



PHOTOGRAPH YELENA YEMCHUK

INTERVIEW SASHA SAGAN

Reason to Believe

From the safety of life in relatively peaceful places, it's easy to picture Afghanistan as just the distant, barren set for a long, abstract war, populated with only insurgent fighters, Western troops, and a few impoverished herdsmen. A land of men, seemingly. But more than 15 million women live there, all too often hidden from the world's view by war, poverty, and patriarchy.

Only 24% of Afghan women are literate, perhaps because the average girl there leaves school at eight years of age. When she grows up, she will live in a society where she has almost no say over her own life. Her father will almost certainly choose her husband for her. She may work, but she will probably never control her own finances. There's a high chance she'll be the victim of domestic violence. And when she becomes a mother, she is more likely to watch her baby die in the first year than a mum anywhere else on earth.

Afghanistan is a hard place to be female, but thanks in part to the members of Women for Afghan Women (WAW), it's getting better. This grassroots organisation fights for the rights of marginalised and abused Afghan women and girls, both in their home country and in the United States.

Programme Director Naheed Samadi Bahram and Executive Director Manizha Naderi talk to Violet about enacting change for the women of one of the most dangerous places on earth.

Sasha Sagan

What drew each of you to this line of work? And how long have you worked for WAW?

Naheed Samadi Bahram

I have worked for WAW for ten years. [Our mission is] securing and protecting the rights of Afghan women and girls in Afghanistan and New York and the direct services the women are receiving in New York. These services are life-changing for many Afghan immigrant families.

Manizha Naderi

I've been with WAW since 2002. For years I wanted to help Afghan women. I along with millions of other people around the world, I watched as the Taliban were slaughtering women on the streets of Kabul for the crime of being a woman. I longed to do something about that. I didn't know what to do and how to help until I met Women for Afghan Women on a sunny summer day in Flushing Park. They were looking for volunteers and I joined then and there.

Do you consider yourselves activists?

N: Yes, I do consider myself an activist. I believe an activist is someone who is involved in causes they care about and I am definitely involved in many causes, such as women's rights, human rights and inter-faith dialogue.

M: I was born an activist and a feminist. When I see injustice, I won't stop until I see that justice has been served. When I think of one word that best describes me, that would be 'activist'.

What were you least prepared for when you started this job?

M: I came to WAW as a young woman in my twenties with very little work experience. I learned everything on the job—from doing budgets, to proposals, to organising, to public speaking, to project management and on and on.

N: One thing I was least prepared for when I started working for WAW was seeing victims of domestic violence in New York. Coming from Afghanistan you don't think that women in New York are also victims of domestic violence. Another was seeing those who were born and raised in New York but had never been to school. It was very shocking because in Afghanistan, despite the difficult circumstances due to war, people will do everything to receive an education. Here in New York, I feel some people take their opportunities for granted.

Who or what is your biggest domestic political obstacle in Afghanistan?

M: Oh I've had many of these! For many years I fought, almost single-handedly, the Afghan government. They wanted to take over the shelters in Afghanistan and limit access to shelters for women. I fought them hard until they lost and I won! Shelters are now entirely run by NGOs. The Afghan government is



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NAHEED SAMADI BAHRAM



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MANIZHA NADERI

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a partner to NGOs in this kind of work now. I also had to fight conservatives who labelled shelters as a form of a brothel. They wanted to discredit our work. We actually had some people from right wing media following us so that they could find our shelters and put the locations on TV.

N: The biggest political obstacle in my opinion is the fact that people in Afghanistan don't abide by the laws in place. There are rules and regulations in Afghanistan but oftentimes people fail to implement them.

What about in Washington?

M: Making sure that Afghanistan and the issue of Afghan women stay relevant in Washington is a challenge. The American public has a very short span in attention. They want immediate results, and when they don't get them, they lose interest. This is what's happening with the issue of Afghanistan now. I am trying my best to keep Afghanistan relevant in the government and in the media.

N: In Washington, the overall policy towards immigrants is an obstacle. While immigrants come to the US, they are left alone in the way that there lacks a way in which they can be guided or receive proper services, i.e. psychological, etc. A better refugee resettlement programme definitely needs to be implemented.

What do Westerners not understand about life in Afghanistan?

N: I believe that Westerners need to understand that it has not always been like this. Afghanistan was a very different place before it became a war-torn country. My sisters were free to go to schools and universities. They sat in classrooms with boys and were free to dress the way they chose. They were equals to men. That side of Afghanistan is often forgotten.

M: People don't understand that Afghans want peace. They have gone through decades of war. They just want to live their lives, send their kids to school, go to work and have a normal life. No more killing, no more terrorism.

How do you change minds in a traditional patriarchal society?

M: Cultural change happens but it's long, hard work. We are doing this every day in our work. We work with men, fathers, brothers, religious figures to teach them women's rights in Islam—that women have equal rights to men in Islam. We are changing culture one family at a time.

N: Changing minds, which have developed in a traditional patriarchal society, cannot happen overnight. It is going to take generations. However, I believe that through education, we will change those minds and that is the most effective way. Afghanistan suffered from war for 30 years. The damage that war has done to Afghanistan cannot change with ten years of democracy. It will take much longer.

How has life changed for the average Afghan woman or girl in the time you've worked for WAW? What has been the impact of the official withdrawal of US combat troops in 2014?

M: From 2001 to now, the change in Afghanistan and for Afghan women and girls has been like day and night. Before 2001, there were no girls in schools. Now, millions of girls are in schools, there are women in the government, in military, in the police, in every aspect of life in Afghanistan. Afghanistan was reborn in 2001. Afghanistan has come a long way since then. It's almost like a miracle to me to see so many positive changes. Of course, there are also problems. You can't build a brand new country in

fifteen years! Afghanistan will need some more help for it to become a thriving democracy. It's well on its way though. Troop withdrawal has had an effect on the security in Afghanistan. Security is worse than before. Even though security has deteriorated, the Afghan security forces have been doing a great job against the Taliban.

N: The millions of girls who were banned from school during the control of the Taliban are now in school. That is a huge change. Women have returned to the workplace, to schools and universities. This accomplishment has definitely brought freedom to the average Afghan woman or girl. When it comes to the impact of the withdrawal, I believe there is still a risk that the country will fall into the hands of the Taliban again. Overall, security has been an issue since the withdrawal. People in Afghanistan are scared for their security, especially the security of women and girls.

What's your vision for the women and girls of Afghanistan over the next decade?

M: I want to see peace in Afghanistan. Actual, long-lasting peace. I want to see our neighbours not supporting terrorism and leaving Afghanistan to rebuild. When there's peace in Afghanistan, women will thrive, too.

N: Over the next decade I would like to see more women in government, not only holding seats in the parliament or ministries. I want to see women having more power by holding key roles in government and decision-making.

What does feminism mean to each of you? How does the concept differ in Afghanistan from what it means in the West?

N: Feminism to me means equality. It means women actively making decisions, whether it be inside the house or within their classrooms or offices. Feminism means freedom and women being in control of their own

lives. I think feminism is essentially the same in both places. I wouldn't say it's much different. Women's rights are both important in Afghanistan and in the US. In both places, women want to be equal, they want equal pay and the same opportunities as a man. While the women's issues here and in Afghanistan might differ, the struggle for freedom and equality is essentially the same. **M:** Feminism means life to me. There's no difference between me being alive and feminism. Feminism has become a dirty word in America these days. Women in Afghanistan call themselves feminists more often and more easily than women here.

WAW has a community centre for Afghan women in New York City. When women arrive in New York from Afghanistan, what is the hardest part of their adjustment? What's the most thrilling?

N: There are many challenges while arriving in New York from Afghanistan for the entire family, but especially for the women. They are in a different country with different religions and languages around them. Most of the Afghan women who come to the community centre in New York have never worked in Afghanistan. Therefore, they don't have experience in managing finances. Usually the men in their family, [their] father [or] husband, were the ones dealing with finances in Afghanistan. For them to get adjusted to that kind of independence in the beginning is hard but I have seen many thriving and that is what is most thrilling. Seeing our clients arrive from Afghanistan not knowing a word of English and seeing them thrive a few months later is very thrilling. **M:** The most thrilling thing for me was when in 2004, one of our ESL clients, who had never gone to school before in her life, came to me and was so very excited. She was almost hyperventilating. She told me, 'Today

for the first time in my life I was on the bus and realised that it was my bus.' It's because she could for the first time in her life read the letters on the bus!

How has the election of Donald Trump and the general political climate in the US affected the lives of the women you serve in New York?

N: A lot of our clients, approximately 95%, wear hijabs. Right after the election a lot of them were scared to step out of their houses because they felt they would be targeted for the way they choose to dress. Many women told us that their families wanted them to remove their hijabs out of safety. Many women would not go to doctor appointments or come to our classes at the office out of fear. One of our clients has not left her house since Election Day; it has been a month now.

M: [Yes, I agree with] Naheed's answer.

What are you most proud of in your work at WAW?

N: Seeing the women becoming independent. Seeing women get their driver's licenses, passing their citizenship exams, going to doctor's appointments on their own, attending parent-teacher conferences at their children's schools and actually understanding what the teachers say is incredibly inspiring. Each and every single time I see a woman in the community do one of those things, it is a very proud moment for me.

M: I have many proud moments. It's a proud moment for me when I know that a woman's life has been saved because of our work. And that happens every single day. It is very fulfilling.

What gives you hope?

N: The new generation here in New York and in Afghanistan gives me hope. I think the

new generation is thriving in Afghanistan. We have over 60% [of the population] youth in Afghanistan and they are very interested in receiving higher education and doing well. I think they want to actively participate in politics and decision-making in governmental roles, which I am hopeful about.

M: I agree with Naheed totally. The young generation gives me hope. They work hard, they go to school and they dream about Afghanistan and how they can make it a better place. Very inspiring.

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