

A quilt a day: The widows of Afghanistan

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You don't have to knock before entering Shkiba's flat in the southern section of Kabul. Just walk up three flights of poorly aligned stairs in a vacated school building, and avoid the rubble and large holes caused by rocket explosions. Shkiba lives in what was once a classroom; the space is large, but the windows are without glass. Visitors are told not to stand too close to a crater hole covered with flimsy metal sheeting. Afghanistan's 1990s civil war took a severe toll on this building, as did subsequent neglect. But now, a year after the fall of the Taliban, this is home for more than 50 families, many headed by widows like Shkiba who have come to Kabul because the Taliban destroyed their villages in northern Afghanistan.

Shkiba tells her story with a subdued but determined ferocity: she doesn't know her exact age—she's perhaps 28, she estimates—and she has seven children, ages six to 12. She came to Kabul six years ago after her husband, a farmer, died in Taliban custody. When the home Shkiba and her children lived in was reclaimed by a family returning from Pakistan, they moved into the school.

Her income comes from a quilt-making project funded by Church World Service and administered through a local Afghan relief organization. Her goal is to make a quilt a day—she has children to feed and no time to waste. “You can see our life here, no door, no windows,” she said, anxious to get back to work.

A year after the Taliban's fall from power, Shkiba's story is all too typical. Kabul, it is said, is the widows' capital of the world. As many as 40,000 women like Shkiba live in the city, and many make their home in the city's abandoned buildings. The widows' plight is easy to ignore amid signs of reconstruction and renewal. Kabul is clearly a livelier, more buoyant and humane place than it was 15 months ago, when I last visited. It is a relief to see children flying kites and to hear music being played—two of the many simple pleasures that the Taliban had prohibited by brutal force. In the summer of 2001 a visitor had to interview women furtively, under cover of night;

now there is at least some space where human rights activists of both sexes can speak openly about their hopes and problems.

“The situation has clearly improved,” said Chaharahi Sadarat, who heads Voice of Women, a smallAfghan education and human rights organization. “Under the Taliban, we lost everything.”

But even Sadarat, who a year ago could neither have worked at a job nor spoken to anAmerican man in public, feels pressured to wear the “burqa” at least part of the time. “Women are still afraid,” she said. “They don’t feel secure.”

Sadarat and other activists cite a host of reasons why: the Taliban may have been the most egregious example of those meting out harsh treatment toAfghan women, but it hardly had a monopoly on sexual oppression. Habits die hard, and it will take years for the social conservatism that the Taliban imposed onAfghanistan to fade away.

Schools for girls and young women have been targets of bombings and other acts of arson recently—a sign of the continued strength of Taliban sympathizers, religious fundamentalists and others unhappy with new government policies supporting equality in education. Equally ominous is the fact that there are still no police or security systems nor a judicial system to protect women. Neither are there such protections for religious and ethnic minorities, who continue to face persecution in parts of the country where local warlords rather than the rule of law govern the application of justice.

“Law enforcement is not yet in place,” said Sima Samar, who heads theAfghan Independent Human Rights Commission and is the director of the Shuhada Organization, anAfghan relief and development group that has ties to U.S. churches and relief agencies.

Samar and others pushing for a stronger role for the government of President Hamid Karzai are frustrated by the limited role of the international peace-keeping forces and the slow, even glacial pace of international aid.Afghanistan has received only half of the nearly \$2 billion it was promised early in 2002.Another persistent worry is that a U.S.-led war in Iraq could embolden religious fundamentalists and lead, once again, to international neglect ofAfghanistan. The international community’s inattentiveness toAfghanistan after the 1979-89 Soviet occupation contributed to the civil dissolution and savage factional wars of the 1990s and, ultimately, to the

rise of the Taliban.

It is impossible not to be reminded of the debilitating social costs of that neglect, particularly in its effects on women and children. A 2002 survey by the Swiss-based relief group Terre des Hommes reported that at least 37,000 children, more than a third of them between the ages of eight and ten, are either begging on the streets of Kabul or working at such things as collecting wood and paper and selling it for kindling. Other children roam the streets or find refuge in the city's many inglorious monuments to the effects of war. Not far from the school that Shkiba's family calls home is one of several royal palaces laid waste a decade ago. From afar you see the outline of the building's former majesty, but inside, in what were once stately rooms, lie mounds of rubble. At least a dozen young children spend their days here, giggling, posing for pictures and seeking a bit of cash from the curious who wander in. Watching a young boy lead the way over shattered marble, concrete and glass, I think of Sima Samar's comment, "Unfortunately, I believe that Afghanistan will be forgotten again."