



Face to Face Campaign for Women

Goedele Liekens, "I'll never forget what I saw there."



"Afghanistan Has Made Me into a Different Woman"
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An Interview with Goedele Liekens by Chris Snick

"When my daughter asks for a chocolate-chip cookie, I think automatically, she's

asking for a chocolate-chip cookie while I just was among children who have never seen cookies of any kind."

"The photographs in the paper and the pictures on TV don't show what it's really like. The situation doesn't compare at all to our way of life. People are living in refugee camps and starving. They have been displaced for years, their homes have been bombed into rubble. They own nothing. What I saw over there will stay with me for the rest of my life. When my daughter asks for a chocolate-chip cookie, I think automatically, she's asking for a chocolate-chip cookie while I just was among children who have never seen cookies of any kind."

As a western woman, was it difficult to get to know the people?

"Not really. I was amazed to find very little hatred toward Americans and westerners in general. The greatest fear of the Afghans is that the Americans will abandon them now that the Taliban has been driven out. The Afghans are not capable of rising above their miserable conditions on their own, and the Northern Alliance is actually a rather unruly bunch."

As a woman, could you go where you wanted and do what you wanted?

"It wasn't bad at all, though men will give you threatening looks. After only two days I started walking around wrapped in a black shawl. It's a different story for Afghani women. They are still forced by their husbands to wear a burkha – if they are allowed to go out at all."

" I asked one man why he didn't give his wife a bit more freedom. He replied that a man who is nice to his wife, who lets her go out without permission and who doesn't slap her once in a while, is viewed as a weakling by the community. They're handsome men, you know, but with such a mentality who could be interested?" (laughs)

You made a documentary about the poor circumstances that women – and especially pregnant women – live in. Every half hour a pregnant woman dies.

"Exactly. I attended a birth which really upset me. Nothing was even in



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the least sterile. The birth was difficult and required a c-section. In Belgium, a woman will stay in the hospital for a while after this intervention. Over there, the wound wasn't even closed because they didn't have a needle and thread. 'It will heal,' the doctor said. I felt so powerless at that moment."

Can the name of Osama Bin Laden be mentioned in Afghanistan?

"Yes it can, to my great surprise. When we arrived at the airport of Kabul – or what serves as an airport – to check in, the luggage of my camera man was inspected. When asked what was in the bag he said calmly, "Osama Bin Laden." I thought, now we're done for, but the agent laughed and told us to go on."

However, it's not really safe there. Did you ever fear for your life?

"The threat is there at any moment. I was thirty kilometers away from the bombing and helicopters were circling overhead. I had the impression of being in a movie about the war in Vietnam. The streets are full of people in uniform. You have no idea whom you can trust. Wherever we stopped with the jeep, we would remain for fifteen minutes. 'That's the time someone needs to round people up,' our driver explained."

"At one point I feared for my life. We were driving with the jeep past the military headquarters of the Northern Alliance and there was an Irishman with us who was busy filming. One of the guards aimed his rifle at us and told us to stop. For half an hour furious guards were pulling at the camera. Finally, an Afghan working for the UN told me to get out. According to him, I could solve the problem. Seconds later the jeep left with the rest of the company and I was left behind – alone with the Afghan who was confronted by the furious guards. 'To put a woman in prison they need a separate cell. If we're lucky they won't bother,' the Afghan confided to me. Finally I managed to calm the men down. I never want to live through something like that again."

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