

Panel Three—Resist!

FIRST SPEAKER:¹ ABBY REYES[†]

I was asked to be on this panel because of the role I played last year in co-organizing California law students to take a coordinated stand against the so-called war on terrorism in all of its manifestations. That effort gelled in the placement of a full page ad in the *New York Times* signed by over 300 law students, staff, and professors from eight law schools. The ad was placed right as the US was officially declaring war on Iraq.

But the war I am more used to confronting is not war officially declared. There is an economic war, often but not always, accompanied by military enforcement. This economic war is waged through multi-lateral trade agreements and the financial programs imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions. It is waged against any place that has a market or infrastructure to be privatized, or natural resources to be extracted. I've been working most closely with communities adversely affected by U.S. oil, mining, and gas companies. As we know, around the world, an oil or gas pipeline is a magnet for armed violence.

In the communities I've worked with, it is the women who have, in various ways, emerged over time to be the leaders in the long haul. As I thought through what I have to say about women resisting war, I thought about these women. But I also thought about women who have survived military operations in their homeland and the displacement that follows. I started to think about stories I could tell of women resisting the culture and continuation of war while in refugee camps in the former Yugoslavia. And then I realized that the stories I would tell are all stories I've learned from one of my mentors in this work, Fran Peavey. So I invited her here to tell them herself.

1. Due to technical problems with the recording of the symposium, all of Abby Reyes' comments were lost. Thankfully, she has provided the *Journal* with her notes. What we have obtained from Abby Reyes is not the full extent of her comments, nor is what little we have a precise translation of what was said at the symposium. The *Journal* apologizes to Abby Reyes and thanks her for her understanding and commitment.

†. Abby Reyes has a background in community-based environmental defense and organizational development. As a Luce Scholar, Abby spent two years working with rural fishing communities on human and environmental rights at the Environmental Legal Assistance Center in Palawan, Philippines. For three years prior to law school, Abby co-directed the U'wa Defense Project, a small non-profit providing legal, advocacy, and community development support to the Colombian indigenous U'wa people in solidarity with their effort to protect their land and culture from the increasing militarization and oil exploitation. In 2003, she co-organized the Wake Up about the War action, an effort by over 300 law students from eight California law schools against this administration's wars in its myriad manifestations.

SECOND SPEAKER: FRAN PEAVEY†**THIRD SPEAKER: SONALI KOLHATKAR†**

It's nice to have sat through this conference and I'm not an academic. I'm not a law student. Well, I used to be an academic once upon a time but then I quit that. I consider my work at the radio station "media activism," if you will. But my real activist leanings, my work began when I discovered a group of women who inspired me so much that I asked myself, "What am I doing wasting my life in front of a computer?"

This group of women is a group of women I want to tell you a little bit about today. They are the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan or RAWA. And I discovered them like many others have discovered them, through their website. But before I talk about the resistance of Afghan women in Afghanistan and in the refugee camps of Pakistan, I want to just talk a little bit about the differences in perceptions between government officials—U.S. government officials—and Afghan women. The big goal of resistance is liberation and the notion of Afghan's women's liberation has two very different definitions depending on whether you're talking to U.S. government officials or whether you're talking to Afghan women themselves.

For example, you have Condoleezza Rice who said under President Bush's leadership, our men and women in uniform have delivered freedom to more than fifty million people in the space of just two and a half years. And she's talking here about Iraq and Afghanistan. And there was a White House press release that said millions of Afghan women are experiencing freedom for the first time. But if you talk to Afghan women, Miriam Rowi of RAWA has said, in spite of its rhetoric, the Karzi government, which is backed heavily by the United States, actively pursues policies that are still anti-women. If you read the latest reports of what Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch—not necessarily the most radical political organizations but who do incredibly good work, nonetheless—the latest two reports also detail a very different reality.

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- †. Unfortunately, the *Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law & Justice* was unable to obtain permission to publish Ms. Peavey's remarks. Fran Peavey is a teacher, comedian and social change catalyst. She once toured the world via its park benches, where in every city she visited, she would simply find a public bench and sit herself down wearing a sign that said, "American willing to listen." She thinks all creative people should consider social activism as a career—a writer and performer herself, she's made social entrepreneurship her primary life work. Her work has taken her to the former Yugoslavia, and to the banks of the Ganges, where she's been assisting Indian activists for years in the task of cleaning up the awesomely polluted and very holy River Ganges. Fran Peavey lives, writes, and organizes in Oakland, CA, and travels around the world learning from and advising other activists. Among her books published is, *By Life's Grace: Musings on the Essence of Social Change* (New Society Publishers 1994).
- †. Sonali Kolhatkar is co-producer and host of *Uprising* (formerly *The Morning Show*) a morning drive-time radio program on KPFK Pacifica Radio in Los Angeles. She is also Vice President of the Afghan Women's Mission, a group that works in solidarity with Afghans to help improve health and educational facilities for Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

Amnesty's report is, *Justice Denied to Women* and the Human Rights Watch report is, *Killing You is a Very Easy Thing For Us*. These sorts of different realities are very, very important for us to examine because when we look at how women themselves are resisting, we have to figure out whom we want to believe. The women's experiences themselves or the words of their so-called liberators.

We've been told that the new Afghan Constitution is a step forward for democracy but there's a little aspect of the new Afghan Constitution that completely undermines the notion of democracy for women. It starts out saying that all Afghan men and women are considered equal, something that *our* constitution here in this country hasn't specifically said. But then a last minute addition to the Constitution was that Islamic law would be the supreme law of the land. And just to give an example of what that means, at the constitutional convention where this Afghan Constitution was drawn up and hailed as a step toward democracy by the Bush Administration, the chairman of the constitutional convention, a man by the name of Ahmed Chalabi, said to a couple of women who were very angry about a particular vote, "Why are you so angry? Look, even God does not grant you equality. Even God says that your testimony is worth half that of men." So, he's quoting Islamic law, which is the very law that usurps the entire constitution of Afghanistan. So this is one way in which, of course, the constitution is deeply flawed and most Afghan women consider it a document that is in no way going to protect them. Not to mention that it's simply a document itself and any implementation is very far off.

Then, of course, the United States' idea of what freedom means to Afghan women is Beauty Without Borders. Do you know what that is? Beauty Without Borders is the name of a new eight-month course that has been brought to Afghanistan by two American women, Debbie Rodriguez and Patricia O'Connor, who talk about their wildly popular beauty salons that they have brought to "introduce Afghans to western ideas of womanhood by teaching them the finer points of applying lipstick." Because once you're liberated you can wear make-up, as Egyptian feminist, Nawal El Saadawi calls the "post-modern veil."

So this is what freedom has meant. But look at what Afghan women themselves are going through. You just have to look at the western province of Iraq and Afghanistan where under the brutal rule of Ismael Khan, one of the many warlords that the United States has helped bring back into power, Afghan women are committing suicide in enormous numbers. In the last year alone, 160 cases of attempted suicide among girls and women between the ages of twelve and fifty have been reported. And that's just the number of cases reported. They say poverty, forced marriages, and the lack of access to education are the main reason for suicide among women.

Another very insidious aspect of Afghan women's oppression, which was made very famous under the Taliban, was the issue of academic education. The Bush administration tells us girls and women can now go to school and that's wonderful. In some cities, they can. But rural schools are still being burnt down

in the countryside. In fact, reality is very different in the countryside than in the cities in Afghanistan.

I feel it is so crucial that we talk about the role of this government in creating a situation where Afghan women's rights have been impacted. And, in fact, the United States has a long history of destroying Afghan women's rights. The *Berkeley Women's Law Journal* was very thoughtful in giving me my first academic publication outside of my original field on that very topic, *The Impact of U.S. Intervention on Afghan Women's Rights*. This article gives a detailed history, going back to the late seventies, of how U.S. actions in fueling extremism have destroyed and have begun a downward trajectory of Afghan women's rights. So I'm not even going to go into that.

I really want to talk about the promise that the Bush administration made to Afghan women and the breaking of that promise. Colin Powell said in 2001, the rights of the women of Afghanistan will not be negotiable. And, unfortunately, they have been negotiated. They have been negotiated away. Right now Afghan women are continuing to fend for themselves, and, in fact, in your folders that you got, your packet that you got today, the contest organizers were generous enough to include a copy of my paper that was just published where you can go into more details about those conditions.

But there's another thing that's also in that packet, and I want to talk a little bit about it. I am referring to the statement by RAWA on International Women's Day. In RAWA's language, the title of this statement is, *Women's Emancipation is Achievable Only by Themselves*. And that's exactly, I think, what most of us in this room would agree with, but unfortunately the Bush administration believes it can deliver freedom from bombs. We do have to figure out how to teach them the reality of that. No better group to teach them than RAWA in my opinion.

So what are women doing to resist? And as Fran Peavey said, wherever there is war, there are women resisting war. And that has been true of Afghanistan right from the start. RAWA has been among the groups of women that have been on the forefront of resisting war and were formed in 1977 by a woman whose name is Meena. In fact, there is a biography of Meena that's just out by a woman named Melody Ermachild. There was an excellent *L.A. Times* review of the book recently. You can read Meena's story there, read about the martyr who founded RAWA.

And this organization was founded in the seventies in order to further women's rights because, even though Afghanistan was a conservative society, women wanted equality. They wanted to change things in the villages where literacy is very, very low. So RAWA was founded in order to further women's rights. But a year later the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, and that changed everything. And RAWA joined in the war of resistance that many Afghans joined in, and they have continued their history up through the nineties under the Mujahidiin, the U.S. backed extremist who committed absolutely unspeakable crimes against Afghan women. They continued resisting through the late nineties when the Taliban instituted the same sort of crimes into law. RAWA was a more

organized form of the chaos that women were going through or subjected to and were among the Afghan women who were resisting the Taliban and its predecessors by doing the most incredible things, such as smuggling educational books under their veils and documenting the human rights abuses that they saw.

Many of you have probably seen the very disturbing image of the Afghan women executed in Kabul stadium that was shown all across CNN and the world media after 9/11. But that image was available months before 9/11 and nobody wanted to touch it. Nobody wanted to touch it because they thought it was just too gruesome to look at women being treated like that. But after 9/11, it became a quite convenient way to justify the war. RAWA has been documenting these abuses for many years and this is one of their older pamphlets, which I'd like to pass around for you to look at. And it's very gruesome. You may have just eaten so you may not want to look through these. These are very, very gruesome photographs, but this is how they wanted to document the images of what was happening in their country because nobody else was doing it. And on the back there is a poem—it's a poem dedicated to the fundamentalists and there is some more literature here. Afghan women challenge the fundamentalists and the image of the woman being executed, and I pass these around because these are part of their documentation. They publish most of their books in Dari, Pashto, and Afghan languages but they publish a few in English for the rest of us. And RAWA is not the only group of Afghan women that are resisting, although they are the most inspiring for me in my work with the Afghan Women's Mission, a non-profit that I helped to found.

But there are many other women as well. A woman that was a real hero for most Afghans and for myself, was Malalai Joya, a young woman who stood up at the constitutional convention and had the guts to say what nobody else had the guts to say. She stood up and denounced the warlords who were taking their seats in this constitutional convention and demanded that they be put on trial in international courts to be tried for war crimes against their countrymen. She was denounced. She was booed out and her life was threatened. And so she had to have bodyguards. She was finally allowed back into the convention because the majority of the Afghans inside, I read, were actually in support of what she said. Malalai Joya moved so many Afghan women and she made headlines. And she's a very, very young woman. She is in her mid-twenties.

There are women like Massouda Jalal, who is working within the framework of the government. Massouda Jalal is the only woman candidate running for president and she ran against Hamid Karzai in the interim when Karzai was picked as the interim president. Well, what did Karzai, who purports to be a backer of women's rights, do? He went after Massouda Jalal and basically offered her the position of running as his deputy if she would withdraw. He did not want to be challenged and she won the second highest number of votes. She refused.

Women like Massouda Jalal, who by the way, has no backing from the U.S., has none of the campaign dollars that the U.S. is spending on Karzai, is

running, and she too, in her own way, is resisting what the United States is doing.

I want to end with talking about a group—a pair of women who were recently featured in, again, the *New York Times*. These two women de-mined their village recently after they saw two young boys killed by the remnants of U.S. dropped cluster bombs—and for anyone who knows what cluster bombs are, they are basically bombs that are anti-personnel devices, which is a nice way of saying anti-human devices. They explode into over 200 bomblets of which 10 to 22 percent remain unexploded and leave behind these very brightly colored yellow canisters littered throughout Afghanistan, which is one of the most landmine infested countries in the world to begin with. And these yellow, brightly colored yellow canisters are very attractive to who? To young children who see these brightly colored canisters. They are hungry. They are desperate. They are starving. They are looking for food. They are just wandering around. What are they going to do? They are going to pick them up and examine them. Two young boys were killed and these two women, without any help from the United States, decided to do it themselves. They risked their lives. They used shovels. They picked them up as best as they could and every single piece that they picked could have destroyed them, could have killed them. And they disposed of them safely in a hole in the ground and they single-handedly or double-handedly rather, between the two of them, de-mined their entire village. These are the stories that are going unreported. We're just lucky that we heard about them. But Afghan women are resisting everywhere. Where there is war, women will resist. Afghan women are among the bravest women in the world that I have seen, and they continue to inspire me everyday.

We have to remember whose responsibility it is in this war, particularly with respect to Afghan women, because they were promised something. They were promised liberation by this government. But Afghan women know exactly how to liberate themselves. They've been doing it for years. They've been trying very hard to do it. They know what the tactics are. They know the strategies. They know how to do it. They know how to educate themselves. What they need from us is to get our government off their backs. That's what they need. And we have to figure out how to do that while working in solidarity with them.

FOURTH SPEAKER: LOUISA BENSON CRAIG†

I consider myself a grassroots activist. I guess life has a way of pushing us in directions that we never dreamed of, and we can either take up the challenge, and if we do, we often find ourselves having wonderful opportunities. In my case, as in many countries in Southeast Asia, women are able to assume leadership roles by virtue of their family connections. In the case of Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, she was accepted and loved because of her father's role as a liberator of the country. He was very actively involved in getting rid of colonialism in Burma, but unfortunately he never lived long enough to see the country – see independence. He and his cabinet members were all assassinated before independence came.

My father was not Burman ethnically, he was of Jewish decent. His ancestors settled in Southern India and left Spain and Portugal with the inquisition. But his own father had been born in Burma and then he married my mother who was a Karen, one of the ethnic minority groups in Burma. And during the second World War, his life was saved by the Karens, and so from that point on he used the honorific in front of his name and considered himself a Karen, and from then on his fate was intertwined with that of the Karen people.

In 1948, Burma became independent. As you may not know, Burma didn't have the present form that it does now. It's actually a multi-ethnic state and fifty percent of the population belongs to the majority Burmans and the rest are a variety of totally different minority groups. We have different cultures, different histories, and a different language. And even the structure of our society is different from each other.

As Burma was working towards its independence, I remember from when I was little, Karen leaders meeting in our home and talking about making sure we had equal rights, equal to the majority Burmans. I remember being in massive marches demanding equal rights when independence comes.

Well, unfortunately right after independence and the death of General Aung San, many of the Karen leaders were put in jail. It was called Section 5. Theoretically, it was protective custody but charges were never brought against them. My father was included in those and he was in jail for three and a half years with lots of time in solitary confinement. And then, after he was released, he was under house arrest for another seven years. And during this time, all our

†. Louisa Benson, born in Rangoon, Burma, is part of the second generation of activists in Burma who are trying to bring about democracy and human rights. Louisa married a Karen Brigadier General, Brigadier Lyn Htin, who was with the Karen National Union, and armed opposition group. He was in Rangoon for peace talks at the invitation of the Burmese military junta when he was assassinated by the regime. Louisa regrouped his brigade and became its leader. She now lives in the United States with her husband, Glenn Craig. She co-founded the Burma Forum, which lobbies for sanctions against the Burmese military regime. She also initiated the Interethnic Conflict Resolution program for Burma's ethnic nationalities in cooperation with Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs.

properties were confiscated and our bank accounts frozen. My father had been a very successful businessman.

Another opportunity and challenge came because of my first husband who was a Karen leader. Right after independence the Karen villages were attacked by the ruling Punta, and I still remember having to sleep on the floor because, at night, they would shoot into our homes and into the villages where we were living. And so the Karens took up arms in defense. In this case, we were either going to defend ourselves or allow ourselves to be killed. The Karen National Defense Organization started then, in early 1949, and it's the longest running civil war to this day.

Anyhow, in '62, General Ne Win took over the country in a military coup and soon after that he made overtures to the Karens to come for peace talks. And my husband, who was a Brigadier General at the time, was among those who agreed to come following his political leaders. The majority of Karens felt that they couldn't trust the good will of the military regime and so they didn't come. My birth family was leaving, emigrating to the United States, and my mother was to follow soon after that, but because I was starting a new life and a new family, I remained in Burma. However, while the talks were going on, my husband was assassinated, although in theory they were supposed to have ten days to return to the area if the talks didn't work out. Leading up to this point, my husband had felt that the talks were not working out very well and so he sent me to live in the hills where his brigade headquarters was. That was another turning point in my life.

After I was widowed, I could have gone back to Rangoon. When they killed my husband, they also confiscated the wireless operator and the code books and everything so they were able to send me messages directly with our codes and kept on inviting me to come back. They promised me safety and all of that, and they said that my mother would be safe. Well, that was an allusion to my mother but I decided to stay because the soldiers looked to me for leadership. I didn't know anything about the military but the remaining commanders helped. Between all of us, we worked together and set up gridlines and military talk, you know, like if you come beyond this point we'll shoot you, kind of thing because it was in our territory.

Anyhow, I made the decision to stay but my mother paid for my decision. The soldiers came with military boots at night and kicked her up and she went to the hospital to be treated but the doctors wouldn't treat her because it was dangerous to do that. Eventually I was able to send a soldier to go in and bring her out the back door. Eventually she was reunited with my father and family and she lived for another two years in the United States.

I remained with my brigade and acted as a liaison officer for two and a half years. And my present husband, an American I had known him in college and who was in touch with my family in the United States, came after many, many attempts at getting together. We finally got together and he did a really good sales number on me and convinced me that I could do more to help my people if

I came to the United States and he pointed out that if I stayed on there, I wouldn't live too long, which probably was true.

But when I first came here, I was consumed with guilt. I had nightmares like my gun would jam and I couldn't shoot. I felt that I had left my people. I didn't belong here or there. I was sort of in limbo. But I closed my eyes and decided to live like a normal person. I tried to be a good wife and mother and we raised three children, three wonderful children. During the time that I was raising my children I decided that I couldn't take chances that would get me killed because I was responsible for them not being orphaned.

Then about sixteen years ago I received a message from General Bo Mya, who is the Karen leader, saying, "Where are you? I've been trying to find you all this time." And that was another turning point. Things happen, as you all know, in life, and I took up the challenge. My children were now grown and I could think of other people's children for a change. In 1988, as many of you know, probably know, the military clamped down on demonstrations in the streets in Burma and it was a very brutal massacre, although not very much reported in the international press. It was a year before Tiananmen Square.

The regime in Burma has existed since '62, but they keep changing their name. First it was SLORC, State Law and Order Restoration Council and now they are known as State Peace and Development Coalition, which is far from the truth. They are a very brutal regime. They are an occupation regime really. They rule by mandate and they don't rule by constitution at all. They place themselves above the law. They are brutal to both the military as well as rural populations. The majority in the urban – they are brutal to the urban as well— are mostly ethnic Burmans and they suffer but in a different way from the people in the countryside where the military has demarcated brown areas and black areas and people in those areas can be shot on sight.

In the military expeditions, the soldiers come and just force people to carry their things. This is forced conscription of slave labor and they pick people for months at a time. Women are made to suffer both during the day and at night they would be gang raped and then during the daytime they'd have to carry goods again. So the survival rate is really very low.

A more recent thing that has happened is that when the soldiers come, the men run away because they get hurt and so the women stay on and lots of times you'll find the village elders are women. They have a little bit more finesse in dealing with the military and sometimes they get away with it, but not always. There is a recent case of a sixty-year-old woman who was a village elder and was tied up by her ankles and had oil poured down her legs. They think of incredible ways of torturing people.

The Karens are by no means the only people suffering in the country. As you may know, Burma has Thailand on one side, Laos and China and India and Bangladesh. Those are our neighbors. And there has been a scattering of people into all these neighboring countries. In Thailand alone there are about 120,000 refugees, but they get some assistance from U.N. agencies and other

international aid organizations. But there are an estimated 1.4 million people who are actually displaced and they have no help from anybody. They live under the trees. They live on—I actually have no idea how they survive but they have.

In 1989, my husband and I discovered that an American-based oil company was doing business there. They were drilling for oil at the time on-shore. And so we went to meet with the president of the company and said, “You probably don’t know what the nature of the regime is like. These people are brutal and you want to wait until there’s a change in government. Because we’re not against business. I’m from a business family.”

“Well,” he said, “I know the nature of the regime. You don’t need to tell me anything but our responsibility is to our shareholders.” That’s a standard response.

He then wrote a letter to my husband saying, “Ken, you’ll be very happy to know we’ve closed down our operations and we’re out of there.” Well, a few months later they popped up on an off-shore gas project in partnership with three other groups. One of them was a military regime in Burma and this was a pipeline project that would come on-shore and cut right across the strip of Burma into Thailand. The sole purpose was to sell oil to Thailand, and then to make matters worse, they hired the military to protect the pipeline. Not just to protect the pipeline but also to get people to clear the way for the pipeline, to move the villages to make way for the pipeline. You can imagine the devastation to the whole area. And, of course, the pipeline project, the pipelines came from none other than Halliburton. So life goes on.

Just recently, the new Thai government is very anxious to do business with the regime. Burma, unfortunately, is very rich in natural resources. So everyone wants to do business with them and all the Asian member nations are keen on bringing peace to the region. Just in the last few months, they started this process called a back-up process. They’ve invited all the Asian member nations plus France, Italy and Belgium, whom they thought would be their friends, and the only host people they invited is the Burmese regime. They really haven’t bothered to include ethnic or the pro-democracy groups at all. The regime is saying, “We want to promote democracy and we’re ready to do this and we have a road map,” but the seven-point road map actually endorses the national convention, which was to draft a constitution, which would make the military a permanent part of the government.

Also, just since December, the Thai government has put pressure on the Karens who are at their mercy to negotiate cease-fire agreements with the regime. They did it in such a way that it created a rift between the Karen leadership. I feel that because I’m a woman and my advanced age, I was able to approach the leaders without being a threat to them, so I talked to each person. I went to the Board and talked to each of the leaders to make sure they talked together. They are on the same page again and so far they are holding together. But the talks are ongoing. There is theoretically a process going on for cease-

fire. Nothing has been signed but while this cease-fire talk is going on, the Karens are still being attacked by the SPCD troops. So, we'll see what happens.

The ethnic nationalities are united in the group called the National Democratic Front and it's represented by all the ethnic groups. Those who have cease-fire agreements with the military groups are not really on board with it. They go on and on and on and it's a very powerful coalition. We had a conference just last month inside Burma and I was fortunate to be part of it. We made the agreement that the road map was unacceptable and that we always called for tripartite dialogue to include the military, the pro-democracy leadership and the ethnic leadership. And we still call for that. The U.N. has supported us in this position and they too ask for tripartite talks. Except most recently, Razali, who is a special envoy for the U.N. and who has business interest in Burma, has been involved in what he says is the peace process but at this point there is no talk of ethnic participation.

It's an ongoing fight, you know. We don't know when it will end. But at the same time I see it as very exciting to be alive in this time in history. We, the older generations, have been marching and pushing and demonstrating, but many have been fighting in the courts of law and because of information technology, so much can be done so quickly and I'm very happy about that. I think that the young warriors, the younger warriors who come after us will stand on our shoulders and be able to do so much more than we ever dreamed of doing. I feel we women have special courage and resilience and also wonderful networking ability of horizontal networking.

I think of us as being like bamboo. Groves of bamboo standing side by side and a strong wind comes and bends them all the way to the ground but the wind goes away and we're back to standing up again. So we're there to support each other and I thank you for this opportunity to speak.

FIFTH SPEAKER: MALIHA ZULFACAR†

I would like to begin my talk with a quote that I found in Arundhati Roy's book, *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*: "Life is normal only because the macabre has become normal." The relevance of this quote becomes clear when I share my exposure to some of the challenges facing Afghan women. Since 2002, I have lived and worked six months at Cal Poly State University, San Luis Obispo, California and six months in Kabul, Afghanistan. Balancing my life-

†. Maliha Zulfacar is an Assistant Professor of Ethnic Studies at Cal Poly State University, San Luis Obispo. She has recently been actively involved in the rebuilding efforts in her native Afghanistan. She was named Deputy Minister of Higher Education by the Transitional Islamic Government of Afghanistan, and has been a consultant on gender and higher education to the Constitution Commission of the Transitional Government as well. She has co-written and co-produced a documentary on the rebuilding of Kabul since the U.S. attacks titled *Healing Kabul*. She is currently splitting her time teaching between San Luis Obispo, California and Kabul, Afghanistan, where she is currently serving as the Chair of the Gender Studies Department at Kabul University.

style between the most prosperous and the most devastated countries on this earth has been challenging, educational, and rewarding. During the past year, I have been doing fieldwork in Kabul towards production of a documentary film while also teaching at Kabul University. I had the opportunity to come across women from different walks of life.

What has amazed me is the remarkable endurance and tolerance among Afghans, especially among Afghan women. Afghan women's resilience against all the misery and brutalities of the past twenty-five years is simply mind-boggling. Contrary to my expectation, the Afghan women I encountered in Kabul are not angry, resentful, and subdued. Their level of destitution and limitation is such that they don't have the luxury to question the brutalities and injustices surrounding them. Their main focus is how to deal with the basic necessities of their daily lives—if they are to survive. This has changed Afghan women to survivors. The overall insecurities surrounding them don't give them the chance to question and to challenge the obstacles. This remains a luxury for women with relative socio-economic and political privilege.

Here I would like to present to you three scenarios dealing with the realities of Afghan women in the third year of reconstruction of Afghanistan.

The first story is about a returned refugee woman—a widow and mother of four—who was living in a run-down refugee camp, in the outskirts of Kabul. I came across a refugee camp located close to Kabul Stadium, in the outskirts of Kabul. I met and spoke with many refugee families in this camp. During this visit, I approached a one-room mud hut. A thin, pregnant woman surrounded by small children stood up, smiling at me, and invited me in for a cup of tea. She had fled to Pakistan from her village located in the northern part of the country. Her house and all her belongings were burned and she had no choice but to flee to Pakistan. She had recently returned from Pakistan. I asked her about the motive of returning to Afghanistan. Basically, she had no choice, all Afghan refugees from Pakistan were asked to leave and the only financial incentive was \$50 per family through UNHCR and free transportation to the border. The average Afghan family has seven to ten children. Most of these refugee families are being picked from refugee camps in the neighboring countries of Pakistan and Iran and transported across the border and let out somewhere in Kabul. This woman had no other human or material resources, except the \$50 to survive with her three children.

She was proud of her one-room hut, which she built with help of her children ages two, three, seven and ten. As I was speaking to her, there was a man standing and listening to our conversation. My assumption was that he must be a close family member. I asked her how was she feeding her children with no outside assistance? Her reply was that two of her sons, ages seven and ten, were the family providers. Daily, they were going to the city to sell water. Both combined had earnings of about one hundred Afghanis per day. One dollar equals 50 Afghanis: so, this family of four was living on \$2 a day. The main source of their nutrition was bread and tea without sugar. On good days, they

also had sugar.

I spoke with some other refugees and they all had horrifying stories about their hardship. They all expressed their regret to have been returned to Afghanistan. They felt they were cheated and were brought back with no further assistance, direction, or job opportunities. They felt they received better care in Pakistan refugee camps by receiving daily food rations provided by the U.N. assistance programs.

A month later, at the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, my film crew decided to donate some food to the refugees of this camp. When we approached the camp a flood of kids, women, and men surrounded our car and we quickly lost control over the distribution of meat. Within a minute, all the meat was gone. It was one of the most depressing moments of my life. I felt helpless. We felt overwhelmed. When the crowd of people left, the refugee woman I had interviewed came by to talk to us. During our talk, I noticed she was no longer pregnant. I congratulated her and asked about the baby. She quietly replied that the baby was given away to the man who had been standing by her when I was there as an exchange for the debt she owed him. She was telling the story with tearful eyes. Her husband was a soldier who was killed in the ongoing fighting in the north. She was four months pregnant when her husband died. She had borrowed money from this male relative for his burial expenses. The deal with him was to give him the baby at birth in exchange for her debt. Often, I wonder if she had become pregnant by this man to pay off her debt. This is one of many kinds of tragedies that befall Afghan women as they try to deal with daily obstacles.

The second story is about a domestic helper who worked in my house. She had endured the effect of war by losing her mother during a rocket attack and raising her disabled brother who lost his leg in a mine explosion. After only a few months of living in Kabul and listening to Afghans, I came to know that loss of family members and living with injured and/or disabled family members has become the norm. She was in eighth grade when one day after school as she was approaching her house, she saw a crowd of people in front of her house. She soon discovered that a missile had landed on her family patio and had struck her mother, who died instantly. That meant she had to discontinue her school to take care of the family. She was the middle child, but the only daughter. Domesticity is the woman's task. Six months later, her brother lost his foot walking on a landmine. The brother was now incapacitated, and she became his caretaker. She mentioned there were days that she would ask her aunts to stay with the brother and she would go to school. But that brought another tragedy to the family. When the Taliban came to power, the father was severely beaten for having allowed his daughter to attend school. After that incident, she was very often beaten by her father.

But, for her, these were matters of the past. The real dilemma for this particular woman was a much deeper concern. She was married for nine years and still had not been able to bear a child; a concern that was silently killing her.

She had become suicidal. She didn't know who to turn to. She had accepted the loss of her mother and the loss of her brother's foot to God and something that was connected to external forces. But she perceived her infertility as her fault. She was perceived by in-laws and family members as a woman with no "fruit bearing" gift to her marriage and husband. She was made to feel useless. She and her husband were taken to the local spiritual healer for further psychological healing and herbal treatments.

One day, she came to me and said, "All I want from God and all I pray for is to become pregnant once. I don't even care if the baby dies, just so all will see that I'm really a woman." This is the microcosm of day-to-day concerns of Afghan women. While, the focus of the media has been on Afghanistan writing a new constitution in which gender equality has been guaranteed, the above scenario reflects the immediate concerns of an ordinary million of Afghan women. A sustainable and effective change in lives of Afghan women demand both top-down laws and policies that guarantee their equal rights, and bottom-up changes of the customary norms and perceptions. And while the focus of the reconstruction has been the physical rehabilitation of the country, the healing of the soul of Afghan people and their hurt and their day-to-day dilemmas remain untouched.

My last story has to do with my work in Afghanistan. In January, 2002, the minister of higher education asked me to become the Deputy of the Ministry of Higher Education. I accepted the offer and was eager to return to Kabul after twenty-three years of living in exile. To return home: this was like a dream come true. It didn't take much more than a month or so to understand my inability to fulfill the role I'd been given, of the token "Afghan woman." While many of the daily administrative decisions were made in my absence, I was always invited to participate in meetings with potential rich donors to justify the gender contingent of the Memorandum of Understandings. Presence and inclusion of women in the governmental institutions was a must criterion to become eligible for financial assistance. I resigned that summer and returned to my Cal Poly teaching position. The following year, I was asked by the Kabul University chancellor to establish a department of women empowerment at the faculty of law and political sciences, funded by the World Bank. I accepted the position.

It was a surreal experience to go back to Kabul and teach at the University. I used to teach at Kabul University from 1973-74 to 1979. In 1979, I fled the country. Nothing resembled the past—classes with broken windows, no running water, no electricity, broken desks, chairs, a depleted library. And yet there was such eagerness to learn—this was even more intense among the female students.

There were twenty-eight female students all together in this department. What each one of these students had gone through was more educational than the content of any article I could find for them. I don't recall a day that went by without a student bursting into tears talking about life under the Mujahidden and the Taliban era. I didn't know, sometimes, if I was a teacher or a counselor.

Despite all the material deprivation and educational limitation, these

students felt “free” and their dream had come true by their return to the University. The interesting part was that they felt free. And yet, each would carry with them a plastic bag, where they kept their veils. As soon as they left the university campus they put on their veils. Security was their main concern. They continue to live under the fear of becoming the target of assault. Wearing the veil is not such a big issue for them as we might think; so long they are able to attend school to continue their education.

For Afghan women, the issue of the veil is their least concern. For some wearing the veil is perceived to bring them freedom—something totally contradictory to our understanding of the veil in the West. For example, I would like share the comment of the domestic helper. One day it was raining and she came to work crying. It was raining and she was totally soaked under her veil. I asked why she doesn’t get rid of the veil now that she doesn’t have to wear it. She looked at me and asked why she shouldn’t wear it. Her reply was, “This is the only thing that gives me freedom!” I asked her what freedom the veil gives her. She replied so eloquently, “You don’t know how it is to walk on the streets of Kabul. The way men stare at you on the streets it feels as if they are about to eat you up. Do you know how afraid I am to leave home and come and work here? Do you think Taliban are gone? They are everywhere. They have shaved their beards but they are everywhere. If they find out that I come to work, they will punish me, the way they punished my father.” Another benefit of wearing the veil for a majority of ordinary Afghan women is to hide their run-down attire, she said. So the veil gives her anonymity and hides her threadbare attire and poverty.

The daily obstacles of Afghan girls attending the university went beyond the issues of whether they had textbooks or electricity. Their concern was to comply with the non-educational obstacles—being devalued by male professors for talking to a male classmate, intimidation for smiling, being called “loose” for wearing lipstick—these were some of the ongoing issues. While, for us here, resistance is to take a stand and to oppose something, for the majority of Afghan women, resistance means to struggle with these daily challenges to remain alive.

The aftermath of twenty-four years of war on Afghan women is not only self-evident in the number of family losses, economic poverty, and the overall physical destruction of their environment. Afghan women have been used and abused both by internal and external male-dominated political agendas and interests. International media have presented to us the three faces of war in Afghanistan: The Soviet invasion (78-'89), the coming of Mujahideen era (1992-1995), and then the Taliban era (1995-2001). We know that in reality, all of these phases were framed, funded, and instigated by the former Soviet Union, the United States, and by the militant ideologist Islamists. The media gave us pictures of the deplorable conditions of women as a result of an Islamic culture, psychopath war lords, and “primitive” tribal Afghans—as mad men who claimed victory by slaughtering one another and condemning these women. And after 9/11, the issue of Afghan women became the focus of media once again. It was

portrayed as though the rescue of the Afghan women could be accomplished through an overthrow of the veil. I wish it were that simple.

I had the privilege to flee Afghanistan to study abroad and live abroad. Millions of Afghan women could not. They endured the hardship of war and had to comply with the policies of the succeeding regimes; the pendulum of male-dominated policies swung from the far left to the far right. But during the past three years, when I hear their stories and all that they have gone through, I am puzzled by their stamina, courage, resilience, pragmatism, and survival mechanisms. When I asked them how they passed the time during the Taliban regime when they couldn't leave their homes, they replied that they learned how to sew, and earned money to learn English and computers. They established home schools for their youngest sisters and neighbor children. The majority of them undertook these tasks without belonging to any organizations. And what else—they wanted to make something out of their lives and it was remarkable that they just wouldn't give up under any circumstances.

In the West, we hear all about the success of Afghanistan's new reconstruction period. However, what we understand by the term "school" is different in Afghanistan. The majority of these children sit on dirt floors, in classes with no roof, windows or doors. There are no desks and chairs. In 2002, I visited a school and saw a teacher holding a map of Afghanistan. I approached the teacher and asked her how she feels about the condition of the school, and how she manages to teach under such circumstances. She stared at me, a bit puzzled, and replied, "What do you mean how I feel about teaching? I longed for this day, to be able to teach with no fear of being put in prison for years. Now I live in freedom. Look at me, I smile, I talk and I am able to leave my house without fear. Do you know what it is to teach and not be fearful that somebody is going to come and kill you? Not having chairs and desks is nothing compared to what we had to go through." I felt ashamed of my questions. Instead of my bringing them enthusiasm and energy, their resilience, strength, and hope gave me the inspiration to become hopeful! Afghan women were silenced but not conquered!

War is evil, both to men and women, yet some aspects of war are hardest on women. Women have been targets of sexual exploitation, rape, and abduction. These are some of the bitter realities that thousands of Afghan women have gone through. These are the kind of wrongs that make the impact of war on women very unique. Women often become objects of reproduction, enslaved, and they become the breeders of the offspring of the conquerors. Yet, in the midst of all, their life goes on. Let's keep in mind that over the past twenty-four years, 1.5 million Afghans have died. Most of them have been men. The majority of the population is now women. In the aftermath of the past decades of war, it is the Afghan women who carry out, not only their traditional chores, but most of them also assume the responsibility of the care for crippled husbands or male family members. While women were not considered to have whole mental capacity and were denied civil rights, they have been expected to perform public

and private economic roles in terms of food and clothing production, and creating a shelter for their children.

Immediately after 9/11, the international media bombarded us with the tragedies of Afghan women. Both Tony Blair and President George Bush presented themselves as hardcore feminist defenders. The Afghan women's cause legitimized our bombing of Afghanistan to topple the Taliban regime. The documentary film *Behind the Veil*, depicted over and over the horrifying realities of Afghan women. From mid-October of 2001 to mid-June of 2002, Afghanistan's map was framed on CNN's headline news background. By the end of 2002, Iraq became the centerpiece and Afghanistan was pushed to the side once again.

While the pinnacle of Afghan women's triumph was broadcasted around the world, the male-dominated cabinet members policies regarding the plight of women are yet to be seen. There is no doubt that Afghan women are relieved from the oppression of the Taliban's draconian oppression. However, beyond the immediate changes following the Taliban's fall and President Karzai's takeover, the limited day-to-day circumstances of women's lives remain unchanged. The imported and fragmented policies sound more impressive for those of us who don't have to deal with the level of poverty that Afghan women inside the country have to face. These token top-down initiations, such as a draft constitution and democratic election processes, are *not* the immediate concern of the majority of Afghan women.

A SPECIAL PRESENTATION

When the Storm Came

The Women and War symposium concluded with a viewing of the short film *When the Storm Came*. This documentary traces the experiences of the women of Kunnam Pushpora who were victims of a mass rape at the hands of Indian security forces. The film was presented by the filmmaker, Shilpi Gupta. The documentary's website can be found at www.kashmirfilm.com