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**Try Looking Through These Glasses with
Shades of Fear and Oppression
*An Afghani Woman's Perspective***

Rita Shankar

One day, my friend asked me, "Asalam vali-khum Shaheeda, should I go to the hospital? My child is pushing hard."

I replied, "Vali-khum asalam Parveen, why go to the hospital when you have no female doctor to attend you? It is better that you stay here; I will help."

Then she said, "Thank you, I am just praying that Allah will give me a boy. Afghanistan is a land where the whips of men slash the innocent women like mules to be driven."

"If only foreign cameras would catch a glimpse of the secluded, desolate lives we lead, then other women may alleviate our pain and sorrow," I responded.

Until recently, many cameras had never caught a glimpse of the world of darkness that lies underneath my burqa. It is unfortunate that we women have had to veil our sorrows and grievances under restrictions imposed by the Taliban group ever since September 1996. And although we are no longer legally required to wear our burqa, most women dare not take it off because they still don't possess the strength and courage to fight their traditional husbands or adapt to their culture according to the rest of the world. My name

is Shaheeda Mohammad, a doctor struggling to help Afghani women.

As a widow of the late Hasan Mohammad, who was active in past wars, I have been reduced to abject poverty: the Taliban consumed and the rest starved. An avid participant in the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), I have heard much about "bombing Afghanistan back to the Stone Age." When the Americans and their allies bombed Afghanistan, the Taliban suffered, along with the people of Afghanistan, including the begging women on the streets who have no rights and the starving children whose parents have been killed by the Taliban. Because of this immense worry, women have become even more fearful.

For the most part, Afghani women are in dire need of medical assistance after constantly being harassed by the Taliban officials. I personally attempt to treat and tend to their medical needs surreptitiously. In Afghanistan, it is very difficult and dangerous for a woman to expect any sort of assistance in a hospital. Furthermore, women may be inspected only by female doctors and examined only through their burqas. Therefore, undergoing surgery for various reasons, such as childbirth complications, diseases, or infections, is out of the question. As a result, many women and children flee their homeland, Afghanistan.

Why don't I run like the rest of them to a place where women are treated with greater respect? I believe I was born to be of some

use to the other women in Afghanistan not only as a doctor but also as a woman who has the ability to share my candle of hope by lighting other women's candles in their darkness.

By escaping Afghanistan, I would, in essence, be doing the very thing that the United States of America is doing – bringing Afghanistan back into the Stone Age, especially for the women. This burning torch of knowledge beneath my burqa is of some use, and the formation of female minds, such as RAWA and Women's Alliance for Peace and Human Rights in Afghanistan (WAPHA), is the key to lifting the veil of inferiority and imposition of cruelty placed upon Afghani women today.

Moreover, of those friends of mine who have crossed the border to Pakistan, hoping for security and peace of mind, many have been raped by armed men and mistreated by Pakistani government officials.

These "officials" are supposed to protect the refugees; instead they accept bribes. One of my friends had to resort to prostitution in order to feed the mouths of her young children. She cries, "The hunger I possessed in Afghanistan is nothing. I would rather have nothing to eat than to lose my security as a woman."

Despite the Taliban, we have been able to educate some young girls successfully in our country. By restricting the education to males, this terrorist group has created an unforeseen enemy: the roaming women on the streets, who may have been doctors, civil

servants, or teachers and who have the passion to stir the minds of other women. We have taught young women the truth of our *Qur'an* and Islam, rejecting Taliban interpretations, which are being used to justify their rule in the name of Islam. The *Qur'an* states, "Men shall have a benefit from what they earn, and women shall have a benefit from what they earn." We teach our young daughters that women in Afghanistan were not always suppressed as they are today. Prior to Taliban rule, we compromised of 40% of the doctors, 50% of the students, 60% of the teachers at Kabul University, and 70% of the school teachers.

I hope that all women of every nationality, race, and religion have looked through these glasses at the life of a poor, yet strong Afghani woman. I plead with all you women to strive to maintain this sense of equality between men and women.

Today, I have decided to lift my veil and bask in the bright sun, yet I still fear those men who do not approve of the change. May Allah continue to lift this terror of subservience from women all over the world. Asalam vali-khum.