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Council on Foreign Relations

***The Dressmaker of Khair Khana:  
Five Sisters, One Remarkable Family, and the Woman Who Risked Everything to Keep Them Safe***

**Patricia Ellis:** Good evening everyone and welcome. Thank you all so much for joining us this evening for this Women's Foreign Policy Group Author Series Event. Tonight we welcome Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, who is a Fellow and Women and Foreign Policy Program Deputy Director at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York and the author of *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana*, a book that Gayle worked on for the last several years. She spent a substantial amount of time in Afghanistan working on this. She started and got engaged on the topic in December 2005, then she spent a good part of 2008 and 2009 there, and last year spent a month and a half there. So she is really quite familiar with this and has spent a lot of time on the ground.

I am Patricia Ellis, President of the Women's Foreign Policy Group. We promote women's leadership and women's voices on pressing international issues of the day. On behalf of the Women's Foreign Policy Group and our board member here with us tonight, Donna Constantinople, we're just so pleased that you could all join us for what promises us to be a very exciting evening. We will be hearing about an inspiring story of an Afghan woman who became an entrepreneur under Taliban rule. This follows the recent program on C-SPAN about a month ago on Egypt with Michele Dunne of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The Author Series along with the Embassy Series are our most popular events, and we work very closely with the diplomatic community. We are very pleased that we have some diplomats here with us tonight. It's also a very special time for the Women's Foreign Policy Group, celebrating our 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We're so glad that you could be celebrating with us. Just briefly before I introduce Gayle, I just want to mention our upcoming events. We will be having our annual Celebration of Women Diplomats both in New York and Washington, and as follows the celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of International Women's Day. We are also having our upcoming UN Conference, which is very exciting and it's at UN Headquarters, where we get briefings by key UN officials. You'll be able to join us for that and we look forward to seeing you at our many upcoming events.

It's now my great pleasure to introduce tonight's speaker. She is an author, a journalist, and a writer. Her career has spanned journalism, business, and think tanks. She worked for nearly 10 years as a journalist with the ABC News Political Unit and *This Week* with George Stephanopoulos. She has written for many publications, a lot of which when she was in Afghanistan. I'm just going to mention a few: *The New York Times*, *The Financial Times*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Daily Beast*, and many others. She reported for NPR and she's the author of a recent cover story in *Newsweek* about Hillary Clinton. After she left the news business, she went and got an MBA at Harvard. It was during this time when she got very involved in the issue of women entrepreneurs war zones and did coverage in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Rwanda. That is actually how she got engaged in this story with what we will be hearing about tonight. She also worked in the financial world for a while. She has been a Fulbright Scholar. She speaks several languages, including basic Dari, which is very relevant if you're going to be working in Afghanistan. Tonight after Gayle speaks we will be going into the Q&A session and she will be signing books. Please join me in welcoming Gayle Tzemach Lemmon. [Applause.]

**Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:** It's such a treat to be here and happy anniversary to the Women's Foreign Policy Group! The work you do is so important because women's voices aren't heard that often and that is in part why I wanted to write this book. In December 2005, as you said, I was in my second year of business school and I went to Afghanistan to write about the women who pull families through war and who almost never get credit for it. We are so used to war stories that focus on men who go to fight and we almost always forget about the women who are there, left behind, who pull families through every time with almost no one paying attention. So I wanted to change that. I decided to fly on my own from Boston to Kabul while I was studying for my MBA. As I talk about in the beginning of the book, I landed in Afghanistan about as green as a reporter can be. I was waiting for my driver to pick me up for hours, and then finally realized after paying a guy five dollars who had a juice stand in the corner of the Kabul airport by begging him to let me use his buggy. Because of the security he couldn't get any closer. So I needed to walk two football lengths with my suitcases fighting to keep my headscarf on really wondering what in the world I had gotten myself into.

I really believe there's a story and that story was women entrepreneurs. Women have started businesses for decades in places like Bosnia, Rwanda, and Afghanistan. The businesses that they start are what allow them to support their families who are counting on them when men go off to fight in war. There is a group that runs entrepreneurship skills-based training in New York. They do certain mentoring and skill training for women in Afghanistan, Rwanda, and El Salvador. I told them I'm really trying to find some women entrepreneurs. I have this *Financial Times* piece to write and I have a case for Harvard Business School that they want. I really need some honest to goodness entrepreneurs to speak with.

So I came with my neatly typed notes. I found after my first day or two that everyone I talked to was running an NGO and they were not running businesses. The reason why—I found out later—is because in the early days after the Taliban it was much easier to register an NGO than it was to register a business. So a lot of people started NGOs. This is what women do. I met this young woman when we were in the Mercy Corps offices in December 2005. It was a really cold afternoon. We were sort of huddled over a cup of tea. There's not a lot of heat in that tough part of the world. I was bundled up in my scarf and I had on my very large pants and socks and shirts, and a burgundy jacket that I had bought at the Islamic clothing store in Anaheim, California, trying to look convincing for my interviewee. When I talked to her I said, "Tell me about your business." She said, "Well you know, I have this consulting company, in its very early days. But what I want to do is teach entrepreneurship all around Afghanistan." "That's pretty interesting. Why?" She told me, "Because I believe business is the key to Afghanistan's future and that nothing will get better unless we have businesses that we started and created ourselves that we be here long after this round of foreigners goes home." I said, "Well I am barely 30 and I know you're not 30. So how in the world do you know this much about business and why are you so passionate about it?" She paused for a while and said like it was the most natural thing, "You know I had this great business under the Talban. We had jobs. One hundred women in my neighborhood worked for me and it really made the difference. That was a really good business and that's what convinced me that I should become an entrepreneur."

As a reporter I had an eureka moment, you are always looking for the untold story. You're always looking for the story that no one else had found, that has been under everyone's nose that no one else ever thought to realize how extraordinary it really was. I think that most people think that women were simply under house arrest under the Taliban: had never gone out, had never worked, had never been survivors in terms of being out on the streets. Here we have these girls who had been breadwinners during years where they were not even supposed to be on the corner, they weren't even supposed to leave their house. The Taliban really wanted them to vanish. And yet they had found a way to be the providers for people who are counting on them. I think that is why I wanted to write this book. We are so used to seeing women as victims of war to be pitied, rather than survivors of war to be respected. I know so many of you had spent time with women in tough parts of the world, and you know that the victim story is a very, very small part of it. The truth is that women are the ones who are left behind and they are the ones that pull families through. I wanted to write something that captured their story, a

book that was the equivalent of a documentary. It just shows how much they do everyday all around the world with absolutely no one paying attention.

When the Taliban swept through Kabul, women's lives changed overnight. This is a really well-told story. Almost every night on the radio new rules would come in. Women could no longer work. Women could no longer go to university. Women could no longer wear white socks because that's the color of the Taliban flag. Women cannot wear high heels because of the sound of the noise on the sidewalk could be arousing to men. Women could no longer let any of their seditious limbs be seen—I'll let you decide what that means. Yes, these girls still had to find a way to remain themselves. You had these young women who had been contributing to their families, had been studying, had been going to school, had been going to work for years and have never been indoors. All the sudden they found that the farthest they could go was their living room. So they figured out this isn't going to work, they can't do this forever.

They thought, maybe the Taliban were only going to be there for a couple months. As you see early on in the book, Kamela and her sisters are saying, "Do you think this will change next week, or next month?" And her father, who was a former army officer said, "We'll see," because he knew better. He knew there was absolutely no way of knowing how long the Taliban were going to be there. The men in their family realized how bad the security situation was getting. The risks that they faced themselves grew very daunting. Kamela's father had been a retired army officer which meant he was immediately in the crosshairs of the Taliban. They did house to house searches at that time trying to find anyone who might have opposed the new government. Her brother was of fighting age—which was basically 16 onward—which meant you could be in the wrong place at the wrong time and simply never be heard from again. So he left early on. Early on in the story he has to leave because his father and mother don't want him to be disappeared. Her father ends up having to leave because they are looking for him. And he said, "Look, I am going to the north and I'm going to expect you to hold down the fort." The reason why he does that is because it's really risky. He had nine girls, only five of whom were still at home, but still that's five girls with whom he would have to travel to Pakistan which was a risky two day journey through the mountains with a guide. You just didn't know what was going to happen. He said, "I am not taking that risk with my daughters. You will be safe if you're in Kabul." And the truth was, the Taliban was actually a welcomed relief in terms of security.

The civil wars here in Afghanistan—which we all don't think very much about because we weren't very involved in them as the United States—ran from 1992 to 1996. And girls were literally taken from schools, taken from their homes, anytime a commander decided he wanted them. Horrible stories of girls jumping off roofs because they knew a warring commander was going to take them and they couldn't take it. Their parents actually helped them because there was no way to say no to these guys. So in some ways some people actually welcomed the Taliban because there was a level of security that they bought at that time. So Kamela's father said to her, "I'm going to leave you at home because you girls—if you stay inside you will be fine. Follow the rules. Do what you can. Keep studying your lessons and one day we will have change in Afghanistan."

So she did but what she found was the money started to run out. At some point she looked around and said, "I have to do something." And so she did the one thing that was left to her, she became an entrepreneur. She realized if you stay at home during those years and you worked with women you could more or less navigate the rules. You see early on in the book there's a scene in which she breaks the rules to go by herself to see her sister and goes on the bus without a male chaperone. As of now, women could no longer travel by themselves in Kabul. The group of seven women was immediately at risk. But seven women with a ten-year-old boy were fine because he was their chaperone. She couldn't go find her brother because he was in class, so she went by herself to learn sewing from her sister. Her sister gave her a crash afternoon course in how to make a dress. And from that one blue party dress she began a business in her living room that became more or less a dress factory, creating jobs for about one hundred women in her neighborhood. Out of hope with this, these women created a community themselves because not only was this a business, girls were coming from all over Kabul

knocking on Kamela's door saying, "I heard you had work. Our family is desperate. The economy has absolutely collapsed. My father lost his job. My brother had to leave the city. Now we don't have enough money for food." In fact one seven-year-old girl who was a neighbor, her mother actually asked Kamela to take her daughter in because she could no longer provide for her and she became Kamela's helper because this little girl could be on the street much more easily than older women.

These girls would sit around while they sewed. They would swap jokes and tell stories and they would listen to Farhad Darya who was one of these famous Afghan crooners. They would talk about the [movie] *Titanic*. Leonardo DiCaprio was the one cultural phenomenon that the Taliban couldn't stop. By 2000 there were *Titanic* wedding cakes, *Titanic* cucumbers, *Titanic* vegetables, *Titanic* lipstick. In fact this girl told me early on, "*Titanic* was huge!" I had for days no idea what she was talking about. [Laughter.] "Leo, Leo, wasn't he popular in the US?" I finally put *Titanic* and Leo together and realized that this story of star-crossed lovers had really resonated in a place that was struggling to find a ray of hope at that time.

These girls came together and made a community on their own and by themselves with absolutely no one helping them, when the world outside had really forgotten that they existed. What was most moving to me was the woman I interviewed—we can certainly talk about this during the Q&A, the whole process of finding a girl, most of those who have never met foreigners in their lives. One of these girls, Mahnaz was her name in the book, said to me, "Being in Kamela's house was like being in a place that had no war. It was the only time which we felt like we weren't in Kabul city." Because think about it, these girls had never lived without war: their entire life was bracketed with conflict. They were born in the late 70s just a year or two before the Soviets invaded. So war went on the entire time the Taliban ruled Kabul. They can't help but depend on the men in their families. Kamela's father had nine girls and two boys and he said to me, "I look at all my children with one eye. It is Kamela's job it make sure her family and community are provided for. And it is her faith that is going to allow her to do all of this." It is true. She had a sense from her own faith. Every time she walked out the door, no matter what the dangers she faced—and as you'll see in the book the dangers are significant—but you never knew what was going to happen. The Taliban's patrol forces would patrol the city in black Toyota pick-up trucks and they would carry their batons, and sometimes TV antennas and they would sometimes beat in the streets anybody who was found that were breaking their rules. That was if you were lucky because if they wanted they could take you as prisoner. There was nobody to stop them. It could depend who stopped you, at what time of day, whether they were in a good or bad mood, or how they felt. There was no higher authority to appeal to. She used her faith because she thought, "It is part of my faith to provide for my family."

The dressmaking business grew with the help of shopkeepers in Kabul. They had girls go to Lycée Myriam which was a bazaar near her house. Kamela and her brother, who is only 13—who becomes her own lifeline—they go together to the Lycée Myriam bazaar to find a shopkeeper who is willing to buy the dresses that Kamela makes. They walk in and she doesn't tell her brother what she's going to do until the very last minute because it's just in case they are stopped, let him have no idea. That way he doesn't have any secrets to keep. She walks in to the shopkeeper's store and pretends to be looking at the glass display case at dresses. She has a black tote, sort of like a messenger bag some of us carry, and spots across the counter a blue dress and says, "My sister and I are at home and no one provides for us, so we started a business. Is there any way that you would be interested in buying these?" The shopkeeper looks across the room, realizes there's no "Vice and Virtue" watching, and says "Yes, because the dresses we used to import from China, Pakistan, and Iran, no one wants anymore. And besides I can't even get to Pakistan anymore because of all the checkpoints and security problems so we actually do need to buy things from local dressmakers. And by the way, do you make pantsuits?" She said, "Yes, absolutely, we are in business. Anything." [Laughter.]

She had no idea how to make pantsuits but she knew she could figure it out and her sisters at home needed the money. So what she did was figured it out and asked her sister to start working on the pantsuits and start making the dresses. Over time the knocks on the door came. Women came and

said, "I need to provide for my family." One of the women, Sara Jan, one of the major figures in the book—she's a widow whose husband died fairly suddenly about a year ago. She relied on him to provide for her three brothers and her. All three brothers lost their jobs at the start of the Taliban: one was in the army, one was a computer guy, and one was a city worker. So nobody was getting salaries anymore. So the Taliban had no idea how to run an economy. You can imagine that the politics kept them very busy to begin with. So what they did was Sara Jan came to her and said, "Can I work with you? I never had a job in my whole life, but I know how to sew. I'll promise you to do whatever is needed." Kamela had no ability to pay another salary at that time, but she just couldn't bear to turn someone away. So she became her supervisor and her first employee. Sara Jan came to Kamela's house and enforced the rules because the Taliban was always around. They had a sign right on the middle of the door, near where the girls would hang their burqas when they came into the house that said here are the rules: "No laughing on the streets. No coming with your face open—what they call without being with a burqa. No talking to men on the way here. No doing anything loudly in Kamela's house. As long as you follow those rules we will protect you, we will welcome you to come work with us."

The Vice and Virtue forces definitely watched to see what women were doing but didn't usually come into your house as long as you were more or less staying within the rules, which is how these girls were able to get away with what they did. So together they navigated in and around the rules. They were always trying to find a way around whatever obstacle presented itself. Toward the end of the book, when Kamela is talking to one of the shopkeepers who is selling her dresses, they became almost like family over time. He too was a young man left with 12 family members to support more or less on barely \$200 a month. So they worked together to find a new business angle, what can they do to make more money for our families. She has been in there talking to him and a Vice and Virtue force creeps in and says, "What in the world are you doing here? You're a horrible woman. How are you talking to this man?" And she says, "My brother, I want to thank you for your work, I have a lot of respect for the other *Amer ba Maroof*—which is Dari for Vice and Virtue forces—but this is my cousin and we are talking about our families. So you have very important work to do outside this job, so I'll let you get on with it." That is how she got out of it because she had spent so much time in the bazaar talking to shopkeepers negotiating contracts, trying to find enough work for all the women that were coming to her house that she sort of knew how these guys thought and spoke to one another by the end.

She used every entrepreneurial opportunity to create an opening not only just for herself, but for other women. Her sisters asked her, "Don't you think this is too much?" At a certain point you have eight or nine shopkeepers doing business all around the city. You have 20 to 25 women a day coming to this house saying, "Don't you worry, at one point the Taliban is going to shut you down. The risk is too great." She said, "My faith and my family taught me you must do all you can for everyone you can and for as long as you can. And that's what I am going to do. God will protect me and I am going to die sometime so if it's going to be now then that's God's plan." She really believed that. She really said to me, "I don't know if I can take all these risks again today because I was a dumb 20-year-old at the time, who was much more risk-friendly than I am now as a mother of two. But I never ever doubt that things wouldn't be okay because I really did believe I was doing the right thing. And my community protected me because I protected and provided for my community." That was true. There's a theme toward the middle of the book where a young girl who is working for her comes to her and says, "Kamela Jan, my father sends word." Her father is a talib who had sent his daughter to work with her because he needs this money to make sure he can provide for his own children, just in the same way that Kamela does. So there were men like this who were simply neighborhood guys who were working for the Taliban because they too need the money. It wasn't a lot but it was better than nothing. So he sent word to his daughter, "As long as you stay within the rules and do what you can. Don't attract attention. Don't have men at your house. My father will do what he can to provide for you."

There's another scene in the book where a woman rushes into Kamela's house and says, "I have been looking all over town for a shop that has enough girls working in it where I can actually get some dresses made for a wedding I have tomorrow." And she said, "Okay. How many dresses do you need?"

One? Three? Three dresses for tomorrow? We have a bunch of work, we are really backed up.” “You don’t understand we’ve been driving around the city all day. My husband and I can’t find a girl who has a dress shop because men can’t make dresses for women anymore. All the tailors we know are men.” So Kamela said, “Okay. Okay.” And her sister Malekheh said, “We’ll do it.” And she comes back and says, “See how many girls who are working here. We actually need six dresses. Is there any way you can do it?” [Laughter.] Kamela said, “Come on. You know we just agreed to do three.” Malekheh, her older sister said, “We can’t say no to you. Do you realize the incredibly unusual order?” She said, “Yes. Yes. Only under extraordinary circumstances we’ll do it since it’s for a wedding.” They started with the pins and the fabric and they start making these dresses. They have the bride come back several times to make both fittings for both a white and green dress like an Islamic wedding calls for certainly in Afghanistan. At the end of the afternoon the following day, the woman rushes in and says, “I need everything now. Can you give it to me?” So the girls are rushing around, rushing around, so they find the seven-year-old girl who has become the gofer. They are handing dress upon dress to her and saying, “You need to walk this out to the car and take this to these women.” As the young girl walks out she realizes that, yes the dress is for a wedding, but it is actually for a Taliban wedding. There are Talibs that are actually waiting in the car for them. So there’s no question that these guys know what she has been doing. And, not only that, they are supporting in some way the work she’s doing. So I do not at all—I’ve gotten a lot of messages about this—have a benign view of the Taliban. That’s not what this book is about. But what I want to show is it was never as monolithic or as black and white as we all were sure it was from outside Afghanistan.

Kamela was hardly the only woman to work. Dr. Maryam is a character in the book, and she was a doctor that refused to leave Afghanistan even though almost every other woman doctor left. She said, “This is my country as much as it is theirs, and by the way, women are now only allowed to see women doctors, so what happens if I leave? If I leave, there’s nobody to treat women.” So she decided that she was going to stay. She was going to follow-up regularly. She was seen as this kind of independent minded lady doctor who was not always in the Taliban’s good graces. But she ended up practicing medicine throughout the Taliban years because they needed her for their wives too. She became Kamela’s neighbor. There’s another girl who was working as a community organizer. Another women I met who was a teacher throughout the Taliban years. One girl taught Microsoft Office in a women’s hospital throughout the Taliban because that was one of the few safe places that women still had throughout the Taliban years, where they didn’t have to worry at every moment about the Taliban coming through. But they did still raid hospitals. There were these girls who were sitting at their computers like this watching to see whether the wrong person was going to go in, but they were allowed to find a way—in their own way to make sure that they could still keep going.

Reporting this story against the backdrop of a resurgent Taliban and deteriorating security was very difficult. We could talk about that in the Q&A if you wish. But trying to get young women who had never been interviewed to talk about five and a half of the most difficult years of their life was really a reporting challenge—one that made me even more committed to telling the story because these girls so mean much, including their education. They asked me, the only foreigner they met, to tell their story, and to share it with women who they’ll never meet about what those years meant to them. We think about Afghanistan, and women, and the Taliban, and entrepreneurs, in the same sentence and that is why I think *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* as a book matters to me as a universal story of unlikely entrepreneurs and unsung heroines. It is, I think, it’s a rebuttal to the women’s stories that are soft. I think even as reporters, some have to apologize for telling women’s stories because we see them as not the real news, the men with guns are the real news. But you tell me what is harder: shooting a gun through a window or getting out the broom, sweeping up the pieces, and putting up the tarp where the window used to be? And yet, it’s the stories of women who put up the pieces that we see as soft. So I hope that you join me in trying to change this conversation. If we change the conversation, we can do our part to do our part to change the world. Thank you. [Applause.]

**Ms. Ellis:** Amazing stories. I’m just going to open it up with a few questions I’ll ask together that are interrelated. First of all, can you give us an update? These women are so inspiring, such role models,

and they were really mentors way ahead of their time. Mentoring is really in today, certainly with our organization. So what happened to them? What is Kamela doing? And what are some of these other women doing? Also related to that, what are the lessons learned for women entrepreneurs today in both Afghanistan and other places in dealing with groups, whether it's the Taliban or other groups that place all these incredible obstacles? What is the status of women entrepreneurs today? I was reading an article in the *Christian Science Monitor* which talked about the fact that the Taliban is far from the only obstacle that you have in rural Afghan society, you have traditions and many other things, so that things could take a back step. Lastly, how are they preparing for the possibility of the Taliban gaining power again, or certainly having more power again?

**Ms. Lemmon:** What are they doing today is a great question. Kamela is an entrepreneur who has continued with the business she had just started with just herself and a laptop when I first met her—a laptop that Mercy Corps had lent her, actually. She now has a half a million dollar contract from the government to teach entrepreneur skills to Afghans all around the country. She just had her second baby and she is doing very well. This business goes all around the country teaching marketing, finance and how to start your own company. She says, “Money is power for women.” She felt really passionately that it was entrepreneurship that helps change women’s lives. Women entrepreneurs find a way. I did a *New York Times* story recently on the multi-million dollar empire of Afghan women entrepreneurs. For those who are interested you can visit [GayleLemmon.com](http://GayleLemmon.com) and go to the journalism section to find all the stories that I’ve done from Afghanistan. There is a piece about the women who have now become role models for the next generation: a woman who has inspired her daughter to start a shoe company in Kabul, another woman whose husband credits his wife that taught him how to become a successful entrepreneur. He said, “If it weren’t for my wife I would never be in business. She’s the one who told me what to take to the first expo in India that I got sent on, and she’s the one who taught me how to market the jewelry that I’ve been selling.” The challenges are enormous for the business environment, and for men it is very difficult in Afghanistan. So you can imagine that for women it is doubly, and triply difficult. With that said, I think people are natural entrepreneurs. They find openings because money is what people need and desperately want in countries—and jobs. So people are starting businesses like dried fruit processing, soccer ball making, some logistics companies that are women-owned, and they are continuing to do business. The number is small but they are growing. You talk about being a mentor and these women are really role models for the next generation.

In terms of women in the state of Afghanistan today, there is real fear about what happens when the Taliban come back. There is fear that they need more time to step in and take leadership positions. Women are not asking for an endless international presence in their country, but they want their own army and police to be able to function better. They want a government that is actually somewhat responsive. They are actually lobbying for better governance themselves, particularly as entrepreneurs because as many of you know, entrepreneurs can become advocates, advocating for not only better business but better governance—that is definitely happening in Afghanistan. But the fear among women now is that their rights will be the price of peace. They are terribly concerned, in a rush to make a peace deal, that that is what will happen. People will give up on their rights to work and go to school again.

**Ms. Ellis:** Wonderful. We are going to open it up for questions. We have a mic over here and if people would kindly go to the mic and please identify yourself—name, affiliation, keep your questions brief. Thank you. Do we have one brave person who is going to go first? We are going to take a few questions together so we can make sure we are going to get to everyone’s questions.

**Question:** Hi, my name is Kelly Harris. I’m sure you’re familiar with the recent article in *National Geographic* regarding the poppy industry there and the women who are entrepreneurs in that industry. I am curious to know what her thoughts and your thoughts on that subject were, especially with the women there? Thank you.

**Question:** I really appreciated the comment you made on mass media and not making a big enough deal about women's stories. I want you to talk about the narrative. How did you find these women? How long of a time did you spend with them?

**Ms. Lemmon:** I think it's the corruption question that people are terribly worried about. Most of the time when Kamela is trying to get a contract, people asked for a percentage right off the top. Corruption is an enormous issue. The governance issue is dramatically difficult for people to function in. Corruption is a parasite that has really eaten off the business community. I think that is the biggest concern. If nothing is done to crack down on corruption it will only worsen. So entrepreneurs like Kamela who are really trying to keep business clean are really in the minority. They face the real challenge in not paying percentages off the top because everyone thinks, "Well you shouldn't be competing for this contract." The good news is that she did manage to get the contract anyway. She refused to give in. She said, "This is my country and I'm not going to give them percentages. They weren't even here during the Taliban era or any time before"—in talking about a lot of the companies and people who were trying to skim off the top. So I think that's the issue.

In terms of the narrative, I think I grew up with this book in a lot of ways. I learned so much in the process of reporting this story, meeting these women, getting to know and spending a lot of time with them and their families. I think my respect for them only grew because they were such powerful women and such powerful leaders in their communities during times where no one expected women to be able to lead. So what I did was basically wear baggy clothing, no make-up, and a head scarf. I disappointed them when I showed up and said that I was the American reporter who had come to interview them because they had images of a Baywatch-type character going on, so I was the dowdiest person they saw in Afghanistan. [*Laughter.*] That was a little bit depressing, I will say.

It was really a privilege for me. One young woman said to me, "If I talk to you and my husband finds out he will divorce me. But it's so important that you tell this story. So I am going to take the risk." I had a lot of young women that would cry during our interviews. For me as a reporter, it was very difficult. I felt even guiltier because I had nothing to feel bad about. I had not lived through these years. I had gone through nothing that these girls have gone through. And yet, listening to their stories every day, I really found it difficult to take a step back sometimes and be removed from their stories. I think that it made me feel—during a time of tightened security with bombings happening pretty regularly—that I had to stay and it was my job to tell their stories because they had entrusted me with it.

**Question:** Allison Johnson. I would just like to ask if you could comment on the future of Afghanistan in relation to the women you had the chance to be with. Out of all these women you interacted with, what difference did they feel that the US Government has made in their lives in the last ten years? Do you think what we are doing is positively affecting their lives and moving the country forward? Thank you.

**Donna Constantinople:** Hi, Donna Constantinople. I am asking a question about the dressmaking part. Where is the issue of Western values that creep in with regard to responsibility about the burqa? The demand for the dresses is interesting to me and since that was part of her source of business, I wanted to ask as well about the economics of the business. Is it deliberately just pennies and dollars? Where is the capital cash flow? As they were down that road it does seem as though—if you look at the implications of the other parts of the Arab world it would seem like there was a clash with the presence of American values, but Western influence coming in this way in that part of your story. Thanks.

**Ms. Ellis:** Gayle, I just wanted to throw in a follow-up about security. You mentioned that it's a problem in terms of being able to do your work and get around. How insecure did you feel and how did you handle the situation with your family back here worrying about you?

**Ms. Lemmon:** First off the US presence in Afghanistan. It felt different for so many people depending on where you lived, but a lot of the women that I spent time talking to felt that the international community's presence, for all its faults—and there are many—has actually allowed them to create a



little bit of space so that they can become entrepreneurs, become politicians, become lawyers—one of them is a prosecutor. The key prosecutor in Herat is a woman. The international community's presence has allowed that to happen and women can take it from there. They don't want the international community to be there forever, but they do think the international community's presence—and there are many—has allowed them to achieve some goals of their potential and to step into the post-Taliban governing. What they want is to continue to build on that and continue to grow achievements that they have already been able to manage in the past ten years.

The security question is very difficult because there are women who are politicians who have their lives threatened regularly. Women entrepreneurs I know were kidnapped, not by the Taliban, but by thugs because they were worth money. They ended up being driven out of business because they lost their entire savings when they had to use it for ransom. So these are real obstacles that these women are facing.

I am the most despondent about Afghanistan when I am here because all you see in the covers are IEDs, kidnappings, bombings, and embed stories. There's a reason why. War is of course a story and American treasure is there. And I fully understand that. But that's not the only story of Afghanistan and that's part of why I wanted to write this book and why I hope it will make a difference in showing the real people who are fighting for something better every day for their families.

The question about the economics: the business was very much earn and spend, earn and spend, and that was pretty much the whole Taliban period. I think people actually forget that—and I actually never knew before researching this—how devastated the economy was. So people would sell shoe laces and baby dolls and windows and doors, anything that they have got that has economic value. Men would sit all day with blankets, with their wares, anything that they could take from their house, selling it on the side of the road, hoping that someone would buy something. The girls made these dresses because fashion still matters even though it's a really desperate time. People are still getting married, although in fewer numbers. People were going to weddings, going to big events and they didn't want to wear the same dress, just like you and me, so they would buy inexpensive dresses. They would have a lot of beading on the bodices and beading on the long sleeves. For the Taliban period, you had to make sure that they were conservative: long sleeved with a fairly high neck. There were vests with beading on both sides of the pockets. They used bright colors because they were wearing them under the burqa so nobody would know any better. There was no ban against red, or blue, or green, so it was a little bit of hope and a little bit of brightness I think for these girls. I asked Kamela once, "Did you ever manage to save any money during the Taliban years?" And she said, "Gayle, this was the Taliban years. No one saved any money. You were just trying to survive." It's not like Afghanistan today. I did have that question and that was the answer.

In terms of security, it was very difficult in the fall of 2008 when everyone was paying attention to the Obama election. Everybody was focused on what was going to happen in terms of McCain-Obama and not what was happening in Afghanistan. Within the course of seven weeks you had three firearms shot on the street, an attempted kidnapping of two French NGO workers—actually her cousin got in front of one of the guns while trying to help a French aid worker escape and he died in the shooting. You had the Ministry of the Interior bombed and three journalists kidnapped. Another time, I was packing and the UN guesthouse shooting happened. If you remember the pictures on CNN there were men who dressed as policemen and they just went in and opened fire on the UN guesthouse. So I was packing and I said to my husband, "Should I still go?" He said, "Of course you should still go. This kind of thing happens all the time. Every time it happens when you're in Afghanistan, you call me and say, 'Don't worry everything's fine. Because you're here you feel a lot worse about it. You've already committed to doing the story.'" Living with that level of fear, I think I would sometimes stay up at night. I lived with security guards at the time—the houses in Kabul are a whole other story, we can talk about it another time. I think the foreigners who are living there are living with a level of fragility and mortality that you don't often experience here in the United States, Europe, or even Asia. So they would tell me every night, these security guards, about who was kidnapping who for what money and how long they were going about it. I don't know if I was much better off knowing this, but I never really ever wanted to stop

doing it because these girls never stopped during the Taliban years and the dangers they faced were every bit as real as those. They did it because people were counting on them and I felt in some ways very similar—that people had entrusted me with their story and it was my responsibility to tell their stories and do their stories justice—telling these stories that are so universal about what women do in impossible times to pull families through.

**Ms. Ellis:** Could you talk a little bit about the role of the government and what type of support they give for these women entrepreneurs or lack of support there is?

**Ms. Lemmon:** Very little.

**Question:** Marie Kux from the Nooristan Foundation. I just returned from Kabul. This was my third stay in Afghanistan. First of all I would like to thank you for talking so truthfully about Afghanistan. Most of the time the press only talks about war and corruption—of course both are true. Very seldom we hear about progress. There is progress in Afghanistan. I loved what you told us about the dressmakers in Kabul. I find Afghan young women are extremely strong. I'm sure you have the same feeling. We are helping a group of one hundred families this year. We decided about a year ago to try teaching literacy to women. The men do not want to hear about this. Three weeks ago when I was in Kabul I was very surprised that in six months they were able to read their school books. Some of them said, "Since we know how to read, what else can we learn?" This was a very impressive question, of course that I did not expect. Several of them said to me before they were done—to make the story short—at the end, the men came to me and said, "We want to learn how to read." That's what really did it for me. I hope the press will want to report on women and progress in Afghanistan because they play a significant role. I met many young professionals full of enthusiasm and they want to go ahead.

**Question:** Along that line—I'm Mimi Bernard. Thank you so much, Gayle, for your courage and tenacity. Looking at the attendees of Women's Foreign Policy Group, that most of them are women—so would you talk about how this book would appeal to all audiences? Thank you.

**Ms. Lemmon:** I just did an interview for CNBC, which is not known for its heavy female audience. [Laughter.] I think the entrepreneurship and business angle—Harvard Business School has been tremendous in supporting my book and talking about it. We actually had taught a case at Harvard Business School around the book in December. We had 80 students, actually two sections of about 60 students, who talked about women's entrepreneurship in Afghanistan. We had great discussions. I was very worried that you would have a situation where you had been in the classroom—but no because there are dresses and women and war, oh no! [Laughter.] But in truth, they were revved up because it's a business story as much as it is a war story. It's an economic story. I never set out to write about women. I set out to write about an economic issue that no one was talking about. The contributions of women are so often undervalued and underestimated. We never think of women entrepreneurs, and if we do, we think about microfinance. And I purposely avoided and still avoid writing about microfinance because we are so quick to put women into that basket. I think we aim low when it comes to women. That's why I hope the business community would see that—thestreet.com reviewed it and gave it a rave. I felt really good that their readers aren't necessarily the same ones as *Ms. Magazine* readers. [Laughter.] I was really delighted by that.

**Ms. Ellis:** Gayle, can you talk about the government?

**Ms. Lemmon:** Yes, absolutely. The government is not helping women. The government is increasingly conservative towards women, geared to the question that was asked earlier with the government. So recently the government tried to crackdown on shelters for women. It was not because women's shelters were fostering prostitution, but because they are not very well viewed by conservative families. And so, the fact is that the Karzai Government is preparing for what comes next. What comes next is likely some return of the Taliban in some way, shape, or form in terms of a negotiated settlement,

especially when you look at *The Washington Post* poll numbers two days ago that show two-thirds of America is more or less fed up with this war. So I think that the government is not particularly interested in helping women. Women are speaking out for themselves. That is what gives me such hope. Women are protesting, are demanding a seat at the table, are asking for the support of the international community, and I think that's what women in this room can help to do today to make a difference.

**Question:** Thank you for your very inspiring presentation this evening. My question is, first, could you talk a little bit about any encounters the dressmakers may have had with materials. Were they compound? Did they ever run out of materials? Did they ever have to suspend their dressmaking?

**Ms. Lemmon:** A lot of the shopkeepers had fabric in their stores that they would give the girls. They would give the girls the fabric because they had stocked it for years. They had gotten it from Pakistan, or they had it the same way you'd go into a fabric store here you'd see fabric. It is basically the same thing and they would give them a lot. When women would come they would often bring their own fabric, women often got that at the bazaar. The other place that you could get them was from the wholesaler in Kabul. There's a great scene where Kamela gets more business savvy. She realizes she can buy fabric for a lot less downtown. She roped her brother into getting into a taxi—which was risky enough as it is, and expensive—to go to the wholesale market and negotiate. She said "Our margins are so much better now." It really shows how much of an entrepreneur she really has become over the years. She was supposed to be a teacher; she was never supposed to be an entrepreneur. And yet it was in some way the minimal opening of the Taliban, in some way, that made her an entrepreneur and she remains one today.

**Question:** Hi Gayle, I am Max from IBM, the token man. [*Laughter.*]

**Ms. Lemmon:** There are a few, come on! [*Laughter.*]

**Question:** Very quick question. Number one: how do you contact this young lady that you talked about? And number two is, can we get a hold of that study that you talked about from Harvard Business School? Lastly, you were saying she had a contract from the Afghan Government. Did she encounter any problems?

**Ms. Lemmon:** Harvard Business School will unfortunately make you pay for the case. But you can certainly get it if you email me at my website, [GayleLemmon.com](http://GayleLemmon.com). I can send you the link to the case and you can just pick it up online and download it.

In getting a contract she would be both teaching men and women. No, in fact there was a great motive she told me about in 2004—early 2005—when she actually traveled to Kandahar, which is not known for being one of the most liberal parts of Afghanistan, very close to the seat of the Taliban, et cetera. She was training a group of men who had come to hear about gender training. You can imagine, she was walking into a room in which she is standing—there's a great photo of her standing with a circle of men around her. And she came and said, "I come to you as a sister and a friend. We are here to share what I've learned." She started by citing the Koran and she talked about what her faith had taught her that it was her duty to share what she knew. By the end of the second day of training one of the more conservative mullahs from Kandahar came up to her, "You know if I could be certain that my daughter would turn out like you, I'd send her to school tomorrow." [*Laughter.*] I think that that proves the power of these young women who are homegrown role models. They are not from any place else and have never left their country. Sometimes European and American reporters—I'm sorry to say this—fail when you only write about the exception—and I said, "Can you show me a society that has ever been changed by anything but its exceptions?" These girls are as Afghan as they come and they are really patriots to the true extent of the world to their own country. So I think that's why they are accepted. They understand their country and they understand how people think and relate to one another.

**Ms. Ellis:** So Gayle, this has been absolutely wonderful. We had a story of an inspiring woman and you inspired all of us. Now Gayle will be signing her book. So I just want to thank you all for coming. We look forward to seeing you all again. It was just wonderful to have you. Thank you. [*Applause.*]