

Afghan Fashion Designer Creates Dresses, Jobs

Thanks for joining us again on "As It Is." I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

Today we are discussing one of my favorite topics: wedding dresses. "Last year I made a beautiful huge ball gown for a lady who was actually from Lebanon. We used more than a hundred yards of tulle just for the skirt."

Roya Hashimi is a fashion designer from Afghanistan. She started a dressmaking business sixteen years ago. It is called "Elegance by Roya," and it is Virginia, in the United States. VOA went to her shop recently to visit.

The store is one long room. It is lined on both sides with white dresses. Many touch the floor. Every half hour or so, the doorbell rings, and a woman comes in. Usually she is with her mother, or her sister, or a friend, and they are trying on a gown Roya has made.

"Business is good, we are doing okay. I'm enjoying my work."

Roya left Afghanistan when she was a teenager in the mid-1980s. Her family went to Germany. Roya studied fashion design there. Eventually she married, and she and her husband Mustafa moved to America. He helps her with advertising and other parts of the business.

“This is a family business. We don’t think of it as the wife and husband. So we work it out as a business once we get here. So it’s all business, business, business, work. Then at six o’clock, come here, honey.”

Roya says owning her own business is a great feeling, especially after all the hard work she did to achieve it. But she has never forgotten Afghanistan. She thinks especially of the women there.

“It is so tough for them to find an, just an ordinary job, just make a little bit of money. It’s hard. Especially when you’re not educated, there’s no chance.”

So a few years ago, Roya Hashimi returned to Afghanistan. She hired some women to help her with her American business. The women in Afghanistan focus on delicate details, like lace, or like the beads used for that Lebanese bride last year.

“We used more than a thousand of them on that dress.”

Roya says the women in Afghanistan use the money they earn from sewing to support their families, or to buy a cell phone, or to buy nice clothes for special occasions.

“They are going every day to weddings, the Afghan women.”

Roya says many also use the money for education. It pays for school, or for computer time to study English.

She hopes eventually to create a factory in Afghanistan and hire even more people. And she would like to pay for a girls' school there.

"Recently one lady bought a little belt and she was telling me, this is more than a belt. This is not just a belt, this is much more than that."

An American customer named Martha came in the shop to try on her dress. She says she loves Roya's work.

"I have on a peach dress with a bit of an empire, mid-modified waist line, it has individual beautiful pink and white beading with a little silver."

Martha also loves Roya's mission.

"I knew that she was from Afghanistan, but I wasn't quite as aware as how involved with the women of Afghanistan she is. And I'm hoping sometime to accompany her to Afghanistan."

"Well, at least you'll have something to wear."

"Yes, maybe not these clothes, but certainly beautiful things nonetheless."

Women Are a Growing Force in the Afghan Economy

Roya Hashimi has spent years building a business in the United States. Back in her homeland, there are now 1600 registered female-owned businesses. Mario Ritter reports that women have become a growing force in the Afghan economy.

Nilofar Sakhi directs the International Center for Women's Economic Development at the American University of Afghanistan. She says half of the university's first-year class are women. Ms. Sakhi says one reason for increased female enrollment is because Afghan girls today have examples of successful, professional Afghan women.

"Looking at women talking about their political rights in parliament, looking at women entering into business and having trade in Malaysia and Dubai, and looking at women who are successful personalities internationally of raising Afghanistan voices. This gives an image."

Ms. Sakhi says women in Afghanistan increasingly have international contacts and resources.

Twenty-five-year-old Roya Mahboob is trying to make sure women also have access to information. She is the chief executive officer of a computer software company.

“We are always thinking how we can take advantage of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube by collecting good content and creating Web traffic.”

Ms. Mahboob’s company, called Afghan Citadel, also trains students in information technology.

“It’s difficult, especially for females in the schools to go outside and learn IT in courses because most of the families do not pay for them to learn in the course. Providing the free education and free IT centers in each school, when they graduate from high school, if they want to work, they can stay at home working online.”

Ms. Mahboob says using the Internet is one way for women to have a freedom that is still hard to find in some parts of Afghanistan.

“The IT and social media gives this power to women to be independent and have confidence to share their ideas because in social networks no one tells them ‘Why are you outside the home?’ ‘Why are you talking with the men?’ Because no one knows them.”

Sharing ideas over the Internet only encourages women to learn even more.

I’m Mario Ritter.

And I’m Kelly Jean Kelly, and that’s our show for today.

By the way, you may have noticed that several women in this story are named "Roya." That is because Roya is common for girls and women in Afghanistan. It means "dream."

Do you have a dream for a business? Why don't you tell me about it? Send an email to special@voanews.com. Or go to our website at learningenglish.voanews.com and click on "Contact Us."

Remember, you can listen to VOA World News at the beginning of the hour, Universal Time.