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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“FEMALE MUSICIAN MAKES WAVES IN MALE-DOMINATED AFGHANISTAN” BY SITARA SADAAT

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.



Sitara is a writer at AWP. 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.



Fazila Zamir plays her rubab in music school in Kabul. (Photo: Sitara Sadaat)

In a conservative and traditional country like Afghanistan, where women can be burned, lashed and stoned simply for their gender, it takes a lot of courage for a young woman to play music in public. Fazila Zamir has plenty.

Her instrument of choice is the lute-like rubab, originating from central Afghanistan. Zamir, 22, plays in a band, appears on television and teaches rubab to other Afghan women.

In male-dominated Afghanistan, women who perform in public—as singers, musicians or actresses—often attract unwanted attention.

Zamir was just 14 when she became the only female student at the Aga Khan Music Initiative in the Afghan capital, Kabul—one of only two music schools in the Afghan capital which accepts girls. Initially, it was challenging being among so many male students and instructors.



Zamir is determined to be a professional musician, despite the obstacles she faces as a woman. (Photo: Sitara Sadaat)

"Some boys were good, but some made fun [of me] when they saw a girl playing," she said, after playing a tune on her mulberry wood rubab, whose neck was decorated with traditional inlays of mother-of-pearl. She plucked the strings with steadfast determination, each note ringing out with clarity.

"I was constantly asked what am I going to do after finishing school," she said. "I argued that I can become a music instructor."

It only took Zamir a month with the instrument to master the basics. Fortunately, her skills impressed one of her teachers. "My first instructor was very helpful and very happy to teach a girl playing music," she said. "But the second instructor was very rude to me, and kept saying music is for boys and not girls." Disapproving family members and a volatile and hostile environment dissuade many Afghan women from performance art. Film directors in the country have complained that finding Afghan actresses is their top challenge. Film directors in the country have complained that finding Afghan actresses is their top challenge. The widely held belief that performance is connected to prostitution has even influenced some women, who argue that the link is dangerous and real.

But despite these obstacles and the threats they receive, women like Zamir are determined to rise to the challenge and do their best to be successful.

"It was difficult, but I tried to ignore them and only think about why I am here and how I could challenge these boys and prove myself. I did not want to lose my confidence," said Zamir, resting the rubab on her knees. Thick, glossy black hair trails down her back.

Zamir's initiative and enthusiasm have emboldened others. "She inspires everyone when she plays," said Mina Noori, a third-year photography student at Kabul University, where Zamir also studies in the arts school. "The security situation in Afghanistan is not good, especially for girls, but Fazila has taken a bold step."

Defying the odds, Zamir has traveled to far-flung places such as Oman and South Korea, where she plays the instrument once praised by the 13th century Persian poet Rumi. She also leads an all-male band of traditional musicians, aged between 16 and 60, at her university—something that would be unthinkable across most of the country, and unheard of at the school until she took on the role.

"Fazila works for change and wants to get people's minds ready to accept that girls are as capable as boys, that they have as much right as boys to achieve their dreams," said the elder Zamir. "I see a very bright future for her."

But the road to success has been fraught. Playing to mostly male audiences, Zamir has been harassed during performances. Four years ago, she was followed home by unknown men over two weeks. Alternating between two different cars, they would creep along the road behind or beside her. Her family was deeply disturbed by this, and made the decision to quickly move house to protect her identity.

"My family was scared, especially my mom, so we left," Zamir told me. She took an enforced break from television appearances for several weeks, and was sure not to venture outside in traditional Afghan dress—her garb of choice when she performs.

Her mother, a doctor who asked that her name not be used, wanted Zamir to pursue a career that did not involve publicly performing, such as medicine or engineering—professions that are also rarely pursued by women in Afghanistan. But seeing her daughter perform eventually made her come around.

Zamir now dreams of becoming the country's first female minister of culture and opening music schools for girls across Afghanistan. Despite her achievements and even bigger dreams, she is often asked the same question: Who would marry a female musician?

But Zamir shrugs this off. "I am married to my rubab, and playing is my life. No one can stop me."



