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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“INTERNET HELPS AFGHAN WOMEN FIND THEIR VOICE IN BATTLE FOR EQUALITY” BY SONIA AZATYAR

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.



Sonia is the Founder of Dedgah Jawaan Faal Weekly. 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.

Regular electricity outages and insecurity have not dented Afghanistan’s addiction to the internet and social media. In a country considered one of the worst places on earth to be female, where women face daily harassment and obstacles due to their gender, being online has given them more freedom in their protracted battle for equal rights.

For 23-year-old Raziya Masumi, who lives in Kabul, the Afghan capital, tweeting is her window to the world. On Twitter, she uses the hashtags #EndChildMarriage, #GenderInequality, #TalibanBeGone. Though she has fewer than 1,000 followers, she has attracted fans from around the world.



Raziya Masumi, who works at a digital media agency in Kabul, sees Twitter as an important tool in the battle for equal rights.

(Photo: Sonia Azatyar)

“The internet and social media gave women the opportunity to express themselves, beyond their immediate surroundings,” said Masumi, who is program officer at Impassion, the first company in Afghanistan to create digital media strategies for a range of clients. Set up in 2013, the company has provided mobile polling of the most recent presidential elections, showcased Afghan women in sports and helped run a social media summit in the country.

Raised in an educated and open-minded family, Masumi’s parents have not discouraged her from being active online. She regularly accesses the internet using her smartphone or her computer at work. Masumi is optimistic that her countrywomen are on their way to achieving greater freedom of expression, thanks to the internet. But greater visibility can also be a double-edged sword. Expressing one’s (female) opinion in male-dominated Afghanistan is not without its dangers.

“Women get bothered by men. Many men make fake accounts and pages, and they use them against women,” Masumi said. “Cyber harassment is a problem.”

Several other women in Kabul, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told me of widespread harassment and abuse online. Some cited examples whereby men have taken profile photos from social media, photoshopped them into compromising positions, and used them to blackmail the women in the photos for money. It has become common for Afghan women to conceal their pictures and names online, instead showing a photo of a single eye, or something more abstract like a flower

While Kabul’s myriad internet cafés are often packed with young men watching videos and chatting on Facebook, women are rarely seen in them. The country’s first and only all-women internet café opened in 2012 in central Kabul with much fanfare, but shut down a year later due to funding issues. Many educated Afghans now have smartphones, and social media is intrinsic to their lives.

The English word “selfie” has effortlessly slipped into Dari and Pashto, Afghanistan’s main languages, and Facebook is intensely popular: Roshan, the country’s largest telecom company, even offers a Facebook-only data plan for less than \$1 a month.

According to government estimates, some 20 million Afghans – or two-thirds of the population – have mobile phones. The number is astonishing considering the country lay in ruins only 15 years ago. While Afghan women have gained back basic rights in education, voting and work since the Taliban were toppled in 2001, their future remains highly uncertain, as Afghan and U.S. officials seek to negotiate with the Taliban to ensure stability. Entrenched poverty and decades of war and conflict have distorted the population’s view of the role girls and women play in society.

Since U.S.-led combat troops withdrew last year, producing a security vacuum, activists say street harassment and sexual assault have reached epidemic levels. In a major report released in April by the Kabul-based Afghan Journalist Safety Committee, women in the public domain face enormous amounts of harassment. Of the 100 female journalists surveyed, 41 percent reported being harassed by the general public. Even more—some 59 percent—complained their male colleagues harassed them at work.

Ahmad Shuja is the managing director of Paiwandgah, Afghanistan’s first citizen journalism platform, which reaches across the country and launched in 2014. Journalists from all over Afghanistan use the platform to report on events in their neighborhoods, covering everything from conflict news to election-related activities. Acting as part citizen journalist, part observer, they do things such as tracking the government’s progress on its campaign promises in its first 100 days, monitoring the polls from places where the media or traditional observers couldn’t go

The platform enables Afghans to be part of the national dialogue. They contribute stories and opinions through phone calls, text messages and social media.

"Our female citizen journalists cover issues as diverse as female police, refugees and land disputes," Shuja said with pride.

The world saw how social media in Afghanistan can be both friend and foe to the country's women in March of last year. The nation is still reeling from the brutal murder of Farkhunda, a 27-year-old woman who was falsely accused of burning the Quran. An angry mob of men attacked Farkhunda in central Kabul, where they bludgeoned her, threw her body off a roof, pelted her with stones, set her on fire and ran over her body with a car. The grisly scene was recorded on cellphones by those jubilantly taking part. But the video soon went viral, and women and men angrily took to the streets in protest. The videos were later used by police to prosecute the perpetrators.

While the government has not broken down mobile phone usage according to gender, access and freedom of movement have restricted women from reaching the internet in rural areas, where female illiteracy can reach 90 per cent. Afghanistan's impressive 4G network tends to not work as well outside of major urban areas.

"But compare today to how Afghan women lived a decade ago," Masumi said, delicately adjusting her bright blue headscarf.

"Farkhunda made all women allies. Her murder made us stand shoulder to shoulder and demand justice."

Photo portraits courtesy of Joel van Houdt.

