

Women's VU

Margaret
Cunningim
Women's Center

V A N D E R B I L T U N I V E R S I T Y

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Women Under the Taliban

Tara Lynn, Junior, Arts and Sciences

In September of 2001, CNN aired a controversial, groundbreaking documentary, *Beneath the Veil*, organized by freelance journalist Saira Shah, to examine the secret and previously untelevised situation of women in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime, which took control in 1996 imposing its strict version of Islamic law. Shah, born in Britain of Afghan descent, visited Afghanistan at the age of 21 and worked there for 3 years as a journalist.

Shah had anticipated seeing her father's homeland, to compare it to the childhood stories she remembered describing gardens filled with fruit trees and beautiful fountains. Instead, Shah arrived in a very different Afghanistan than she had expected. War-torn remnants of cities remain, and under the Taliban regime, Afghan citizens lack the most basic human services; for women, these conditions are even more extreme.

As a journalist, Shah traveled with an undercover group of Afghan femi-

nists in order to interview and observe the lives of women living under the Taliban regime. She uncovered and documented many horrifying conditions of their existence. One of the most harrowing examples of the sub-human manner in which these women are treated under the Taliban is the lack of medical care they receive. While female physicians are theoretically allowed to practice in hospitals, the social and political restrictions are so stringent that most have fled the country, and since male doctors are not allowed to treat female patients, Afghan women are left with few, if any, options for receiving medical care.

Women in Afghanistan are also barred from the educational system under the Taliban. In order to receive an education, young girls are often taught in groups at secret schools, under the constant threat of punishment and incarceration. Furthermore, the Taliban prohibits women from being employed,

continued on page 2

Steinem Speaks

Welcomed to Vanderbilt with an unrestrained and enthusiastic standing ovation, Gloria Steinem took the podium at Langford Auditorium November 14th and dove directly into the heart of the matter—feminism that is. After discussing the “demonization” of the term itself, attributing that opposition to fear of change, Steinem’s energetic lecture became, essentially, a brief introduction to and history of feminism delivered by America’s most famous feminist.

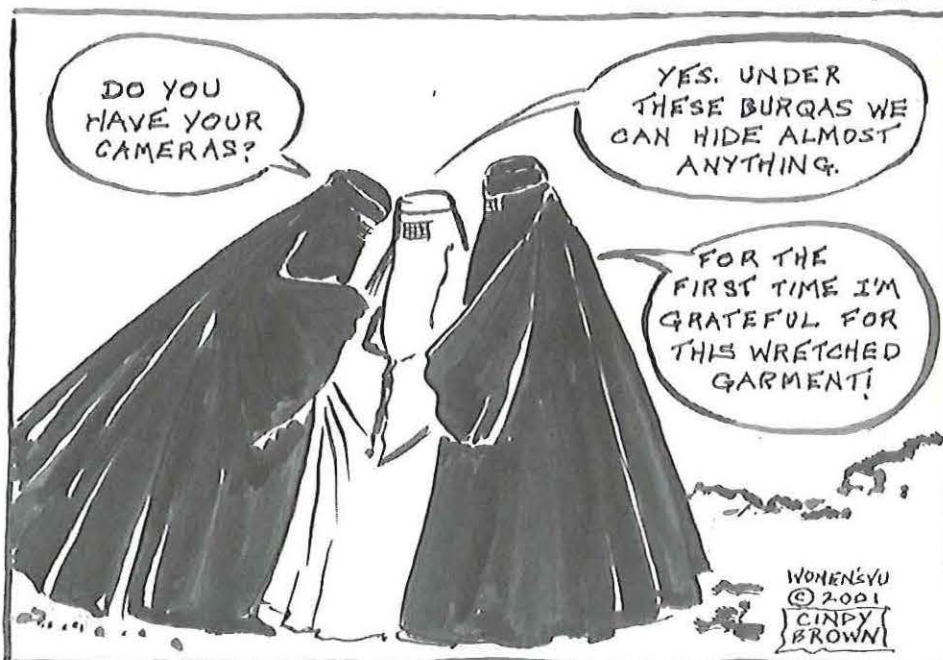
Clad in black leather pants and looking every bit the riot grrl, which she laughingly claimed to be, explaining, “why not?” Ms. Steinem tackled tough issues, such as the undervaluing of traditional “women’s work” and care giving, false, societal representations of normalcy, reproductive freedom and what she termed “bodily integrity,” and sexuality and “gender apartheid,” to name a few.

Eventually, Steinem turned her attention to the current international situation, focusing on the plight of Afghan women. Although Steinem concedes these women need any and all assistance the feminist community can give, she insists that it will be the “strong, smart, courageous” Afghan women who will save themselves.

Gloria Steinem maintains that the realization of feminist goals will take “about a hundred years...and we’re only 30 years into it.” Her writing and activism have spanned these three decades and her persistent efforts and continuing work remain a primary source of knowledge, strength, and inspiration for American feminism.

For a bibliography of Steinem’s writing and more information about her life, log on to

<http://www.eagle1.american.edu/~bk4915a/Gloria1.html>



even to support themselves, thus the number of women beggars driven to the streets has been steadily growing. While the Taliban claims laws that forbid women from holding jobs are meant to protect them, ultimately, it is these exclusive laws that have forced many women into the streets to beg in mass numbers.

Many women involved in political activities in the country are forced to live in "safe houses," some of which are operated by the feminist group RAWA (The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan). RAWA currently stages numerous political activities intended to improve the situation and status of Afghan women. Shah worked with RAWA to create a photographic documentary of the conditions of repressed groups in Afghanistan. RAWA itself works by using hidden cameras to document and preserve the situation of the country under the Taliban; Shah adopted this technique, donning the required attire for women, a body-length garment called a burqa. Some of the appalling visuals she collected include widespread torture and executions, footage showing prisoners being paraded around a soccer stadium before finally being hung from the goalposts or shot at point-blank range, women studying in illegal, RAWA-run women's schools, and testimonials of women at Taliban-outlawed beauty parlors.

Saira Shah and RAWA emphasize that the Taliban do not seem to know very much about Islam, or rather, choose to construct their own strict, overzealous version of it. Afghan feminists even go so far as to say that many of the rules and regulations imposed by the Taliban are in direct opposition to Islamic law. Many more moderate Islamic followers believe Mohammed's teaching that "women are the twin hearts of men." The current Taliban regime in Afghanistan has consistently committed atrocious human rights violations against women as a group. It remains to be seen if international interest in Afghanistan will quell this trend.

To view Saira Shah's *Beneath the Veil*, log on to <http://www.cnn.com/2001/COMMUNITY/08/24/shah/index.html>. For more information about RAWA, log on to www.rawa.org.

IDEAS FOR ACTIVISM: SUPPORT AFGHAN WOMEN

The National Organization for Women is currently sponsoring two on-line petitions intended to draw attention to the plight of Afghan women. Each site contains a box that you can click to send automatic e-mails to politicians in Washington so that your voice in support of these oppressed women can be heard.

Log onto <http://capwiz.com/now/issues/alert/?alertid=63542> to help guarantee that Afghan women will be included in the restructuring of their country's government. This site suggests telephoning the U.S. State Department (202-647-4000), the White House (202-456-1414), Senator Joe Biden (202-224-5042), and the United Nations (202-326-7000) to demand Afghan women are represented in any future political administration formed in Afghanistan.

Log onto <http://capwiz.com/now/issues/alert/?alertid=60417&type=CO&razip=> to help ensure that women refugees are receiving the aid they need. Because women in Afghanistan have been forbidden to work under the Taliban regime, their financial needs are great. This site advocates phoning the U.S. Capitol Switchboard (202-224-3121) to reach your senator and express your concern regarding this matter.

NOW urges you to take action and stresses that phone calls are particularly effective.



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Campus address: Franklin Building, 316 West Side Row.
Mailing address: Box 351513, Station B, Nashville, TN 37235. Phone: (615) 322-4843. Fax: (615) 343-0940.
E-mail address: womenctr@vanderbilt.edu.

Visit our web site at:
www.vanderbilt.edu/WomensCenter/womenctr.htm

Linda Manning, director
Hilary Forbes, assistant director for programs
Sandra Harrell, coordinator for outreach and services
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Gladys Holt, office manager
Maureen Duffy, editor (direct dial 343-4367)
Cindy Brown, cartoonist

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Missing In History - MEENA



Meena, founder of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, was born in 1957 in Kabul. She began her activist career during her time at Kabul University, where she became involved with feminist causes—specifically in protest against the oppression of women taking place in Afghanistan; in 1977, she organized RAWA to give voice to those causes. In 1979, during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Meena organized a campaign against the occupation, which included public marches and organized meetings, not only among students, but reaching out to include the Afghan community as a whole. Further efforts included publishing a feminist magazine, *Payam-e-Zan* (Women's Message), which is still distributed today.

Meena garnered international attention for her cause and in 1981 was invited by the French Socialist Party Congress to represent the Afghan resistance movement. She continued on and traveled to several other European countries exposing to the world the difficulties facing Afghanistan and Afghan women.

While her outspokenness and activism attracted much-needed attention to the situation in Afghanistan, it also goaded the Soviets as well as Afghan fundamentalists. On February 4, 1987, members of the Afghan faction of the KGB murdered her in Quetta, Pakistan.

women's HEALTH MATTERS

Medical Abortion and Emergency Contraception: What's the Difference?

Planned Parenthood gives you the straight dope.

Tanya Bailey of Middle and East Tennessee's Planned Parenthood offers this compilation of facts intended to dispel misconceptions about medical abortion and emergency contraception, and clarify the difference between the two. If you have questions or require additional information regarding these issues, contact Planned Parenthood at 834-4840 or www.plannedparenthood.org.

The new medical abortion drug is called RU-486, correct?

Yes, but in France only. "RU-486" is a French trademark for a drug called Mifepristone. RU-486 was discussed as an example of the type of drug the FDA was considering as a medical abortion method in the U.S. Now FDA-approved, the medical abortion drug is simply referred to in the U.S. as Mifepristone or "Miffie" for short. The brand name for Mifepristone is Mifeprex.

Are Medical Abortion and Emergency Contraception the same thing?

No, they are two very different methods. Mifepristone is one drug in a regimen of medications taken to perform a medical abortion. It will terminate a pregnancy up to 7 weeks (49 days). Emergency Contraception (EC, or "The Morning After Pill") is comprised of one to four specific birth control pills. EC does not *terminate* a pregnancy, but it can *prevent* a pregnancy up to 72 hours after unprotected sex.

A medical abortion is easy, right? You can use it at home and it works overnight.

Not true! Again, Mifepristone is just one medication in a series of drugs used to perform a medical abortion. Twenty-four to 48 hours after Mifepristone is taken, a second drug, Misoprostol, is administered. The combination of the two drugs can take anywhere from 1 day to 3-4 weeks to complete the abortion. Aftercare, including an ultrasound test, is required to verify that the pregnancy has been terminated.

Might Mifepristone encourage more women to have abortions?


There is no scientific or anecdotal evidence that the availability of Mifepristone will increase the overall number of abortions being performed. What research does tell us is that many women feel that medical abortion is more private, less invasive, and thus, less stressful than conventional abortion.

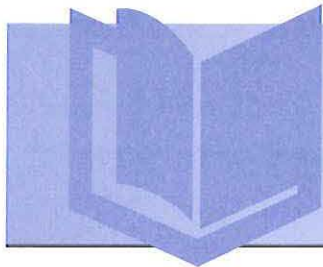
Reader's Forum

In a recent issue of *Women's VU* you ask about ideas and concerns—what we are thinking about now, so I thought I'd tell you. I feel the need to defend myself and my choices far more from feminist women than I do from any other segment

of society. I get the sense that feminists seem to feel that I am "doing nothing." As an adult, I started to question some of the thinking that undervalues child care and working in the home, and now I am actually angry that I almost missed out on what has been the most amazing experience of my life—having my son and watching him grow—in exchange for a "career," which in the end frequently consists of nothing more than selling more widgets or making them more cheaply. I enjoy the newsletter and have ever since I was an intern there in 1986. I would like to see addressed the issue of feminist support of women who choose to make their families top priority.

Scarlett Martin

Scarlett, You'll be happy to know that Gloria Steinem agrees with you wholeheartedly, as do many more feminists than I suspect you may recognize. One of the major issues Ms. Steinem discussed in her lecture at Vanderbilt was the undervaluing of care giving "jobs"—mainly because they are tasks that are performed most often in our culture by women in the home. She called for a reevaluation of "work" in our society—suggesting that home work be given economic value—and tax consideration. She also shared an interesting anecdote about Canadian women refusing to complete census information because the government was failing to recognize their work in the home as, well, *work*, which it is indeed! Thank you for your message—as a assurance that feminists do support you, we will attempt to speak to issues that concern you and other home workers in future issues of *Women's VU*. -MD 



IN THE LIBRARY

BARBARA CLARKE
Women's Center librarian



Prominent Feminist Illuminates Society, Medicine, Maternity and Motherhood

Naomi Wolf's introduction to motherhood brought many unexpected discoveries, revelations, and emotions. In *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies, and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood* (Doubleday, 2001) she focuses mainly on her first pregnancy and the early months of motherhood. Wolf, who was born in 1962, had her first baby when she was in her early thirties; a second child followed five years later.

The writer, who became well-known in 1991 with the publication of *The Beauty Myth*, is a feminist writer and lecturer. Her experiences and those of other new mothers surprised and often dismayed her. They were not given nearly enough realistic information about many aspects of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood. Wolf is particularly critical of the medical profession, and believes that pregnant women are treated condescendingly and are deliberately left uninformed about childbirth options and about the dangers of procedures such as amniocentesis. Women give birth in unnatural positions in sterile and businesslike surroundings; they are often coerced into having Cesarean sections and other procedures that Wolf believes are seldom medically necessary. Surgery is too often performed for the convenience of doctors and hospitals and to lessen the risk of expensive malpractice lawsuits.

Though the writer arrived at a

hospital's alternative birthing center for her first birth, she was soon shuttled to a regular delivery room. She was persuaded to have a Cesarean section when her labor did not progress as quickly as the hospital said it should. Yet when women are under such pressure, their labor often slows or stops.

Wolf is disturbed by the lack of support for new mothers—from society, from employers, and from the women's partners. It is not surprising that depression is so common among mothers of newborns. Many feel alone and overwhelmed and see that child care is not valued by society. Many women of Wolf's generation married men with feminist beliefs who would surely share housework and child care. However, many new mothers discover that their spouse's concepts of sharing are very different from their own.

The emotional aspects of pregnancy and motherhood were a surprise to the author; she was particularly unprepared for the feelings of dependency during the last months of pregnancy and for the loss of self after the child was born. The images she saw in her first sonogram led her to question her beliefs about abortion.

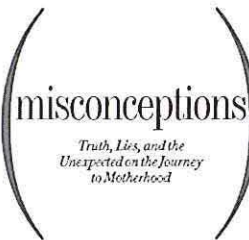
In the last chapter Wolf details what she considers that mothers need and deserve: family leave and flextime for both parents, on-site day care centers, certain tax benefits for new parents, healthcare benefits for low-wage and part-time workers, a complete

overhaul of the birthing industry, a "Motherhood Movement," and a societal change of heart. "It will be a revolution when we finally start *treating* motherhood and caring for children in general as it were truly the most important task of all."

The eighteen members of the Latina Feminist Group have collaborated on *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Duke University Press, 2001). These women all have doctorates and work in academe; they come from diverse Latina ethnic and class backgrounds, are of varying ages, and live in different areas of the country. The *testimonios* are stories of their lives presented as narratives, poems, and short stories. They believe that "our book expands the construction of *testimonio* in our feminist desire to make visible and audible our *papelitos guardados*—the stories often held from public view—and to express the full complexity of our identities, from the alchemies of erasure and silencing to our passions, joys, and celebrations."

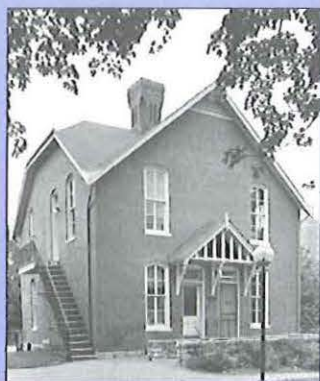
The contributors tell of childhoods spend on tropical islands or in distant lands, in large American cities or rural areas. Their stories describe family life, education, migration, racism, patriarchal attitudes and sex roles, incidents of abuse and violence, life in academe, and many other topics. The writers of ten selections chose to remain anonymous.

Naomi Wolf
Author of the International Bestseller
The Beauty Myth



TELLING TO LIVE
Latina Feminist Testimonies





Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center

Calendar of Events

PLEASE SAVE AND POST

Unless otherwise stated, all programs are held at the

Cuninggim Center, Franklin Building, 316 West Side Row.

For more information on the events listed, call 322-4843.

December

Tuesday, December 4, 11, 18, 25, 12:00 noon - 1:00 pm

Creative Life Planning Group. Topic to be determined.

Thursday, December 6, 5:30 pm - 7:00 pm

Women and Power Panel. See Announcements on page 6 for more information.

Monday, December 10, 5:30 pm

Book Group. Holiday party and book selection meeting will be hosted at Elaine Goleski's house. Contact Hilary Forbes at 322-6518 or hilary.forbes@vanderbilt.edu for directions.

Wednesday, December 12, 5:15 pm

Women, Spirit, and Poetry. Poetry by Kate Daniels will be read and Jan Rosemergy will facilitate the discussion. This group is open to the public.

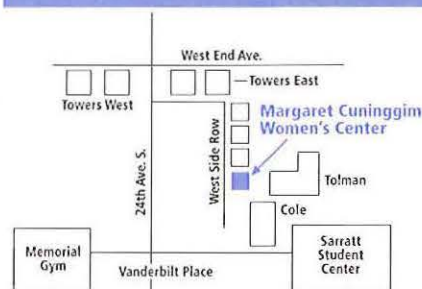
Thursday, December 20, 12:00 noon - 1:00 pm

Reading Sisters. This book group focuses on the writings of black women authors and will discuss *Mama Rose* by Bernadene High Coleman. Everyone is welcome to participate—students, staff, and faculty. Contact Hilary Forbes at 322-6518 or hilary.forbes@vanderbilt.edu for more information.

Friday, December 21

Living with Loss Lunch Group. The meeting for December is cancelled; the group will resume in January.

How to find us . . .



The Cuninggim Center is located in the Franklin Building at 316 West Side Row.

Are YOU a feminist?

I am a humanist; my personal goal is to strive toward understanding people and their struggles, regardless of sex...but if appreciating the desire for female equality in multiple facets makes me a feminist, then so be it.

Christopher Tan, PhD

Post-doctoral Fellow, Department of Pharmacology

Why yes, I am. I am a feminist in the historical sense, in that I endorse and recognize the pursuit of equal opportunity for men and women to seek their own ends, use their bodies as they please, and define the lifestyles they choose to lead. Also, I am a feminist in as much as I seek to question gender and sex dichotomies in the pursuit of a more embracing society for each of us—in and for our differences.

Eric Woodiwiss

VU Staff, Department of Pharmacology

Do you have questions about where to turn after a sexual assault? Do you have concerns about how to help a friend in a violent relationship? Hand in Hand can help. Call 6-RAPE for confidential assistance.

A N N O U N C E M E N T S

Project Safe, in conjunction with the Psychological and Counseling Center, is offering support groups for women who have experienced violence by a dating partner or any form of sexual assault. The group's location is confidential. Please contact Project Safe at 322-1333 for more information.

Oxygen Media, a cable network and Internet site for women, and Comcast are presenting a Women and Power Panel on December 16 from 5:30 pm until 7:00 pm at the Country Music Hall of Fame. The panel will discuss the complex relationship between women and power and will feature some of Nashville's most prominent women leaders, including State Senator Thelma Harper, Vanderbilt's own Associate Vice Chancellor, Division of Public Affairs, Beth Fortune, Kathy Cloninger, MaryAnne Howland, and Teddi Bonadies. This event is part of Oxygen's "Choose to Lead" campaign, a network-wide initiative to raise awareness of the need for more women leaders and to increase understanding about the impact that women leaders can make.

Seven non-profit organizations in Nashville: CABLE, the Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center at Vanderbilt University, the Nashville Women's Political Caucus, the Nashville Women's Breakfast Club, the Nashville Chapter of the National Coalition of 100 Black Women, the Nashville Chapter of NAWBO, and WIN are co-sponsors for this event. For more information, go to <http://www.oxygen.com/choosetolead/>.

The Staff of the Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center wishes you
a peaceful and joyous holiday season.



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Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center

Vanderbilt University
316 West Side Row
Box 351513, Station B
Nashville, TN 37235

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