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MARCH 8: INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

FROM AFGHANISTAN A WAR WIDOW'S TALE

KHORSHIED SAMAD

When I first met Asma, I was struck by her heavily lined face, her sunken cheeks, and her eyes, which showed deep sorrow and fear. Though in her early forties, she appeared much older from years of hunger and stress. She had come looking for work, and I hired her as our housekeeper in Kabul. She wasn't very good at first. But, after a while she got the hang of it, and the look of discomfort disappeared from her face.

Asma is one of millions of war widows in Afghanistan, a country that still suffers from nearly three decades of war and destruction. She would bring her small son, Milat, with her on workdays. He sat and ate in our kitchen, slowly drinking Coca-Cola like it was nectar from the gods. Asma told me stories of her life, how her husband had been killed during the Soviet occupation and how she had lost her job under the Taliban. They had forbidden all women from working, attending school and receiving medical care from male doctors. They couldn't leave their homes or travel without a male relative. Once Asma said she received a brutal whipping from the steel rod of a Taliban across her legs and ankles; apparently her shoes had made too much noise in the market streets.

Life had been very cruel to Asma and her family, but she had hope once the Taliban were driven out by the Coalition forces. Now, she could work again instead of being forced to beg on the dusty streets of Kabul. She was a high school graduate who, unlike nearly 96% of Afghan women in the rural areas of the country, was literate, and had worked in a government office for several years before losing her job.

She admitted that times had gotten so tough after her husband's death, that she was forced to push her daughters into early marriages at ages 14 and 16 because she could not afford to feed them and her younger son. It had been a tough decision, but she felt lucky that they were safe now and had babies within their first year of marriage.

I met her teenage daughters and saw their tiny babies. They seemed too young to really know what to do, but that was the reality for the majority of young Afghan girls. Many are married between 12 and 14, even though the law states the legal marriage age is 16. This has contributed to Afghanistan having the highest maternal mortality rate in the world. A 2006 UN report states that an Afghan woman dies every 30 minutes

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HANDMAIDS' TALE

Teenage girls forced to marry in Afghanistan have high maternal mortality rate. *A16*



from childbirth or other related causes, and 87% of these cases are preventable.

When I first arrived in Afghanistan with my aunt, a gynecologist from New York, we visited several hospitals and maternity clinics. It is hard to convey the horrible conditions and lack of equipment and medication. One young mother had just delivered twins by herself in her home, and had been brought into the maternity hospital by her relatives because she was hemorrhaging to death. They did not have the US\$10 it cost to pay for a blood transfusion, and so we pulled out money from our pockets to cover her medical expenses. She was one of the lucky ones that day.

I noticed that a new ultrasound machine lay in a corner unplugged. When I asked why the machine was not being used, I was told that no one

knew how to use it and electricity was too unreliable to use such a fancy machine. Three out of five incubators did not work in the baby unit, and all of the children born that day were under birth weight; a few were stillborn. The one who had spina bifida would surely die within a few days.

But things are getting better for Afghanistan's women. One bright development is their growing participation in the political and media sectors of society. Nearly 60% of the country's population is female. Without their significant involvement in the transformation of post-Taliban Afghanistan, positive change will be difficult.

Last time I saw Asma, she proudly showed me her voter registration card and flashed me a beaming smile. She was about to participate in the historic 2005 parliamentary

elections. (More than a quarter of the lower house's seats now belong to women.) As Asma told me, this was only the beginning. Real change is slowly appearing on the horizon. But we all need to remain committed to Afghanistan's transformation because it might take a long time to materialize. For the sake of Asma and many other Afghan women, I certainly hope we all do.

National Post

■ Khorshied Samad is the former Kabul bureau chief and television correspondent for Fox News Channel, and is the wife of the Afghani ambassador to Canada, Omar Samad. Her photojournalism exhibition, *Voices on the Rise: Afghan Women Making the News*, is opening today at the University of Montreal. To view more of Ms. Samad's photos, please visit www.fullcomment.com.

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VERONIQUE DE VIRGERIE / SAYARA MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

Rokia Aziz is one of the first women in Kandahar to attend university after the fall of the Taliban.