

On a mission: A diplomat's wife and former journalist is trying to help Afghan women -- one shawl at a time

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CORRECTION: (From The Ottawa Citizen, February 13, 2007) Khorshied Samad, the wife of Afghanistan's ambassador to Canada, moved to Ottawa in September 2004, not 2005. Ambassador Omar Samad, whose posting to Canada is not scheduled to end this September, was raised in Afghanistan, but attended university in the United States. He did not grow up in the U.S. as Mrs. Samad did. Incorrect information appeared in an article on page J1 Saturday. *****

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Note: Ran with fact box "Buy a shawl", which has been appended to the story.

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Illustration: Colour Photo: Wayne Cuddington, The Ottawa Citizen / (Khorshied Samad)

Colour Photo: ArteZan Designs founder Shaima Breshna, centre, with two weavers show silk thread from the western Afghan city of Herat. The silk is spun from mulberry trees and is coloured with natural dyes. Colour Photo: The shawls and scarves are made by hand on primitive looms in a small workshop on the outskirts of Kabul. The women start as soon as it's light and work until the sun sets. They stop at lunch, when two teachers come to teach them to read and write. Colour Photo: Each shawl takes about a day to make and they come in a variety of jewel tones. Some have traditional stripes, some a few squiggles or diamond patterns or gilt thread.

It's a Tuesday afternoon in Rockcliffe Park, and outside Khorshied Samad's home the snow is falling in this odd winter's first serious snowfall. Inside it's cool too, but that's OK. Samad's warm personality provides plenty of heat.

Besides, if it gets too chilly, we can always wrap up in the gorgeous silk shawls that she has draped over a cabinet in her living room. The vibrant colours of the handwoven silk gleam in the late afternoon like gold.

And for the women of Afghanistan who made them, these shawls are gold. They cost \$60 each, and every one Samad sells pays the women in Kabul a salary, rents them a work space and hires them a teacher to help them learn to read and write.

That's Samad's mission here in Canada -- at least her humanitarian one, which co-exists with her diplomatic mission as wife of Omar Samad, Afghanistan's ambassador to Canada. In a milieu where most diplomatic wives play a low-key role as hostesses, the effervescent Samad, 43, is front and centre with her husband as an advocate for Afghanistan's needs, especially those facing the country's women.

"I've been put into a position where I'm able to give some information. My husband feels I'm capable of doing it," says the former journalist. "So I try to help in any way I can."

And "any way" is extensive. Since moving to Canada in September 2005, Samad has wasted no time getting involved. She has written to newspapers with stories of the plight facing women in Afghanistan before and since the fall of the Taliban, and urging support for Canada's involvement there.

As a masters student at the University of Ottawa, she and Canadian journalist Jane McElhone organized Voices on the Rise: Afghan Women Making the News, an exhibition of 25 photographs of female

Afghan journalists. One showed a burqa-clad figure wielding a microphone, another a beautiful young VJ, later murdered for taking part in a western-style show similar to Much Music. The exhibit moved Gov. Gen. Michaëlle Jean to tears when she visited in October.

The shawls are Samad's latest project -- dubbed ArteZan Designs -- yet in some ways it is the oldest, arising from the reasons that drew Samad to Afghanistan in the first place.

Born in the United States, the daughter of an Afghan Muslim father and an American Christian mother, she had a California upbringing influenced by a culture from a country she had never visited.

In 1998, she started hearing stories of the atrocities being committed against women in Afghanistan by the Taliban. Wanting to help, she recorded a CD with blues pianist George Winston to raise funds. Her father sang traditional Afghan songs on the CD and Samad co-wrote some other melodies with a cousin. "I'm a Gemini so I have lots of energy," she laughs.

The CD was good enough to be used at some United Nations events and on an ABC-TV special. As the funds started to roll in, Samad set up Artists for Afghanistan Foundation, a registered NGO. She sent the money to people she knew in Afghanistan who used it to operate secret schools for girls, who were banned from being educated.

On Sept. 11, 2001, Samad was working in New York for ABC's marketing department. Suddenly, she was an "expert" on Afghanistan, frequently called upon to offer her opinions and analysis for the network's news arm.

It was a role she liked. In 2002, months after the Taliban were driven out of power, she went to Kabul as a freelancer for ABC News. It was the first time she'd been to Afghanistan.

"When I got there and I saw the conditions and saw how much help the Afghan people needed, that was it. I went on a two-week assignment, I stayed for two months, I decided to move there, I lived there for almost three years."

Among the many people she met was her husband, who was then the spokesman for Afghanistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Like his wife, he grew up in the U.S.

She also met Shaima Breshna, an Afghan woman who was working to revive her country's ancient craft of hand-loomed silk shawls and scarves. Prior to the Taliban, women wore them to cover their heads. But with the Soviet invasion in 1979 and the Afghan civil war, silk became hard to get. And when the Taliban arrived, with its disdain for the arts and decree that women must wear the all-encompassing burqa, shawl-making all but disappeared.

Samad loved Breshna's idea and promised to help. "When we knew we were coming to Canada, my offer was 'Once I get settled ... once I realize what I can do, let me see.' I think I can probably help create a market here so we can send money back to the project, we can build upon it and we can help these women who are just desperately looking for work try to get some income and try to pull their lives back together."

Made of silk spun in the western Afghan city of Herat from mulberry trees and coloured with natural vegetable and mineral dyes, each shawl takes about a day to make. Traditionally, Samad says, they were green, deep purple and silver, but the women she is helping are making them in a variety of jewel tones "to create a more modern palette." Most have traditional stripes, others a few squiggles or diamond patterns or gilt thread.

The pieces are made by hand on primitive looms in a small workshop on the outskirts of Kabul. The women start as soon as it's light and work until the sun sets. They stop at lunch, when two teachers come to teach them to read and write.

Samad says every week 10 to 20 women show up asking to be taken on. "They're desperately looking for work, so if we could get a market going, maybe in six months we could have another location and have these women work."

Her dream is to one day open a factory in central Kabul where the women could also run a storefront.

The shawls have been popular with other diplomatic wives and with women's groups, for whom Samad is a frequent speaker. She sold 100 at a party given by her friend Odile Jouanneau, wife of the French ambassador. Another 60 changed hands at a party at Stornoway hosted by Cathy Curry when her husband, MP Bill Graham, was acting Liberal leader.

A recent interview with CBC Radio brought more responses to ArteZan's website, artezandesigns.com, than Samad could handle. Pictures of the shawls and also scarves are posted so buyers can also order online.

Samad's goal now is to find a

fair-trade store in Ottawa that will carry them. She has talked to Ten Thousand Villages but is still waiting for a reply.

"I haven't given up, but I'd really like

to get them into a retail store. It would help build up the market, and also would take a little bit off of me because I'm kind of like a one-woman show here," says the mother of 5 1/2-month-old Soleiman.

Plus, in September her husband's posting may end and the Samads would move back to Afghanistan. While she loves Ottawa, she likes the Afghans' emphasis on matters of the heart over material concerns.

"When you go to Afghanistan, it puts everything into priority in life and you become so grateful for what you have ... I sometimes tell my friends 'I wish I could just dropkick you into Afghanistan for a week, then you'd stop whining,'" she laughs.

One of the things Samad tries to impress upon Canadians wondering if Canada's troops should stay in Afghanistan is that 80 per cent of the country is stable but needs support. Unfortunately, it's the 20 per cent that's unstable -- the border areas with Iran and Pakistan where the Taliban is still influential -- where Canada's troops are.

"The West really cannot afford to abandon Afghanistan right now because it will slip back into a terror haven if it doesn't have the critical support it needs," she says.

In the meantime, there is still work to be done here.

The photo exhibition has already been to Carleton University and will open March 8 at the Universite de Montreal in March, followed by a stint at Concordia and possibly Laval University and the University of Toronto. Samad and McElhone are also working on a website.

There's a store to be found for the shawls, and more shawls to be ordered. And always, more Afghan women to help.

"I didn't go there thinking 'I'm going to help Afghan women,'" says Samad. "I knew I needed to go and I knew that I'd be able to do something. I was just letting myself go for the experience and it just took me. It was one of those times in life where it was my

fate.

"And it still is."

Wendy Warburton is the deputy editor of Style Weekly.

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Buy a shawl

Shawls by ArteZan Designs will be for sale Thursday, Feb. 22, 1 to 3 p.m. at Rockcliffe Community Centre, 380 Springfield Rd. Shawls are \$60, payable by cash or cheque. Or you can purchase them through their website, artezandesigns.com.