



## **Redefining the Burqa: A Reflection from Afghanistan**

### **By Michelle M. Risinger**

Perhaps one of the most disputed symbols of culture, repression and women's rights can be found in the much-publicized debate over the burqa. Arguably the most infamous burqa is the Afghan *chadri*, a sheet-like garment used to fully conceal a woman from head to toe beneath a loose fabric, with a lattice patch across the eyes to permit vision. Whether this garment stands as an icon of archaic repression or an expression of Muslim identity, I wanted to share a unique instance in which the anonymity provided by the *chadri* saved a number of women from violent repercussions while I was recently in Afghanistan. Although still operating within the confines of Taliban culture, this example reflects women's ironic defiance of the *chadri* as a cultural norm.

I lived and worked in Afghanistan with an NGO for 5 months in 2011. Based about 50 miles north of [Kabul](#), I performed a range of humanitarian assistance activities, both with Western forces and with Afghan locals. Up to three times a week I spent time at an Afghan-only hospital teaching English and basic health education to women and children. Through my time at the hospital I became familiar with, though I would never say understood, the plight of the Afghan woman. When the women would remove the *chadri* - which was acceptable in the all-female setting - the battered, prematurely aged faces of young women were revealed beneath the periwinkle fabric. I watched as the women would gather outside the office of the only male doctor waiting, not to discuss ailments, but to beg the doctor to intercede on their behalf against husbands who beat and starve their children.

Through an interpreter, I once asked the women how they felt about the *chadri*. The universal response was loathing. Not because the *chadri* was a tool of repression as one might expect, but because it made the women ill and dyed their skin. The women found themselves sick from daily breathing in the fumes of the dye and the fabric. One question I sincerely regret never asking, was whether or not the women would chose to wear the *chadri* if they had the choice.

Nevertheless, one Thursday in July a number of women from the neighboring villages were invited to attend a *sharia* on the coalition military base. Periodically this base would hold *sharias*, or discussions, specifically for attendance by local Afghan women on empowerment topics such as female education, health etc. I am unaware of the topic this particular day, but as the *sharia* progressed over the course of the day, word had spread that the village men were preparing to stone the women when they were released from the gate at the end of the day. U.S. military troops were sent to line the gate of the women's release. When the time came for the women to exit the gate, the unrest between the soldiers and the village men had

escalated. As the seconds ticked by and the women did not appear, the village men began to pelt the soldiers with rocks. Still the women did not appear.

To ensure the safety of the women, the military had ordered the soldiers as a decoy to draw the attention of the village men, while under the anonymity afforded by the *chadri*, the women slipped out another gate. Once far enough from the base, the *chadri* ensured the men could not identify which women had attended the *sharia*. It was one of the most ironic coups by Afghan women over the Taliban and the garment used to control them I witnessed during my assignment.

Upon reflection, I believe this story represents the re-definition of the *chadri* from a symbol of repression to a means of protection, and even the sustainment of women's empowerment activities. While public renouncement of the *chadri* would lead to violent retribution, the manipulation of this cultural symbol represents both an expression of resistance and a reframing of the *chadri's* purpose.

I would argue in my experience that the *chadri* has become a socially accepted, though quietly opposed, cultural norm in Afghan society. Imposed by the Taliban patriarchy, the *chadri* serves to both physically and psychologically prevent women from expressing themselves. This demonstrates the skewed power dynamics at work in current Afghan culture as men dictate the freedoms of women and control their universal rights. I would argue however, that the *chadri* appears only superficially as a symbol of Taliban culture in the sense that its purpose and role in society are not universally accepted, particularly by those forced to wear the garment. The *chadri* is visibly obvious in Taliban culture but women's manipulation of this norm defies, rather than honors, the *chadri's* purpose. To use the *chardi* as a way to evade punishment for attending women's empowerment activities signifies defiance of this cultural norm. Women would have no need to seek anonymity and protection beneath the *chadri* if they were obeying the laws of their husbands and the Taliban.

The *chadri* and its manipulation in this story represent a reframing of the power dynamics at work between men, women and the veil in Afghanistan. In current Afghan culture, men largely speak for women. But in this instance, women chose to risk their own safety to attend an empowerment meeting and then slip out from under the nose of the Taliban using the very device the Taliban employ to keep women under submission. Not all battles can be won to the tune of trumpets and fanfare, but I would argue that on this day in Afghanistan, women of the local villages defied both the oppression of the Taliban and the cultural symbol intended to keep them subjugated.



Sitting (far right) with the Afghan women and an interpreter outside the doctor's office at the hospital

### **About the author**

*Michelle Risinger is a gender specialist with 8 years of experience in humanitarian assistance, advocacy and evaluation. While living in Iraq and Afghanistan with the American Red Cross, Risinger designed and implemented health and education programs for women and youth. Additionally while with the Red Cross, Risinger was responsible for the logistics and distribution of humanitarian supplies across the Middle East and South Central Asia. Risinger undertook monitoring and evaluation in Bosnia & Herzegovina to ascertain disparities between local and INGO perceptions on women's human rights and implementation of UN treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Risinger has consulted with Channel Research to design gender M&E methodologies and insure gender awareness was incorporated as a crosscutting theme throughout the proposals. Most recently, Risinger has been working with the Buguruni Youth Center in Dar es Salaam, which targets disaffected youths, to create a number of vocational, micro-credit and women's empowerment programs.*