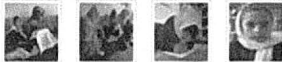


# Work gives Afghan women hope amid security worries

By KATHY GANNON | Posted: Saturday, December 5, 2009 12:20 am



This Nov. 2, 2009 photo shows Nazia, 8, left, whose name means "hope," sitting next to her mother at a small sewing center for women, run by Afghan-American Rangina Hamidi, in Kandahar, Afghanistan. For Nazia, hope has come through the thriving business that employs her mother and 199 other women. The women tailors sew the latest in embroidered men's and women's clothes, tablecloths and shawls under their own label



(1) More Photos

Nazia is an 8-year-old in tattered secondhand clothes whose name means "hope."

For her, hope comes from the thriving business that employs her mother and 199 other women who sew embroidered clothing, tablecloths and shawls under the label "Kandahar Treasure." They proudly call their collection Kandahar's first designer label.

For women once denied access to both schools and jobs under a fanatical Taliban regime, the enterprise is a chance to earn money and support their families in a conservative part of Afghanistan where it can still be dangerous for women to own businesses or even work for them.

"This country needs people to stand up on their own two feet and work and earn their living," says 33-year-old founder Rangina Hamidi, an Afghan-American who packed up everything and left her home in Stoneridge, Virginia, to return to Kandahar.

Hamidi was born in Kandahar just three years before the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Her family fled and lived as refugees in neighboring Pakistan before finding refuge in the United States.

Hamidi's first foray back to Kandahar was with a nonprofit group that sought to help women. But eventually she found half her time was spent writing proposals and briefs to get grant money to run the charity.

"I couldn't focus on design or quality," she says. "I

got tired of depending on the aid world."

In 2006 and 2007, as security deteriorated, money became more difficult to get. That's when Hamidi decided to go private and launched Kandahar Treasure on a small budget of a few thousand dollars. Today she sells her handmade items in Kandahar, to the Afghan government and for the past three years at the Santa Fe Folk Art Market.

Even now, only 20 of the women Hamidi employs come into the office to work. The rest work out of their homes and live in the districts surrounding Kandahar city, several of them largely under the control of the Taliban and too dangerous to visit these days.

"Instead of me going to the villages, the women now select an old woman who will come into the city with their finished products and return with fresh orders," she says.

The amount of money the women who work at home earn depends on their output, but on average it is about 1,600 Afghanis (\$32) a month, says Hamidi. However, most homes will have two or more women sewing for Kandahar Treasure.

The women who come into the center every day earn on average 5,000 Afghanis (\$100) a month \_ the equivalent or more than a teacher would earn.

Hamidi looks around at the women sitting on the carpeted floor, each creating her own piece of art on a separate swatch of cloth.

Hamidi expected the women to abhor the Taliban. But she found some among her sewing circle longed for their return. Others say disappointment and insecurity have blunted their frustration with the Taliban, whose edicts did not stray too far from restrictions placed today on most women living in deeply rural Afghanistan.

"Women here cannot go out without being fully covered. It is against our culture, our religion," says Namgullah, one of the women. "They weren't here long enough to bring schools for girls. They had no money, eventually they would have brought schools for girls but under Islam."

The women speak quickly, each with an opinion and all wanting to be heard, as their fingers move rhythmically. They speak of politics, their government, their religion, the Taliban.

"I wear a burqa (because) I am afraid. I am afraid of the police who are corrupt and ugly and of the thugs and criminals who now call themselves Taliban," says a round-faced Fariba, who is Hamidi's production manager.

Habibi, an elderly woman who provides the only income for her family, laments the lawlessness and insecurity in Afghanistan. She walks a dangerous route every day to reach the sewing room, and with every step she is afraid.

"For us the big problem is the security. It is the No. 1 problem. During the Taliban the security was better. I could come out and I wasn't worried about being killed," she says. "But now even the men are afraid."

One of the women sitting on the carpeted floor is Nazia's mother, Parveen. Barely 34 years old and raising seven children, Parveen sews tiny mirrors on a piece of cloth that would eventually be a wedding dress.

She is married to a drug addict who doesn't work. While the Taliban ruled, Parveen couldn't work. The family was destitute. "I was ashamed because our families would bring food and clothing for us, like we were beggars. I used to hide in my room," she says.

"Now I tell my family to take their charity and give it to the beggars on the street," says Parveen, as Nazia slips her hand through her mother's. "I don't need it. I earn money."