

## Afghan Women: Artfully Unforgotten

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Rabia Balkhi wrote her last poem on the bathroom wall with her blood while dying. She had fallen in love with a servant and her brother ordered her killed. Rabia died a violent and unjust death, but the people of Afghanistan now remember her as a hero.

In June 2009, I asked men and women in Afghanistan about heroines. Rabia's name was always mentioned. She was a famous poet who had challenged the cultural norms by falling in love with her brother's servant. Her brother's honor was therefore ruined and he ordered her dead. Nobody could tell me what poem she wrote on the wall, but that was not the point. The point is she refused to give up and die a victim. She defied her brother by having the last word.

Rabia was a strong woman who refused to be silenced, and women and men alike visit her grave in honor. While in Mazar-i-Sharif where I learned of Rabia's story, I decided hers was a story that needed to be told, together with the stories of the women of Afghanistan.

Storytelling is what I do. Throughout my life I have told stories by acting in the theatre. I transitioned into telling the stories of battered women and children while serving as a legal advocate, and I went to law school to expand my ability to present those stories in court. Yet I found myself drawn to advocating through art rather than in the courtroom. Instead of jumping into the practice of law, I founded Artfully Unforgotten, a nonprofit where artists raise awareness and resources for vulnerable communities through telling stories that don't often get heard, such as Rabia's.

Today there are women like Rabia Balkhi all over Afghanistan. These women refuse to give up and be victims, even though they experience severe oppression. I realized when hearing their stories that it serves no one to think of Afghan women as merely victims, because they are the last ones to see themselves as such. Nor does it help the cause for women's empowerment worldwide. Thus, the NGOs and media working in Afghanistan should tell these stories of strength and accomplishment among Afghan women.

Ferishta is one such woman, the founder of a soccer ball manufacturing company. Ferishta said, "The women of Afghanistan are strong. All the men in the world would not be able to bear the pain that they have endured." Ferishta fled to Pakistan during Taliban rule. She returned to Afghanistan upon the fall of the Taliban with nothing in hand and no home. She got a job with the UN, married a childhood friend, and started her own company. It never crossed her mind to merely be a victim.

Alima is another such woman who refuses to take on that role. She is a computer science student who wants to make money. While walking in the bazaar in her burqa, a young man purposefully bumped into her thinking she would retreat. He was wrong. Alima took her notebook and hit him back, ordering him to "Be careful."

As Walter Fullemann, head of the International Committee of the Red Cross delegation to the United

Nations, recently stated at the 54th United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, "The image of women as helpless victims of war is flawed." Images in our media that focus solely on the oppression and violence that women have suffered do not tell a complete story. They grab attention, but the women in Afghanistan deserve more. Despite oppression they are determined to define their own destinies.

The women I met are gaining education, getting jobs, and rebuilding their country. As Ferishta said, "Of course, you know that the building of a country is not only the responsibility of the men. It is the responsibility of every individual to contribute to the economic growth of the country."

Rangila had to relearn how to read and write after being forced out of school during the Taliban regime. "We can do everything if we have good aim, good desire, good wishes. If we do our work honestly then we can do anything another country can do," she said.

Ferishta, Rangila, and many women like them demonstrate determination and hope. Furthermore, they would make excellent ambassadors on behalf of the cause of women's empowerment throughout world. They are evidence of women's resilience when freed from oppression—we are just not having the opportunity to hear them.

To be sure the women of Afghanistan have suffered severe forms of oppression and many still do. And, yes, the stories and images of violence and oppression need to be told as well. The overwhelming majority of women are affected by domestic violence, the majority of young women have been forced into marriages, and many women are illiterate. However, focusing on the oppression leaves viewers thinking in generalized terms that women are merely victims.

According to [UN Resolution 1325](#) [PDF], women are to be included in the rebuilding of society, especially post-conflict. If women are constantly viewed as victims, then the resources women have to offer are likely to be overlooked. If NGOs and donor governments want to further the cause of Afghan women, then more stories of their accomplishments need to be told. Not only will these stories encourage a belief in their ability to rebuild Afghanistan, but they will also inspire hope in women worldwide.

If the women of Afghanistan can arise and have hope, then women everywhere will know we can arise from anything. That is why the story of Rabia must be told—for the numerous Rabias who share her spirit of creative perseverance.



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