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Life behind the veil

Dr Neelam Batra-Verma

They are fifty per cent of the population in Afghanistan yet have toiled equally or more in the social and economic life of the country. They have contributed socially and economically yet have suffered at the hands of their male counterparts who have tortured them no end. Governments have merely added to their woes. President Hamid Karzai's government is no different. Life behind the veil is of deprivation, depression and hardship.

Nahid was a 16-year-old high school student living with her family in Myrcorayan in Afghanistan. In mid-1992 her house was raided by armed Mujahideen guards who had come to take her. The father and family resisted. Nahid ran to the fifth floor of the apartment block and threw herself off the balcony. She died instantly.

In mid-1993 Nafisa, a 25-year-old woman, reportedly tried to kill herself when armed guards came for her. A neighbouring family who subsequently took refuge in Pakistan recalled how in June that year armed men from Shura-e Nezar had come to the woman's house. Nafisa ran to the third floor of the building and jumped off the balcony. The neighbours came to the streets and the guards left the area.

Nose and ear of yet another Nafisa were cut off by her husband in Herat province in Western Afghanistan. She says her husband is addicted and also burned her child by hot water. She wants out.

22-y old Fatima who has been abused and injured by her cruel husband in Herat - Western Afghanistan. Her toes were cut off by her husband, she was burnt by hot water, her hair pulled, and according to a doctor of a local hospital in Herat: "The woman claims to be beaten up by her husband. Signs of beatings and injuries are seen all over the body."

A 15-year-old girl whose father, Muhammad Ali al-Zahrani, a death-row inmate, married her off to a cell mate who also was sentenced to death.

Gulsoom is 17-years-old and married. Last year she tried to commit suicide - she failed. She set fire to herself but, against the odds, survived with appalling injuries. Gulsoom was engaged at the age of 12. Three years later her family married her to a man aged 40 who she says was addicted to drugs. She was then taken to Iran. Her husband beat her regularly, particularly when he had no money for heroin.

These are just a fraction of the cases of violence against women in Afghanistan prevalent in the country today. Driven to desperation by forced marriages and abusive husbands, more and more women are taking their own lives to escape. And all this when the dreaded Shia Personal Status law is yet to be implemented. Thankfully, Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai is bowing to international pressure and is planning to review legislation which the UN says would legalise

rape within marriage. As if problems for women are not enough in the war torn country, the new law which if comes into affect, will certainly make life for the women of Afghanistan, miserable within the homes, a place which is supposed to be safe and secure from the outside world. The law would, however, affect members of Shia minority.

During election time, the Afghan president was seeking to win support from hardliners but instead attracted international condemnation. Countries like UK and Canada condemned Karzai's intentions as they have soldiers dying for the people of Afghanistan in that country so that the country could live in peace and bring democracy. Instead of democracy, the present Karzai government wants to win votes by making women his sacrificial goats.

It has been 1400 years since Islam has given both men and women equal rights before God and gave equal rights of inheritance, choose their life partners, right to vote and right to work. Yet, for centuries, women in Afghanistan and other Muslim countries, have been denied these basic rights by their own fathers, brothers, husbands or by a government decree. When Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in 1996, the plight of Afghan woman worsened. They were not allowed to leave the house without a male escort or seek medical help from a male doctor. They were forced to cover themselves from head to toe and women doctors and teachers were not allowed to continue with their profession. Many of them turned to begging and even prostitution to feed their families.

Syed Soharwardy of Muslims Against Terrorism, finds the situation for women appalling. Says he in a telephonic interview from Ontario," Islam is the most progressive religion. Fourteen hundreds years ago, when women were considered commodities and they had no rights, Islam gave rights to women. These rights of women are protected under Islamic laws. The right to inherit, the right to marry of own choice, etc were given by Islam. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said that the salvation of all people including men lies under the feet of a woman and that woman is the mother. In the holy Qur'an, the relationship between husband and wife are based upon mutual protection, comfort, respect, loyalty and care. In fact, Islam is the most feminist religion, if implemented in its true form. Fourteen hundred years ago when pagans used to burry their own daughters alive, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, "Anyone who would raise three daughters with good education, he will be very close to me in the Heaven".

Studies have time and again shown that whenever, there is a war, women and children are the worst affected. The situation in Afghanistan for women had shown some improvement after Taliban was overthrown. More women and girls started going to school and they were allowed to leave the house without a male escort and show their faces. Yet in areas still dominated by Taliban, those changes have yet to take place. Girls and women are still scared of going to school for fear of acid being thrown at them by the Taliban. The Karzai government adopted an Afghan constitution stating that "the citizens of Afghanistan - whether man or woman- have equal rights and duties before the law". Yet, many challenges still remain. In the rural areas, repression of women continues unabated and families still restrict their women from participating in public life and denying them basic education. Little girls are forced into marriage to older men who then

torture them to submission, both physically and emotionally. More teenage girls have resorted to suicide to escape their tormentors.

Lauryn Oates , Project Director, *Excel-erate* Teacher Training Programme, Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan has been working for the uplift and education of Afghan women since she heard about their plight as a teenager along with Calgarians, Janice Eisenhauer and Carolyn Reicher. While completing a senior Development Studies course at the University of Calgary, they were shocked by the human rights violations Afghan women were facing under the Taliban regime, they began to explore how they as Canadian women could help Afghan women in a tangible and effective way. From there unfolds many remarkable stories of how women from all across the country joined together in solidarity as members of this uniquely Canadian network: Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan (CW4WAfghan). Some ten years later, there are now fourteen chapters and affiliated groups in Canada with hundreds of members and supporters working together to advance human rights for Afghan women. CW4WAfghan trains women as teachers as well as give them post secondary education, to enable them to teach other women and work as teachers. The organization mainly survives on donations by local Canadians.

Since then Lauryn has made 4-5 trips to Afghanistan and during her last trip, which was in March this year, she says no one there was talking about any new law coming. “There was no discussion and even University students were not aware of any new legislation in place. Everything was so discreet that women parliamentarians were caught by surprise.”

During her visits to Afghanistan, Lauryn finds a huge contrast between women living in urban and rural areas. “In the rural and border areas, most people are influenced by Pakistan and live a very traditional life. Only 15% of women are educated in the country. The educated ones are either leaving the country or have already left. Since Taliban was overthrown in 2001, we have succeeded in getting as many girls to school as possible. We now want to focus on the quality of education by giving them resources, equipments, text books etc. People in Afghanistan are hungry for education and many families want to send their children to school. In the Taliban dominated areas, they are scared as acid is used as a weapon to deter the girls from going to schools.”

According to a recent United Nations Population Fund in Afghanistan (UNFPA) report, as many as 25% of women in the country are subjected to sexual violence and most go unreported and the perpetrators of the crime are never punished. According to Younis Payan, deputy of the United Nations Population Fund in Afghanistan (UNFPA), “The statistics show that about 30.7% women suffer physical violence and another 30% suffer from psychological violence.” An Amnesty International survey also confirmed that several Afghan women reportedly commit suicide to avoid being raped. While others commit rape to escape harassment and torture at the hands of their husbands, who are mostly more than double their ages. Yet another group seek death as they fail to get justice from the law after being raped by men in power. In at least one case, a father who saw the Mujahideen guards coming for his daughter reportedly killed her before she could be taken away.

It is ironical but true that those Muslim men who refuse to give their women any right whether to work or go out in public, yet do not hesitate to send them out as suicide bombers to accomplish their own missions. It is important to educate the women of any country as one educated woman will educate a family, which in turn will educate the nation. And when you educate the nation, a strong economy is built and you build the status of your country. The main role of NATO in Afghanistan is to assist the Afghan Government in exercising and extending its authority and influence across the country, paving the way for reconstruction and effective governance and not to help governments to merely win elections at any cost. Undoubtedly progress has been made-of 351 parliamentarians, 89 are women today and in the upcoming August elections, a female lawmaker, Shalah Attah, plans to run for the President's position. Yet what cannot be ignored is that despite all advances, millions of unfortunate Afghan women face violence and traditional practices of trading women to settle feuds continue unabated.