



# BITTER ROOTS TENDER SHOOTS

The Uncertain Fate of Afghanistan's Women

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## CHAPTER 1

# BITTER ROOTS

Whenever women protest and ask for their rights, they are silenced with the argument that the laws are justified under Islam. It is an unfounded argument. It is not Islam at fault, but rather the culture that uses its own interpretations to justify whatever it wants.

—Shirin Ebadi, Iranian lawyer, 2003 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate,  
excerpt from her presentation at Rights and Democracy,  
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IT IS AN OLD, OLD STORY but as modern as present-day Afghanistan. In the middle of the ancient city of Balkh, in front of the mosque, and just ten metres away from the road, a slab of cement two metres high marks a spot that has become a kind of holy sepulchre for Afghan women and girls. It is the tomb of poet Rabbia Balkhi.

Rabbia was a tenth-century Afghan princess. She was born Rabbia Kosdor but is now famously known as Rabbia Balkhi

because of her association with the city. She was a beautiful girl according to the stories, and just twenty years old when she began writing the poems that ultimately would lead to her being known as the first female Persian poet. She wrote about nature and beauty but mostly about love—her forbidden love for a man called Baktash.

She lived during an era of prosperity, in what was then known as Bactria, the centre of the Samanid Empire, the greatest civilization of central Asia. It was a time, beginning around 900 AD, when architecture and the arts flourished along the Silk Road. The region's reputation was well established before Rabbia took quill pen to parchment, thanks to its many famous and infamous inhabitants. The Persian prophet, Zoroaster, reputedly died within the walls of Balkh. The city was conquered by Alexander the Great, and eventually would be sacked by the Mongol warlord, Genghis Khan. But at the turn of the tenth century, it had become a centre of study in mathematics, medicine, and astronomy, and the site of the first silver mines to produce coins. By any measure, Balkh sheltered an advanced civilization. Examples of its architecture can be seen today. The Nuh Gunbad (nine domes) mosque still stands in Balkh, as do the remnants of the city wall. But it was also an empire that kept its women veiled and out of the public eye.

Rabbia was prohibited from joining the discussions among the scholars, artists, and writers at court but often hid herself in a secluded part of the courtyard where she could see without being seen. She began to write her own poems but kept them carefully concealed, even from the women who waited on her.

The story of her love for Baktash has many versions, according to Professor Ekramuddin Hesarian in Kabul University's literature department. As the daughter of a Samanid king, Rabbia would have had slaves, and depending on which version of the story you hear, Baktash was either her slave or the slave of her brother Hareth. She fell in love with him, and

began writing poetry about her passion for a man she was forbidden to see. It is said that Baktash responded with poems of his own declaring his love for the beautiful Rabbia. Then, the story goes, they were found out. What happened next also comes in two versions. In the first version, Baktash is banished from the empire but ultimately returns and kills Hareth before killing himself. Upon hearing the news, Rabbia decides she can't live without him and goes to the *hammam* (women's bath) and slits her wrists. The second version is equally gruesome. Hareth discovers the lovers' tryst, sends her to the *hammam*, and orders the king's barber to open her vein and bleed her to death (or does the grisly job himself), to preserve the family's so-called honour. In this version, Baktash finds the love of his life dead and kills himself.

Whichever account is correct, it was in the act of dying that Rabbia claimed her place in history. The oft-told story says that, while she lay bleeding to death, she used the blood dripping from her vein to write a poem, "Love," on the wall of the *hammam*. The English translation by Manouchehr Saadat Noury reads:

I am caught in Love's web so deceitful  
 None of my endeavors turn fruitful.  
 I knew not when I rode the high-blooded steed  
 The harder I pulled its reins the less it would heed.  
 Love is an ocean with such a vast space  
 No wise man can swim it in any place.  
 A true lover should be faithful till the end  
 And face life's reprobated trend.  
 When you see things hideous, fancy them neat,  
 Eat poison, but taste sugar sweet.

This Romeo-and-Juliet-style love story has been woven into the fabric of the lives of women in Afghanistan ever since

Rabbia's tomb was found in 1967 by Ghulam Habib Nawabi. He wrote a book about Rabbia, and she became part of the cultural history of contemporary Afghanistan. Although most of her poems have been destroyed, the few that remain have captured the attention of literary critics, as well as the women and girls who visit her tomb. Professor Hesarian, for example, rates the poems as excellent in terms of their contribution to literature; meanwhile, the women of this tortured country see them as the same story of forbidden love they struggle against today.

Rabbia's tomb, which is surrounded by a park where children play, is approached by the women and girls who go there with the devotion appropriate to a pilgrimage. They go to Rabbia to pray for the fulfillment of their own romantic dreams. Children climb over the tomb, while their older sisters and mothers squeeze into the narrow opening and drop to the floor below. In the damp, cold vault, the coffin is draped in fabric that displays the words of her poetry. When asked why her poems are so popular with women and girls who haven't been to school, much less studied ancient poetry, Hesarian says, "It's because she was a woman in love, she was an oppressed lover, and she's seen as a martyr because of the way she was killed."

The devotion of the women of Afghanistan to the poems of a tenth-century romantic poses a conundrum that is rarely addressed in any culturally correct discussion about their situation. While it is accepted that women are the heart of the Afghan family, that they are protected and, indeed, guarded by the men, neither tradition nor everyday practice allows them to fall in love. And yet they do. The attraction to one special man or boy; the giddy, heart-pounding enchantment; the charm and chemistry that accompany love—all are as old as the bathhouses and the village wells and as current as the high-tech offices in downtown Kabul. But romantic love is forbidden.

In January 2008, a thousand years after Rabbia was murdered for loving Baktash, a modern version of the story is playing out

in the office of the women's project at the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission in Kabul. Project officer Homa Sultani arrives with a girl who looks like a deer caught in the headlights of a car. Masooda, who like many Afghans has only one name, doesn't know how old she is, but she does know she is in trouble. Her burka is folded back over her face, revealing big brown eyes that are red from crying. She picks nervously at her fingers and fidgets with her clothing, her face is a mask of red blotches over pale skin, and she dabs at her nose incessantly with a tissue that is balled up in her hand. She is nervous and watchful, seemingly caught between the urge to bolt and helpless submission. Sultani puts in a call to Jamila Ghairat at the women's shelter, assures Masooda that she is safe, and recounts the girl's story.

Masooda grew up next door to Mohamed Rafi, a young man who is now twenty-two and is on his way to the commission office. Both are from dirt-poor families. They played together with the other kids in the neighbourhood and suffered together through the Taliban years when Masooda had to watch boys such as Rafi go to school while she had to stay at home. Eventually the friendship between them developed into love. They were inseparable. Everyone in the neighbourhood knew that—everyone, that is, except Masooda's family, and in particular her grandfather, a harsh man who rules the family roost. The young lovers wanted to get married. They knew Masooda's conservative family would never allow a daughter to choose her own husband, so they decided to run away to Pakistan and have the wedding ceremony performed there, a safe distance from Masooda's grandfather and the dysfunctional jurisprudence of Afghanistan.

They were married and lived in Pakistan for eight months. But, as happens in many love stories, the besotted pair made a grave error. They missed their families with an ache that grew by the day. After three-quarters of a year had passed, they

decided that it was safe to return, that their families would be so glad to see them that their indiscretion would be forgiven. One more thing: Masooda was six months pregnant.

There was no joyful reunion. Instead, the lovers were struck by a devastating triple whammy. Firstly, Masooda's family accused Rafi of having kidnapped Masooda. Secondly, Rafi's family made it clear they wanted nothing to do with his bride. Thirdly, Masooda's life was threatened because she had brought shame to her family. She was quite likely to become the victim of an honour killing.

Masooda's furious grandfather sent Rafi packing. His family had been so frightened by the rage of their new in-laws after the pair had escaped to Pakistan that they had moved to another neighbourhood. Masooda was kept in the house while her grandfather decided her fate. Not a girl to be easily intimidated, Masooda fled at the first opportunity. Out on the street, she asked for directions to the human rights commission and wound up in Homa Sultani's office. At which point, this human drama came to epitomize women's lives in Afghanistan.

While the constitution grants equal rights to women, tribal law denies such rights, dismissing them as the product of foolish Western thinking. Civil law says a girl must be sixteen to marry. Tribal law says a girl is married when, and to whom, the male members in her family decide. Homa Sultani knows she needs to find a solution that embraces both civil and tribal law to make sure all parties will abide by the ruling. The negotiations began this morning with a meeting in a judge's court at the police station. "The grandfather was screaming in the court, demanding revenge, begging God to kill the girl who played with his dignity, saying he would never forgive her, and that she had sinned against Islam," says Sultani. But this shrieking demand for revenge, although it sounds terrifying, is just the usual starting point, she says. The truth is that if Rafi gives him one hundred thousand afghanis (about two thousand dollars),

the case will be closed. So for all the allusions to tribal law and religious piety, it's really about cash. The giving of a dowry is not allowed by either civil or sharia law, but the custom of *mahar*—the groom giving money to the bride—is allowed as long as the price is not fixed, and so that is the route Sultani decides to take to save Masooda from certain death. "I don't agree with it, but I'll do it to get peace," she says. "The mediation will begin now. I think I can get the grandfather's price down to twenty-five hundred afghanis [about \$500]. We'll give Rafi the money, and after a very long time, he'll pay us back. It's the way we're managing these cases now. Masooda will stay at the shelter, away from her husband, until we get this solved. We'll arrange for him to visit her here at the commission."

Jamila arrives from the women's shelter to fetch her new resident. She is a pretty woman, dressed in a fashionable beige suede jacket, black straight-leg pants, and high-heeled boots. Her makeup has been carefully applied and a small silk scarf barely conceals her beautifully coiffed hair. Rafi has arrived as well, wearing a black leather jacket, and with a Burberry-like scarf flung waggishly around his neck. He sits outside the office waiting to see Masooda. Jamila offers a sympathetic shoulder-pat to the girl, tries to convince her that this is the best solution, and picks up the paperwork from Homa Sultani. It is time for Masooda to say goodbye to Rafi.

Outside in the waiting area, they sit side by side in two oversized chairs, the armrests coming between them like parents still barring the way. They whisper to each other and shyly touch each other's hands. Rafi looks as forlorn as Masooda. I ask her what she wants. "To be at home with Rafi," she says. Why did you marry him? She casts her eyes down. "Because I love him." Rafi adds unbidden, "I love her too." My next question: Are you afraid? She starts to tremble. "Yes ... from my family." Big, watery tears are falling down her cheeks, wetting her entire face. "They will beat me, kill me." When I

ask Rafi what he will do, wondering if he will abandon the marriage and leave the girl to her fate, he says, "She has to stay in the shelter so we can solve this problem. My family isn't angry with me now. They were before, but not now. They won't let Masooda stay with us because her family will make trouble for us, or with the police, or they'll come and grab Masooda and take her away. But when the problem is solved, we can be together again."

He knows the stakes are high. The judge at the court said Masooda has to have a test to determine her age. A bone X-ray will be arranged by the commission. "We can only hope she's sixteen or more," says Sultani. "Otherwise she'll go to jail." The family may have their revenge after all. Six months pregnant, still a child really, Masooda faces the unknown in a women's shelter, caught between her love for Rafi and her fear of being killed by her family.

It is time to go. Masooda is crying so hard and trembling so much she can hardly get out of the chair. She takes one more look at Rafi, stares at his face as though to record it with her eyes, struggles to her feet, and then, in one swift move, brings the burka down over her head and is invisible. Masooda follows Jamila to the stairs. Rafi hangs his head, covers his face with his hands, and tries to hide his own tears. The only sound is the clicking of Masooda's heels as she descends the stairs, and the choking noise coming from her throat as she attempts in vain to stifle her crying. Then they are gone: out the door, into a van, and off to the shelter.

Sultani comforts Rafi. She reminds him they will arrange times to visit here at the commission office and assures him that Masooda will be safe because no one is allowed to know the address of the shelter. He thanks her and, with his head still drooping like that of an old man, shuffles to the stairs and leaves. A woman in the commission sniffs furiously. "You see, we don't even have the right to love in this country."

It is a significant observation. While the rest of the world can't claim victory on love marriages versus arranged marriages—the statistics on the success of one against the other are a draw—there are issues among women who are controlled by so-called religious men the world over that need to be addressed. Although cloaked by piety, these issues invariably are about sex and ownership. Indeed, the Madonna/whore designation is part of the lives of women wherever fundamentalists are in power. Falling in love is interpreted as seeking illicit sex. And by tradition, sex is the domain of men: Men use sex to fulfill their own needs and to control, punish, and isolate women. What is worse, men are not held accountable for their sexual behaviour, the suggestion being that a man's sexual desires cannot, and should not, be restrained as they are the fault of women. But if a man cannot govern himself, how is it that he has the right to govern women?

A fundamentalist will tell you it is about righteousness, that a woman is the centre of the family honour and she must be protected at all costs. If she strays from the coveted position she holds, gives up the status of fragile creature that requires protection, she is by default taking on the role of an evil Jezebel. In which case, the accepted tradition says, she must be cast aside, even killed, so the stain she has spattered on the family is removed. Or, in a slightly less extreme version, the woman who strays is seen as someone who deserves to be raped, so she can be taught a lesson about who is in charge. The protection bestowed upon a woman includes keeping her out of public life, confining her behind a purdah wall, and denying her an education or the right to participate in civil society. While those restrictions have been modified recently in some parts of Afghanistan, where education is seen as having value, and the right to run for public office is even encouraged in several provinces, the fact remains that even the most emancipated woman is still seen as the vessel of blame for a man's

sexual urges. So she must cover herself, keep her eyes cast downward, and refuse the company of a man who is not a husband, brother, or son.

These bizarre restrictions are not imposed on the women of Afghanistan alone, nor are they found only in Islamic countries. History is littered with stories of women who are denied ownership over their own lives. From Hecuba in ancient Greece to the Cherokee in America, women and girls have been traded like bounty. There was a time when the Catholic Church said women didn't have souls. In Canada, women were not considered persons under the law until 1928. Prior to that, they were designated by the British North America Act as persons in matters of "pains and penalties" but not in matters of rights and privileges. And rape was not considered a war crime until the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia declared it to be against international law in 2001.

The same issues bearing on the status of women are deeply rooted in almost every religion and in every part of the world. Although they are more prevalent in Asia and Africa, they are also evident in Europe, Britain, the United States, and Canada. Those who hijack religion, and issue decrees and punishments in the name of God, are rarely challenged by governments or international bodies that opt instead for the politically correct excuse of cultural relativism—as if religious tradition justifies criminal assault.

THESE BITTER ROOTS HAVE GROWN FROM the centuries-old impunity bestowed upon men who usurp women and girls as property and impeach them for their own sexual indiscretions. To be female in much of the world means bearing sons, being forbidden to voice an opinion, and being subjected to the fancies and furies of men. The suggestion that women should be held responsible for a man's lack of sexual control is preposterous,

and yet, until the recent past, it has gone unquestioned. It has been taboo even to raise the subject in the village, the centre of worship, the town hall, or legislature. If women are ever to take their place in society—within the community, in the corporate hierarchy, or in positions of political power—these outdated notions need to be addressed.

Afghanistan and a dozen other countries cannot prosper until they alter the status of women. We know this to be true because studies done by the World Bank, the North-South Institute, the Grameen Bank (a community development bank specializing in microfinance for women), and even the International Monetary Fund have demonstrated unequivocally that if the women are treated fairly, the village will prosper. But all the laws in the world (the U.N. Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) are not going to change the status of women until and unless the international community condemns misogyny and puts teeth into its vow to protect citizens.

But first, many countries need to look to their own laws and their ingrained attitudes towards women. For example:

**2002, PAKISTAN:** A tribal council of adult men in Meerwala ordered an eighteen-year-old girl to be gang-raped because her eleven-year-old brother had been seen walking with a girl from a higher-class tribe. During the six subsequent years, the men who raped her have been charged, found guilty, sentenced, sent to jail, acquitted, released, charged again, and set free once more. The victim, Mukhtar Mai, was invited by a human rights group to address an audience in the United States, but the government of Pakistan barred her from travelling abroad. The travel ban has been lifted, but the case is still in the courts; the perpetrators still have not been made accountable for their crime.

**2002, SAUDI ARABIA:** On July 15, fifteen school girls died in a fire in Mecca when the religious police refused to let them out of the burning building because they weren't wearing correct Islamic dress—head scarves and *abayas* (black robes). One witness reported that the police were actually beating the girls back while they tried to escape the flames. The police came from the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. (This is the same mob that cruised the streets of Afghanistan during the Taliban regime, whipping women whose hands slipped out from under a burka, or who dared to wear white socks, which was considered a sign of sexual promiscuity.) These guardians of morality also turned away parents and local residents who came to assist the girls. Even the reporters who arrived to cover the story knew they were risking arrest by criticizing the barbarity of the action of the vice-and-virtue squad. The crown prince, seeing a brewing storm in his tightly controlled kingdom, quickly issued a press release calling for an inquiry and saying “the deaths were unacceptable, the work of negligent, incompetent, careless officials.”

**2003, ONTARIO:** It was late afternoon when the phone rang. Ten-year-old Tara was doing her math homework—her favourite subject—when she picked up the receiver in the Mississauga apartment where she lived with her mother. It was her father on the line from Iran, and the words she heard would shatter the sense of safety both mother and daughter had found in Canada: “I know where you are. I am coming to get you. You belong to me.”

Tara knew this was not an empty threat. A year earlier, in Iran, nine-year-old Tara had been forced to stay with her father when her mother, Minoo Homily, fled to a friend's house after being beaten to a bloody pulp for the umpteenth time in their ten-year marriage. Minoo was allowed to see Tara for two hours

on Fridays during supervised visits at the courthouse. Her friends encouraged her to escape from Iran, and during one Friday visit, even the guard at the courthouse whispered to her: "Take your child and get out of here. Your husband is not to be trusted." After a harrowing getaway over the mountains into Turkey, the terrified mother and daughter found their way to Canada in 2002. They thought they were out of the reach of Iran's sharia laws.

They weren't. Not only did Tara's father discover their Toronto phone number and the address of her school, he also knew that, in a stunning turn of events, the government of Ontario had agreed to allow the application of sharia law in settling family disputes. According to the rules of sharia law, Tara would be returned to her father. The very law they had escaped in Iran had now followed them to Canada.

The news that sharia law was being used in Ontario hit like a thunderbolt. Women activists were outraged. Most Muslim women were shocked. "Removing family disputes from the public court is a loss for women," said Andrée Côté from the National Association of Women and the Law. "By accepting sharia law, we're renouncing thirty years of reform." It was two long years before the size of the protest persuaded the premier to overturn his decision.

**2004, BRITISH COLUMBIA:** Polygamy is practised in the small town of Bountiful, even though it is against the Criminal Code of Canada. Inside the colony, there used to be a collection of nine rocks that spelled out the words *Keep Sweet*, the mantra for the women and girls who live here with their husbands and sons, in a sect called the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Recently, someone flipped the rocks over to spell *Fuck you!* The long-held secrets of Bountiful have been exposed by the media. They tell a story about polygamy, incest, and brainwashing, about convictions for sexual abuse, and

accusations of cross-border trafficking in brides. Some reports accuse the men of the community of breeding young girls like cattle, of committing tax fraud, and of promoting a white supremacist agenda. Not your average Canadian tale.

The fine print on the ticket to paradise sold in Bountiful says the only way to get to heaven is through plural marriage. It is illegal to practise polygamy in Canada. The Criminal Code and Charter of Rights and Freedoms outlaw underage marriage and cite impregnating a child as abuse. Cross-border trafficking in girls is also illegal.

Various attorneys general in British Columbia have claimed their hands are tied because, under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the men who run the colony are protected by freedom of religion. Despite this claim, one of the authors of the charter, lawyer Marilou McPhedran, says, "In the Bountiful case, the excuse that women and girls have consented to their treatment would likely collapse when measured with the Criminal Code prohibition of polygamy and equality rights of women and girls in sections 15 and 28 of the Charter." But so far, there's been no action from the attorney general.

**2006, SWAZILAND:** In Swaziland, a woman does not have the right to refuse sex with her husband, even when he is HIV-positive. Swazi women have no rights when it comes to sex: Polygamy, a practice that denigrates women and spreads the virus, is the norm. A woman can't demand that the man wear a condom. She can't even go to the hospital without her husband's permission. What's more, a widow is expected and, in fact, often forced to marry her husband's brother. Women are considered minors with no legal status. Life expectancy has dropped to a stunning thirty-one years due to the AIDS epidemic. It is expected to drop to twenty-nine by 2010.

Siphiwe Hlophe and four other women formed Swaziland Positive Living and began the task of changing the cultural

mores of one million people. “Our objective is to teach our partners and families about HIV and AIDS so that they have knowledge, so we can live positively, and prolong our lives.” The challenge involves nothing less than taking on the myths, superstitions, and ancient male-dominated laws of the entire country. Even King Mswati keeps a harem. The women who are leading the protest against these deadly traditions say, “We have to do this or we’ll all be dead.”

**2007, ISRAEL:** Ultra-orthodox Haredi Jews in Israel demand that women ride in the back of the bus and stay out of the universities, so as not to tempt the men among them. Mariam Shear, a fifty-year-old Toronto woman, was in Jerusalem for religious studies when she was told to move to the back of the bus. She refused, was slapped, pushed out of her seat and onto the floor, beaten, and kicked. News reports said her cheek was bruised and her head scarf flew off in the altercation, further embarrassing the observant woman. The same Haredi group has been accused of throwing bleach on women who were not modestly dressed, and setting fire to shops that sell clothing considered inappropriate. They also announced that post-secondary education was anathema for women, and in the process earned the nickname the “Israeli Taliban.”

**2007, QUEBEC:** A Montreal mosque posted a warning on its website that said if young girls took off their hijab (head scarf), they could end up “getting raped and having illegitimate children.” The posting also warned that failure to wear a hijab could lead to “stresses, insecurity, and suspicion in the minds of husbands,” and “instigating young people to deviate towards the path of lust.”

**2007, SAUDI ARABIA:** A judge in Saudi Arabia ordered a victim of gang rape to receive ninety lashes because she had been alone

in a car with a man who was not her husband, brother, or son when the attack occurred, so it must be her own fault that seven men raped her. The nineteen-year-old girl had the temerity to protest this unjust verdict. Her reward for speaking up was a six-month jail sentence and two hundred lashes. Her lawyer's comeuppance for taking on this human rights case was the threat of losing the right to practise law. When human rights organizations and women around the world protested the case, the Saudi king made headlines by "pardoning the victim"—an oxymoron if ever there was one—in his annual year-end list of exculpations.

**2008, AFGHANISTAN:** In the Afghanistan province of Sar-e Pol, a well-known judge handed over a nine-year-old girl to a fifty-year-old man in marriage. The decision contravened the constitution, civil law, and even sharia law. Why did he do it? Because he can—and no one would dare to stop him. This is just one example of the abuse of women selected from the dozens of cases recorded by the women's project at the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. Among the others are cases of women brutally beaten by their husbands, of women forced into unsuitable marriage, of death threats and humiliations. Every week, more such cases are added to the list.

To murder your own daughter and call it honour. To give your blameless child to a man knowing she will be sexually assaulted. To send your girl back to her husband when she comes pleading to you with her broken arms and blackened eyes. To shroud her in black garments that absorb the blazing heat, so she will avert the eyes of men who strut about in white robes that deflect the heat. To ask her how she was dressed—was it modest enough?—when the rapist defiled her. To suggest that her loss of chastity is her own fault, that a man can't help himself. These are the norms in the lives of women who are

controlled by so-called religious men. While the concept of human rights has entered the lexicon of common discourse, when it comes to the treatment of women and girls and their sexuality, most of the world is silent. It leads one to wonder how we can sell ourselves so cheaply.

This indifference prevails especially in zones of conflict. Women have been brutalized in war at least since Hannibal crossed the Alps. Nowadays, we are told they are victims of the “culture of war,” as if that somehow justifies the savagery. Until a few brave women from Bosnia and Rwanda who had been gang-raped by soldiers took their case to The Hague, women were seen as the spoils of war. But even now, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, and Iraq, and wherever civil strife boils over, women are raped, humiliated, mutilated, kept as sex slaves, and traded as bounty. The level of violence the victims endure is almost unspeakable. Women have been paraded naked in town squares, assaulted vaginally with broken beer bottles, and plucked from villages to be raped repeatedly by soldiers. Some of the victims are no more than eight years old; some are eighty. The world invariably tut-tuts at the barbarity and then looks the other way.

These crimes against women can have long-lasting effects. For example, in Congo, crop production went down 70 percent in 2004 because the planters are women and they had been so traumatized by sexual violence they could not work in the fields. When the workers and caregivers are down, the paralyzing effects of war continue.

Unless these wrongs are addressed, experts claim the debilitating effects of war will continue. A Canadian-led team of women from six continents drafted the Nairobi Declaration to correct the systemic flaws of national truth-and-reconciliation initiatives and existing reparation schemes. They came from Peru, Colombia, Chile, Guatemala, South Africa, Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Sudan, India, Belgium,

and Canada to write the report that calls for a comprehensive response that courts would be bound by. Led by the Montreal-based Coalition on Women's Human Rights in Conflict Situations, and in collaboration with Rights and Democracy and the Urgent Action Fund, the Nairobi Declaration was written as an instrument to establish basic principles that legislators can use to right the wrongs visited on victims of violence.

Says Ariane Brunet, coordinator of the coalition: "The right to reparation is not only about restitution, compensation, and access to judicial redress, it's about women playing an active role in repairing the social fabric and building a just and equal society."

Hundreds of millions of women have been the victims of sexual violence. From the comfort women defiled by the Japanese army during the Second World War, to the twenty thousand women gang-raped by Serbian belligerents in Bosnia in the early nineties, to the sex slaves of Sierra Leone and Rwanda during the civil wars in those countries, to the female Aboriginal students of the residential schools in Canada, all have been forced to endure the stigma, prejudice, and exclusion that victims of sex crimes have to live with. The consequences affect everyone.

The point of the Nairobi Declaration is this: Condemning the perpetrator is not enough. Jailing the rapist will not restore a girl's dignity. A mere apology will not regain her trust. Reparation is essential to empower women and girls and support them in rebuilding their lives. Without it, as decades of evidence shows, the reconstruction of society will fail.

The Nairobi Declaration has been endorsed by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and dozens of non-governmental organizations, as well as by leaders such as Stephen Lewis, Charlotte Bunch (Centre for Women's Global Leadership), Dr. Sima Samar (Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission), jurists such as Claire L'Heureaux Dubé of

Canada and Carmen Argibay of Argentina, scholars such as Janice Stein, and legislators such as Carolyn Bennett, MP.

The challenge the reformers face is to overcome the long history of neglect and failure. The Truth and Justice Commission in Afghanistan has been shelved. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa interviewed twenty-two thousand victims, 70 percent of them women, but only sixteen victims of sexual assault were heard in court. In Rwanda, human rights groups threw the government reparation report in the garbage because it ignored the crimes against women. Not a single covenant or convention of the United Nations requires adherents to be fully accountable; they depend instead on the politics of embarrassment. What the authors of the Nairobi Declaration want is a document that is enforceable. If governments accept the declaration and its recommendations, they will have an instrument to right the wrongs for women and girls.

In an unprecedented move, the United States presented a resolution to the United Nations Security Council on June 19, 2008, that called the sexual abuse of women a security issue because it prolongs civil war. Rape was referred to as a weapon of war, a strategy for continued destabilization. Humanitarian Stephen Lewis said, “If all the peacekeepers were women, and the men of a country were under pervasive sexual assault, do you think the women would simply observe the carnage? Not a chance. And they wouldn’t need a Security Council Resolution to tell them what to do.”

I once asked Louise Arbour, the retired high commissioner of the United Nations Human Rights Commission, why it is that women are always on the short end of the stick when it comes to human rights. In typical Arbour fashion, she replied, “Well, there are lots of theories, but one I prefer—being an optimist—is the desire and need of men to rein in the obvious, natural superior power of women. Women give birth. In a very

immediate way, we are immensely powerful. We literally, individually and collectively—if we decided to do that—hold and can control absolutely the future of the planet. That’s just speculation. But it’s not that we are easily dominated because we are naturally weak. That has no plausibility whatsoever. I don’t see any examples of that anywhere. Half of humanity has every reason to be worried because the other half has the upper hand in controlling the future.”

ONE THOUSAND YEARS HAVE PASSED since the young poet Rabbia Balkhi was murdered for falling in love with Baktash. Today, the fact that an uneducated girl such as Masooda even knew there was help available at the human rights commission, the very fact that the commission exists, and the gumption that girl demonstrated when she escaped her home to find safety signal a tidal change. It comes down to this: If you can’t talk about it, you can’t change it. The conversation in Afghanistan has begun.