

A liberated woman is back on the job

After 5 years of Taliban rule, normal life in Kabul is returning in the smallest of ways

November 21, 2001
The Globe and Mail

Last Tuesday morning, Jamila Mujahid was in her tiny kitchen making lunch, as she had every day for the past five years. Suddenly there was a pounding at the thin wooden door.

Her husband opened it to find producers from Afghan Radio, who wanted Ms. Mujahid to read the 1 o'clock news. Stunned, fearful and joyous all at once, she dashed around her Soviet-era two-room flat grabbing shoes and burqa, then headed into the street, leaving lunch on the stove.

"We didn't even know if the Taliban were gone, but I was going to do the news," the 36-year-old journalist said.

Reading the news was something she had done for years, presenting the evening broadcast on TV and radio since 1985. All that changed when the Taliban took power in 1996: They not only ordered women out of their jobs and back into their homes, but also outlawed TV and limited radio programming to religious edicts.

So it was only fitting that when anxious Kabul residents turned on their radios in the first chaotic hours of the Taliban's flight, they heard Ms. Mujahid.

On Sunday, Afghan Television went to air for the first time since 1996, and again it was Ms. Mujahid, a simple black scarf draped loosely over her hair and gold earrings glinting, who presented the evening news.

It was a triumphant moment, after five years that were, she says with a crack in her voice, "more than the worst torture."

She had suspected, in 1996, what might happen. At the time the Taliban ruled Afghanistan's second largest city, Khandahar, where they had outlawed television.

The day they took Kabul, a Taliban edict was delivered by radio banning women from leaving their homes without their husband or father, forcing them to give up their jobs and schooling.

Though her salary continued for a year after she was barred from her work, the reality of her changed life was crushing. "I loved my work in television and radio, loved it the way a person loves their mother."

Suddenly, a woman used to dashing around Kabul was stuck in two small rooms. Heavy drapes

permanently covered the windows, under Taliban orders, lest a man accidentally see a woman's face. "I never saw sunlight," she recalled.

She kept the family's television and a secret stash of video cassettes in a padlocked wooden cupboard hidden beneath a bed. They played the videos with the sound almost off, because a squad of Pakistani Taliban soldiers were billeted across the road.

Ms. Mujahid said she could have lived with the Taliban strictures, if the regime had kept its promises about improving people's livelihood and security. "The living conditions were terrible during the mujahedeen period, and if the Taliban had improved this, then I was willing to sacrifice my freedom of speech, my freedom of movement."

But while the regime clamped down on crime and improved security, most people's lives were worse than before. As others they knew left the city, Ms. Mujahid stayed because her husband, history professor Sayed Amin, would not leave out of loyalty to his country.

She spent her days looking after her family (she smilingly refers to her three-year-old son, Sayed Haseen, as "a Taliban production"). She paced, and wrote stories and impassioned poems about her changed homeland.

Ms. Mujahid began her journalism career in 1980, at the age of 15; a producer from Afghan Radio came to her high school for a workshop and noticed her talents. She suggested Ms. Mujahid try out at the station, and soon she was reading advertisements.

By the time she was 22, she was the evening newscaster on both radio and television.

Her 18-year-old son, Sayed Matin, remembers when his mother was famous; he watched in anguish as she became a war prisoner in the house.

"She was so sad and nervous. It is very difficult for a person with an official job to be in the home, for a woman who was popular and had respect to be under cover," he said.

Five-year-old Sayed Mobin, though, has no memory of his mother working and was perplexed by her appearance on television. He couldn't understand how she got into the box, and wanted to go with her.

In 1996, 23 of 50 on-air personalities at Afghan Television were women. So far, just four other women have come back to work. Most of the others fled the country.

Yesterday, more than 100 people lined up at the broadcasting station, responding to a call for more on-air staff.

A room full of young women waited to take the voice test, their body-enveloping burqas pulled back to reveal their once-banned faces.

by Stephanie Nolen