

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Afghanistan I Know

Freshta Tori Jan · Wednesday, October 7th, 2020

The Afghanistan I grew up in is not the same Afghanistan my mother or her generation knew. The Afghanistan I grew up in showed me how much you will suffer everyday being a female, especially being a female from the ethnic minority, Hazara.

Hazaras belong to the Shia sect and have been facing mass executions for decades, what is, in my opinion, a genocide that surprisingly goes unnoticed by the international community despite how involved the United Nations is in Afghanistan. The Hazara's treatment is not far from the treatment of the African Americans before and during the Civil Rights Movement, even though the constitution has made amendments to "protect" their rights.

There is so much hurt tied to growing up in the Afghanistan I know that I don't know where to begin; yet, it is in the same Afghanistan I find hope, hope in the female warriors that rise and fight each day.

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Today, as I sit here and write this, I want to be thankful for the safety and support that surrounds me. Yet, I find it very difficult to carry on peacefully knowing that I left my mother, who sacrificed everything she could for me, to pursue my future, knowing that my sister and nieces find it hard to even step out of the gate to walk to school, knowing that hundreds of girls are being married off against their will, raped, murdered, or mutilated, because they choose to stand in the face of oppression and fight back for their simple and basic human rights.

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During my childhood, I developed a deep understanding of what could happen to me if I chose to break community norms. In a collective society, losing your membership in the group results in severe consequences for not only you but your whole family, especially if you are a woman and caused the loss. As a girl, I felt inspired knowing that my older sisters were in the military, fighting to better our country. While I felt inspired by their bravery, many in our society viewed it a disgrace that my sisters took on a male-dominated role, and our family received murder threats daily. This frustrated me every day, because, even as a little girl, I felt the pressure to learn the basic skills of a wife and to be submissive to a future husband and be his servant.

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To be a girl meant your life was not valued. In the community where I spent most of my childhood, most babies born as girls were thrown in the trash or had their lives taken away one way or another, and women were punished for birthing girls. In these situations, I would see the kindness and leadership of my mom as she extended a hand to the voiceless. She would always try to take these babies before it was too late and raise them.

I will never forget the day that a neighbor put his baby girl on sale after her mother died. I was only seven when that event left a heavy mark. I spent seven days hurting and crying for that little girl. For the longest time, sometimes even now, I wish we had gotten there early enough to save that little girl from facing her last breaths. She died at the hands of her own father; she died because no one wanted to buy a baby girl.

To be a woman meant your only value was to cover the failure and foolishness of coward men. As a girl, I witnessed and learned that women were sold at a certain price and married off against their will. Most of the time, these brides were little girls who had not hit puberty yet.

When their fathers, brothers, and uncles committed crimes, raped other women, lost in gambling, these girls were simply given away to cover the costs of men's foolishness. What happens to these men? I wish every day that the justice system would hold them accountable. But, how could this be possible when the justice system is full of false religious heads, rapists, and abusers?

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As a woman, no matter how modest and "good" you uphold yourself in public, whether in a burqa, hijab or chadar, harassment, accusations, and abuse will always follow. Many around the globe know of Bibi Aisha, whose nose was cut off, and Farkhunda, who was killed brutally, yet the government failed to do its duty. Both stories shocked the world, and both were frustrating events that made me vomit each time.

Farkhunda never should have been beaten in public, thrown from the top of the mosque, dragged for miles behind a car, and burned alive as men stood around to film her death, just because she righteously accused a man of breaking the law.

Where was the police? What did the judicial court do? They announced that she had a mental illness, and released every single man who had a hand in her death. Had it been the other way around, a man would have been praised, and his actions would not have even drawn a glance from the public.

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I cannot forget the days I left school with bleeding hands and bruises everywhere because as a Hazara girl, I was inferior to the rest of class; because being Asian and belonging to the Shia community made me less valuable. I remember many times I went out grocery shopping with my mother. I cannot count the number of times I was harassed by men who had their own wives and young daughters. It happened every day on the way to school; men would corner me or my sister in public to have their way with us.

It finally got me to the point where I had to fight for my rights and my body. I had the right to step into public without constantly being abused. I had the right to take martial arts or play soccer without being bullied and threatened by boys, without being told I was a disgrace to the culture and

to Islam. The number of times I have been called a “whore” and “bitch” and “infidel” for engaging in physical fights with men are overwhelming, and these fights always ended in threats of getting my head cut off or through social media to this day. But, I am not afraid.

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My experiences are nowhere close to the injustices that my mother faced for allowing me to attend a co-ed school. She was beaten in public, run over by motorcycles, faced death threats, and more. My mother will be my hero forever. She is a woman who has made a positive impact on so many lives and took life-threatening risks throughout my life.

My mother preserved through the brutal treatment of the Taliban, a group that mutilated women, packed cars with female body parts, and forced her to wear a burqa with bullet holes, tears and sweat. Alongside my father, my mother not only saved our family throughout the war and from the hands of the Taliban, but she endured so much oppression by breaking cultural norms and sacrificing her own life so that I would be able to reach my goals today.

When I left home five years ago, I did not know it would be the last time I’d see her. In the time I did have with her, I will be forever grateful for the ways she taught me to fight back with compassion, love, and a heart for justice in the face of terrorism, of coward Afghan men, and of all types of injustice.

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Today I am an activist for the baby girls whose lives were cut short.

Today I am an activist for the girls who had to pay the price for their fathers’ and brothers’ failures and acts of cowardice. For the days many like myself got raped and assaulted without the government holding men accountable. For the days I stood helpless, watching my mom fall down to her knees saying, “You have to carry on,” as I let go of her hand, leaving her behind. Today I speak without any fear holding me back, because everything I had was taken away from me—my childhood, my family, my education, the place I should call home, and the comforting arms of my mother. I am no longer afraid of being shot with a bullet for seeking justice for Afghan children, women, and minorities whose cries are continuously silenced and ignored. I may continue to receive death threats, but my experiences have taught me that Afghan women are hard to break even if they bend. Today I applaud the women who are getting their education, who are participating in international competitions, who are leading organizations, who are empowering each other, and together making Afghanistan the place it was before the war.

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