



This page: Gen. Suhaila Siddiqi arrives at a command center for earthquake aid efforts in March 2002 in Nahrin, Afghanistan.

Opposite, left: Afghan National Army Brig. Gen. Rahimi Razia, Chief Nurse of the ANA, tells a reporter in October 2010 that she plans to visit all five ANA medical centers.

Opposite, right: Afghan Gen. Khatool Mohammadzai greets women during an International Women's Day fair organized by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan in March 2007.



ROLE MODELS

~ FOR A **NEW** AFGHANISTAN ~

THREE WOMEN BROADEN OPPORTUNITIES
IN A TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

By *per* Concordiam Staff

Women in Afghanistan are breaking out of their traditional roles and becoming military generals, cabinet members and surgeons. Once punished for venturing out of their homes without a male escort, they are acquiring more freedom to contribute to the protection and development of their country. This modern generation of female leaders, including Gen. Suhaila Siddiqi, Brig. Gen. Rahimi Razia and Gen. Khatool Mohammadzai, are viewed as pioneers who have overturned stereotypes in this male-dominated society.

Gen. Siddiqi is a woman of firsts in Afghanistan. She was one of a select few female generals in the Afghan National Army (ANA), one of the first women to hold an Afghan government cabinet position as health minister in 2001, and one of the few prominent women who declined to wear a traditional burqa. “The General,” or “General Suhaila” as she is known, graduated with a doctorate in endoscopic medicine from the Medical School of Moscow State University in 1961 and climbed through the medical corps ranks during her 39 years in the army. She is Afghanistan’s most respected surgeon, according to the BBC, and is credited with saving hundreds of lives.



STAFF SGT. JASON COLBERT/U.S. AIR FORCE



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



Afghan women, in July 2011, march in Kabul to protest harassment in public places. Women handed out fliers and held signs that read “Street violence is illegal” and “We will not be silent in the face of street harassment.”

Gen. Siddiqi openly fought against the Taliban’s suppression of women and children, and told *The Times* of London that priority should be given to primary school education, the economy and reconstruction of the country. She believes that women should obey Islamic law, but that men and women are equal under its tenants. The general negotiated with the Taliban to return to her medical post after they had banished her and all women to their homes. She agreed to return on the condition that she and her sister, Shafiq, were released from the burqa requirement. The Taliban relented.

The new Afghan government agrees with the general’s noncompulsory burqa policy. “Already, more women are showing their faces in public,” she told the *Los Angeles Times*. “Many have become used to the burqa and are still afraid to go out without it. But this is a matter of habit, and it cannot survive.” Despite the Afghan government abandoning the burqa requirement, its use remains widespread for cultural and religious reasons.

Gen. Siddiqi comes from a royal Pashtun family that produced Afghanistan’s exiled king Zahir Shah-Siddiqi. Her older sister, Mastura, taught medicine at Kabul University and Gen. Siddiqi followed in her footsteps, graduating first in her class. Upon graduation she immediately started working for the Russian-built Four Hundred Bed hospital in Kabul. She climbed the ranks and became the highest ranking woman in the Afghan Army at that time. While many well-connected Afghan families fled the country for a more comfortable exile, she stayed. “It is a matter of pride for me. I stayed in my country, and I served my people. I never fled abroad,” she told the *Guardian*.

Brig. Gen. Rahimi Razia followed a similar path into the high ranks of the Afghan military. She is steadfastly committed to Afghanistan and has served 38 years as a military nurse. She currently serves as chief nurse of the ANA. Brig. Gen. Razia serves as a powerful mentor to nurses, medical professionals and women across Afghanistan. She represents nurses at the ANA Office of the Surgeon General and helps set policy for the five regional hospitals

– in Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, Paktya and Mazar-e-Sharif – that make up the ANA hospital system.

The task confronting Brig. Gen. Razia is enormous. The nation’s health care system can be primitive. “Nearly three decades of war and religious extremism have devastated medical libraries and crippled the educational system for doctors, nurses and other health professionals,” *The New York Times* reported in September 2010.

The Taliban destroyed medical textbooks during their rule from 1996 to 2001, objecting to human anatomical illustrations they considered blasphemous. Doctors in Afghanistan were left without reference books such as Physicians’ Desk Reference to aid in prescribing medicine and performing medical procedures. Surviving books show Taliban bullet damage. Medical reference book donations from the University of California, Los Angeles, have helped restock the shelves of Kabul Medical University.

Brig. Gen. Razia launched Afghanistan’s first military vaccine program in 2005 to improve the health of ANA Soldiers and protect them from historically debilitating diseases that weaken their ability to fulfill their missions. After reviewing cost, logistics and disease impact, her staff started vaccinating for polio, typhoid, MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) and meningitis. The goal is for every ANA Soldier to receive the vaccines. “If our army is not a healthy army, they would not be able to do their duties well,” Brig. Gen. Ghulam Sakhi

Affi said at the opening ceremony of the program, reported and published on the Sunni Forum website.

In October 2010, Brig. Gen. Razia initiated a grand tour of the ANA medical system, starting with Paktya Regional Medical Hospital. “The good things I saw here included the friendship with the nurses with each other and the leadership. Also, I found that the hospital was very clean. ... This is the best hospital I’ve seen in my visit,” she was quoted as saying in an International Security Assistance Force-Afghanistan news article.

Gen. Mohammadzai is a trailblazer as well. As a paratrooper, Gen. Mohammadzai has more than 500 jumps to her name. On March 21, 2005, in celebration of Afghan

“Becoming a general, especially in Afghanistan as a female, is not an easy thing. I wanted to work hard and show other Afghan females that a woman can be a general.”

—Gen. Khatool Mohammadzai

New Year's Day, she parachuted holding a sign that said: "We want education, employment and salaries for widows, orphans and handicapped people."

"Becoming a general, especially in Afghanistan as a female, is not an easy thing. I wanted to work hard and show other Afghan females that a woman can be a general," she told Haseena Sullaiman, an Afghan journalist. "I had to work very hard; sometimes I was even scared for my life. I still went ahead and did it."

Gen. Mohammadzai grew up in a wealthy and educated family, but now lives modestly with her sister and son. Her husband was killed during the Soviet war when their son was only 40 days old. Throughout her career she faced death more than once, being fired upon, poisoned and nearly killed by a malfunctioning parachute. She holds a black belt in three martial arts, is a trained commando and is highly skilled in weapons. She recalls the frustrations of Taliban rule, when she was restricted to her home. What hurt most during her confinement was being unable to wear her uniform and go to the barracks, she told the U.A.E. news organization *The National* in January 2011. Among her main responsibilities today is running the Afghan Army's female sports teams.

Thanks in part to the trailblazing efforts of those three female generals, the ANA is recruiting more women than ever. Television advertisements in February 2010 invited women between the ages of 19 and 35 with at least nine years of education to sign up. The ANA also started a female officer training program. "Although women have served in the Afghan Army in the past, this is the first time that officer training has been available to them, part of a plan to make the number of female soldiers 10 percent of the total," *The Telegraph* wrote. Afghan Minister for Women's Affairs Hussan Ghazanfar announced on a recent trip to the UK that 57 percent of women and girls attend school and that 24 percent of health workers and 10 percent of the judiciary are female, the *Guardian* reported in February 2011.

The number of opportunities open to women in Afghanistan is growing, and the world is taking notice. "For the first time outside of the setting of the United Nations and of the international community, there is a groundswell of concern, from Parliaments to First Ladies, from entertainers and media stars to nongovernmental organizations, all calling for the full recognition of the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan," the UN said on its website.

The statement recalls the words of former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 2001: "I would like to take the opportunity to say to all Afghans: There cannot be true peace and recovery in Afghanistan without a restoration of the rights of women." Afghan women have embraced those words, and are now, a decade later, in a prime position to take advantage of the opportunity to help their country. □



TIMELINE OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN AFGHANISTAN

1978

Communist rule, pre-Soviet invasion. Compulsory education for girls. Bride price was abolished. Minimum age for marriage was set at 16. Little political and religious freedom.

1979
-1989

Afghan-Soviet war. Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. In the capital and some major cities, women enjoyed basic freedoms.

1992
-1996

Mujahedeen took control of Afghanistan. Civil war broke out and basic human rights for all were violated. Women were allowed to work and attend school under strict restrictions. About half of the work force was female teachers, doctors and professionals. New Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmaty restricted freedoms, but permitted women to work and attend school.

1996
-2001

Taliban rule. The Taliban took over Kabul and immediately imposed severe restrictions on women. Women were forbidden to work, to leave the house without a male escort, to seek medical treatment from a male doctor and were forced to cover themselves from head to toe.

2001

International Security Assistance Force took over Kabul and restrictions on women were officially lifted. Religious and cultural restrictions remained. Government struggled to enforce rule and Taliban remained in control in many rural areas. Dr. Sima Samar was chosen as Minister of Women's Affairs under President Hamid Karzai.

2004

Afghanistan adopted a new constitution establishing equal rights for women and men. Female athletes Friba Razayee and Robina Muqim Yar represented Afghanistan in the Summer Olympics.

2005

President Karzai appointed Afghanistan's first female provincial governor, Habiba Sorabi, to administer Bamiyan province. Medical doctor Masooda Jalal ran against Karzai in the presidential election. She lost but was appointed to the Ministry of Women's Affairs.

2007

Female boxing federation was established by the Afghanistan National Olympic Committee.

2008

Afghanistan's Ministry of Education reported that girls made up more than 35 percent of total school enrollment. Hoping to dissuade girls from attending, Taliban supporters sprayed acid on the faces of more than a dozen girls.

2009

Azra Jafari became first female mayor of Nili in Daikundi province. A controversial Shia law that restricted female rights was enacted. International criticism caused the government to put the law on hold until further review.

2011

About 2.4 million girls are enrolled in Afghanistan schools. In 2001, only 5,000 were enrolled.