



COURTESY OF DURKHANUM: KABUL SEWING CIRCLE

Style

Meet the Afghan Women Showing Their Resistance by Sewing

In the face of crisis, making clothing became a method of survival, an act of bravery, and a source of comfort for these women.

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Since the **takeover** of Kabul, Afghan women and girls in the country have been **prohibited** from continuing their careers and education. Because of this, combined with an **economic crisis**, many have had to search for alternatives to make ends meet. For the women of the Durkhanum: Kabul Sewing Circle, the answer is sisterhood.

When the capitol fell in August, **Mina Sharif**, an Afghan activist and media producer based in Canada, feared for a fellow activist in Afghanistan, whose name she does not use in order to protect her safety. Sharif helped plan a safe exit for her friend, hoping she could leave the country and avoid the risk of being targeted.

At the same time, though, Sharif's friend worried about those who would be left behind in Afghanistan. She had previously employed women through her custodial business, but they could no longer make a living cleaning as many homes and offices, and shops had **closed** their doors amid the chaos. These women, many of them **widows** or members of a **minority group**, were the primary breadwinners for their families.

“We literally got her on an evacuation emergency flight,” Sharif tells *Teen Vogue* about her activist friend. “She got to the airport, [but] she didn't end up getting on the plane. She didn't feel comfortable leaving the country while these women were left in this condition.”

Sharif's friend remained in Afghanistan and told Sharif about her idea to help the women. Based on a previous **decree** that prohibited tailors from serving clients of the opposite sex, she **wondered** if the same rules would again be enforced and expected a shortage of women tailors. Using this as a starting point, she imagined a program that

SHORTAGE OF WOMEN TAILORS. USING THIS AS A STARTING POINT, SHE IMAGINED A PROGRAM THAT would teach women to sew and run their own businesses from the safety of their homes. She originally intended to run the program for her former employees, but word spread and other women asked to join as both organizers and students.

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“I did volunteer to help her raise these funds,” Sharif says. “I’m saying that not for my benefit [or] to tell you that I volunteered, but to say that she didn’t even ask me for that.” Sharif adds, “She didn’t say, ‘Let’s go get money from the west.’ I said, ‘You can’t do that all by yourself. How are you going to pay for it? Let me help. Let’s do a link.’”

Sharif enlisted the help of [Shamayel Shalizi](#), a fellow Afghan activist and artist. The trio started a grassroots fundraiser, the [Durkhanum: Kabul Sewing Circle](#). They accepted donations to hire a teacher, rent a classroom, and provide meals plus sewing materials, including sketchbooks and fabric, that the women could take home and use for their business. Says Sharif, “They’re meant to not need a thing and be prepared for their first round of business.”

Even with the trio’s initiative to take action during the crisis, the consequences of the takeover in Kabul posed an issue: As the world reacted to instability in Kabul, [transferring money](#) to the country became difficult. “There was all of this chaos of how to even get money to Afghanistan. It was barely possible,” Shalizi says. “When the world has turned its back on us time and time again, even getting the money to these women was something in and of itself.”

They used [hawala](#), which Shalizi describes as an anti-capitalist credit system.

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Seeing photos and videos shared by the women, Sharif and Shalizi have felt the impact of their work through their screens. Says Shalizi, “There is something about this, that when they discuss things like, ‘Oh, I always wanted to be able to make myself this kind of Punjabi suit. I can't believe! Who knew that in the middle of all of this, I would learn how to do something that was just like a little dream of mine in the back of my head?’”

Shalizi continues, "Those kinds of things open the heart, open the mind, and it lets you look forward to something and believe in a future that Afghanistan could be stable again.”

Sharif reflects on the sense of community that has come out of these efforts. “Not only did they learn so much, not only is it a really high potential for them to take care of their families," she points out, "but also there was the sense of sisterhood that was created in this group that was a real benefit to their mental health situation too.”

Sharif smiles as she shares stories of the women making a cake to celebrate Teachers' Day, laughing as they teased each other, and coming up with their name themselves. “We [the organizers] were just like a sewing circle in Kabul, and the women got together and called it Durkhanum,” Sharif says. “*Khanum* is women and *dur* means strength. So the strength of women is really a name that they came up with on their own for their project.”

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For Shalizi, who is inspired by her multicultural roots and runs her own jewelry and apparel brand called **Blingistan**, this project is particularly meaningful. She began her label to advocate for Afghans around the world and celebrate their culture. Due to the events in Afghanistan, she felt the need to take a break from designing, even postponing releases she had planned. But the understanding that her creations

brought joy to Afghans and could help raise money enabled her to continue.

With Sharif's help, Shalizi designed three shirts for fundraising, each based on values in Afghan culture that have been especially relevant throughout the crisis: honor, strength and resilience, and hope. Now she can also help others share their message through clothing.

“To have these women be able to express themselves at a time like this through making clothing, that's something that I can feel so deeply within me because I also have that artistic inclination,” Shalizi says.

“Maintaining our culture, our heritage, and our identity should be at the foremost of our revolution,” Shalizi says, explaining the importance of making **traditional clothing**. “Things like these are everyday revolutionary acts that can bring you to tears if you think about it.”

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After seeing the success of the first round of work, the organizers began round two. But as the news cycle continued on, the people of Afghanistan seemed to have become an afterthought. Based on Sharif's experience as an activist, she says, she expects catastrophes to have a window of about two weeks until people begin to forget about them. Since the first round was already after that two-week period, the second round posed an even greater challenge. As time went by, they found that people were passive about helping, especially since the focus was on long-term aid for women.

“The two weeks had passed and people don't resonate with sustainable projects as well as they do with food drives. We really had to appeal to those who had experience with Afghan women,” Sharif recalls. “Those were the ones who gave us the largest donations. There were people who had done film work in Afghanistan and had met Afghan women. There was another private donor who had visited Afghanistan. That connection that you have when you meet Afghan women helps you understand that they don't need you to be holding their hand for the rest of their life. They're not crying at you, begging you. They are so capable. And when you meet them, you know that.”

“You can abuse the situation of Afghanistan being the world's tragedy. The stage that the world looks at Afghanistan for the past 20, 30 years as this place with constant humanitarian crisis, constant sadness, that is part of the war machine that is used to fund the wars that have been going on in Afghanistan,” Shalizi says. “We don't get those kinds of donors because what we're trying to do is allow the women in this sewing circle to be the heroes of their own story. There's a very big difference between humanitarian aid that equips a person to live for a day and humanitarian aid that doesn't make them a beggar, [but] makes them the hero of their own story.”

Regardless of these challenges, Durkhanum is inspired by the women of Afghanistan.

“What's so beautiful about this is that what they're doing is an exact testimony to what I've spent pretty much, I don't know, 15 years trying to tell the rest of the world: Afghan women are some of the most badass women that you'll ever meet,” Shalizi says. “Even through the middle of a Taliban invasion, they're sitting and sewing beautiful clothing that they learned just six weeks ago how to sew.”

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