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Women and the Afghan Filmmaking Sector

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While film industries create jobs and contribute to economic development, they also have an immense impact on social life. In today's world, cinema is considered one of the most important tools for initiating social change. However, in Afghanistan this industry is not functional or has yet to take off substantially. When compared to the other fields of arts that have taken off in the past 19 years, the Afghan government and the international community have not focused much investment in this sector. In today's Afghanistan, women are active in literature, fine arts, and other forms of art, but very few are active in filmmaking.

Given how women comprise nearly half the population of the country, what has been their contribution in filmmaking (feature films as well as documentaries)? This essay attempts to examine the role of Afghan women in filmmaking over the past two decades, and the challenges and opportunities that exist in this sphere.

Women in Afghanistan's Filmmaking Sector

Afghan women have contributed to various forms of art and literature. Some well-known figures include poets such as Malalai, Sultan Razia, and Rabia Balkhi, and politicians such as Soorya. However, a cursory glance at the history of Afghan cinema reveals that there were very few Afghan women in the filmmaking industry before decades of conflict commenced in the 1980s. Among them was actress Anisa Wahab.²

1. Masoma Ibrahimi is an Afghan filmmaker and the Founder of Arastoo Film.

2. Heath, Jennifer; Zahedi, Ashraf. "Children of Afghanistan: The Path to Peace." University of Texas Press, November 15, 2014. pp. 300

Motion pictures were introduced to Afghanistan for the first time in 1926, when the then monarch, King Amanullah Khan, brought a projector. The first silent movie was aired to the public in Paghman and later the first Afghan film ‘*Love and Friendship*’ was produced in 1946.³ However, later, due to opposition from the society, Afghanistan’s first movie theatre, ‘Behzad Cinema’, was shut down in 1934.

During King Zahir Shah’s reign, Behzad Cinema reopened. Between 1965 and 1975, cinemas halls were established in the cities of Kabul, Kandahar and Herat. These theatres mostly screened Indian movies. Between 1965 and 1972, the numbers of movie theatres in Afghanistan increased to 54.⁴ After the communist regime came to power in 1978, the numbers of movie theatres did not increase but movies were strictly censored and the content was completely under the state control. With the spread of the civil war, invasion by Soviet forces, and the rise of the Taliban, all cinema halls were destroyed and eventually banned across country.⁵

In the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 too, the presence of women in the cinema and visual arts was lacking. With an improvement in the security situation and the relative improvements in freedoms that women in big cities were able to gain, women were able to make films and to participate in filmmaking to highlight issues of women’s rights, and to contribute to society at large.⁶ In the recent years, especially since 2012, Afghan women have made short documentaries, short films and feature films. These include *A Letter to the President*; *Afghan Women Behind the Wheel*; *Hava, Maryam, Ayesha*; *The Wolf and Sheep*; and *The Orphanage*. These films have been screened in many local and international film festivals and have received numerous awards. However, these movies (as well as those by foreign filmmakers) depict Afghan women as victims who do not have any rights and ignore the fact that Afghan women play important roles in all spheres of life.

3. “A Brief History of Afghans and Films.” Internet Archive Way Back Machine, June 17, 2005. https://web.archive.org/web/20050617033335/http://www.3continents.com/f3c2004/eng_afghanistan.html

4. “Brief history of Cinema in Afghanistan.” *Afghan Paper*, October 23, 2014. <http://www.afghanpaper.com/nbody.php?id=82088>

5. Ibid

6. “Afghan women in cinema and literature.” *BBC Persian*, March 06, 2015. https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan/2015/03/150306_hn_women_art_package_bbc

Women in Filmmaking in Afghanistan: Post 2001

As Afghan women expressed their keen interest in working in filmmaking as directors, actors and in other positions, some international organizations provided support to female artists and filmmakers in the country. For instance, the British Council has been providing filmmaking training for women since 2010. As part of this training, young Afghan women and men were trained in filmmaking in Kabul, Herat, Balkh, Bamyan and Kandahar, where they made short films and documentaries.⁷

Various embassies in Afghanistan supported the development of the Afghan film industry by providing filmmaking projects and festivals, in which women were encouraged to make films and television series. For instance, the US embassy in Kabul supported female Afghan artists by funding some private television stations to make television series on women's rights, security, and children. For instance, a television series titled 'Secrets of this Home' depicting women's rights was broadcast by Tolo TV. In many cases, the precondition for the implementation of these projects was that they had to be women-led.

Afghan Film is the state-run film company which was established in 1968. Since 2001 this company has been overseen by the Ministry of Information and Culture. Its main mandate is to support Afghan filmmakers. For several years this department received a lot of assistance from various agencies, but these benefits were limited to the purchase of film production equipment for this department only, whereas the filmmakers did not utilize these equipment to produce films in the past. In May 2019, the Afghan government appointed Sahraa Karimi, a female Afghan filmmaker, as the head of Afghan Film.⁸ It was under her leadership that this state-of-affairs began witnessing a transformation. It was only in 2020 that the Ministry of Finance allocated funds to Afghan Film to make 10 documentaries and feature films and a comedy series. Additionally, Afghan Film is mandated with preparing and compiling the cinema policy for Afghanistan.⁹

7. "Young filmmakers." British Council. <https://www.britishcouncil.af/programmes/arts/leadership-skills/young-filmmakers>

8. "Sahraa Karimi to Lead Afghan Film as First Female Chairperson." Tolonews, May 19, 2019. <https://tolonews.com/arts-culture/sahraa-karimi-lead-afghan-film-first-female-chairperson>

9. Morning Magazine, 1 TV, Interview with Sahraa Karimi, Head of Afghan Film. YouTube, August 10, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXIEPJ8eUHM&feature=youtu.be>

One of the ways in which Afghan women can enter this field is by enrolling in the Department of Fine Arts of Kabul University to formally learn film making. It was only after the fall of the Taliban that many young girls (after passing the entrance exam) enrolled in the Department of Fine Arts. On the other hand, since 2001, many female Afghan filmmakers have made films relying on their own funds and some financial support from international organizations. For instance, Roya Sadat produced her film, *A Letter to the President*, with her own funds. Similarly, in 2018, Sahraa Karimi produced *Hava, Maryam, Ayesha* with her own funds. The abovementioned films, namely *A Letter to the President*, and *Hava, Maryam, Ayesha* were screened at various major international film festivals around the world and received prestigious awards.¹⁰

Women's presence in the filmmaking sector is not limited to producing and directing roles alone. In the post-2001 era, Afghan women have contributed to the world of cinema as actors in domestic and international movies. These women have performed in movies, television series etc. and have demonstrated their skills despite the restrictive cultural norms prevalent in the country. Some of these actresses have encountered several threats, including threats to life, due to their participation in this sector.

In terms of relevant infrastructure, at present, many movie theatres are unused and some have not been rebuilt since the end of the Taliban regime in 2001. Cinemas are run and controlled by municipalities, which outsource the task to private sector companies/individuals under specific contracts, and the relevant person or body is entitled to use the theatre to screen films and to generate income. Three decades ago, before the civil war, there were 54 movie theatres across Afghanistan, including 23 in Kabul, which screened movies. Today, most of these buildings have been demolished or have been turned into commercial centers, warehouses or conference venues. In the past 19 years, only five theatres (*Ariana, Pamir, Park, Khairkhaneh* and *Teymourshahi*) have been active, and the numbers of their patrons is low as a result of these theatres not screening newly released movies, Afghan movies, insecure environment for the families, and people's negative perceptions about cinema.

10. Boyd van Hoeij "Hava, Maryam, Ayesha": Film Review | Venice 2019" *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 16, 2019. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/hava-maryam-ayesha-1239710>

Currently, watching movies in cinema halls is not suitable and as a result, movie theatres have taken on a masculine face and the presence of women is extremely low. But some filmmakers have established small movie theaters for families, such as the I-Khanoum family cinema theater and the Kabul-based Noma Rasana. However, movie theatres are non-existent in most provinces.¹¹

Challenges to Afghan Women in the Filmmaking Sector

Although the current state-of-affairs in Afghanistan is somewhat conducive for the Afghan women to participate in filmmaking and other arts, many challenges still exist. One of the most important obstacles is the patriarchal culture and traditional beliefs among Afghan people *vis-a-vis* women's active role in the society, especially in cinema. This obstacle exists both in rural areas and major urban areas. Only a handful of women currently produce films and documentaries.

The other key obstacle is the unstable security situation, which prevents Afghan women from partaking fully in the filmmaking sector. While Afghanistan has many untold stories that can be transformed in to feature films, documentaries and historical series, security problems hamper women's ability to carry out filmmaking activities in remote provinces, and these activities are thus limited to urban centers. To address this hurdle, filmmakers (men and women) are required to acquire permits from the Ministry of Interior Affairs, who can then provide security for the film crew. While this is useful in the capital city or in provinces that are relatively less insecure, in most parts of the country, the security situation is not conducive for filmmakers to opt for any such projects.

For instance, in 2014, Fio Aladag, a female German filmmaker came to Afghanistan to make a German film on Afghan translators working with German troops stationed in Afghanistan. She brought a German team and equipment worth hundreds of thousands of dollars and hired an Afghan team¹² to work with her during the making of the film. Despite the presence of security forces during the filming, when the team was working in Balkh

11. "Women and girls went to Movie Theater for the first time." Afghanistan Sputnik, July 22, 2019. <https://af.sputniknews.com/opinion/201907223654381-زنان-و-دختران-برای-بار-اول-سینما-رفتن-و-دیدن-1>

12. This author was a member of the Afghan team hired by Aladag.

University, students threatened them by saying that the content of the film was un-Islamic. All teams left the area with the support of security forces leaving the project incomplete.

Filmmaking is among the most expensive enterprises in the world. Today, Hollywood and Bollywood movies are made with massive budgets. Having a producer and a financial investor is one of the most important prerequisites to make films. In Afghanistan, most female filmmakers (or aspiring ones) do not have the financial resources to make movies. Furthermore, due to the security situation, the absence of insurance companies or the absence of Afghanistan in the list of foreign insurance companies, disincentivizes producers from investing in this sector, resulting in many Afghan filmmakers making their films either with the financial support of international agencies (which is very limited) or at their own expense.¹³

In some developed countries, special policies and laws have been adopted to support independent filmmakers and the country's film industry. Countries impose taxes on foreign films so that those funds can be used to support domestic film industries.

Conclusion

The continuous conflict of over three decades has immensely affected every aspect of Afghan society, and cinema has not been spared either. On the other hand, the film industry and associated artists have always been looked down upon in the Afghan society. Cinema halls were destroyed during the wars of 1980s and 1990s as they were viewed as un-Islamic, and the society did not endeavor to preserve them. Even after the establishment of a democratic government after the fall of Taliban regime, cinema halls were not reconstructed. While millions were poured into the country in aid, very less attention has been paid to this field. This has created a vacuum wherein indigenous filmmaking is scant. Consequently, the cinema experience in Afghanistan is dominated by foreign movies that do not contribute much to Afghan culture and do not tell the stories of the Afghan people.

13. Eran Fraenkel, Emrys Schoemaker, and Sheldon Himelfarb, "Afghanistan Media Assessment." USIP, 2010. https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/PW68_Afghanistan_Media_Assessment1.pdf

At the same time, the role of the Afghan women has been very much restricted by the Afghan cultural norms. Consequently, the aspirations of Afghan women are either misrepresented, or underrepresented in the international media and the foreign filmmakers have never been able to depict the reality experienced by Afghan women. In most cases, Afghan women are depicted as victims and their stories too have been narrated from the lens of victimhood.

Policy Recommendations

- The government of Afghanistan must establish a fund financed by the government to support independent filmmakers, especially women, and thereby enable an increase in the production of films in the country.
- Films made by women must be supported by facilitating their screenings in different countries and festivals around the world.
- A committee tasked with ensuring the safety of filmmakers, especially women, must be established.
- The government must record and take action to address instances of violence and challenges that female filmmakers face.
- Increase taxes on foreign films and series and utilize the additional funds to support the Afghan film industry.