

Woman who broke the law to learn has much to teach

Recalling the days of Taliban rule in Afghanistan, Shaima Khinjani says, "I would not wish these experiences on women anywhere."

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THE STAR-LEDGER



The young woman reacted with surprise to something the guest speaker in her class said. The speaker said she was afraid of driving in her hometown because she was a woman.

"Why would you be afraid of driving just because you're a woman?" the young woman asked. Seemed odd to her, an American-born, first-year student at Ramapo College, one of maybe 30 students in this international studies course.

The speaker, Shaima Khinjani, also a Ramapo student, smiled a sad, knowing smile.

She was learning, too — learning just how bizarre what she said might sound to the American women who probably owned at least half the cars packed into the college's expansive parking lots. She said men would try to yank her out of her car.

"Can't you call the police?" the student wanted to know.

"Some of them would be the police," said Khinjani. She was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, the year the Soviets invaded and the nation plunged into endless war.

"Aren't there laws protecting women?"

"Yes, but we still need time before they

are enforced."

Khinjani, 29, spoke of other experiences that seemed unreal to the American students. Weddings without music, because music was forbidden. The closing of barbershops because men were not allowed to shave. The banning of kite flying because it was frivolous. The imprisonment of women caught going to secret schools.

Some of the events occurred while the Taliban were in charge; some — like the harassment of women drivers — continue still, despite the "liberation" of the country from

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BRAUN**



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Shaima Khinjani, 29, speaks to an international relations class at Ramapo College in Mahwah, where she is studying, thanks to the Initiative to Educate Afghan Women.

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Denied education, woman has lessons

Islamic fundamentalists.

"I would not wish these experiences on women anywhere," said Khinjani.

She came to Ramapo two years ago to learn, part of an initiative sponsored by a coalition of colleges. She also came to teach — to bring uncomfortable reality to Americans who might hear things are bad in Afghanistan but don't know what that means.

"She has become a great resource for us," said Cliff Peterson, who heads international studies at the college. "Shaima's also a great student."

Two Jersey colleges — Ramapo and Montclair State — participate in the coalition, the Initiative to Educate Afghan Women. It was founded at Roger Williams University in Rhode Island by Paula Nirschel, wife of the university's president.

She was a friend and neighbor to Afghan expatriate Fatima Gai-

lani, the daughter of a mujahideen leader. Gailani now heads the Afghan Red Crescent Society, and her husband directs the nation's central bank.

Nirschel wrote to hundreds of other colleges, asking them to give scholarships to Afghan women so they can be educated and sent back to assume leadership positions. About 50 women are now studying in the U.S. through IEAW.

"Afghan women have traditionally been denied education," said Khinjani. The new Afghan constitution now sets aside 25 percent of parliamentary seats for women.

"But before you give women power and responsibility, you first must give them education. Otherwise, they will just be used."

Khinjani credits her father, Abdul Aziz Khinjani, a ministry of education official before the Soviet invasion, for insisting that his five daughters be educated.

"Even then, it was not culturally acceptable — but it was permitted," she said.

After the Taliban won the civil war in 1996, Khinjani was forced to quit school. She started a secret school in her home, aided by her father. Eventually, she and an older sister — a teacher before the Tali-

ban — taught hundreds of women how to read.

"He kept the Taliban away," she said. Her father, once imprisoned by the Communists, died of cancer five years ago.

With the fall of the Taliban, Khinjani got a job with the ministry of women. It sent her around the world, but she felt handicapped by a lack of a university education.

She returns to Kabul in the summer and works for the government.

"I can feel myself becoming more professional, more able to take on more complicated tasks," said Khinjani.

She's learning other things. How freedom works, for example, often found in the reaction of classmates, like the girl who couldn't understand how men could possibly be allowed to stop women from driving.

Or in how she felt when she first arrived on campus. She insisted on wearing a headscarf, because she felt she was expected to wear it, but then realized no one cared.

"I was treated the same whether I wore the scarf or not. So now I feel I don't have to wear it. I am free to do what I want."