

ICC Fails Afghan Women, Filmmakers Step In

By Phyllis Chesler

I've just watched the film *Bread and Roses*, co-produced by actress Jennifer Lawrence and Nobel Laureate Malala Yousefzai, and directed by Sahra Mani.



'Bread and Roses' Official Trailer (Apple TV+ Youtube)

If only American women were half as brave as the on-camera real-life women activists in Kabul! We see them willing to risk being beaten, arrested, tortured, and even murdered by the Taliban because they've dared to demonstrate for "Work, Bread, and Education."

You've issued warrants for Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu, but not for ... the Taliban. Something is wrong with this picture.

Wearing hijab, but naked-faced, identifiable, these heroes march, chant, hold placards aloft, scrawl their demands on walls and even on the snow, meet secretly – and continue to do so even as the Taliban death-threatens, beats, and arrests activist after activist, even after they murder many. The women demand the return of their arrested sisters – and in one

instance, they actually prevail.

Strong Women Against the Taliban

Bread and Roses depicts Afghan women who tried to get to the airport on the days before the Taliban stormed into Kabul; they found that all the airport “gates” were closed to them. Thereafter, the women left behind were, essentially, placed under house arrest, forbidden to work, (even if they were doctors and dentists), forbidden to attend school, go out without a male escort and without wearing the Afghan burqa, the garment I view as a sensory deprivation isolation chamber.

Both schools and beauty shops were shuttered. Music was forbidden. Impoverished families began selling their very young daughters to much older, already married men. Women were forbidden to take taxis alone.

Courtesy of body camcorders and hidden cameras, we see these women activists being beaten by the Taliban with whips and sticks. These are the women who say, on camera: “Not everyone is brave enough to risk their lives against terrorism.” We see an enraged Talib break a door down, we hear about a Talib “who beats me at home more than women in prison are beaten.”

The women bond, they tell each other that they are “warriors;” one woman says: “For me, it’s God and then you guys;” “We are tired of captivity;” “Strong women are always lonely;” My crime? I demanded freedom for women;” “We should write our own histories, write our own stories.”

The information is in. The Taliban are women-killers. It is their version of Islam. UN Women are you listening? Hey, International Criminal Court: You’ve issued warrants for Israel’s Prime Minister Netanyahu, but not for the Iranian mullahcracy or the Taliban. Something is wrong with this picture.

Will a film like *Bread and Roses* make any difference? If this

film were shown at the United Nations would they sanction and isolate the Taliban and its supporters? Would the ICC issue arrest warrants for these Islamist death-eaters – or are warrants only issued to Israeli leaders fighting an existential war of self-defense, even as they are accused of countless blood libels?

Would the UN find ways to free Afghan women? Would Europe or the United States? To be fair, they did, but only a little and for a little while. Nothing went smoothly during these efforts; but that's an entirely different and important subject. However, when governments fail, individuals can and do step in.

I did. In 2021, together with British Sikh-Indian activist, Mandy Sanghera, I co-led a team which rescued 398 women from Afghanistan. I was once held captive in Kabul and wrote about it in *An American Bride in Kabul*. When Mandy asked me if I wanted to help rescue Afghan women, I told her that I'd been waiting for this opportunity for sixty years.

I am certain that the United States did not enter Afghanistan to improve the lives of women but only to find Bin Laden. Staying on, boots on the ground, led to far more freedom for girls and women than Afghanistan had ever known.

Women became physicians, lawyers, professors, business owners, grade school teachers, artists, and athletes; they prosecuted wife-batterers and opened shelters for battered and raped women. The question of how much blood and treasure the West is obligated to expend in order to do what is morally necessary – but which ultimately cannot succeed, at least not in a land-locked, tribal, impoverished, and radically Islamist country – remains a haunting question.

Nevertheless, President Biden and his administration are, in part, responsible for this exceptionally dystopian Hell. The Democrats pulled out of Afghanistan in a totally irresponsible

way, and left billions of dollars of military equipment behind. They did not rescue many of their Afghan allies and/or the educated women who were desperate to get out.

Had President Biden seen this film – had he known what would come after – would he have abandoned Afghanistan in quite this way?

Brave Filmmakers Take on Islamist Hatred

There are many films that have shown the West what the lives of women in Muslim, Islamist countries are like. And yet, young American college students obediently don hijab and kneel in Islamic prayer as if doing so is an anti-racist act, even as Muslim women elsewhere are being forced to wear burqas, chadors, and hijab, and are jailed or murdered for failing to do so.

For many years, fictional films have portrayed the surreal hatred towards Muslim women within Muslim families, villages, and countries.

In 1982, I began showing my students the film *Yol*, set in rural Turkey, in which a husband, a convict on leave, is forced to honor kill his wife due to his family's allegations that she has been unfaithful to him while he's been in jail. Dutifully, he walks her to her death; she is wearing cloth slippers, in freezing weather, trudging over snow-packed fields. It is a deeply shocking yet very moving film by Serif Goren and Yilmaz Guney.

In 2003, *Osama*, directed by Siddiq Barmak, appeared. It tells the story of a young (and very beautiful) Afghan girl-child who had to dress as a boy in order to be able to feed her family. She is scooped up, taken to a madrasa (an Islamic school), where they discover that she is a girl when she menstruates for the first time. She was spared death. Her punishment was being forced to marry a much older man who

already had three wives, all of whom “hated” him. We see him literally locking her up after a bridal night rape.

In 2009, the great Cyrus Nowrasteh directed *The Stoning of Soraya M.* It starred the beautiful Shohreh Aghdashloo, was based on a true story, (soulfully, carefully written by Freidoune Sahebjani). It happened in a small Iranian village, Kuhpayeh, in Isfahan province.

A derelict, petty criminal husband, Ghorban-Ali, wants his wife’s property and wants to marry a 14 year-old girl and move her in. Thus, Ghorban-Ali falsely accuses his wife, the 35 year old Soraya, of adultery. He, a bought-and-paid-for religious authority, and the entire village rather joyfully stone the innocent Soraya to death.

As yet, the UN has not sanctioned or isolated Iran – nor has the United States. The ICC has never issued arrest warrants for the Iranian mullahcracy.

In 2007, director Mark Foster turned Afghan-American Khaled Hosseini’s best selling novel, *The Kite Runner* into a film. It depicts the Afghan Sunni Muslim persecution of Hazara (Shiia) Muslims, and the cruel practice of war-lords turning orphan or Hazara boys into “dancing boys” and sex-slaves. The film was mainly shot in China – because it was too dangerous to make it in Afghanistan.

The World Cannot Claim Ignorance

Can you now understand the bravery of the *Bread and Roses* demonstrators, seen naked-faced on camera, desperate to document both their persecution and their heroic opposition to it? Should the UN sponsor mandatory showings of this film? Might it shame them into doing something – anything – to uplift the women of that cursed country?

We can never say that we did not know, that no one told us. The entire world, including the world’s leaders and diplomats,

have seen or heard about Islamic gender apartheid as practiced in Afghanistan and Iran via articles, books, and films. Even the members of the UN and the [ICC](#) must have seen one of these films or read about it.

The title is a well-meaning but unfortunate one. Why? Because the 1912 textile worker's strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, run by the [Industrial Workers of the World](#) became known as the "Bread and Roses" strike. The problem is that strike ultimately failed, and the cause of the Afghan women demonstrators is too important to meet that same fate.

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