Making a Difference

With huge illiteracy rates and prohibition from many activities, Afghanistan’s women were effectively economically disenfranchised under the Taliban. Mina Sherzoy returned to Afghanistan from over 20 years of exile, saw the situation at first hand and resolved to make a difference. Stuart Crainer talked to her in Kabul.
Mina Sherzoy's story begins in 1979. At age 18 she was visiting her father in Czechoslovakia, where he was the ambassador for Afghanistan, when the Russian army invaded their home country. Unwilling to return to Russian control, the Sherzoy family left Prague by train and headed first to Frankfurt – then London – then Raleigh, North Carolina – and, finally, California. For the next 23 years, Mina Sherzoy lived the Californian dream. She raised a family and worked as a secretary of an attorney, as a systems analyst and as a real estate agent selling luxury properties.

In 2002 all this changed. In February 2002 Mina and Sondra Meyrose of the San Francisco Friends of Afghanistan left Fremont, California, on the 36-hour trip to their homeland by way of Texas, London, Dubai, and Islamabad. They arrived armed with blankets, medicine, and medical equipment to ease the suffering in the wrecked country that was once their home.

The visit changed Mina Sherzoy's life.

"I came for three weeks to check things out and, because I left when I was 18, I wanted to see what I had left behind." The Kabul of Sherzoy's memory had tree-lined boulevards and people-filled bazaars. The post-Taliban reality was devastatingly different. After arriving, she stopped at the American Embassy for security registration. "When I was filling out the forms, I went outside and I saw this little boy. It was very cold, which is normal for Kabul in late February. This little boy in ragged, dusty clothes was shining the shoes of 20 or so Afghans. I saw that and my heart broke because I didn’t expect it. It just changed my mind right there. I said to myself: I have two daughters who have graduated from high school; they know how to read and write; they have a good life; they are self-sufficient; they are on their feet. These people need me more. So that’s what made me change my mind. I’ve been here since then.”

The journey from selling California real estate to the decay of downtown Kabul is a difficult one. Sherzoy argues that the leap is not so intimidating. She makes easy links between her past and present lives. “What helped me was my experience. I was a successful businesswoman. I had worked in real estate and as a private investment consultant. All of this meant I had to deal with all kinds of people all day long, from morning to night. I was a closer, I was a negotiator. And I did a lot of marketing; so I’ve done all of these things, and I had over 20 years of experience. This is what I brought here.”

Learning as you live

Sherzoy’s father had returned to political life as deputy foreign minister; he is now Afghanistan’s ambassador to Egypt. She started doing humanitarian work. “Of course, everybody was asking: what are you doing here, why are you here? There’s always suspicion, and so you have to prove yourself to the community.” Sherzoy worked full-time – and more. “I was in the villages and schools and everywhere. I tried to make things happen and saw that women were (and are) suffering. They don’t know anything and can’t do anything, even clean a house. They told me that the reason they didn’t know is because they’ve never had a home. You learn as you live with these people.”

The women of Afghanistan were at a low point. The per capita income of Afghani women is around one-third of men’s. “It is a very male chauvinistic society, a male dominated society,” Sherzoy says. “Especially during the previous 10 years women had been deprived of everything, even education, even work. They couldn’t travel. Men wouldn’t let their women out because they could be raped, killed, stolen, or kidnapped. That’s how it was for 23 years, and now there is an opportunity because the illiteracy rate in women is about 96 per cent. Can you imagine?”

Sherzoy’s speedy, but impossibly challenging, conclusion was that the only way to get women out of poverty was to build capabilities and capacity by providing them with economic empowerment.

The skills begin at the most basic level. She recounts the gratitude of one woman who had benefited. Her first lesson had been how to hold a pen, and she had moved on to learn how to sew. Sherzoy ultimately set up the Entrepreneurship Development Programme at the country’s Ministry of Commerce, helped by American aid. Along the way,
she also established the Afghan Women’s Business Association (AWBA), which gave women very basic business training.

The new generation

The result is that a new and astounding generation of female entrepreneurs is emerging in Afghanistan. “Now we have entrepreneurs,” says Sherzoy. “We have women who are working out of their homes; they have shops, they teach, have companies. At the AWBA we not only teach them the basics of business but also how to do exhibitions, how to produce, how to design. We have done everything with them.”

None of this was easy.

Sherzoy encountered obstacle after obstacle, not out-and-out opposition, but something more insidious and patience-stretching. “Once we started the work, there would be problems: extra administrative work, stealing, all kinds of things designed to prevent progress. But I learned, as I continued working with people and getting to know them better. Now I have my own management systems. And this is where people got to know me too. At the beginning they thought: oh, this woman is from the West, we don’t know what she’s doing, she’s opening all these institutions, she’s trying to fool our women. But as time went by, when they saw the results, when they really saw what I’m teaching and how I’m guiding all these women, then they came to respect my work.”

Sherzoy’s NGO, WOMAN, now has 10 people working as administrators. About 170 to 180 women graduate every year from training courses. The Afghan Women’s Business Association has trained thousands of women in basic business skills. In
2005 Sherzoy set up the Afghan Women’s Business Federation – with $6 million of funding – to shape policy. With over 580 member businesses employing an average of 355 women, the Federation has a design school, a basic business school, a trade development centre, a retail centre, five offices in the provinces, and also works on protecting the branding of products made by Afghan women.

Expanding horizons
To keep all this moving forward, Sherzoy is working up to 16 hours a day, constantly moving between various offices, orphanages (where she also works), and provincial towns and villages where she hopes

But they're moving, they're trying to make a living, they're going to school – they're still learning to make a difference in their family, to bring up better children, to have a better life. It's very frustrating to work in Afghanistan; there is no infrastructure, no system, no capacity. I need more funds to build capacity!"

Sherzoy's plans remain as bold as her energy is infectious. Rather than traditional skills such as embroidering, sewing, and carpet making, she is interested in moving into electronics and production: “If I can get a factory, we could have women assembling bicycles. That would be a great thing. If I could produce jewellery with copper, silver, gold, or get involved in painting – all of these would offer new horizons. Afghan women don’t need to be really literate to do these things; but once you build the capacity, you empower women economically.”

She is working on a new project: building an online shopping mall (www.awwsom.com) to sell goods made by Afghan women.

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to develop centres encouraging women to take up entrepreneurial ways. Developing initiatives outside Kabul requires even more patience. Says Sherzoy: “You have to keep a very low profile in the provinces and work with people and move with people when they are ready. This is how I’m working with everyone, and that’s why I can move things around. I communicate widely. I talk to the tribal leaders; I talk to everybody. Once I gain their trust, then I move; that’s how you do it here.”

There is, she makes clear, a long, long way to go: “Afghan women are very brave women, courageous women, and very motivated even though they have suffered a lot. To be honest, they're still suffering in a lot of ways; there are challenges they're facing.

She does not regret her decision to stay, but remains surprised by how her life has changed direction. “I never ever dreamed of going back to Afghanistan. Never. If I’m sitting for a few minutes thinking about it, I still don’t believe that I’m here because there have been times when things were so bad. But thanks to God we were able to come back and help.”

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