

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Peshawar, Pakistan
September 1992**Radio Days for Refugees**

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS
4 West Wheelock Street
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Dear Peter,

Twelve veiled women sat in the barren classroom. Only their eyes were visible and all twelve pairs were focused on me as I began the first day of a workshop on Radio Journalism for Afghan women.

On the surface, journalism may seem like a fairly irrelevant skill to teach Afghan refugee women. A few months earlier I had told the director of the journalism program at the International Rescue Committee (IRC) that teaching English-language print journalism to Afghans was misdirected: 90 percent of Afghans are illiterate, even fewer read and write English, and there is little hope for newspaper distribution in post-war Afghanistan.

Instead, I suggested, IRC should teach Afghan women how to produce radio programs. It would enable them to use the airwaves to reach house-bound women in Afghan villages concerning issues of health, education, mine-awareness and more. Moreover, I said, they should work in their native Persian language rather than struggling with English.

In response, IRC asked me to run a two-week radio seminar for its Afghan women journalism students. I welcomed the opportunity to give something of myself to Afghan women and to learn from them in exchange. That's how I ended up standing in front of a classroom wondering how I was going to teach radio reporting to a dozen Afghan women in just two weeks.

The students ranged in age from 17 to 25 years. Most were educated women from elite Kabul families. Two had been medical students in Kabul before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The rest had been at university or in high school before becoming

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refugees in Pakistan. All came from families that allowed their daughters to take courses from an American-financed agency -- itself a testament to their liberal attitudes.

Nonetheless, each woman was living in "purdah" -- or seclusion -- in Pakistan. They came to class in a curtained van, wore long capes to cover their clothing and covered their heads with veils. I had clear instructions that they were not to go outside of the classroom to conduct interviews and were forbidden to interview men under any condition.

In addition to the restrictions of purdah, I was hindered by my ignorance of classroom pedagogy. Not knowing what else to do, I turned the class into a newsroom.

"This is not longer a classroom; it is a newsroom," I said. "I won't be your teacher; I will be your editor. And there will be no grades. If you produce a radio program then you pass the course. If you miss a deadline then you fail."

From the beginning, the students handled the radio equipment, learning by doing. By the end of the first week each woman had practiced setting up and using field recorders, microphones, cables, head-sets and editing equipment.

They had a real flair for operating the equipment and an almost overwhelming eagerness to work. Although the class was supposed to meet three hours each afternoon, the students asked if I would hold classes in the morning as well. They then requested that we skip the weekend break and continue working. And when I suggested that we might tour the local studios of Pakistan Radio, every woman agreed -- and obtained permission to go from a male family member.

Getting permission from the Afghan staff at IRC was more difficult. On the day of our departure for the radio station, an Afghan woman in charge of transportation for the students refused to release a curtained van for us to use. She said she didn't approve of the women going to a public place, such as Pakistan Radio. She warned that the field trip could endanger the women if they were seen and threaten all of the female education programs at IRC.

"They will be in a curtained van wearing veils," I said, incredulous. "Pakistani female journalists will be taking us through the station. And no one -- male or female -- will actually see the students' faces because they wear veils."

My reasoning had no effect. But when I threatened to resign, we got the van. The tour was exciting for the students, most of whom have few opportunities to see professional women at work. They were brimming with curiosity about the studio equipment, the production of radio programs and the treatment and working conditions of the female broadcasters at the station. I was particularly amused when one of the students, while veiled from head to foot, asked a Pakistani female radio producer why Pakistan Radio has only 30 percent women on its staff instead of an equal number of men and women.

At the end of the first week, I saw a different side of the students. One of them invited me to attend an engagement party for her sister at a downtown hotel. When I arrived at the party that night, I was shocked to find about 100 Afghan women dressed in colorful clothing and celebrating in a private banquet room. My students were seated at one table, but I hardly recognized them without their veils. They wore their hair down and elaborately curled and were adorned with make-up and jewelry. Their gowns were beautiful and obviously expensive -- some were red velvet, some black lace and others covered with gold sequins. In the middle of the room, young women were dancing one-by-one for the all-female crowd, swaying their hips suggestively and spinning so that their skirts flared up to reveal tight leggings.

This was a view of Afghan women I had not seen before.

"This was what our life was like in Kabul before the war," said one of the students, noticing the shocked expression on my face. "But I don't think parties will be possible when we return to Afghanistan."

I fought off repeated entreaties that I dance for the crowd by saying that I was not properly dressed (which was true) and also that I was too old (also true).

The second week of the workshop was devoted to producing three radio programs. Each program was produced by four women and focused on one topic: mine awareness, health or repatriation.

As the days passed, the class became more and more like a newsroom. We worked hard but also laughed together. Best of all, I got to know the women behind the veils. There was Mariam, a quiet and helpful 25-year-old woman, who had been a senior medical student in Kabul before the war. She turned out to have a knack for comedy when it came time to produce radio dramas. Belgees and Manija were best friends and studying to become nurses. They said they wanted to learn how to use the radio to deliver health messages. One evening after class they borrowed a tape recorder, returning the next morning with a spectacular set of interviews about the impact of water shortages on Afghan women in refugee camps. Another student, Atifa, came from an extremely conservative Muslim family. But she was a whiz-kid when it came to getting machines to work. She would rewire cables or rig tape recorders to produce special sound effects, improve the quality of a recording and make it easier to edit tapes for the final program.

During the final days of the class we worked from morning to late afternoon, recording dramas, editing interviews, splicing tapes. It seemed impossible that we would meet the deadline of producing three half-hour radio programs in just two weeks. But when graduation day arrived, we were ready.

Twenty women leaders from the community came to the graduation ceremony to hear the programs aired. Our listeners seemed impressed by the quality of the programs. Two people said they hadn't thought the women could do it. I don't know who was

more proud -- me or the students. In any case, each student received a "diploma." And then they gave me a present -- a shiny orange Afghan dress covered with mirrors to wear at the next engagement party. (I'm still too old to dance, however.)

Nancy Dupree, a noted Afghan scholar, graciously accepted my invitation to be the keynote speaker at the graduation ceremony. She gave an inspiring talk on the history and responsibilities of Afghan women in journalism. She said that in the past misguided people had attempted to stop Afghan women from speaking over the radio because of their "alluring" voices. Nonetheless, she said, Afghan women had prevailed and become journalists -- and would do so again in the future.

Alas, about a week after the graduation the new mujahideen-led government in Kabul announced that women would no longer be allowed to appear on television or be heard on the radio in Afghanistan because it was considered "un-Islamic." My heart sank. The prospects for educated women in Afghanistan are increasingly dim as the mujahideen government moves to bar women from public office, from work, from education -- even from appearing on the streets. But my immediate concern was for the individual women with whom I had worked, taught and learned. What a shame to see their talent thwarted by chauvinism and intolerance.

But this story has a postscript. A couple of months after graduation, a veiled woman approached me on the street and threw her arms around me. It was Belgees, one of my students. Although I could see only her eyes, I heard in her voice the relief and happiness as she told me she was to be married to an Afghan-American and would soon emigrate to Oregon. Her fiance, a very-American looking young man clad in blue-jeans and a T-shirt, walked up and offered his hand to me in friendship -- a very un-Afghan greeting from a man to a woman!

It was a happy moment: Belgees may have a chance to reach her potential in life and we have an opportunity to meet again in America. But what about the remaining students? It isn't easy to find an Afghan husband in Europe or America. And it is sad that marriage and emigration should be the sole chance for these women to build a life commensurate with their abilities.

Whatever happens in Afghanistan, those twelve women already have proved themselves to be fine journalists and creative individuals. Whether they ever have a chance to utilize that creativity in a professional setting, at least they have the inner knowledge that they are capable of doing so. And no man, no government, can take that knowledge away from them.

Regards,

