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## Weekend

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### 'We want to go to school'

By Pratibha Umashankar

20 April 2007

Hasina Sherjan returned from the United States to her native Afghanistan after witnessing heart-rending scenes at a refugee camp. She gives glimpses of life in the war-ravaged country



Her sophisticated accent, the smart business suit and her confident gait are a far cry from the women of Afghanistan. But Hasina Sherjan admires the courage of the fellow women of her country.

She is the president of Aid Afghanistan. She also runs a textile factory in Kabul where indigenous, decorative handmade items are made by local men and women under the name Boumi. Hasina hopes to direct 25 per cent of its profit to Aid Afghanistan, which runs a learning programme for Afghani youth.

**Your family migrated to the United States before the Soviet invasion. What brought you back to Afghanistan?**

A visit to an Afghani refugee camp in Pakistan in 1995 changed my life. When I saw what I saw there, I realised I was very lucky. I could have been any one of them in the camp.

**What exactly did you see there?**

There was a woman with twin babies. She asked me which one was strong enough for her to keep because she couldn't afford both. There was a 10-year-old taking care of her younger siblings because the children had lost their parents in the war. There were many other tragic stories. I felt that those of us who had escaped this kind of fate had a responsibility towards those left behind.

**I also felt that the reason for the disastrous things that have happened in Afghanistan is due to lack of education.**

I went to a literacy programme where 50-year-olds were learning to read and write for the first time in their lives. Their eyes glowed with a sense of discovery. They kept asking 'What else is there to learn?' Life expectancy



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in Afghanistan is not high. So these people didn't have much time left to learn. I realised how we take things like literacy for granted.

### **Did you then decide to return to your homeland for good?**

Yes, but first I went to the US. I had taken a lot of slides and pictures with me to show Afghan professionals in the US. We formed an organisation called Aid Afghanistan. Now it is called Aid Afghanistan for Education.

### **Why education?**

The plight of Afghan women during the Taleban regime was quite shocking. They were not allowed to go to school. I spoke to a few leaders of Taleban to try to restart some of the schools. But I realised I was wasting my time. So I met women who were teachers before the Taleban took over. We decided to establish five underground education programmes.

### **How did underground schools function?**

The women taught youngsters secretly in their homes. Each house had 25 students and we managed to teach about 250 children. They couldn't afford it, but they rounded up children begging on the streets. And the children loved studying so much that they would find ways to come to school. They would wrap up their books and come one by one instead of in groups to avoid being caught. They would sometimes get beaten up, but they would still come. That was amazing.

They wanted to go to school. This was the only place where they made friends. I went to the US, but the programme went on.

Meanwhile, I financially supported the teachers through Pakistan — funds, books and school supplies.

I came back in December 2001 after the fall of the Taleban and made an assessment of the situation in the education sector and how we could help.

We realised that older girls — 16 and 17 years — were in the second or third grade. So I decided to start accelerated learning programmes for them. Now we have 2,600 students and we operate in five provinces. I am also looking into establishing the same kind of programme for boys this year.

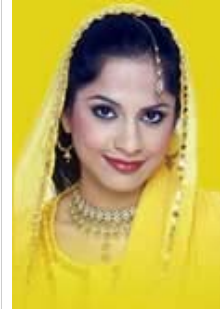
### **Why boys?**

Because men have suffered as much as women there. They had to be very careful. They lived in constant fear. For example, they had to have beard of a particular length or they would be beaten up. If something like this were to happen to people in the West, they would be seeing a psychologist.

The international focus is usually on the plight of women, but there are young men who are 18 and 20 who have not been to school at all. Girls of the same age don't have a problem sitting in the second grade, but the young men do. They have seen so much more in the world outside. They keep loitering around and could be easy targets for Taleban recruiters. They have not had a direction the whole of their lives. Even if boys had education during the Taleban regime, it was mainly indoctrination of their ideology. So we thought of an accelerated learning programme under Aid Afghanistan.

### **What is accelerated learning programme?**

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Students deprived of education during the Taleban regime will get an education, but they move one grade level every six months. Once they reach the seventh or eighth grade, they move one grade every eight months. They will have a chance of going to the university. We are also planning to give them some sort of training in office management, computers, English, accounting and such things so that they can get jobs.

### **How is the programme doing?**

The students are very committed. In fact, 13 of our female students took American University entrance exam for a foundation course. They all passed and they are very excited.

The American University of Afghanistan is now open. I will be looking for sponsors for these girls. We will start the foundation course, which is basically to help them enter the university after they finish grade 12.

### **Has the condition of Afghan women changed?**

Compared to their condition during the Taleban regime, yes, of course. But people talk as if the Taleban has been there forever. You must remember that there was an Afghanistan before the Taleban. We had Afghan women in politics way before they had them in the US. Women have been very active in Afghanistan for a long time.

Afghan women are very brave and work very hard and find ways to overcome all kinds of obstacles. The situation of women is generally not good in many parts of the world, not only in Afghanistan. But if we focus only on women, then we lose the bigger picture because the problem are the men. We need to really focus on them, create jobs for them, give them education, and then slowly we can solve other problems.

If we educate only the women or focus only on them, what are we going to do? We will have a generation of women who are educated, who won't find husbands, because men are not educated, and women would be forced to stay home. So we need to broaden the mind of the men and give them education and give them jobs, make them feel secure, and at the same time, improve the condition of the women. Men and women are part of society. We cannot focus on one and forget about the other.

### **But the international media focusES mainly on women....**

I don't know why.

### **They make good copy?**

Exactly! They make good copy and men feel ignored. We have to look at society as a whole.

### **How do you feel living in Afghanistan now? Don't you miss your life in the US?**

Actually, I feel more grounded now. I feel I am really home. The work is very fulfilling. Now I have a purpose in life. And to know that you can make a difference is an amazing feeling. I have come to realise that I don't really need all the luxuries. I feel they are artificial. They only give you temporary pleasures.

### **What is Boumi?**

Hasina Sherjan salvaged a company called Boumi in Kabul two years ago. It now makes cushion covers, coasters, vallets and placemats

entirely out of indigenous materials and labour for predominantly an export market. The concept behind it is to teach skills and provide jobs for both men and women. Its goal is to support families to contribute to the economic development of Afghanistan and to create a model. It plans to donate 25 per cent of its profit to support schools run by Aid Afghanistan.

The products are of international standard and are entirely handmade. The products have drawn the attention of President Ahmad Karzai

Boumi had set up a stall recently in Dubai during DIHAD to attract prospective buyers. Hasina believes that there is a potential market in Dubai to be tapped.

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