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SOPHIA AMORUSO
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ISSUE 45
GOOD THINGS COME OUT OF ANGER,” SAYS AMIE FERRIS-ROTMAN, FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF SAHAR SPEAKS. AMIE IS A BRITISH-AMERICAN JOURNALIST WITH A DECADE OF EXPERIENCE AS A FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT. SHE’S REPORTED FROM MORE THAN A DOZEN COUNTRIES AND, FROM 2011 TO 2013, WORKED AS A SENIOR CORRESPONDENT FOR REUTERS IN KABUL, AFGHANISTAN, WHERE SHE BECAME INCREASINGLY DISAPPOINTED BY THE LACK OF FEMALE JOURNALISTS IN THE COUNTRY.

“I TRIED IN VAIN TO HIRE WOMEN, BUT IT WAS MET WITH FIERCE OPPOSITION BY OUR FEMALE JOURNALISTS IN THE COUNTRY. ‘WE KNOW THE RULES,’ THEY WOULD SAY. ‘AFGHAN MEN AND FOREIGN MEN AND WOMEN ARE THE ONES TELLING THE STORIES OF AFGHAN WOMEN, DESPITE THEIR LACK OF CONNECTION TO THE REALITY OF WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN. STRANGE CULTURAL CUSTOMS THAT PROHIBIT MOST AFGHAN WOMEN FROM SPEAKING TO AFGHAN MEN POSE FURTHER BARRIERS. “WILLING TO HIRE AFGHAN FEMALE CORRESPONDENTS, ACCESS TO THESE STORIES IS NEAR IMPOSSIBLE FOR MEN, AND DIFFICULT FOR INTERNATIONAL WOMEN.”

One of the reasons for the absence of women at foreign news outlets was related to the way foreign news media established themselves in Afghanistan after the civil war.

“Most of the bureaus [and] offices were established during and after the November 2001 ousting of the Taliban. They were staffed by foreigners who employed the same male faces and translators they had used to cover the civil war. Many of these men became established in the news organizations and often hired their relatives and men they knew. Women were never part of this,” says Amie.

“I also mean ‘dawn’, heralding the beginning of a new era, where Afghan female reporters can tell their stories to the world,” says Amie.

In 2013, Amie was selected as a John S Knight Journalism Fellow at Stanford University, where she developed Sahar Speaks, which offers the mentoring, training and publishing opportunities necessary to give a voice to women in Afghanistan. It is the first program of its kind to produce consistent and high-quality journalism from female Afghan correspondents in the global media.

“We hope to change the paradigm that has contributed to the marginalization of women’s voices,” says Amie, adding that Afghan men and foreign men and women are the ones telling the stories of Afghan women, despite their lack of connection to the reality of women in Afghanistan. Strict cultural customs that prohibit most Afghan women from speaking to Afghan men pose further barriers.

“Without having Afghan female correspondents, access to these stories is near impossible for men, and difficult for international women.”

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“Things that we take for granted are enormous hurdles for them, such as walking down the street [without being harassed] or going around town at night. But these impediments do not mean they’re not worth hiring.”

Refining her idea during her 12 months at Stanford, Amie says her fellowship taught her she had to be tougher; she needed to appear more firm in what she believed in and self-promote. The following two years she lived mostly off savings, with a few freelancing gigs on the side, while trying to create Sahar Speaks. It was rejected “from just about everyone,” she says, adding that it was rejected “from just about every grant-giving body out there”, and Amie, who now wishes she had brought on an advisory group, had moments of anxiety and despair before the UK’s Kestrelman Trust provided seed funding.

“Officially launched to the world in December of 2015, Sahar Speaks’ pilot round took place in March 2016.”

Women are half of the world, not just of a single country, and Sahar Speaks’ purpose shone a light on issues surrounding women across the world.>
I've learnt how, as a GROUP, female JOURNALISTS can bring about MORE CHANGE than one person alone.

Some of those reporters have since been invited to work for the Associated Press, Al Jazeera, German newspapers and The New York Times.

Shougofa, one of the Sahar Speaks participants, says she had always wanted to be a journalist. “I want [to] try to help people and raise their voice. I write about women in my country and their issues. I want my stories to finally be heard, because currently they’re not.”

“Through Sahar Speaks, I’ve learnt how, as a group, female journalists can bring about more change than one person alone.”

Amie, now a senior correspondent for The Wall Street Journal in Moscow, is currently making plans for round two of the program this year, funded by the Sigrid Rausing Trust.

“I want to see Afghan women working for foreign news outlets in Kabul,” she says. “I want people across the world to read and see their stories and learn something about Afghanistan’s women that they didn’t know before. I want their lives to become part of a global discussion. I do not want them to be forgotten.”
SPARGHAI BASIR
RESEARCHER/INTERPRETER

Role model: Her illiterate grandmother, Bibi Gul, who challenged the Red Army during the Soviet occupation
Mentor: Lauren Bohn, Middle East correspondent for the Ground Truth Project, Istanbul
Article: ‘Kabul in 1979 and 2016: A Mother and Daughter Reflect on Change’  
@1989Basir

ZAHRA NADER
NEWS ASSISTANT AND FREELANCE JOURNALIST

Role model: Simone de Beauvoir
Mentor: Vivian Nereim, reporter for Bloomberg News, Saudi Arabia
Article: ‘For Afghan Women Seeking Divorce, a Wild Goose Chase’  
@zahrayusufi

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SONIA AZATYAR
FOUNDER OF DEDEGAH JAWAAN FAAL WEEKLY

Role model: Foreign women who help Afghan women
Mentor: Rossalyn Warren, senior news reporter at BuzzFeed UK, London
Article: ‘Internet Helps Afghan Women Find Their Voice in Battle for Equality’  
@soniaazatyar

MARIAM ALIMI
FREELANCE PHOTOGRAPHER

Role model: My mother, who insisted on my education despite her own illiteracy
Mentor: Monica Campbell, editor at Public Radio International, San Francisco
Article: ‘Photography Project Lets Young Afghan Girls Share Their View of the World’  
@MariamAlimi1

PARASTOO SAQIB
WRITER AT AFGHAN WOMEN’S NEWS AGENCY

Role model: Iranian poet Forugh Farrokhzad
Mentor: Najiba Feroz, broadcast journalist for the BBC, London
Article: ‘Why the ‘Barbaric’ Practice of Stoning Is Still Used in Afghanistan’  
@parasto0saqib

ALIA RAJAI
FREELANCE JOURNALIST

Role model: Sima Samar, Afghan human rights advocate
Mentor: Danielle Moylan, freelance journalist, Kabul
Article: ‘Woman-Owned Businesses On the Rise in Afghanistan’  
@rajaialia