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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT LETS YOUNG AFGHAN GIRLS SHARE THEIR VIEW OF THE WORLD” BY MARIAM ALIMI

CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.



Mariam is a freelance photographer. Her piece is part of “Sahar Speaks,” a project by Amie Ferris-Rotman for The Huffington Post that provides Afghan female journalists with training, mentoring and publishing opportunities for a global audience.

Most of these students have never held a camera. That was clear when I started working on this project in June of last year, teaching photography skills to 10 teenage girls living in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. When I asked how they felt looking through the lens, they said it was like seeing their village for the first time. "It's so beautiful through our cameras," several said.

During the workshops, they learned to ask permission before taking photos in public. Some people welcomed them, while others, both men and women, rejected their requests. Children and nature can be easier subjects here.

A few students plan to continue with their art. I think of one student, Hamida, whose parents, both doctors at a local hospital, have encouraged her to pursue photography. They told me of the need to offer new skills and opportunities for young women like Hamida, especially in this part of Afghanistan, where it is relatively safe compared to other parts of the country.



A student enrolled in a photography workshop in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, shot a farmer collecting grass for animals.

"I love to learn photography to show everyone that Bamiyan province is safe, but not much has been done so far to actually improve people's lives," Hamida said.

Later this year, we will take the photography workshops to Kabul, my hometown. It's where I first immersed myself in photography not long after returning to the city in 2002. I was 22 then, and my family and I had lived for a decade in Pakistan, seeking safety from the Taliban. Back home, I began working with a non-governmental organization. I eventually had the opportunity to take photos for its publication, and hone my skills through photography workshops. It wasn't always easy. When I went to the local markets to shoot life there, people didn't understand why I was taking photos. Some people would throw stones or tomatoes at me, and ask me to stop.



*A student photographed children at play in Bamiyan, Afghanistan.
(Photo: Zahra Mirzad)*

I loved journalism from the start, and I always dreamed of becoming a journalist, though never a photojournalist. But in 2004, I volunteered in the public information department at the Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees. We had a monthly publication, and I started taking photos for it. I was offered a chance to go to Herat with my colleagues to make a Danish documentary about growing saffron as an alternative to poppy. I took a photo there that became popular with foreigners — of an old saffron farmer listening to a recording of his own voice. His smile was huge. From then on, I was known as the woman who'd taken this photo. I wanted to develop this skill, to go deeper.

In 2007, I saved enough cash to ask a friend traveling to the Netherlands to buy a Canon and bring it back to Afghanistan. Soon after, I earned my first income, \$200, from photos exhibited by the United Nations in Kabul.

I hope some of my young students can experience the same success one day.



*Hamida Mohammad Ali and Freshta Habibuallah capture paintings inside caves at the site of the Buddha statues in Bamiyan, Afghanistan.
(Photo: Mariam Alimi)*

Photo portraits courtesy of Joel van Houdt.



