

# Afghan Women Face the Future

Saturday 9 March 2013, by [JONES Ann](#) (Date first published: 8 March 2013).

This is a personal story, and it's hard to tell because nobody knows how it will end. I first went to Afghanistan in 2002, where I volunteered with two small nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) staffed by Afghan women: widows, university students, teachers. I've gone back to Afghanistan to work with those women almost every year—except for part of 2010 and 2011, when I embedded with the US military instead, to learn more about its “mission” in the country. The military was so out of touch with the actual Afghanistan that I may as well have been on the moon.

I went back to Kabul again in January, eleven years after first meeting my Afghan colleagues, and more than a year since I had last seen them. I thought I would find them changed, and I did—but not as I had imagined. I was worried about their future. They're worried too, but they're also stronger and more determined than ever.

On my first morning back at the office, I walk into a staff meeting on “contingency planning.” Just ahead looms 2014, when the next presidential election will be held (in April), as well as the departure of most American and foreign troops by year's end. My colleagues tell me about the results of a local poll. Of the Kabulis asked how “things” will be after 2014, 25 percent say “better,” 25 percent say “the same” and 45 percent say “worse.” (Anticipating hard times, 36,000 Afghans left the country in 2011, while an estimated 50,000 followed in 2012, most of them entering neighboring countries illegally by dangerous routes.) In addition, everyone says the government to come will be “even more conservative” than the ultraconservative government of President Hamid Karzai now in place. Although Karzai, like his “angry brothers” of the Taliban, is a Pashtun who keeps his wife at home, he has managed, with his colorful multiethnic costume and fluent English, to appear far more liberal than he is to the West. The next government, Afghans think, will drop the disguise and jettison women's rights just as the US State Department did in 2011 (when, as an anonymous official said, it dumped those “pet rocks” from its policy rucksack).

We sit together, talking, in the long shadow cast by these dire predictions. In the last few years, as President Obama looked for a way to end the war, some American-led women's organizations in Afghanistan turned hawkish. They argued that American forces are needed to protect Afghan women and the gains they've made during the last decade. I was on the other side of that argument, convinced by work in multiple conflict zones that war is not good for women. There was no evidence that the everyday problems of women in Afghanistan—poverty, religious tyranny, child marriage, sexual assault, enslavement, domestic abuse, confinement, death by childbirth—could be solved by armies. But there was no evidence either that these political, social and economic problems—involving questions of power, equality and human rights—could or would be fairly addressed by a government of men who thought much like their Taliban brothers. The much-publicized “gains” of women here owe more to the work of NGOs than to the Afghan government, while Karzai himself had done little to advance, and much to impede, women's progress.

With 2014 on the horizon, I wanted to learn from my colleagues—these smart, trustworthy old friends—what they believe they have gained in the last decade, and what they now stand to lose—or keep.

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I find my questions already under discussion in this meeting on contingency planning. The heater isn't working—electricity is still intermittent at best—but we huddle around the table in our coats and shawls, wrapping our hands around cups of hot green tea. My friends are talking about the foundation of their work to end violence against women. Highly trained (and funded) over the years by their European parent organization, this Afghan NGO—which I agreed not to identify because of safety concerns—specializes in psychosocial counseling and legal representation for female survivors of violence, plus public advocacy for women's rights. From a staff of two in Kabul, when I joined in 2002, the organization has grown to employ about ninety people and to provide services in three major cities. A few years ago, it became an independent national NGO, run entirely by Afghan women. The women seated around the table easily made that transition, but now, as the ground shifts beneath them, they're looking for a place to stand.

"All these men!" one of the lawyers says. "They have all been put in charge of something. They have public offices, political parties, big money, private militias, secret alliances, bodyguards, passports, houses in Dubai, even their own TV channels. They control everything. And look at us! We do so much work, but we're not in charge of anything."

Another asks, "Why didn't America build some lasting structures for women into the government at the beginning?" It's a rhetorical question, but even so, it's painful to be reminded of the monumental international blunder that Afghans call "The Great Mistake": the Bush administration's decision to replace the Taliban regime with a like-minded government of America's old fundamentalist pals. Much of the essential work these women do might have been institutionalized from the start in the Ministry of Health or Education or Justice—but not in a government that has no place for women. Afghanistan's newly "liberated" women were consigned to a separate Ministry for Women's Affairs, the only ministry with merely advisory powers and, for many years, no telephone.

It's not that there weren't any women prepared to take on positions of responsibility. Women who remained in Kabul throughout the civil war and the Taliban regime knew very hard times; but before that, under communist rule in the 1980s, Kabul had been an island of safety in the midst of the Soviet war. Women, wearing Western clothes, had studied and worked—they were the majority of doctors, teachers and civil servants—and sent their children to school, just as they had during the long reign of the late king. Being "liberated women" was not a foreign concept to them. Nor was it foreign to men in their moderate and progressive families. For much of the past century, Afghan kings and presidents have denounced burqas and extremists alike, only to have this long, slow modernization reversed by Washington functionaries ignorant of history.

President Karzai has managed to maintain a near-perfect, decade-long record of excluding women from government. He holds the extraordinary undemocratic power to appoint all provincial and district governors and mayors in the country; since 2001, he has named one female governor, one female mayor and, just last month, for the very first time, a woman to head one of Afghanistan's 398 districts. His cabinet usually includes a token woman (the minister for women's affairs); sometimes two or even, at the moment, three. The international community prescribed quotas that did put women in the Afghan Parliament, but in numbers too small—27 percent of the lower house, 17 percent of the upper—to save them from intimidation or to override presidential decrees. Many are silenced by threats, and others vote as they are told by the warlords who sponsored their election, leaving a courageous group of activists to put their lives on the line by speaking up for women's rights. Years ago parliamentarian Shukria Barakzai, the mother of three girls, famously responded to the death threats by saying, "I would rather die for the dignity of women than die for nothing."

It is possible that American policy-makers simply failed to notice the remarkable absence of women in the Afghan government, since cabinets and Congresses in Washington are also prefabricated collections of men in suits. But the unavoidable result of this disgraceful record is that, as the United

States prepares to leave Afghanistan, it will also be leaving Afghan women on their own again, much as George W. Bush did after he “freed” them—with only a flimsy, and perilous, attachment to public life.

Kabulis say the United States will leave behind nothing durable for ordinary Afghans. They say the Russians, by contrast, at least left behind large modern housing projects, until recently rated the best in the city. Now, with the economy contracting as businessmen and government ministers take their investments elsewhere, more Kabulis are falling into poverty, which means that more women are falling (or being pushed) into prostitution. The coveted apartments that the Soviets left to the Afghans have degraded on America’s watch into brothels: my colleagues say there are now 123 of them in the Russian-built Macroyan apartments alone, with 5,000 women working as prostitutes across the city. Women in tattered burqas, trying not to fall that far, line the center of Kabul’s busy streets, begging motorists for help. All of this means more work ahead for my colleagues in this NGO, if only they can keep the organization going.

And now here we sit in a meeting to consider the “contingencies” they may face in the next two years. A European colleague has come from the parent organization to find out how it can help. We refill our teacups to keep our hands warm while we listen to a report from Salma, head of the public affairs team, whose job it is to keep abreast of political matters. She warns that the United States wants the Taliban to make a deal with the government. A power-sharing agreement could bring a kind of stability, she says, but it’s hard to predict because no one yet knows who “the government” will be (though Karzai, who is not eligible to run again, is rumored to have already struck a deal with his rivals). Worse, any such power-sharing arrangement is certain to involve more hard-core Taliban, which means women will be “at risk.” A second possibility, she adds calmly, is civil war, and in that case this organization will close. (In passing she remarks, “It would be wise to have a personal plan.”) A third possibility: the Taliban will again take over the government. “There is speculation,” she says, “that the Taliban would be more moderate because they would want the Americans to leave them alone. We can’t be sure, but possibly we could continue our work very quietly.”

A psychologist says, “Even if the Taliban don’t take over completely, the next Parliament could be full of them.” A lawyer laughs grimly and says, “They’ve been there all the time.” She reels off the names of the usual suspects, and other women add more. Then they fall quiet, as if to observe a moment of silence: part of the dreaded future is already in place. At last a lawyer says, “They’ll push us out of the criminal court. They won’t let us defend those ‘bad women’ anymore.”

Another lawyer says, “Maybe so, but we can still defend them now.” Many voices murmur support. All the departments have already drawn up strategic plans for 2013. The women are impatient to get on with the work.

The meeting breaks up, and they hurry to the cars that will carry them on their rounds. The psychologists head for hospitals and community centers to listen to ordinary women recount lives steeped in the problems of poverty: anxiety, abuse, depression, sorrow, violence. The senior psychotherapist goes to a women’s shelter to counsel women who have been brutally tortured and mutilated: one with a face dissolved by acid, another whose head had been split by an ax, yet others slashed with a knife and disfigured. Some lawyers go to the women’s prison to meet their clients and prepare their defense. The new and bigger prison holds ever more women charged with the same old “moral offenses”: running away from home, being raped or forced into prostitution (all charged as “adultery”). Other lawyers accompany social workers to the “Mediation Center,” an unheated shipping container on the grounds of the Welayat, the provincial administration, where women line up to talk to them about husbands who raped them, beat them, forced them into prostitution or threw them out of the house. There is no end to the problems of such ordinary women in Afghanistan, whose “gains” consist almost entirely of the help they get from NGOs like this one and

the other organizations of civil society.

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Hala is one of my oldest friends in the NGO. She joined it when I did, in 2002, upon returning with her parents and brothers from exile in Iran. She was a university student, hired as a translator; now she works on the administrative staff. She tells me, “We didn’t know anything in the beginning—and conditions were so terrible, we were always busy with emergency humanitarian work. It took us some years to realize that giving ‘help’ is not enough. To really help women, you have to change their lives. We had to learn how to enter political discussion, how to maneuver to change laws, how to talk to these very conservative people. We kept learning, and we got smart.”

But then the mood turned against women. Many think it happened in 2005, with the murder in Kabul of Shaima Rezayee, a popular Tolo TV presenter. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan reported a series of assassinations of prominent women in Kandahar and other provinces, starting just about that time and continuing through 2009, when the report was published. No one was ever arrested or punished, so assassination became a convenient tool—the public face of the domestic violence so many women meet at home. The dead are policewomen, actresses, journalists, provincial councilwomen, advocates for women’s rights, schoolgirls, teachers and, in some cases, even the husbands who failed to keep their wives at home.

Then, in 2009, came the Taliban-like Shia Personal Status law, passed by Parliament and all but eliminating women’s autonomy. Protest in the international press brought about a recall of the so-called “Marital Rape Law,” whereupon President Karzai enacted it by decree. “We worked so hard against it,” Hala says. “It took away women’s freedom. Women’s rights were broken. Women were made second-class. It was so clear: we had no more illusions after that.”

Until then, women had thought they were still protected by Article 22 of the Afghan Constitution of 2004, which states that men and women have equal rights and duties before the law. But increasingly, lawyers in court cases encountered Article 3 of the Constitution, which enshrines Sharia, or Islamic law, as the ultimate arbiter. “This was something new to us,” Hala says. “We had to learn about Sharia and how to interpret it, and that knowledge made a big change in our attitude.” Seated behind her desk, she straightens her back and seems to grow taller. “Sharia does not require that women must stay at home,” she says. “My working is not against Islam. It is those extremists who are against Islam, with all their violence and their drugs.” She laughs at her own vehemence. “That’s something I’ve gained,” she says. “I learned that I have the right to talk. I talk all the time now, and I’m good at it, too.”

Just last year, however, she had been near death. Happily married, Hala had trouble with a pregnancy; it kept her in bed for months and ended in a botched delivery. The baby was fine, but Hala recovered slowly and imperfectly and has been told she needs surgery. Some of my former colleagues have already died from Afghanistan’s abysmal healthcare, but pregnancy is a special peril, and this NGO office seems to be full of young women pallid from difficult pregnancies. (One asks another, “Do you have pain all the time?”) Hillary Clinton boasted of a US Agency for International Development study showing such unbelievable improvements in women’s health—for example, life expectancy zooming from forty-two years (in 2004) to sixty-two (in 2012)—that even the experts hired to work on it didn’t buy the results. But while USAID spends money on hype, forty-eight Afghan women still die every day from “reproductive health complications.” In eleven years, the maternal death rate has “improved” from the worst in the world to one of the worst, while infant mortality remains at the bottom.

he members of President Karzai’s handpicked High Peace Council are also talking all the time now,

mainly about disarmament and reconciliation with the hundreds of small militias around the country. Nine members of the seventy-person council are women, belatedly added at the insistence of the international community. This is as close as Afghanistan will come to honoring the series of UN Security Council resolutions, passed since 2000, that call for women in all conflict zones to be involved at decision-making levels in every phase of peacemaking and reconstruction—to ensure that the “peace” will be both just and sustainable, not merely another temporary absence of war. (Many Afghans believe real peace is not possible until all of the war criminals, including those now sitting in the government, are brought to justice.) But the High Peace Council, designed to make a deal with the Taliban, includes twelve members of the former Taliban regime, countless sympathizers, and not a single representative of the civil society through which most of women’s gains have been realized.

Even so, one of the councilors tells me that the presence of women is effective in these meetings with minor-league Taliban. “It lets extremists see for themselves that Afghanistan includes both women and men,” she says, “and we women have our moments.” At one meeting, the Talibs reportedly ranted about reinstating strict dress codes. They stopped only after a councilwoman advised them not to demean themselves by stooping to attend to immoral women. “Let them go to hell, where they belong,” she said. “You should concern yourselves with the more important purity of men.”

One day, I accompany the NGO’s lawyers and social workers to the Mediation Center and find the walled compound of the Welayat crowded with armed men. Inside the freezing shipping container, I talk with a woman in her 20s named Masuda. Happily, she tells me that the social worker “did a miracle” for her, then impulsively bends to kiss the woman’s sleeve. Masuda was desperate when she first came to the center: her husband, along with his mother and sister, beat her almost every day because she had not produced a baby. Then a lawyer explained to Masuda, and later to her husband, what their rights and responsibilities are under both Sharia and national law. Next, through fourteen meetings with Masuda and her husband, separately and together, the social worker brought about a family reconciliation based on a contract of good (Islamic) behavior. Now, Masuda is happy and says her husband even treats her kindly. (The contract provides that no family member will ever strike her again or make her wear a burqa.) There she sits, smiling, wrapped in a dark brown shawl, with a matching scarf over her head. And beside her sits her mother, a little slip of a woman with a burqa tucked back off her face. Masuda’s mother says, “This is all because the lawyer explained to us that a woman has human rights, even under Sharia—and a man who forgets that could go to jail.” She takes her daughter’s hand. “I was blind,” she says. “I told my daughter she had no choice but to accept her punishment. Nobody told me about rights before.” Masuda adds, “Now we tell everyone.”

Given enough time, I find myself thinking, this small NGO could change the whole country—one woman, one family, at a time. But when we leave the center and head back across the compound, my usually companionable colleagues hurry ahead of me on the icy walkway, as best they can in their high-heeled boots. A gunman on the roof casts a shadow on the wall beside me, and I remember that just weeks ago, on this very spot, a female Afghan police officer shot and killed an American contractor. I realize that the rising anti-Americanism has made me a liability to my friends: they don’t want another shooter catching them arm in arm with this foreign target.

Later, in the restaurant of my small Afghan-owned hotel, I see two young women smoking a hookah and texting at top speed. Both are wearing slim, fleecy sweaters and black spandex miniskirts over lacy black tights. They’re students at Kabul University, they tell me, organizing artists concerned about human rights. I have to ask, “Do men ever give you any trouble about the way you dress?” They laugh as if I’d said something truly funny. Then one admits, “We couldn’t be ourselves everywhere at the university, but we are in the arts faculty.” They want to stage a big art exhibition,

with music and dance, to cheer up the people of Kabul, who seem to them far too serious and depressed. Their pricey European clothes and English as polished as their nails mark them as expats, recently returned, and probably possessed of European passports. Girl Power has come to Kabul, in outfits not seen in these streets since the 1970s.

There's no question things are changing, though like everything else in Afghanistan, the changes are complex and often contradictory. For example, the Ministry of Women's Affairs received reports between May and October 2012 of 3,500 cases of "severe violence" against women (including seventy beheadings); but my colleagues take these figures to mean that the women who survived these assaults have found the courage to complain. The change that counts is in the women themselves. Anyone with a TV set can observe women parliamentarians not only sitting in close (at one time shocking) proximity to their male counterparts, but also rising to wave their arms and call out their objections. The NGO's psychologists appear on talk shows to discuss trauma and answer the questions of an anxious nation. ("Why is my son so aggressive?" "Why can I never be sure that I locked my door?") Their legal experts are welcomed in girls' schools and even mosques (normally for men only) to provide information about laws regarding marriage and women's rights. People are hungry for the knowledge such women possess.

At the same time, other Afghans for whom knowledge is blasphemy continue to commit political murders and assassinations. In July 2012, Taliban members in a village in Parwan province put on trial a 22-year-old woman, Najiba, charged with committing adultery with a Taliban commander. Within an hour they executed her, shooting her in the back, while the villagers cried out, "God is great!" That same July, Hanifa Safi, the head of women's affairs in Laghman Province, was killed along with her husband by a bomb placed under their car. And in December, Safi's successor, Najia Sediqi, was shot and killed on her way to work. Also in December, Anisa, a tenth-grade student and volunteer in the polio eradication program in Kapisa, was fatally shot in the head as she walked home from school. In early January 2013, Taliban in Wardak province claimed credit for abducting, torturing, shooting and then hanging a woman who worked with an NGO that distributes sewing and carpet-making materials to women so they can work at home, an arrangement once acceptable under the Taliban government. (The overkill involved in this execution speaks for itself.)

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I think of one of our counselors—someone who, working with the survivors of rape, beatings, torture and attempted murder, didn't burn out. Instead, she says, the refusal of these women to give up on life "empowered" her; she too learned to speak out and even ran for public office. She gave good speeches that made her husband proud, and she almost won. Then her husband started receiving letters from his ancestral village in another province, warning him to keep her at home. These were followed by threatening calls to her mobile phone. She changed the phone, the family moved across the city, and even at risk of losing his land, her husband decided not to visit the village anymore. This is a fearless woman who worked as a psychologist in a government hospital straight through the Taliban regime. (She says, "Taliban have so many psychological problems, they make lots of work for us.") She still appears on radio and TV, a warm and comforting counselor, but she tells me, "I feel at risk now." Like many others, she worries that her husband might eventually insist she stay at home—not because he is conservative, but because he is afraid.

I think of another colleague, who now heads what I still call "our" NGO and believes that international donors will continue to support Afghanistan's civil society and speak up for women. "They know that change doesn't come from this government—it comes from us," she says. "And I have this inner feeling of 'Go for it.' We may lose part of our freedom; we may have to put on conservative clothes. But whatever happens, everything will not be lost."

I think of Dustana, who started as a translator in 2002 and now manages logistics. She told me, "These years have made me a women's activist, and I've brought my husband around too. This is now my personal vision, my own mission. Even if they lock me up at home, I will find a way to work. I will be part of this movement forever. Our minds are made up."

I meet a European friend for dinner, a woman who was a colleague in this NGO and now directs a European NGO that works on education. She shows me a photo of her new grandchild, and I think, "We are growing old in Afghanistan." We talk of the many things Afghan women could have done by now if the United States had chosen to back moderates and progressives instead of the fundamentalists who confound it both as allies and as enemies. My friend tells me that the Afghan women leaders in her NGO have already applied for asylum in Europe. They know they'll be on a hit list.

I say, "I have two conflicting narratives in my head. One is about these powerful, determined Afghan women who will mop the floor with the Taliban and go on working to restore the rights of women in their country. The other is about the same powerful, determined women who, whether the Taliban come to power or not, may be shut down or sent home or shot."

My friend says, "Both are true."

**Ann Jones**

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