline for Ibrahimkhail — the news and radio drama *Naway Kor, Naway Jwand* (New Home, New Life), based on the long-running BBC radio soap opera *The Archers*, provided reprieve from the hardships.¹²⁹ But it was the excitement of listening to outside news that made Ibrahimkhail, married while young and mother to three children, dream of becoming a journalist. When her husband was found dead, shot with three bullets, during the Taliban years, Ibrahimkhail faced, like so many Afghan widows, the formidable prospect of becoming sole breadwinner. After the Taliban were ousted, she attended journalism school and became a television reporter with *Tolo TV*. Her focus, she says, was to document human rights abuses and women’s rights and politics, especially corruption. It wasn’t just the Taliban who threatened Ibrahimkhail, who in 2015 won Afghanistan’s Medal of Malalai, so named for the warrior flagbearer Malalai of Maiwand, for her courageous fight for women’s rights.¹³⁰ After reporting on domestic abuse cases, which would sometimes take her into the far reaches of Afghanistan with a television crew, Ibrahimkhail would receive threats from those implicated in the mistreatment of a female family member. Such threats — whether from the Taliban or ordinary civilians — scared her. “But I couldn’t close my eyes; I have to do my job,” says Ibrahimkhail. One of the

benefits of reporting on such cases, Ibrahimkhail says, is that the stories circulated outside Afghanistan, resulting in pressure being brought to bear on the Afghan government by external civil rights groups and governments, as well as spurring additional press coverage inside the country. Ibrahimkhail's coverage of domestic abuse also resulted in more people calling in to *Tolo* to report such cases. Despite the danger, Ibrahimkhail was able to take comfort in knowing that she was helping educate the public about women's rights. "Slowly, slowly people's minds changed," she says.

Another well-known female journalist, Najiba Ayubi, the managing director of The Killid Group (TKG), a non-profit media conglomerate, has been involved in the media sector since the fall of the Taliban. TKG has a presence in all 34 provinces, with print (including magazines), broadcasting and online media platforms. Initially created with funding from USAID and the European Union, with Internews (an international non-profit organization that supports local media worldwide) backing its radio station, TKG became financially independent in 2005.¹³¹ Ayubi, who was interviewed on camera June 15, 2015 at her busy TKG offices in Kabul, says that she is one of 13 women running news media organizations in Afghanistan.

Despite this significant advance, there are still huge challenges facing women journalists, says Ayubi. These include the tendency of her female reporters from areas outside urban centres to self-censor — especially on "sexual issues, rape and corruption" stories, for fear of being threatened or even killed by conservative extremists.

Ayubi, who won the 2013 Courage in Journalism Award from the International Women's Media Foundation, based in Washington, DC, says TKG, from the outset, reported "on very important issues like transitional justice, war crimes, corruption, social protections and the Afghanistan power structure." TKG also pushed, along with other media outlets, for Access to Information legislation, which President Asraf Ghani signed into law in December 2014.¹³² This law, says Ayubi, is helpful for women journalists who may not be able to undertake in-depth journalism in the field due to cultural constraints but can write investigative pieces based upon Access to Information requests. (Integrity Watch, an independent civil society organization that monitors transparency,

accountability and anti-corruption in Afghanistan, stated that the law, which only applies to non-governmental organizations and the private sector, requires improvement and should become independent from the government overseer, the Commission on Access to Information.)¹³³

TKG's influence in Afghanistan has much to do with Ayubi's tenacity. She recalls days when its existence — and her life — was endangered. Sometimes her journalists were beaten up, she would receive threats over the phone or gunmen would sit outside her home in vehicles with blackout automotive glass. Members of Parliament threatened her, too. In 2012, Ayubi was publicly disparaged and her professionalism called into question at a press conference by a government minister who didn't like her reporting. Another time she sent one of her journalists out to a school where a policeman had shot a student. Officers confiscated the journalist's equipment except his mobile, so Ayubi went live to broadcast, repeating what the reporter relayed to her over his cell phone. Another time two journalists reported on a shooting at a hospital. The gunmen, who had escaped, saw the report on television and came to Ayubi's home, pounding on her door, demanding that she come out. Ayubi calmly told them from behind her locked front door: "I'm her mother and she's out of the house. I will take a message and forward it to her." They left, and Ayubi jotted down the license plate of the car and reported it to police. "These issues happen a lot in our career, in our life," she says, in a matter-of-fact fashion.

Everyone has a breaking point, however. In 2016, the Taliban followed up on their 2015 threat to treat *Tolo TV* staff as military targets. At the end of the Jan. 20 workday, a suicide bomber drove a car loaded with explosives into a van carrying *Tolo* employees. Seven died — three of them were women — and more than two dozen were injured. The employees were not journalists but worked in graphics and dubbing. The Taliban immediately claimed responsibility.¹³⁴

Ibrahimkhail disappeared shortly afterwards. My Afghan fixer, Ahmad Shuja Momuzai, contacted me to say that Ibrahimkhail was no longer on television and no one among his contacts knew where she had gone. I sent her Facebook messages but there

was no response. Later, I was told that she had fled to Turkey with her three children following the attack — the reporting risks had become too great. Later in 2016, Ibrahimkhail began to post photos of herself with friends in settings that were clearly European. I like to think that her great well of courage ran out before her luck did. And that's a good thing.

Chapter VIII

Ideas Without Borders

“You stopped my show but you can’t stop my music. It’s going to be on YouTube; it’s going to be everywhere.” - **Mozhdah Jamalzadah interview, Vancouver, Sept. 6, 2015**

Extremists forced Mozhdah Jamalzadah to close the book on her eponymous television show. As a result, she channelled her creativity into music. Her music videos were posted on YouTube for viewing by anyone with a computer or smart phone, disseminating her messages of protest to Afghans everywhere.

Access to social media has escalated in the past several years and Afghan women have become more assertive — more present — as a result. As of 2013, Afghanistan had 3G mobile communications standard capability serving two million mobile broadband users, allowing smartphones to show videos. Fourth generation, or 4G, followed in 2014.¹³⁵ According to a USAID survey, the country has more than 20 million mobile phone subscriptions for a population of about 30 million people. Even though the average monthly wage for an Afghan is only \$45 a month, mobile phone ownership is affordable at US\$1 for a SIM card and US\$10 for a used handset. Airtime costs about US \$3.50 an hour.¹³⁶ Youth are the majority of mobile-phone owners: about 65 percent of new purchases are made by those 25 years of age or younger. Females are mobile phone users, too, with half of those surveyed owning a phone and another 32 percent having access to one.¹³⁷

Mobile phone ownership allows Jamalzadah and other Afghan musicians like female rapper Sonita Alizadeh, who also posts to YouTube, to reach out to Afghans and communicate their ideas without being in the immediate crosshairs of punitive extremists.¹³⁸ Music, of course, isn’t all these Afghans are absorbing. Exposure to different ways of thinking and acting, whether that comes from music videos, newspapers, chat rooms, fashion sites, movies or television shows, challenges a world view constructed by parents, religious leaders and conventions and traditions.

Dr. Najib Sharifi, president of the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee and Afghan Voices, who was interviewed on June 20, 2015 in Kabul, says that the Internet has given young people in Afghanistan unprecedented access to ideas, as well as influence. When he became part of the creation of Afghan Voices, the content development program that trained young men and women in media, the intent was to give them skills in using the “most effective tool we could give them as the means to air their grievances and their hopes for their country.” It also gave them a storytelling platform. “You don’t need to have a TV station. If you have 10,000 followers on Facebook you [effectively] have your own TV station and it’s cheap, it’s free — you don’t have to pay anything,” says Sharifi.

The Asia Foundation, an international development organization that addresses issues relating to governance, economics, international cooperation and female empowerment in 18 Asian countries, released a survey report in 2016 compiling general lifestyle statistics and attitudes of Afghans.¹³⁹ The comprehensive survey included looking at citizens’ access to the Internet as well as social media use. It found that Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have become vehicles for disseminating information and are used by politicians, youth, the private sector and even insurgents. When Farkhunda Malikzada was killed on March 19, 2015, a power outage prevented the dissemination of coverage by conventional media outlets. However, smartphone users posted videos of the attack on YouTube, drawing media attention and galvanizing protestors from within Afghanistan and around the world.¹⁴⁰

Overall, slightly more than 40 percent of respondents had access to the Internet. Rural residents had 32.6 percent access and urbanites 62.2 percent.¹⁴¹ Mountainous Nuristan province, which borders Pakistan in northern Afghanistan and has a population of slightly more than 140,000 people, sees only 2.4 percent of residents having access to the Internet, compared to slightly more than 66 percent in Kabul province.¹⁴² Barriers to Internet use, besides a lack of network coverage, include illiteracy and affordability.¹⁴³

An essay posted on the Afghan Women’s Writing Project, a web-based writing initiative started by American journalist, author and literacy advocate Masha Hamilton,

details the impact of the Internet from the perspective of an Afghan teen. Titled “Internet Bringing a Magical Change to Afghan Girls,” written by a young woman named Shama, (traditionally, Afghans only have a first name) describes how it complements girls’ education by enabling them to do additional research on school subjects while allowing them to have conversations with girls in other parts of the world via FaceTime, which is the Apple video chat application for use on iPhones, iPads and Mac computers.¹⁴⁴

Shama describes how she learned to cook non-Afghan dishes via the Internet (impressing her parents). Fashion websites are popular among her friends, inspiring them to alter and enhance their conventional Afghan attire. Via the Internet, the world has come to girls and women who are restricted from leaving the home by parents. Shama’s friends with Internet can communicate with others via Facebook, Viber, which is an instant messaging app, and WhatsApp, a free messaging app for Android and other smartphones. Shama describes how lives have been changed: “They can download and play games, listen to favorite singers, or watch videos on YouTube. They have access to movies after their home chores or studies are completed. They’re not shy to share the ideas with people around the world: they can create an account and talk to whomever they want, on Facebook for example. The Internet has turned their homes into a cinema, a place where girls can feel the excitement of a concert or even imagine going to Disneyland.”¹⁴⁵

The Internet is also a tool for females trying to deal with all-pervasive street harassment. Impassion Afghanistan is the first company in the country to help businesses, government and communities (such as women’s sports teams) devise digital media strategies. Among its many projects, which has included the organization of an annual Social Media Summit, first held in 2013, Impassion Afghanistan, funded by the US Embassy in Kabul, co-created a website dedicated to combatting street harassment. Called AzarBas, website users can submit reports about being hassled or threatened and relate their experiences online while debating solutions to this ubiquitous and detestable practice.¹⁴⁶

Social media can be used as a way in which to participate in political debates as well as promote women's rights. Malali Bashir, a reporter with Radio Free Afghanistan, which is affiliated with Radio Free Europe, was voted the most influential Twitter user in Afghanistan during the Afghan Social Media Summit, held in 2015. The award recognized best practices in social media as well as the impact within Afghanistan. With 30,000 followers, Bashir's tweets, which often take a women's rights perspective, cover the gamut from government corruption to insurgent attacks, culture, housing for the poor — whatever might be of interest and concern to Afghans. (Bashir, who is from the province of Zabul in southern Afghanistan, also runs the blog *Afghan Watch*.)¹⁴⁷ Social media, clearly, is influencing women's integration into public and civil discourse while opening up their eyes to new possibilities and ways of thinking, stretching the bonds of tradition like an elastic.

Chapter IX

Conclusion - The Sound of Silence

It shouldn't be forgotten that, less than 16 years ago under Taliban rule, professional women: journalists, teachers, engineers and physicians, as well as students and housewives, weren't allowed to work. They couldn't leave the house without a male escort, called a *mahram*.¹⁴⁸ The Taliban even renamed places that had women in the original title, for example, "women's garden," became "spring garden." It was as if women in Afghanistan had been wiped off the face of the Earth. If they left the imprisonment of home, they emerged in another, smaller jail cell: a blue burka, not daring to speak for fear of breaking a Taliban edict forbidding females to be heard.¹⁴⁹ Invisible, silent and therefore irrelevant and worthless — this was women's reality.

The invasion by the US in October 2001 unlocked the scold's bridle muting women's voices. Although focused on the military objectives of forcing out the Taliban and the Islamic group Al-Qaeda, the secondary objective was implementing gender equality on an institutional and societal level.¹⁵⁰ Women embraced the new opportunities presented to them. Today, there are millions of girls in school. Women run 800 companies nationally and there are 68 MPs, 240 judges, 72,600 teachers, 2,000 Afghan security forces, two ambassadors and the deputy attorney general who are all female. About 20 percent of the civil service is women, with 10 percent in leadership positions. The country has 3,700 female physicians. Hundreds of women athletes have represented Afghanistan on the world stage, including the Olympics.¹⁵¹ The voices, no longer silent, are recorded and disseminated by a free media that has embraced its role as a pillar of democracy.

Such statistics would seemingly bode well for the nation. However, the Taliban are a continual threat, with the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), stating in January 2017 that the country lost nearly five percent of its territory to the Taliban since the beginning of the year. In total, the Afghan government's control and influence within the country decreased to less than 66 percent, down from 70 percent

in 2016, according to US Armed Forces data.¹⁵²

Islamic State (IS) is also a growing threat and is active in the eastern part of the country in Nangarhar province near the border of Pakistan. It has terrorized villages in Nangarhar, attacked government installations and kidnapped and tortured local women. IS also targets Kabul. Joint Afghan-US operations have reportedly reduced IS numbers to 700 from 3,000 in 2016.¹⁵³

As time and history have shown in Afghanistan, such victories can be short lived. The Taliban, which extorts money from Afghan poppy growers and is provided haven and training in Pakistan, is a hydra devouring time, investment, money and lives.¹⁵⁴ The Taliban are merciless and cunning and its suicide attack on *Tolo TV* staff Jan. 20, 2016 damaged the journalism sector psychologically. NAI - Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan reported in March 2016 that 300 reporters had fled Afghanistan for Europe via Turkey and Greece, some with their families, others in groups of up to 20.¹⁵⁵

The next steps between the Afghan government, US and NATO against the Taliban and its supporters will be determined in large part by what President Donald Trump's administration determines America's role will be in the coming years. The Pentagon has asked for additional troops to top up the current count of 8,400 American soldiers (complementing 13,000 international troops). How will the administration respond to the request and what will happen to nation-building and women's-rights initiatives?¹⁵⁶

Awaiting further engagement (or not) from the international community provides time to reflect. Will the remarkable advances made by women succumb to the deadly back-and-forth tango that has engaged Afghanistan for nearly two hundred years? Will the voices of women — increasingly firm and clear — carried along by social media, newspapers, magazines, television and radio, diminish, like turning down the volume on the TV remote? Will women's voices, once again, become the sound of silence — mere footnotes in the annals of Afghanistan's past?

It is clear that media are crucial in promoting a progressive agenda leading to greater personal and political emancipation for women in Afghanistan. Without female journalists, the voices of many women and girls will never be articulated and thus never debated or discussed, due to the strong cultural taboo against speaking to strange men — and thus male reporters — who aren't members of the family. Ensuring that women's voices are heard acknowledges that their concerns, viewpoints and experiences matter. This female perspective is vital for Afghanistan to continue to grow its democratic institutions, support rule of law, expand economic development and boost the integration of quality education throughout the country. A society where women are not engaged in these various segments of society on par with men is a society that is locked within a cultural milieu that wastes the economic, social and political potential of half the population. Ensuring that the inequalities that women face within politics, education, law and health are heard via media channels is the first, crucial step to changing these inequalities, which became entrenched during three decades of war.

Afghanistan faces enormous developmental challenges and many of them are directly linked to the oppression of women. This includes widespread domestic violence as well as omnipresent sexual harassment in the public sphere, which prevents women from participating fully in the workplace, or even participating at all. Stymied economic opportunities influence the welfare of families by exacerbating poverty, which in turn hinders children's health and educational opportunities. As history shows, the Muslim world, despite its association today with extremist organizations like the Taliban and Islamic State, is a religion that is open to change. This is evidenced by the 20th century Young Turk movement, which supported a progressive and reformist Islam, to the efforts of such Afghan leaders as King Amanullah Khan and his wife Queen Soraya Tarzi, who created a woman's magazine and promoted girls' education and gender rights. If women's voices on a variety of issues continue to be promulgated throughout media, this further paves the way for the shifting of attitudes towards women and acceptance of their equal participation in civil society. Clearly one of the stated objectives — the restoration of the rights of women — of the October 2001 invasion by the United States and its NATO allies will only be upheld if women themselves have the wherewithal to promote

and support these rights. It is only through the consistent publication and dissemination of needs and injustices that change — institutional change — begins to happen. As women in the West know, achieving gender parity is a protracted battle that must become part of public discourse in order to change hearts and minds, thus swaying voters and motivating policy makers. Women's rights around the globe are precarious, as evidenced by the right wing, conservative agenda currently re-shaping women's reproductive rights in the United States.¹⁵⁷ Awareness — here in the West or Afghanistan — is the first step to countering injustices and instigating actions. Awareness brings about change. The Afghan media should be supported, both internally by the national government and externally by foreign countries, and female journalists nurtured and encouraged, if Afghanistan is to continue its painstaking efforts towards greater equality for women and, by extension, greater national prosperity.

Brave is the woman

Who breaks the taboos, punches

And walks over the face of patriarchy.

- You are that woman.

- Sahar

Poem by Sahar Fetrat, posted to Facebook, International Women's Day, 2017

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