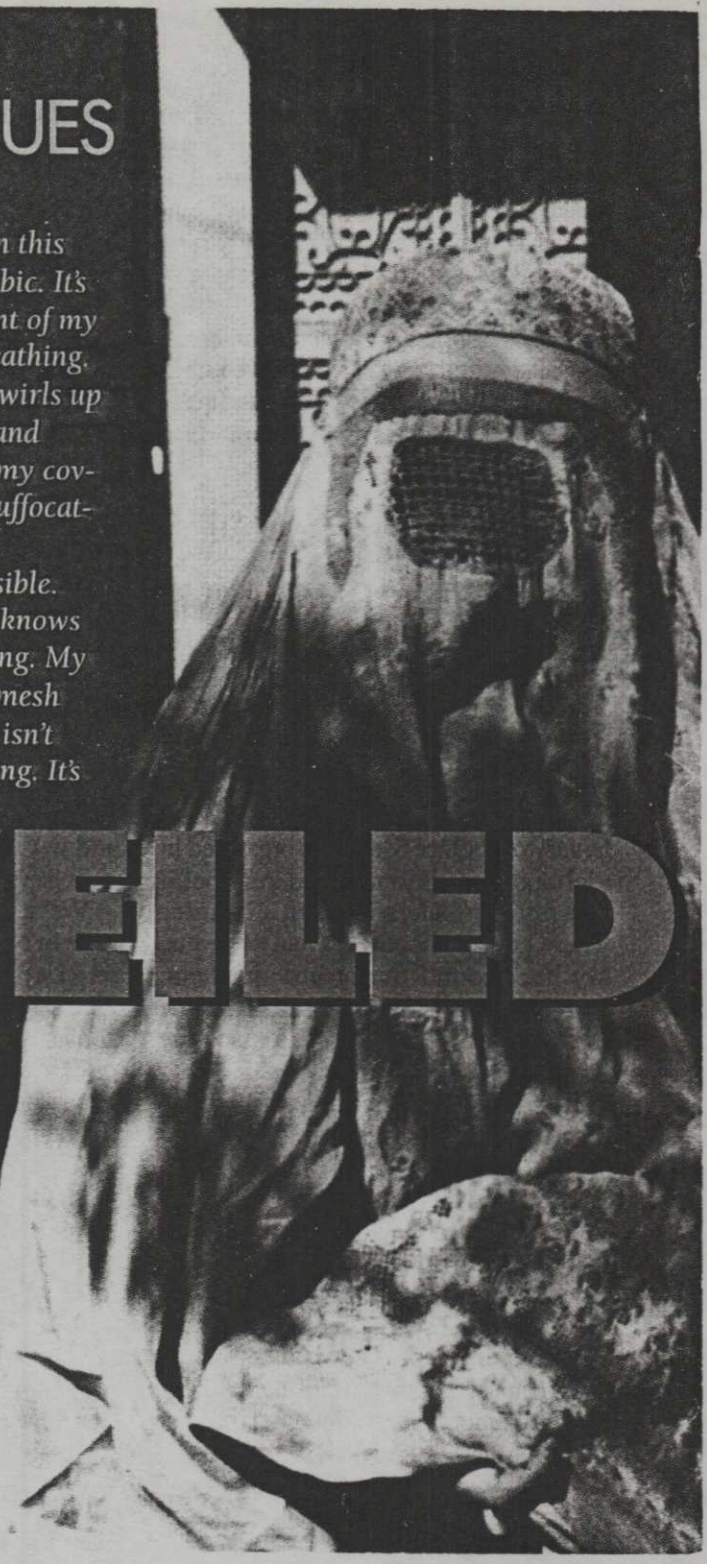
VEILED

"It's hot in here. Shrouded in this body bag, I feel claustrophobic. It's smelly too. The cloth in front of my mouth is damp from my breathing. Dust from the filthy street swirls up under the billowing burqa *and sticks to the moisture from my covered mouth. I feel like I'm suffocating in stale air.*

"It also feels like I'm invisible. No one can see me. No one knows whether I'm smiling or crying. My view isn't much better. The mesh opening in front of my eyes isn't enough to see where I'm going. It's like wearing horse blinders. I can see only straight in front of me. Not above or below or on either side of the path I take. Suddenly the road changes. I step ►



THREAT

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SALLY ARMSTRONG

on the front of the hideous bag that covers my body and tumble to the ground. No one helps me. It feels like no one in the world wants to help." — Fatana, 28

Who "in the name of Allah" has decreed this wretched fate on the women of Afghanistan? A ragtag band of bandits called the Taliban, who are mostly illiterate and mostly in their 20s, thundered into the capital city of Kabul on September 27 of last year, and overnight the lives of women and girls were catapulted back to the dark ages. After hanging the government leaders in the public square, the Taliban announced their draconian decrees on the radio: schools for girls were immediately closed. Women could no longer work. They had to be completely covered by the head-to-foot wrap called a burqa and kept in purdah (secluded from the public) because, according to the Taliban's leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, "A woman's face corrupts men." Afghanistan has become a place where mothers and wives, sisters and daughters, are seen as a holy threat. Today, a woman can only leave her home in the company of her husband, brother or son, and only if she is shrouded in the hated burqa and carries a permit that gives her reason to be outside.

To disobey is to die. Soon after the takeover, a group of women in the city of Herat marched in protest. According to eyewitnesses, the Taliban surrounded the women, seized their leader, doused her in kerosene and burned her alive. Women have been sprayed with acid, beaten with twisted wires and shot for crimes such as showing their ankles, letting a hand slip out from under the burqa while paying for food, allowing their children to play with toys. For being outside with anyone who is not a male relative, the sentence is death by stoning. The hooligans in power dig a pit and bury the woman to her shoulders. Then they form a circle around her and throw rocks at her head until she is dead.

They say they do it for Islam. But Muslim scholars all over the world say this has nothing to do with Islam. It's a grab for power and control in a country that's been struggling with unrest for 18 years. It is also misogyny, a contempt for women that goes hand in hand with the disturbing rise in extremism in Muslim countries. In Bangladesh, a woman can receive 50 lashes for speaking her mind. In Pakistan, a rape victim can be jailed for fornication. In Saudi Arabia, women are forced to cloak themselves in black chadors that absorb the stifling heat while men walk about in white robes that deflect it. Afghanistan is a human rights catastrophe.

Astonishingly, this throwback to a medieval era has created a strange wall of silence. The United Nations is wringing its hands. Government leaders are looking the other way. And the women of Afghanistan are asking what in the world is going to become of them.

I met Fatana, 28, a psychiatrist, Farahnaz, 26, a civil engineer, and Mina, 28, a pharmacist, six months after the beginning of the darkest days this country has ever known. [We agreed that their last names, the towns where they have found shelter and their former employers would not be named to protect them from the terrible retribution of the Taliban.] For them, life under the Taliban is nature thrown into reverse. They're like spring ▶

When the Taliban took over, Farahnaz, a civil engineer (left), Fatana, a psychiatrist (centre) and Mina, a pharmacist, had to cover themselves in burqas and stay at home in purdah.

blossoms that were forced to fold their beautiful petals back into their casings. With downcast eyes and sagging shoulders these young women describe their grievances in words that make me think of a line from the poem *In Flanders Fields*. "Short days ago we lived." They went to university in Kabul, wore jeans, short skirts, met at the restaurants on Da Afghanan street and went to discos on Froshga. Like other young people, they walked along the river and through Pul bagh Vuumi park with their boyfriends. Their lives were full, their futures hopeful.

But the convulsions that shook the country out of communism in 1992 threw the formerly cosmopolitan city of Kabul into utter calamity. Extremist factions fought each other for control for four deadly years. Last autumn, the ultra-extremist Taliban won the spoils of war. And women like Fatana, Farahnaz and Mina became invisible. Their jobs, social lives and self-esteem disappeared overnight.

"On September 26, we were at work," says Fatana. "Everyone was anxious. The Taliban were near the city. We were waiting for something bad. At noon most people went home because we could hear the shelling. We'd heard about Taliban policies and we were afraid for our futures."

The next morning they heard about the fate of the government leaders on the radio. And they heard the Taliban's misogynist manifesto for women. "I'd never owned a burqa in my life," says Fatana. "Most women in Kabul had never even worn a scarf over their heads." When I ask her what effect this will have on the mental health of the women, Farahnaz speaks up. "I can answer that question for you. I've lost my mental health. I don't want to leave my house. I start to laugh or cry and I don't know why. I feel sad all the time. And I cannot concentrate. The other day I was helping someone with accounting and I realized I'd entered the same number over and over again. I have no hope ▶

for my future and, what's worse, I have no hope for the future of my two children."

Today the streets they walked on as students are like a moonscape. The shops are closed. So are the restaurants. Sixty per cent of the city has been destroyed. The roads are full of holes. There's garbage all over the place, there's no electricity in most parts of the city and few people have running water. The university has reopened for boys only. Women doctors have been allowed to return to work but only to treat women patients. And if women and girls can't find a woman doctor, tough luck. "Let them die," say the Taliban.

Women face death if they are not totally shrouded in public or are accompanied by a man who is not a relative.

In the absence of any real protest from the international community, a litany of new regulations is visited upon the people on an almost daily basis. Radio and television are forbidden. So is music, clapping, singing and dancing. Photographs, even at weddings, are considered unIslamic. So are sports for women. Makeup, nail polish, high-heeled shoes and white socks – the only item of clothing that shows beneath the burqa – are also forbidden (white is the color of the Taliban flag). There's to be no noise made by women's feet when they struggle to the bazaar to find food and water for their families. Windows must be painted black to prevent anyone from seeing a woman inside the house. New houses can have no windows on the second floor. In a stupefying rationale, Omar explains the Taliban's actions against women by saying, "Otherwise, they'll be like Princess Diana."

There are 30,000 widows in Kabul who are virtually destitute. When asked how they should cope, the Taliban reply again, "Let them die." In a particularly hateful response to the handicapped, some men have told their disabled wives that they'll no longer require prostheses as they no longer need to be seen outside.

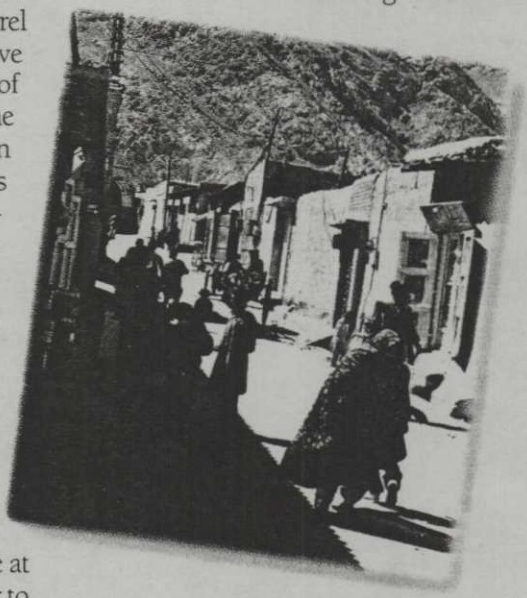
Afghanistan is a country about the size of Manitoba. It has five major tribes that have warred endlessly throughout the centuries. It was a monarchy until 1972 and a republic until 1978 when the Soviets invaded. Then it became one of the last violent crucibles of the Cold War. The detested boot camp rule of the Soviets spawned the Mujahideen (Freedom Fighter) camps across the border in Northern Pakistan. Funded by the United States, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan itself, the Mujahideen were like folk heroes who

represented a spiritual return to pre-communist Afghanistan. But within the camps, several factions jockeyed for power, each pretending to be more religious than the next to win the support of the people. In the process they planted the seeds for a fratricidal bloodbath that began with the defeat of the Communists. Life under the victorious Mujahideen proved to be as violent as it had been under the Communists and more religiously strict than the people had ever imagined. Enter the Taliban, young hoodlums who had never been to school and never known anything but war. Presently they control two-thirds of the country.

While the world has clearly grown weary of Afghanistan and its 18 years of war, the people trapped in that country and the 500,000 refugees who escaped to border towns in Northern Pakistan are hoping someone will "take up our quarrel with the foe." Although the Taliban have no official role in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, their presence throughout the north is threatening. The steady rise in fundamentalism in Pakistan leaves many Afghan refugees and native Pakistanis in this northern region wary. Many women continue to wear burqas out of fear. Others are careful to cover up just to avoid attention from the extremists. There's an uneasy calm. It's like waiting for an intruder.

At the northwest corner of a Pakistan border town called Quetta, the Afghan diaspora is burgeoning. The dusty, rock-strewn landscape that unfolds from the huge mountains here at the west end of the Himalayas is similar to the refugees' native land. The miniature yellow wildflowers that push defiantly out of the scrubby soil grow like symbols of their struggle. The diorama of contrasts – mud houses and rented two-story homes, the delicious scent of fresh-baked naan bread from the bakeries and the putrid stench from the latrines in the street, the fear and longing of the people – is the quintessence of life in a refugee centre. It was here in Quetta that the Mujahideen assassinated the leader of the Afghan women's movement a decade ago. It is here that I meet Dr. Sima Samar, a precious bead on the world's scanty string of humanitarians.

"I have three strikes against me," she says by way of introduction. "I'm a woman, I speak out for women and I'm a Hazara, one of the minority tribes." The road she travelled from Helmand, the Afghan province where she grew up, to this refugee centre in



The rhythms of life rock uncomfortably on the streets of Quetta.

►

Quetta, is strewn with the history and customs of her beloved Afghanistan. Her father had two wives (a usual practice for many Islamic men and one she doesn't approve of). She won a scholarship to go to medical school but her father told her she couldn't leave the family because she wasn't married. So a marriage was arranged (another usual custom) and she went to Kabul University. But during the upheaval that finally rousted the Communists, and soon after she'd given birth to their son, her husband was arrested, never to be seen again. Samar managed to finish medical school and wound up practising medicine in a rural district. Her experiences there brutally demonstrated that the lives of women were nearly unbearable and that lack of education was a direct cause of the turmoil her country was in. She decided to do something about both conditions.

Dr. Sima Samar

Today she runs medical clinics in Quetta as well as Kabul. And she has clandestine schools in rural Afghanistan for more than 4,500 girls, as well as a school for refugee girls here in Quetta. Her steadfast refusal to observe purdah and the stand she takes on equality for women have made her anathema to the fundamentalists and a hero to the women she serves.

When asked how she gets around the paralysing rules of the extremists' interpretation of the Koran, she shakes her head in astonishment at her own audacity. "Let me tell you a story," she begins. "A 16-year-old girl came with her parents to my clinic. A quick urine test and cursory examination told me what I suspected. She was six months pregnant and terrified. She had been raped. The law according to the extremists is that a woman who is raped must have four male witnesses to prove that she didn't cause the rape. Naturally no such witnesses are ever available. Without them the family is obliged to kill the girl to protect the family honor. This kid had kept her terrible secret until she could hide it no longer. I had to decide what to do. I don't approve of abortions unless there is absolutely no other way. But if I didn't do something for this girl, she would be killed. I chose life.

"Remember, most people here don't have any education, so I can get away with saying things they may not question. I told them their daughter had a tumor and needed surgery. I said she was too sick to have it now and she would have to stay at my clinic. I kept that girl for three months. When the baby was due, I did a caesarean section. The family waited outside the operating room because it is the custom here to show them what was

found in the surgery. I put the placenta in the surgical basin, showed them the so-called tumor and told them their daughter would be fine. Then I gave the baby to a woman who was also in trouble because she is married and infertile."

Dr. Samar can't change the law by herself but she's part of a group that hopes it can. It's an international network called Women Living Under Muslim Laws and it presently has links to 40 countries and an increasingly powerful voice at the United Nations. Farida Shaheed, the Asian coordinator of the association in Lahore, Pakistan, won't even use the word fundamentalist. "It suggests a return to cherished fundamentals of Islam, which it certainly is not," she says. "Extremists aren't religious at all. This is political opportunism. Their strength is in disrupting the political process and using that to blackmail those in political power."

It worries her that such groups are

At the refugee camp in Quetta, this woman doesn't have to wear a burqa, but still she feels compelled to hide her face behind a veil. ▶

gaining momentum because of what she calls "a refusal of mainstream political parties in Muslim countries to produce democratic rule. But women are gaining as well. There's an unprecedented number of women coming into the workforce [in Pakistan] at the same time that the extremist groups are saying, 'Stay home.'"

They fight back at their peril. Members of the association have been harassed on the street and had firebombs thrown at their houses. And Sima Samar receives so many death threats from the Taliban, she simply replies, "You know where I am. I won't stop what I'm doing."

The rhythms of life rock uncomfortably at Samar's clinic. Her patients, who pay about 30 rupees ($1 Canadian) per visit, come with their full wombs and fears of infertility. They suffer all the ills that refugee camps are heir to: malnutrition, anemia, typhoid fever, malaria. In the lineups at the door, they whisper news of the latest atrocities and decrees of the Taliban. Today, there's a terrible message from Jalalabad, a city across the border in Afghanistan. Yesterday a woman tried to leave. She was wearing her burqa but walking with a man who was not a relative. She was arrested by the Taliban and stoned to death. The man she was with was sentenced to seven years in prison. There's still a hush in the clinic, when suddenly the curtain is pushed aside and a woman appears with her Taliban husband. He tells Samar that his wife bleeds from her nose whenever she works hard in the fields. Samar raises her voice: "She's full-term pregnant, she shouldn't be working so hard." The man replies, "She has to work. Fix her nose." Another young woman has been menstruating for 11 months. Her blood pressure is dangerously low. She's as weak as a sparrow. The doctor says she needs a simple D and C (dilatation and curettage) but culture interferes again. She's a virgin. The simple operation would destroy her virginity, which in turn would destroy her life. So abdominal surgery is scheduled.

After surgery, the doctor is obliged to show family members the results of the operation.

As the war against women rages on, a new and menacing problem is turning up at the clinic. "Almost every women I see has osteomalacia," Samar says. "Their bones are softening due to a lack of vitamin D. They survive on a diet of tea and naan because they can't afford eggs and milk and, to complicate matters, their burqas and veils deprive them of sunshine. On top of that, depression is endemic here because the future is so dark."

Samar is angry with what she sees as all talk and no action on the part of world organizations that claim to be pressing

ahead with issues for women. "Recently the UN held a meeting in Quetta for all the various factions to discuss Afghanistan," she says. "They met at a hotel for three days. Can you imagine what that cost? Well, the meeting was for men only. The women were invited to meet for one hour on a different day." There's more. She was invited to attend a meeting in Washington, also held to discuss the situation in Afghanistan. Each delegate was allowed six minutes to speak. Samar was the only woman. She told the gathering, "I represent more than half the people in Afghanistan. How come I only get the same six minutes as all these men?"

When the phone rings in her small office she speaks English to the caller, wanting to know, "Where's my wheat?" The caller explains that her wheat is in Kabul but the priority delivery is to

Fatima Gailani says the actions of the Taliban have nothing to do with Islam. "They go against the Koran, in fact."

women and girls. "My wheat is going to a school for girls in Ghazni. It's the only school still operating for girls. Why aren't my girls part of that priority?" ▶

Amid the international sound of silence, a lone voice in London is sounding a clarion call for the women. Fatima Gailani, who holds a master's degree in Islamic jurisprudence, is the daughter of Pir Sayyid Ahmad Gailani, the spiritual leader of the Sunni Afghans. He is also a descendant of the prophet Mohammed, which means they both carry a lot of clout. Gailani is outraged with the Taliban's interpretation of Islam. "A woman with a covered head is not more honorable than a woman without a covered head. I can prove that any action of the prophet has nothing to do with this. It goes against the Koran, in fact. The Taliban are against Afghan tradition, against Islam. They only continue because presently there is no alternative." With that in mind, she and her father recently travelled to Rome to meet with the exiled monarch. "My hope is that an Afghan element – the king, the leaders of the tribes, my father – can do something. The Taliban need aid of every description. They need money. They'd respond to pressure." So far there hasn't been any.

Meanwhile, the lineup at Dr. Samar's clinic grows longer. Her schools for girls are working in shifts, since she doesn't have the money to rent more space. The women in Kabul have given up a resistance movement. And some international agencies are caving in to the classic consequences of gender abuse and saying, "At least there's peace under the Taliban." For the women, living in prison isn't peace. The threat of being stoned to death isn't peace. Painting your windows black isn't peace. Being without music isn't peace. And so they wait, for peace.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

The women of Afghanistan are desperate. They're hoping other women will speak up on their behalf. If you want to help, see page 4.