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Studio Kabul

By ELIZABETH RUBIN

At the age of 27, after 14 years of marriage, with seven children and a husband 30 years older than she was, a husband who was addicted to opium, who once deprived her of food because she gave birth to a girl and not a boy, who beat her when she took too long to conceive, who pulled out her hair and knocked out her teeth to make her too ugly to remarry, who beat her again when he couldn't find money for opium because he had spent it on phone cards for the mobile to call his lovers — after 14 years, Abada had had enough. She cried, screamed, pulled out her hair, desperate to die. She put her littlest daughter outside the room where she cooked. She turned on the gas and waited for peace.

This life had never been hers anyway. From the time her father died and her mother remarried, she was deposited in someone else's idea of life. First the stingy stepfather, who saw her as nothing more than a financial burden. Then the marriage at 13 to the 43-year-old addict. Then the mothering. Her first children were twins, and she found the will to live for her babies. One of them had a liver disease they called black tongue, and there was no one to buy her medicines but Abada. She began giving private lessons to the children in her neighborhood, teaching Dari, math, Koranic studies. And though the old addict insisted Abada stop her own studies, she and her mother devised a secret scheme for her to take exams at odd times, with the collusion of her teachers. She finished high school, then paid her way through college and earned a degree in education. Under the **Taliban**, when schooling for girls was illegal, she went on giving lessons. She gave birth to five more children, and her financial burden grew along with her husband's irrationality.

"I wanted to die," Abada told me. But as soon as she turned on the gas, she heard her little girl say, "Oh, God forgive her." "Immediately with my hand I shook. I thought, Oh, this is a message from God." She flung open the windows and turned off the gas, grabbed her daughter and said, "I'll live, I'll make it work so she can have a better life."

That's when she found acting. Was it a *métier*, a calling? Not really. It was a job. She has been acting now for three years. Often she finds herself acting her own life out onstage. She once had a lead role as a mother begging her abusive but comical husband not to marry off their 12-year-old daughter to an old man who, in exchange, would give his own little daughter to her husband. "I didn't have to act very much," she said, "and by the time he beat me and I collapsed from a heart attack onstage, all the children were on me to save me." Just like at home. What's more, she had

her own 12-year-old daughter play the girl's role.

I met Abada on the set of Afghanistan's first TV soap opera, "The Secrets of This House," produced for Tolo TV. She has a small role as the good wife who comes back from America and is adapting to her new life in Kabul. Abada earns \$100 an episode. It sounds lucrative, but there is no guarantee how long her character, and thus her job, will survive. She still teaches too, and had just returned from giving lessons, her daughter in tow. The show's set was a three-story house in a residential neighborhood in Kabul that Tolo was renting.

I was sitting on a bed next to another actress, Shekiba, who was breast-feeding her youngest child while waiting for her scene. We were discussing the possibility of official negotiations with the Taliban. "If the Taliban come back, they'd behead all of us," Shekiba said.

Abada, who'd been quiet, jumped in: "There's no need for the Taliban to come back. Even now my brother-in-law tells my husband that he's not a man anymore because I appear on television." And then out flowed Abada's life story. "I still think of suicide," she said, "but then who will take care of the children? I have to pay the rent, feed them, my daughter has a liver problem. It's for these reasons that I act, though I take so much humiliation for it, even my fellow teachers tell me things. . . ." She broke off. She cried. Her daughter fiddled with a string hanging off her school backpack. Everyone in the room became sad. Then the assistant director, a woman named Shahla Rachidi, leaned in the door and asked us to be quiet for the shoot.

Abada tried to be quiet. She showed us the bangles on her wrist — props. Her husband, she said, is convinced they're real gold from a rich lover. "He says to me, 'Why are you getting fatter?' " — a sign of beauty and happiness. " 'Why don't you die?' " So after the shoot she was going to the jeweler's with her husband to prove to him they weren't gold. The absurdity was too much. Abada, and everyone else, broke out laughing.

A few years ago, Saad Mohseni, the Afghan founder (with three of his siblings) of Tolo TV, who is often called the Murdoch of Kabul, had an argument with President [Hamid Karzai](#) about the merits of cultural change. As Mohseni tells the story, Karzai was under pressure from his conservative culture minister and the Afghan Council of Islamic Scholars to ban Indian soap operas. They showed Hindu idols and way too much female flesh. Mohseni agreed to blur both the flesh and the statues. That didn't appease the conservatives. But Mohseni is not easily appeased, either. He is shrewd and relentless and has the appetite of a Hollywood mogul. He has been married three times. He darts around the world tending to kids and business and politics in Australia (where he spent his teenage years) and in Dubai, Kabul, Washington, Los Angeles. He is passionate about changing Afghan society and playing the wealthy, powerful, independent macher. So when Karzai tried to patronize Mohseni, telling him that he didn't understand Afghan culture, Mohseni asked him a question: Isn't it time we change? "Eighty percent of Afghans with TVs have watched the Indian soap," Mohseni told me. "The Guardian had a beautiful picture of a house with

no windows and a family watching the show. They had nothing in their lives but the soaps.” Besides, he told Karzai, they could change the channel if they were offended. When Karzai said the people are very uneducated, Mohseni countered, “You can’t say they’re mature enough to vote for you but not mature enough to change the channel.” Karzai laughed.

Mohseni kept broadcasting the popular Indian soap “Because the Mother-in-Law Was Once the Daughter-in-Law.” But he also got an idea: Why not create an Afghan soap? He hired the best Afghan writer he could think of — the novelist and filmmaker Atiq Rahimi, who exiled himself to France in the ’80s and won the Prix Goncourt in 2008 for his small literary masterpiece, “The Patience Stone,” a novel.

“I wanted to tell the political, economic and cultural story of the different Afghan generations through one family,” Rahimi told me by phone from Paris. The story is typical of what happened to so many families after the Taliban fell. An Afghan man who has been living in the West for 20 years returns to Kabul to reclaim his house, which he left under the care of his cousin. The cousin, who fought the Russians, says, Wait up, not so fast. If not for us, the house would have been confiscated by the Communists, the Taliban. “This was the political story of Afghanistan,” Rahimi said. “The mujahedeen stayed. The intellectuals and bureaucrats and technocrats left during the war, and now they’ve come back to take power.”

Family members search for the deed to the house, and eventually they discover the grandfather left it to all of them. The house becomes a metaphor for Afghanistan. Everybody has to live in it together. “Of course, after that we wanted to reveal the daily problems of Afghans,” Rahimi said, “the corruption, drugs, crimes, conditions of women, young people and, of course, love.”

Rahimi wrote the pilot (with Hafiz Assefi) and then passed it on to a group of six young Afghan writers who had workshopped with J. F. Lawton, the screenwriter of “Pretty Woman.” The first season was directed by a young woman filmmaker, Roya Sadaat. The writers say they hope the soap will not just hold up a mirror to Afghan society but will also become a topic of a cultural conversation, a messenger and an agent of change. (Some 50 percent of Afghans watch television regularly, according to Kabul-based Altai Consulting, and Tolo, according to its own estimate, reaches 45 percent of that audience.) They have created characters through whom Kabul talks to itself and about itself. There’s Sangin Shah, who never studied because of the wars; he is illiterate, always searching for jobs, but no one wants to give him one. He tries to be a shopkeeper, a driver. He comes up with crazy schemes to make money, like cockfighting. “It’s a dark story, but we made it comedy,” Samiullah Nabizada, now the lead writer on the show, told me. “Most Afghan people face the same situation, and he’s our audience’s favorite character.”

Or there’s Soraya, the main heartthrob, played by 19-year-old Arzoo. She and her cousin Kabir are in love, but their parents oppose the union. Kabir, a painter, falls in with a crime ring and becomes clinically depressed. Soraya wants to take him to a doctor and help him. “Because of the war and

economic problems and no jobs, I can say 60 percent of Afghans have such problems, but they will never go to the doctor,” Nabizada said. “They say this is our destiny, and we have to suffer it. We are saying you are not crazy if you go to the doctor. And we’re encouraging young people to help each other.”

In the show, Soraya has just come back from studying film and theater in America. She’s directing a drama, and the main actress in the play within the soap opera suddenly tells her that she can’t perform any longer. Her brother and uncle are against it. “Let them oppose you,” Soraya tells her. “You are not the only girl in Afghanistan who is facing such difficulties. You think I didn’t have problems when I first started this? I’m still having problems.” But even as she is telling this young actress to stand up for herself, the real actress playing the actress was being pulled off the show by her parents. The writers had to invent a new story line.

Arzoo, who portrays Soraya, comes from such a conservative Pashtun family that when she became an actress, she says, her uncle tried to kill her and the neighbors beat up the taxi drivers who took her home. Since childhood she had dreamed of being an actress. She refused to give up. “My family were very close, but once they saw me onscreen, they disowned me,” she whispered to me in a corridor of the Tolo TV set. “My father said if you are happy to work in films, you are dead for us. You are not our daughter.”

Every single woman I met working on “The Secrets of This House” faces scorn, ostracization and even death threats. “We are hypocrites,” Mohseni told me. “We all watch TV, but we don’t want women to appear on TV.” Actually it’s not that they don’t want women on TV — dancing Indian girls are as popular as ever. It’s that families don’t want *their* women to be on TV. Arzoo’s father told her, “You took all the honor of our family away.” And it is this honor — the family asset — that is at stake in every women’s issue in Afghanistan. If the honor is tainted, the family is tainted.

One spring morning I went to the police academy on the outskirts of Kabul to meet Shekiba, who plays the good and patient wife of Sangin Shah, the feckless comic character who is always failing to find a job. Young men in uniform jogged along the well-manicured grounds past blossoming apricot trees. Inside a small yellow clapboard building, I found a dozen women at target practice. Two Norwegian police officers were overseeing the Security and Awareness course. An Afghan female commando in black shouted, “Put on your ear defenders, load your guns, don’t be nervous, feel confident, full attention, ready, put your feet one in front of the other, load, aim, breathe in, fire.”

Shekiba was trying to shoot, but a bullet was stuck somewhere in the barrel. The pistol was an old Walther. “The weapons are crap,” said Roy Hooen, one of the Norwegian police officers handling the training. “I never have this problem with the men. They have Kalashnikovs and good pistols all the time. The high-ranking generals don’t actually want the females to be educated or to learn to shoot. We have to push them to send female cadets to this course.”

The Norwegians provide what they can — pepper spray and batons, training in self-defense and mental awareness — although they had to shut down baton practice because the male police officers thought the Norwegians were dancing with the girls.

Shekiba wanted me to put my hand on her heart to feel how fast it was beating. She had fired again, this time well and on target. “Oh, my God, I can understand how hard it is in a mission to shoot someone for real,” she said. “I have to imagine it’s an enemy, and I have to kill him. It’s not for fun. It needs a lot of courage.”

Shekiba is an explosive personality, on the move, afraid of nothing. Unlike Abada, she wanted to be an actress. She studied and acted in Iran as a refugee and did well because she lied and told the Iranians — who often treat Afghans like servants — that she was from Tajikistan, which gave her an exotic appeal. She told her husband, whom she met in Iran, that he could marry her as long as he was prepared for her to be an actress.

Why had Shekiba turned out so differently from other Afghan women? Her father. “He was proud of my acting and always told me, ‘You are my brave daughter, you can compare yourself to men,’ ” she said. He ran a shop, and they had a good life in Iran. But when they came back to Afghanistan, Shekiba said, they were like beggars. Her father died last year — of diabetes, of grief. Three of her four brothers won’t speak to her. Her husband is a street worker for the municipality and earns \$60 a month, supplemented by his income from running a sweets-and-juice stand. They live with their four kids down a sewage-filled street in what she called “a Taliban-infested neighborhood.”

A few months ago she was heading home from a TV interview when two men in an army vehicle trailed her, cut her off, leapt out and pulled her into the truck. She screamed for help and pulled the driver’s hair. “They kept cursing me, calling me a whore, a slut, a harlot,” she told me. “I heard one say, ‘Kill and dump her in a ditch.’ I kept screaming until they kicked me out of the car. They said they would have killed me if I were not a mother. I still receive phone threats warning me to stop acting and appearing on TV.”

She wrote letters to the minister of the interior. She petitioned the police. But no one responded until officers at the local station told her they needed a female police officer to help them with house searches in the neighborhood. “So when I saw nobody really cared about me, I joined the police,” she said. “I wanted to be armed so that I have my own weapon to defend myself and shoot those who want to harass me.” When we met at the firing range, she had been working as a policewoman for two months but still hadn’t received any pay.

She looked at her watch. “Oh, my God! It’s one o’clock. We have to finish. I have to be at Tolo for filming,” she whispered. She told the Norwegians she had to run home to cook a meal. A slight fib. Then to me she said: “I was supposed to be at Tolo at 8 a.m. If I don’t come, they’ll cross me out and replace me.”

Shekiba was a pro, sort of. She didn't tell the police academy about her acting, and she didn't tell Tolo about her policing, and she charmed people into letting her do what she needed to do. Everyone's life in Kabul is a high-wire act, and sometimes there's camaraderie in that. Yet for all her mendacity she could not resist showing the clip of her latest scene, which she had on her mobile, to her fellow policewomen. "Doesn't your husband give you trouble for playing someone else's wife?" asked one of the older women. Shekiba smiled. "My husband is my biggest supporter."

As we left the police-academy grounds and walked into the city streets, Shekiba swishing along in her long flowered skirt and oversize celebrity sunglasses, her phone rang. "Please don't tease a married mother," she said and then put the caller on speakerphone: "Ma'am, if you're free, come let's go for a drive. I love you. I am one of your fans."

"It's good for you to die," Shekiba said. "Be ashamed!" She hung up. "It's not easy to keep out of problems," she told me. "I'm an actress and policewoman, and neither is respected in this society."

True. But exigency is pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable in Kabul. Is it honorable to starve your children for your drug addiction as long as the honor of your wife is kept? Or as Abada's opium-addled husband told his brother: if she doesn't act, who else will support the family? It's a simple equation: Only once they are armed with the cash for survival do most women have the room for thoughts of social change. "Acting has made me free," Abada told me.

Badam Bagh, the Almond Orchard, is the name of a relatively new women's prison in the north of Kabul built by the Italian government. It is populated by women convicted of murder, attempted suicide bombing, kidnapping. It's equally populated by women who have tainted the family honor. They are serving sentences for so-called moral crimes. It is a clean, smooth-running institution with vocational and literacy classes. The prison is so used to visitors that when I met the director, he said, "Which stories you want?" The prisoners are happy to cooperate with film crews, journalists and aid workers asking questions. There is always the hope that a well-told story will earn them a get-out-of-jail card.

Officially all the women in the prison have gone to trial and been convicted. Unofficially the stories were fudgy. The guards spoke with certainty one minute and then would start adding nuance and doubt. After all, they, too, are women. Zarafshan Nahibi is the no-nonsense deputy director of the prison, and as Habibi Abdul Aziz, a small woman who looked much older than her 20-something years, lost the logical threads of her own story, Zarafshan would help her to remember. Habibi came from a small Pashtun village in Wardak Province. She was married off young in exchange for a piece of land. Her husband was cruel. "He beat me and used me like clothes — he washed me or soiled me. I felt not human, but where could I go? If I left the house, they'd assume I was having sex." One day her husband suspected her of having an affair with his cousin, so he killed him. He was in jail for two years when he got the idea to accuse Habibi as well, thinking he'd get off earlier.

At that point in the story Zarafshan said: "The killing happened because of her. That's why she was arrested."

My translator, Jamila, a filmmaker who is running for Parliament, could not contain herself: What kind of law is this?

Zarafshan: "She's in jail because he said, 'I killed because of her.' And she is in jail for having illegal relations."

Jamila: "But there must be proof."

Zarafshan: "We don't have fair courts. Once the husband says something, the wife is in jail."

And so are the children, in many cases. There are more than 60 children living with their mothers in Badam Bagh.

Suddenly Zarafshan was on a roll. She wanted us to know just how bad things could be. Three years ago, the women's prison was still part of the main Kabul prison at Pul-i-Charkhi. Habibi and her husband were both locked up there. During visiting hours one day, Zarafshan heard people shouting, "Habibi is dead!" Then she saw Habibi bloodied and her husband running away, Zarafshan recalled. "I grabbed him and began to beat him so blood came from his mouth, and I shouted, 'Do you see how she feels?' All the females attacked him and beat him, and the male police said, 'Please don't kill him or we will be responsible.' The women wanted to kill him. We slapped the police. 'Why didn't you do your job?' And what happened to those policemen?"

"They lost their salary for a week," said a guard, who laughed uncomfortably.

Habibi was by now crying. She was still terrified of her husband, even though he was miles away. Apparently that day in the Pul-i-Charkhi courtyard he had tried to have sex with her, and then insisted he was going to give away their 10-year-old daughter, Gullabo, to the father of the man he had killed; he thought this might settle the debt and get him out of prison. "I told him I'd scream if he tried to touch my daughter," Habibi said. He hurled an enormous rock at her. She fell into a coma for three months.

Twelve new prisoners had just arrived at the prison. Zarafshan got up to help them settle, and in walked Nasima, the heroine and bully of the prison. A tall, physically agile woman with green eyes, a long, light brown ponytail and a raspy chain-smoking bark, Nasima was clearly the ward's jester: "Hey foreigner foreigner," she called out to me. "Why am I here? Murder. He had to kiss all the ladies in front of me? Bring bad ladies to the house? Why? I had everything they did. And he was beating me. So I killed him. I don't talk rubbish." She demonstrated by digging her toes into the floor as if crushing her husband's head. Apparently her husband was abusing her children too. She cut him up, Zarafshan said, and buried him under a tree.

Outside, at the gate, the new prisoners were being welcomed by the older prisoners. The mothers among the new arrivals were clutching their children, all of whom were crying.

There is now an oasis for some of these kids. In a quiet neighborhood, in a pastel three-story house with columns and a terrace, Women for Afghan Women, run by Manizha Naderi, has created a fairy-tale home, the Children's Support Center, with 49 children currently in residence. Naderi is one of many Afghans who left the country as a child, grew up in America with the benefit of an education and returned to give something back to women who had had no such luck. The afternoon I arrived, some of the children were outside playing badminton and jumping rope, others were in language class, others were at the monitors in the new computer room. On the terrace was a small library with children's books and a prized nesting bird. Upstairs, girls were watching a National Geographic program on chimps. Downstairs, the boys were watching Disney's "Aladdin." All the bunk beds were neatly made. I'd never seen such a beautiful, clean institution in Afghanistan. Shahbibi Halimi, the director, was a kind mother of six who had been working as a program manager in various women's organizations for years. She was married to an army general and joked that as long as she kept up her housework, he supported her. When the kids first arrive from the prison, she said, they are disoriented, depressed, sometimes violent: "One 4-year-old told me, 'I can kill you,' and when I asked how, she said, 'Just like that I can bring my hand up and kill you.' I try to work like a servant and be patient and slowly get them into a routine and teach them how to solve problems without violence. These kids are the future."

Whatever her formula, it was working. Gullabo, Habibi's 10-year-old daughter, was thriving. Her hair was cut short. She wore a red sweater-dress with a zipper and collar. She said she would never go back to the prison. "The ladies were fighting so much and the kids were fighting I wanted to die," she told me. "I hated my life. Every day was boxing, boxing. They were all crazy." And so might she have been. Years ago, back in her village, she went up the mountain to watch the stars when suddenly she saw her father carting a body in a wheelbarrow. He had murdered his cousin. Last year in the prison yard, she saw her mother lying in blood after her father stoned her mother and told Gullabo that he was going to give her as *baad* — blood money. Now she hated to look at herself in the mirror because her face reminded her of her father. The orphanage was the first school and the first speck of hope she'd seen in her short life. She studies hard, writes poetry, plays sports and takes care of her little brother and sister. What did it cost to run such a place?

According to Naderi, all of \$230,000 a year.

In addition to the Children's Support Center, Women for Afghan Women also runs a shelter for women and children. Naderi, the organization's executive director, says she worries that all its work will disintegrate if the ongoing negotiations with the Taliban earn them a seat in government. "The first thing they will want to do is close the shelters," she told me. It's possible: even conservatives in Karzai's own government want them shut down, considering them sinful. But if the Taliban do find a way back into government, they face a very different kind of Afghan woman

this time around. The new generation that has grown up in the last decade has access to media. They see women as parliamentarians, lawyers, judges, professors, actresses, film directors, policewomen, even a governor. It is these new realities of women's lives that will force the reinterpretation of the meaning of honor — the most radioactive ingredient in any discussion of cultural change.

Or at least in Kabul. In Kandahar and elsewhere in the Pashtun half of the country, the relationship between the family's honor and society is hardly changing. In fact there's a counterassault against women there. And it's not hard to see why. Afghanistan missed 30 years of globalization. Now Afghans wake up assaulted by the Internet, Iranian culture, Indian TV, Pakistani mullahs, NATO bombs. Their culture and honor and lives are under siege from every direction. So who takes the brunt of the resulting frustration? The weakest, of course. But the weak can hit back. Girls are running away from forced marriages. Women have demanded a place at the peace *jirga*. They've forced passage of the first law criminalizing violence against women. They have been killed and maimed trying to change the world they were born into. And now they have taken up the pen and the camera, writing memoirs and novels, shooting documentaries, feature films and even a soap opera, to transcend their reality by seizing control of their own narrative.

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