

## **Background Information about *The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis**

### **Beneath the veil**

Ever since the Taliban took control of most of Afghanistan in 1996, the group has imposed its harsh version of Islamic law on the country. In "Beneath the Veil," journalist Saira Shah traveled to Afghanistan to see the effects of the Taliban's rule on her father's homeland.

She discovered public executions, allegations of human rights violations like massacres and torture, and a place where women are forced to beg because they are prevented from working. But she also found that the first voices of protest come from the most repressed, including an opposition group that uses hidden cameras to film the executions.

### **The refugee camps**

Shah first visited refugee camps in Pakistan, where millions of Afghans initially fled to escape the war following the 1979 invasion by the Soviet Union. They are now seeking relief from famine, drought and the Taliban's harsh rule.

The United Nations estimates there are some 1.2 million Afghan refugees in camps in Pakistan and 800,000 in Pakistani cities, down from more than 3 million during the Soviet occupation in the 1980s. However, there are still a total of 2.6 million Afghan refugees, making them the world's largest refugee group for the 19th year in a row. In the Pakistani camps, many of the refugees are children

### **Crossing into Afghanistan**

Shah met with the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), an underground group of Afghan feminists who are using hidden cameras to document the actions of the Taliban. In Pakistan, Shah attended a demonstration by the group, which turned into a mini-riot when Taliban supporters launched a counterdemonstration.

After a two-month wait for visas, Shah crossed into Afghanistan with a film crew. Their first stop was the southern city of Qandahar, where they were immediately detained by the secret police known as the Ministry of Enforcement of Virtue and Suppression of Vice. Charged with filming illegally, they were later released.

### **The ruins of Kabul**

In Kabul, Shah and her crew were detained again for trying to film confiscated cassette tapes displayed at a police checkpoint. The Taliban has banned secular music as "un-Islamic." But to their surprise, instead of being arrested, the local intelligence chief invited Shah and the crew to tea. The chief also took them on a tour of the district that he oversees, saying if Taliban opponents enter his district, he can find and arrest them within minutes of their entry.

Shah also visited a soccer stadium where public executions are held, some which have been secretly filmed by RAWA. The footage shows the prisoners paraded around the field, before being hung from the goalpost or shot in the head at close range. The Taliban's spokesman said the executions are bringing "order and security" to society.

## **The hidden world of women**

In Kabul, Shah left her crew behind and proceeded alone, posing as an ordinary Afghan woman but continued to film with a hidden camera underneath her burqa, a body-length veil that adult women in Afghanistan are required to wear. She visited a filthy hospital for women with few doctors. The Taliban don't want women to work as doctors, but they also don't want male physicians to see women and there are few female doctors left in the country. The country now has one of the highest infant and maternal mortality rates in the world.

Shah also met up with her RAWA contacts, who took her to an illegal beauty parlor and one of the group's riskiest activities -- a school for girls.

## **Allegations of massacres**

The Taliban control most of the country, except a small part in northern Afghanistan held by an alliance of different ethnic groups and former mujahedeen, guerrilla fighters who fought the Soviets in the 1980s. Both the alliance and the Taliban have been accused of human rights violations.

Shah interviewed people in villages, who accuse the Taliban -- mostly ethnic Pashtuns -- of killing unarmed civilians belonging to different ethnic groups. Three young girls said they saw their mother killed in front of them.

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