

# COLLATERAL DAMAGE

## Women and Girls of Afghanistan

BY HUMAIRA GHILZAI

An Afghan girl attends a female engagement team meeting in Balish Kalay Village, Urgan District, Afghanistan. Women and children attended the meeting with the FET of Paktika Provincial Reconstruction Team to discuss issues and concerns.

**I**N OCTOBER OF 2002, THE UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL PASSED RESOLUTION 1325 ON PEACE, WOMEN, AND SECURITY, WHICH acknowledged the grave impact of war on women, girls, and children. Of course, this belated resolution came at a time when Afghan women had already suffered 23 years of war bookended by the Russian invasion in 1979 and the U.S. occupation, which had commenced in 2001.

Governments often measure the success or failure of war by citing the number of wounded or killed combatants, the number of cities captured or lost, and more often than not, the exorbitant cost of war. What rarely gets recorded, however, especially in a country like Afghanistan where women don't often have a voice, is the collateral damage—the unintended civilian deaths; rape and exploitation of women; food scarcity and malnutrition of children; and truncated health services for women and girls. There is also the heavy cost of brain drain, emigration of highly trained members of the population, and school closures due to the breakdown of societal infrastructures.

**THESE THEMES RUN THROUGH PLAYWRIGHT URSULA Rani Sarma's adaptation of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Afghan American writer Khaled Hosseini's award-winning second book.**

In this play, war is practically a living, breathing character within itself. In the opening scene, Afghanistan is immersed in civil war that has erupted after nine years of Russian occupation. Even in a moment of mother-daughter intimacy where Laila, the protagonist, and her mother talk about boys and wedding dresses, war growls and purrs in the background. When a shell destroys Laila's house, she not only becomes an orphan, but also lands into the home of Rashid, a married neighbor, who deceives her into marrying him.

As an audience, it's easy to blame Rashid for the brutality, betrayal, and violence that the women of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* endure, but what we have to recognize is that this household is a microcosm of the collateral damage of war—unemployment, hunger, malnutrition, lack of health care, and oppression of women under the guise of ensuring their safety.

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**In this play, war is practically a living, breathing character within itself.**”

**WITH FOUR DECADES OF TURMOIL, WAR HAS** become the backdrop for Afghans whether they live in Afghanistan or have become a refugee in an adopted country. Unlike Laila, my family was able to escape the war. We did not face the atrocities that Afghan women suffered in the 39 years of ongoing conflict, but the presence of the distant war was always present in our home like an unwanted guest, even after we resettled in the United States.

Shortly after the first gun was fired by Afghan communists, after almost 45 years of peace, my parents realized life as we knew it was over. Within months, my older siblings and diplomat father left Afghanistan because they were most at risk of being affected by the new regime. My mother, who had mostly focused on raising her children, was left with me and two other siblings, a devalued home, and all the worldly goods my parents had accumulated in their upper-middle-class life.

**WHILE KABUL RESIDENTS WERE SHOUTING “ALLAH-u-akbar”** from their rooftops, a protest against infidels taking over their country, my mother managed to sell our two-story modern home in exchange for a suitcase of devalued currency. She gave away everything we owned and hired smugglers to take us across the border to Peshawar, Pakistan. She spent the last of our remaining funds to cobble together fake passports and airline tickets to Germany, where we lived on food stamps and in refugee housing until we received a visa to the United States, where we joined the rest of our family.



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**DESPITE MY LACK OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE** skills or cultural acumen, I embraced my new life as an American while my mother suffered from PTSD, culture shock, the language barrier, and her internal struggle to be a good Afghan mother. The ideals, expectations, and wisdom that served her well as a middle-class wife of a diplomat in Afghanistan did not equip her to support a teenager straddling two identities. While I mourned the loss of school friends, cousins, and our dog, Rusty, my mother mourned the loss of dignity, status, and the beautiful life she had left behind in Kabul.

Whether it's the fierce brutality and setbacks Afghan women and girls have faced, as portrayed in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, or the psychological effects of displacement that plagued my family, we Afghans are all collateral damage of war.

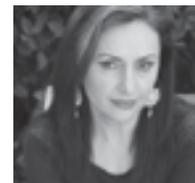
Whether we are Afghans living in Afghanistan, Afghans who grew up in the diaspora, or Afghan children who are born into the ongoing war, there's no denying that war is a central element of Afghanistan's history, so it's hard to ignore its effects on people's everyday lives.

Since resolution 1325 passed, the UN Security Council has initiated measures to serve the needs of women and girls during armed conflict, repatriation, reconstruction, and reintegration, but much work needs to be done. As world leaders do their part to

shed light on Afghan women's needs, I hope that more theatres, films, and other forms of art showcase diverse stories of women from around the world because when we know each other's hopes, dreams and suffering, it's easier to relate to one another, and for me, this is a better way to reduce collateral damage than with further resolutions.



The photo was taken in 1977 in *Bagh e bala*, a park of Kabul. I have my hand wrapped around my brother Tamim. My cousin Toro, who is also in the photo never left Afghanistan. After we left the country in 1979, the next time I saw him was in 2006.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Humaira Ghilzai** is a writer, speaker, and Afghanistan Cultural Consultant focused on projects that bring positive social change. Our world is changing, but many of us aren't equipped to change with it. For people who are curious and want to move past the stories in the media, Humaira helps to open their eyes to the realities of other cultures by highlighting their faces, names, and identities.

Humaira co-founded Afghan Friends Network and instituted a Sister City relationship between Hayward, California, and Ghazni, Afghanistan, where she has done extensive work to improve education for girls, boys, and women. Humaira is a sought-after cultural expert on Afghanistan, its people, and history. She works with theatres, films, authors, and playwrights on cultural authenticity of their creative work relating to Afghanistan and the Islamic world. Humaira has worked on the adaptation of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* for the past four years with director Carey Perloff and playwright Ursula Rani Sarma. Humaira helps the audience connect with stories on a human level, because at the end of the day we are all fighting the same issues.

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REFERENCES: UNICEF; UN Office of Special Adviser on Gender Issues, Common Dreams; Wikipedia