

## Book Guide

# The Dressmaker of Khair Khana

In this book, CFR Senior Fellow Gayle Tzemach Lemmon provides an intimate look at the daily lives of women in Afghanistan through the incredible true story of a female entrepreneur who mobilized her community under the Taliban. Teaching notes by the author.

## Summary

*The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* tells the story of a real-life heroine, a young entrepreneur whose business created jobs and hope for women in her neighborhood during the Taliban years. That woman is Kamila Sidiqi, an unlikely breadwinner who had become an entrepreneur under the Taliban. Desperate to support her six brothers and sisters at home and banished from Kabul's streets by the Taliban, she started a dressmaking business in her living room, which offered work to over one hundred women in her neighborhood. Together these unsung heroines made the difference between survival and starvation for their families despite—and sometimes because of—the Taliban.

We are used to seeing women as victims of war who deserve our pity, but *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* demonstrates that women are resilient survivors who deserve respect. Lessons learned from their stories about the power of women to facilitate hope and change can be applied in other postconflict situations. The involvement of women is vital for the success of economic development and postconflict reconstruction initiatives. At a time when a surge of U.S. soldiers continues the fight in this war-hardened country, *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* shines a light on the lives and struggles of those who believe a brighter future for Afghanistan is possible.

This book, along with the teaching notes, discussion questions, and suggestions for further projects, are ideal for courses on U.S. foreign policy and international affairs; international development strategy and policy; women's empowerment, gender equality, and globalization; postconflict reconstruction and security; global political economy; and religion, gender, and development.

## Discussion and Essay Questions

### Courses on U.S. Foreign Policy and International Affairs

1. Think about the 2011 political uprisings in the Middle East. What are ways in which women in Afghanistan worked to subvert the Taliban regime's rules? How do their efforts compare to those of women in Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain?
2. How does economic development factor into broader U.S. foreign policy goals in Afghanistan and the Middle East? How does education and women's empowerment influence economic development and stability?
3. In what ways can foreign support of female entrepreneurs affect economic growth, population growth, public health, literacy rates, and food security?
4. How can women be empowered to be invested in allies in the fight against extremism, religious fundamentalism, and terrorism?

### Courses on International Development Strategy and Policy

1. How and why does investment in women spur economic development?
2. How can support for female entrepreneurs in developing countries help achieve the Millennium Development Goals? What are the economic, political, public health, and educational ramifications?
3. At the end of the book, Kamila leaves nongovernmental organization (NGO) work to start her own

business. Why? What does this tell you about the successes/ failures regarding the sustainability of initiatives led by international agencies in Afghanistan?

4. If the Taliban returns to power, what, if anything, can the international community do to support economic development and women's empowerment? What lessons can be learned from previous NGO efforts between 1994 and 2001?

### Women's Empowerment, Gender Equality, and Globalization

1. What role can men play in women's empowerment? Can they be passive or active agents of change?
2. What are the challenges and benefits of investing in women as economic agents of change?
3. Think about debates surrounding the concept of empowerment. Is Kamila's story one of true empowerment? Why or why not?
4. Do increases in the economic involvement of women always lead to more equal distributions of wealth, rights, and responsibilities between women and men? How can empowerment be ensured?

### Postconflict Reconstruction and Security

1. With an increase in Taliban power in Afghanistan and U.S. troop withdrawal imminent, what, if any, investments should the U.S. government make in order to protect and sustain peace-building work conducted since 2001?
2. According to traditional media portrayals, what roles are women typically seen as having during times of conflict, especially in Afghanistan? What impact do these images have upon public consciousness, both in conflict countries and abroad? Do stereotypes affect reconstruction efforts?
3. Beyond investments in economic opportunities for women, what can be done to increase stability in Afghanistan? Is it possible? What other social dynamics, inequalities, and demographic factors need to be considered?
4. Why is it important for Afghans to acquire business skills, such as business-plan writing, budget development, and profit-and-loss analysis? Why is Kamila a more effective business teacher than her foreign counterparts? What policy planning lessons can be learned from this?

### Global Political Economy

1. What are the micro-level and macro-level benefits of increasing women's access to and control over economic and financial resources?
2. Think about Kamila's business practices. Why was she successful? What lessons about entrepreneurial business models can be learned from her story?
3. What effect has the global economic crisis had upon women's empowerment? How do men and women experience economic hardship differently?
4. What lessons can be learned from economic downturns about the benefits of increasing women's control over resources? Why might decreases in funding for women's initiatives be counter-productive for economic development programs?

### Religion, Gender, and Development

1. Some argue that there is a tension between Islam and women's rights. In what ways do Kamila and other men and women in the book use Islamic texts and principles to support women's education and financial empowerment?
2. At many crucial junctures, Kamila turns to her faith for guidance. What role does faith play in her personal journey? In general, what does this reveal about the connections between religion and women's empowerment in Afghanistan?
3. Are there parallels to be drawn between the Taliban and other practiced forms of religious fundamentalism concerning the status of women? How are they similar and different?
4. Is there a role religion or religious institutions can play in development, women's empowerment, and politics? What are the costs and benefits, particularly in Afghanistan?

## Supplementary Materials

Amnesty International, *Women in Afghanistan: Pawns in Men's Power Struggles* (London: Amnesty International,

1999).

Donini, A., N. Niland, and K. Wermester, eds. *National Building Unraveled? Aid, Peace, and Justice in Afghanistan* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian, 2004).

Dorransoro, Gilles, "Kabul at War (1992–1996): State, Ethnicity and Social Classes," *South Asian Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* (2007): 1–25.

Dupree, N. H., et al., *Afghanistan Aid and the Taliban: Challenges on the Eve of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Stockholm: Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, 1999).

Gutman, R., *How We Missed the Story* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2008).

Johnson, C. and J. Leslie, *Afghanistan: The Mirage of Peace* (New York: Zed, 2008).

Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan: Humanity Denied—Systematic Violation of Women's Rights in Afghanistan," (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2001).

Maley, W., "Women and Public Policy in Afghanistan: A Comment," *World Development* 24, No. 1 (1996): 203–6.

Matney, S., *Businesswomen in Kabul: A Study of Economic Conditions for Female Entrepreneurs* (Kabul: Mercy Corps, 2002).

Mehta, S., ed., *Women for Afghan Women: Shattering Myths and Claiming the Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *The Limits and Scope for the Use of Development Assistance Incentives and Disincentives for Influencing Conflict Situations-Case Study: Afghanistan* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1999).

Pont, A. M. *Blind Chickens and Social Animals: Creating Spaces for Afghan Women's Narratives Under the Taliban* (Portland, OR: Mercy Corps, 2001).

Rashid, A. *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of National Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (London: Viking, 2008).

Rubin, B. R. "Women and Pipelines: Afghanistan's Proxy Wars," *International Affairs* 73, No. 2 (1997): 283–96.

Samar, S., et al., *Afghanistan's Reform Agenda: Four Perspectives* (New York: Asia Society, 2002).

[Visit Book Page](#)