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OTTAWA CITIZEN

'Out of darkness': An upcoming photo exhibit at the University of Ottawa looks into the lives of Afghan women journalists and the struggles they face.

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Shaima Rezayee was a woman who pushed boundaries. As the television presenter of Hop, a popular Afghan MTV-style music show, Ms. Rezayee, 24, raised the eyebrows of some for taking off her burqa and joking with male counterparts. It defied the mindset of those who couldn't accept a woman showing her face publicly -- let alone interviewing a man and laughing about it.

Young women looked up to her. The country's conservative clerics hated her.

In May 2005, Shaima Rezayee was murdered by a single bullet to her head.

Thousand of kilometres away from Afghanistan, in Ottawa, Jane McElhone points at a photograph of Shaima Rezayee's funeral. In the photo, Ms. Rezayee's family clusters around her body, wrapped in white cloth.

"In Afghanistan, women in the media are such role models," she says gesturing to the photo. "But they also face many challenges."

Beginning Oct. 5, a new photography exhibit at the University of Ottawa takes a look at the lives of Afghan women journalists and the challenges they face. Ms. McElhone, a curator of the exhibit, Voices on the Rise: Afghan Women Making the News, says the exhibit tells a different story.

"There are so many difficult stories, so many bad stories about Afghanistan and it's nice to know that we're telling a different kind of story about Afghanistan," says Ms. McElhone. "People read about it every day in the newspaper. Her are some faces for people to look at."

Khorshied Samad, the other curator of the exhibit, adds, "We're looking at how the media can empower women in Afghanistan. Having these women, working in media as role models is very significant. It is literally helping to lead this country out of darkness."

Under the Taliban regime, many Afghan women faced conditions so horrific that Amnesty International labelled it a "human rights catastrophe." Stripped of their basic human rights, women could no longer work, attend school or leave their homes unless escorted by a male relative.

Both women are familiar with Afghanistan's history; they met while living there. Ms. McElhone is a Canadian journalist now based in London. Mrs. Samad, a former bureau chief for Fox News Channel in Kabul, is married to Omar Samad, the Afghan Ambassador to Canada. The exhibit features Canadian photographers Marija Dumancic, Elise Jacob, Leslie Knott and Lana Slezić.

Today, life is slowly changing for Afghan women. Despite the barriers, more and more are fighting -- fighting to go to school, fighting to work, fighting to become journalists. By law, women are now considered equal citizens.

IMAGES



Fardin Waezi, Aina Photographers Farzana Wahidy and Freshta Kohistany hold up their photos next to the Kabul River bazaar. (FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)



Veronique De Virgerie Sayara Media and Communication / Rokia Aziz, right, was one of the first women in Kandahar to pursue university studies following the collapse of the Taliban. She is taking courses in media and education. (FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)



Farzana Wahidy, Aina Camerawoman Mehria Azizi films a woman in a burqa preparing bread in Kabul. (FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)



Lana Slezić, Citizen Special A group of women mourn former TV announcer Shaima Reyazee, 24, who was allegedly shot to death in her home in 2005. (FPinfomart: Restricted, Canada.com: Restricted)

It is estimated that about 1,000 women, in a population of about 28 million, work in journalism and communications in Afghanistan.

"These journalists are making sure all Afghan women have a voice," said Mrs. Samad. But there are risks involved.

"They face incredible danger. They receive death threats and they are blocked in terms of access a lot of the time. Men still have a lot more access. The women have to be extremely strong."

Yet the numbers of Afghan women entering journalism is growing. In Herat, Afghanistan's second-largest city, women can now graduate from Herat University's Journalism Department.

Both curators say they feel that the journalists profiled in the exhibit are revolutionaries.

"One of the most exciting sectors in Afghan society is women. Women are the ones to lead that country forward," added Mrs. Samad. "This is about having dreams and being able to fulfill those dreams. And this is happening at such a historic time. It will never be the same again."

Illustration:

- Photo: Fardin Waezi, Aina / Photographers Farzana Wahidy and Freshta Kohistany hold up their photos next to the Kabul River bazaar.
- Photo: Veronique De Virgerie/Sayara Media and Communication / Rokia Aziz, right, was one of the first women in Kandahar to pursue university studies following the collapse of the Taliban. She is taking courses in media and education.
- Photo: Farzana Wahidy, Aina / Camerawoman Mehria Azizi films a woman in a burqa preparing bread in Kabul.
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