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BEFORE
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TALIBAN
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A year after the Taliban seized power, Afghanistan's economy is in ruins - and women are paying the highest price

By Greg Bearup

She's calm to begin with, but it doesn't take long for her vast reservoir of grief and anger to bubble up. She spits it out in bursts, pushing through tears. She has a master's degree in criminal law. She's just started a job as a journalist with the country's best television station. She's young and vibrant and very bright and should be looking forward to the future. And yet, if she wants to go shopping with a female friend, she has to be accompanied by her father or brother. She was recently stopped for the sin of riding alone in the back of a taxi with a male driver. Of course, there are only male drivers. "They asked the taxi driver why he was alone with me," she says. "They told me I can't leave the house unless I have my brother, my father or my husband with me. They told me there would be big problems if I was caught out alone again." She's not married and her brothers and father have to earn a living too; how can they possibly chaperone her everywhere? She despairs at what will come. What will be the next edict restricting the lives of women? When will they say to her, as they have to others, you cannot work, you must stay at home because you are a woman?

"Day by day they bring in more orders for women," she says. "They say it's in accordance with Islam. They say, 'You can't do this according to Islam. You can't do that according to Islam.' But in Islam women have rights. Why don't they do something for women?" By now, the words are coming out in a bitter stream. "In Islam it says that a man cannot torture and hit his wife, but there are no orders [from the Taliban] against this. Why

don't they tell their brothers they can't marry a girl when she doesn't like him? Why don't they do anything about young girls, children, forced to marry? In Afghanistan girls don't have any control. They don't have any choices, not even in the biggest decision of their life, their marriage. Why? Day by day they are bringing in more limits on women. Always women."

A year after the Taliban seized control, Gulalai Hakim, 26, is living in a dystopian world that could have come straight from the pages of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. People are starving. The economy is in ruins. The UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, says that 700,000 Afghans were newly displaced within the country last year, 80 per cent of them women and children, adding to millions who'd previously fled and are still displaced after decades of fighting and the worst drought in living memory. There are two million Afghan refugees, living mainly in foetid camps in Iran and Pakistan. More than 24 million people are in dire need of humanitarian relief. More than half the country's 39 million people are suffering acute food shortages.

This has been coupled with an oppressive crackdown on the rights of women, with many effectively banned from working. While bans have been ad hoc, depending on the province, women judges and police can't work. Women secondary teachers have been stood down, but are still being paid. The Ministry of Finance recently declared that women who had been working in the department should send a male relative to replace them - regardless of his qualifications. Women are largely banned from the

Control: women must be veiled, with a male chaperone, if they go out

service sector. Female health workers are still working, as are some women in the private sector, but they face difficulties with transport, as a male relative has to accompany them.

It wasn't meant to be this way. In October 2004 Afghans voted in a presidential election that would usher in Hamid Karzai. Millions of Afghan refugees who'd fled to Pakistan and Iran also got to vote. Due to the time difference, the first vote was cast in Islamabad, Pakistan. I was there – almost two decades ago – to witness a beaming 19-year-old refugee, Moqadasa Sidiqi, become the first person to cast her ballot. It was a moment of great hope. "I cannot explain my feelings, just how happy I am," Sidiqi, a science student, said at the time.

A few days later, in a televised presidential debate with John Kerry, US president George W. Bush said: "As a result of ridding the Taliban out of Afghanistan, the Afghan people had elections this weekend. The first voter was a 19-year-old woman. Think about that. Freedom is on the march." Now, what's left of freedom in Afghanistan has retreated into the barren mountains. It's holed up in a dark, dank cave shivering to death.

A year ago, Samantha Mort was in her office in UNICEF's Kabul bunker, meeting with some of the agency's bigwigs. She's the head of communications for the UN children's agency in Afghanistan. The skies were filled with the deafening groans of gigantic US transport planes, taking off and landing. After 20 years, the Americans and their coalition partners, including Australia, were pulling out. Her bosses had flown in that morning to reassure staff and to help plan for the multiple crises inflicting the blighted nation; it was in the midst of a horrendous drought, and fighting in the provinces had forced thousands to flee their homes. "Children would walk for days with weeping burns, it was very distressing." Still, she thought, Kabul was safe. At least for the moment. "The Taliban controlled 60 to 70 per cent of the country," Mort says. "But it seemed the army was quite strong and holding its own [around the capital]."

At one point during the meeting she glanced down at her Twitter feed. She noticed the security staff were likewise checking their phones. "I'm so sorry," she said. "It's probably nothing, but it seems like the Taliban is quite close to Kabul." The security staff left the office to confer. People were looking at each other nervously. It was soon confirmed the Taliban had broken through the North Gate of the capital's airport. Kabul had fallen. "One of the most distressing memories I have of that day is seeing huddles of young Afghan

women, our staff, holding each other and crying, scared about what they were going to see outside the compound. Scared about getting home safely. Scared about what this meant for their futures."

Not long afterwards, the Taliban opened the jails and released all the prisoners. "And so we had thousands of deeply disaffected inmates all over the streets," she says. There was bedlam in the city. People rushed to the airport. Desperate parents were shoving their kids over the airport fence, hoping someone would take them to a better life.

An Emirates plane took off that morning. And then the airport was closed to all commercial flights. Mort's mother rang her from Scotland, distressed. "Tell me you are on that last bloody plane," her mother pleaded. She wasn't. She opted to stay.

I caught up with Mort when she visited Sydney recently. The 50-year-old grew up in Scotland but spent time here as a teacher, years ago, and is visiting old friends. She's also on a tour, drumming up support for her agency that, like other UN groups, has opted to stay in Afghanistan and work with the Taliban. The tanks, helicopters, Humvees and swaggering soldiers have all gone and it's been left to the "do-gooders" and the "tree-huggers" – as the military folk in Afghanistan called the humanitarian workers – to help the most vulnerable. "After the fall of Kabul, the global community pressed pause on its funding to Afghanistan," Mort says. "Within a matter of weeks teachers stopped being paid, health workers stopped being paid, there was no money for medicines, infrastructure and construction projects ground to a halt and the wealthy private sector fled to Pakistan."

The fighting has largely ceased. UN staff now have unfettered access to much of the country. Some of their tasks are now easier – they are able to go door-to-door to deliver polio and other vaccinations, for example. "We are now tantalisingly close to eradicating polio in Afghanistan," she says. Midwives have been deployed throughout the country, so fewer mothers and children are dying in childbirth. Mort recently went to one village that had never had a health clinic until the UN arrived. Previously, if someone had a toothache they'd go to the barber, who used pliers to pull teeth.

But the task is overwhelming. "Basically the UN is shoring up the country at the moment," Mort says. "It's not sustainable... we're doing things that we've never had to do before, like shoring up the entire health system." The UN is currently paying 24,000 healthcare workers who operate 1000 health clinics across the country.



"Everything we had, everything we had become, was destroyed. In just one day"

Shattered dreams: from top, Sam Mort; Gulalai Hakim; veiled women; Moqadasa Sidiqi votes in 2004; Maryam Zahid; Narges

Mort says it is particularly distressing to see the hopes and dreams of young women and girls being snuffed out. "Afghanistan is the hardest place in the world to be a woman," she says. "I don't know how Afghan women get out of bed. It also has one of the highest populations of widows and many of those widows have been told to stay at home." If they have no one to support them or their kids, they starve.

There's no sugar-coating how bad things are and so Mort grasps onto anything they can build on. While most of the country's 34 provinces have banned girls from attending high school, there are nine that haven't. "That's a sign of hope," she says. The girls are being taught by men.

● **The Afghanistan of August 2021, when the Taliban came crashing into Kabul, was a different country from the Afghanistan that Coalition troops invaded following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.** For six months, in 2005, I lived in the remote and mountainous province of Bamyan, working with a UN body tasked with running the Afghan parliamentary elections. In 2015, I flew to Kabul to write a profile on Saad Mohseni, an Afghan entrepreneur who grew up in Australia and who had returned to set up Tolo TV, the station where journalist Gulalai Hakim now works.

Over that period I watched the security situation deteriorate, but also saw how the country had transformed and blossomed. Tolo TV, for

example, was making dramas about strong, independent women. The most popular television program in the country was a version of *The Voice* called *Afghan Star*, in which female rap singers could express themselves about life as a woman in Afghanistan. I interviewed *Time* magazine's Afghan correspondent, Aryn Baker, who said the arrival of media such as Tolo TV, and other momentous changes such as the internet, had given Afghans, particularly women, a sense of what was possible. "What has happened can't be erased," she said in 2015. "It is indelible." But the Taliban is a brutal eraser. Step by step, edict by edict, it is obliterating the cultural revolution of the past two decades and returning the country to the dark ages.

For Gulalai Hakim, it is becoming more and more difficult to continue her work as a journalist. Recently, a female journalist with a male camera crew went to report on a story at the airport. The cameraman was allowed in; the female reporter was not. "They said, 'Next time, bring a male reporter or you will be in a lot of trouble,'" she says. "They have a plan to erase women from public life." If women are found without a face-covering veil "they will torture our fathers and brothers". Women who have protested for the rights of women and girls are beaten and tortured. But still she insists we use her real name.

Would Gulalai leave Afghanistan if she could? "No, I don't want to leave," she says. "It is my country. We have to stay and try to help our country. We had an opportunity to leave, but we didn't... my wish is that we could have job security and life security." On weekends she used to go out and meet her friends for a wander in the park, or to go shopping and have a meal. "Now we sit at home and watch TV, or read a book," she says. "Everything we had, everything we had become, has been destroyed. In one day, just one day. We woke up in the morning and then just two or three hours later everything was finished, everything was destroyed. It hurts. It hurts so much."

Before she got her job at Tolo TV, Gulalai was secretly teaching girls who were banned from attending high school. "There was one girl who I taught and she told me that every night before she goes off to sleep she thinks, 'We Afghans are the darkest people of the world'. That one sentence made me silent. I had no words for her. She could see no future. There was nothing I could say to comfort her. She had no hopes or dreams for the future... she was 12."

I meet up with Maryam Zahid in a Westfield shopping centre in Sydney's west, and not long after we are seated at a cafe she says: "I could be killed in Afghanistan for this. I am sitting here without my face covered with a man who is not my husband. This is a crime that is now punishable by death in Afghanistan." Zahid, 42, fled Afghanistan to Pakistan as a teenager, along with her family, when the Taliban first came to power in the '90s. Like so many who escaped, she feels guilty about those who are left behind. And so she founded Afghan Women on the Move, an organisation that helps Afghan women in Australia deal with their traumas and supports women back in Afghanistan. She holds photography exhibitions and seminars. She badgers politicians and journalists. She wants the world to know what is happening. She's frustrated that the world is losing interest in her homeland. She shows me her phone and starts to scroll – there are hundreds upon hundreds of messages from women, begging for help. "What they are asking for is money to buy a bag of flour, a tub of oil and salt, and painkillers – because so many of them have injuries. These are the very basics of life," she says. "Many of these are jobless and they are frightened. They have no future. They are hopeless."

I contact Narges, a 26-year-old high school teacher and women's rights activist from Kabul. She lost her job when the Taliban closed her school, but is secretly teaching teenage girls. She is desperate to get out. "All my life has fallen," she says. "All my dreams are gone. My heart is completely broken. Before the Taliban I felt like I was flying, now my wings are broken."

During the time that I am in communication with her she receives terrible news. The family had pooled what little money they had to help her 15-year-old brother escape and establish a beachhead in Europe to support his family. He made it to Turkey and then boarded a boat bound for Greece. It appears that the boat has sunk. Her family has been desperately trying to call authorities in Greece, "but the police said they couldn't find any ship".

She sends me a message on WhatsApp. "You know Greg, there is no family in Afghanistan that hasn't got a situation like this. Every parent is trying to get their children and boys out even though it is very dangerous. It is so awful for my mother right now. This is the reality of Afghanistan now. Sometimes I wish I wasn't a girl. I wish I wasn't born in Afghanistan. It is too difficult to be a woman and a mother in Afghanistan... I want to leave this hell." ●

