

Hesitant Hopes of Afghan Women

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The collapse of the Taliban regime has given women hope but they remain wary

The most memorable image that followed the fall of Kabul to the Northern Alliance in mid-November was that of a young woman with her face turned to the camera among a sea of blue burqas.

The burqa - the Taliban-enforced head-to-toe covering - became a symbol of repression. Despite the regime's collapse, the young woman captured on film is one of only a few to have discarded the veil.

Ninety-five per cent of women continue to wear the burqa, concerned that they will be punished if they shed them.

"Although I, and other women like me, want to get rid of the veil and go back to work we are not able to do so," said Najeba, a former teacher. "I will not stop wearing the veil as long as women are being beaten up and mistreated."

Fearing ingrained chauvinism, many women, though they despise the burqa, think that it does at least give them a measure of protection. "Although we no longer fear being hit by the Taliban, there is still the possibility of being raped," said Dr Sema Umaid.

While such fears prevail, Umaid, who is keen to get back to practising medicine again having been excluded from the profession for years by the Taliban, remains covered in public, looking, she says, like a "weak and uncivilised human being".

The Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan, RAWA, which has defended women's rights in the country since 1977, believes they are no safer under the new interim government, many of whose members they associate with the anarchy and violence of the early Nineties.

Members of RAWA, who risked their lives to leak information about the ill-treatment, rape and murder of women under the Taliban to the outside world, suspect that the Northern Alliance, which have half the seats in the new government, might well repeat excesses they meted out following the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989, when Afghanistan was torn apart by factional fighting.

On December 10, Afghan women staged a demonstration in the Pakistani city of Peshawar protesting the composition of the new government. Organised to coincide with International Human Rights Day, the protesters chanted slogans urging the UN to save them from further victimisation.

One of the speakers at the Peshawar rally said that the interim government led by prime minister Hamid Karzai was unacceptable to Afghan women because the Northern Alliance "are the most murderous violators of human rights".

The two women who have been appointed to the thirty-strong cabinet are also pushing for greater representation of the opposite sex in the country's new institutions. Minister for women's affairs Sima Samar said on a recent visit to the US that the international community had an obligation to ensure they soon occupied high profile posts.

But it's going to be a long haul. With the overthrow of the Taleban, women will be able to return to their former jobs, but they may continue to face discrimination in the workplace and other spheres.

Shaysta is one of the few who've has discarded her veil. "Under Taleban rule, Afghan women were some of the most helpless women in the world and I never want to be in that position again," she said.

Yet she thinks that it will take a while before the majority of women begin to feel safe and believes that legislation must be brought in to protect them from the sort of prejudice and violence they have had to endure over the past decade.

"Only then can we feel free of the threat of humiliation and safely play our part in the reconstruction of the country," said Shaysta.

Afghan women want to pitch in and help return the country to normality. But, for the moment, their role is unclear. They have seen change before and know how it has worked against them.

Nega Saya used to work for Kabul-based Anis newspaper

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