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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“I DRESSED LIKE A BOY SO I COULD GO TO SCHOOL”

BY ZAHRA JOYA

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.



Zahra is a writer at Jomhor News. 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.

Life for an Afghan woman is grueling, like a constant state of war. The country resembles a burning oven, where one can feel the heat of discrimination with every breath.

I want to tell you a story about the hardship that we women face. And sadly, my story is no different from that of many others. We share the same destiny.

I was born in the Waras district in the southern part of Bamyan Province, in 1993. My family's first reaction to my birth was not happiness but sorrow. If I were born a boy, my relatives would have celebrated with an ancient ceremony.

Inside my father's mud house – day in, day out – my family echoed the cries that I let out, matching each tear, while cursing my mother for bringing another woman into this world.

During my childhood, the Taliban ruled Afghanistan. While the militant group didn't have a direct presence in Waras, their laws were implemented and strictly enforced. In my impoverished village, people were concerned with survival, not education – especially not for women or girls.

But they did collectively hire the imam of the local mosque to educate their boys. Two members of my own family, my uncles, studied at a mosque. However, traditional social norms dictated that girls were not allowed in boys' classrooms. On top of that, the Taliban had outright banned girls' schooling. One of my childhood wishes was to study like my uncles. With the help of one of them, I was able to find a way.

But the solution wasn't straightforward. I not only had to change my attitude, but also the clothes that I wore. At the age of 5, I decided to rewrite my destiny.

I became a boy so that I could go to school.

By Western standards, a 5-year-old is an innocent child, but by that age, I had already seen with my own eyes how my mother had suffered, and that brought me closer to adulthood. I had come to believe that if I didn't have access to education, and remained ignorant of my rights, I would face the same fate as my mother, my grandmother and the other women in my village.

My relatives and neighbors didn't react well to my decision. But my young age helped me remain unaffected by the outcry.

This was the path that I had chosen to reach my goal – my last resort.



In this photo, 8-year-old Zahra Joya is dressed as a boy. For six years, during the reign of the Taliban, Zahra became "Mohammed" to attend school. Education for girls was banned under Taliban rule. (Photo courtesy of Zahra Joya)

And to me, boys’ clothing symbolized hope for a better future. I dressed in characteristic male clothing and changed my name from Zahra to Mohammed.

From my first day at school, I was known as a boy. I knew that if anyone were to uncover my true identity, it would cause a scandal. Though because of my newfound love for education, I was outwardly happy, my innermost struggle continued.

Many Afghan men behave violently. In order to adapt to this all-male environment, I was forced to keep my emotions at bay. For six years, I was forced to go against what felt natural to me; I was not only dressing like a boy, but also speaking and walking like one. For six years, I abandoned Zahra for Mohammed.

In the meantime – despite repeated requests by my family – I refused to wear women’s clothing even out of school. The reason for this was that I wanted the day to come when girls would be able to go to school. Maybe on that long-awaited day, I would become a girl once again.

And the time finally came. When I was in 6th grade, the Taliban was overthrown. Schools under President Hamid Karzai reopened their doors to female students. But parents were still terrified of sending their daughters to school. As a result, various organizations started to set up incentive programs to entice families, including food packages.

The first day that I went to school as Zahra, all my friends were shocked. And why wouldn’t they be? Curiously, that’s when my problems started. Girls wouldn’t accept me as one of their own, while the boys mocked me for “changing my gender” overnight. And it took some getting used to.

On the upside, because of my previous years at school, I was ahead of the village girls, who were illiterate. I could read, write and express my views. And so, I continued to pursue my education with fervor until I completed school.

Little did I know that another dark period in my life would follow because my family would not allow me to take university entry exams.

But my father could no longer stand to see my tears. One day he told me that while he couldn't afford my higher education fees, if I were able to provide for myself, I could go to Kabul and continue my studies at a private university.

His permission was my golden ticket. In the spring of 2011, I left Bamiyan for Kabul. On my arrival, I enrolled at the legal studies department of Gawharshad Institute of Higher Education. But this was by no means an end to the challenges that I would face. I was, after all, a rural girl in a big city. On top of that, I had no money. I couldn't even afford the car fare to university, so I would end up traveling long distances on foot. There was also a great sense of isolation. For the first time in my life, I was living alone in a small room with no one to talk to but my own reflection.

But that wasn't long-lasting. I soon met Zahra Yusufi, who was also a long way from home. She too was from the Waras district. This kind and hardworking woman would become someone I gladly call my friend today. Zahra used to work part-time in an office. When she learned of my problems, she was moved and promised to help me out.

I needed her help sooner than I thought I would. The stress of life had finally taken its toll, and my health started to deteriorate. I feared that I'd have to surrender to my illness, Typhoid, and return home to my family. But my greater fear was sharing the same fate as the other girls in my village: ending up married with no real future.

At a time when I felt my most vulnerable, Zahra gave me a glimpse of hope. She helped finance my treatment and promised to get me a job at her office. I felt strong once again, and could continue to not only pursue my education, but also embark upon a career in journalism with Zahra as my mentor.

After four years, I was able to bring my family to Kabul. I wanted my three sisters to have the same opportunities as me. There are times when I want to shout from the rooftop that I'm proud of all my achievements, despite the obstacles that I've faced. But my future remains unclear.

As a woman, I still fear oppression and I'm aware of the red lines that I can't cross because of my gender – whether they have to do with my clothing or my lifestyle. I'm afraid of shaming my family with my laughter or tears in equal measures.

But I live with the hope in my heart that one day I will live a life of my own choosing.

Photo portraits courtesy of Joel van Houdt.

