

# **The Dressmaker of Khair Khana**

## **by Gayle Tzemach Lemmon**

### About the Book

The life Kamila Sidiqi had known changed overnight when the Taliban seized control of the city of Kabul. After receiving a teaching degree during the civil war—a rare achievement for any Afghan woman—Kamila was subsequently banned from school and confined to her home. When her father and brother were forced to flee the city, Kamila became the sole breadwinner for her five siblings. Armed only with grit and determination, she picked up a needle and thread and created a thriving business of her own.

*The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* tells the incredible true story of this unlikely entrepreneur who mobilized her community under the Taliban. Former ABC News reporter Gayle Tzemach Lemmon spent years on the ground reporting Kamila's story, and the result is an unusually intimate and unsanitized look at the daily lives of women in Afghanistan. These women are not victims; they are the glue that holds families together; they are the backbone and the heart of their nation.

Afghanistan's future remains uncertain as debates over withdrawal timelines dominate the news. *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* moves beyond the headlines to transport you to an Afghanistan you have never seen before. This is a story of war, but it is also a story of sisterhood and resilience in the face of despair. Kamila Sidiqi's journey will inspire you, but it will also change the way you think about one of the most important political and humanitarian issues of our time.

### Praise for the Book

“A fascinating story that touches on family, gender, business, and politics and offers inspiration through the resourceful, determined woman at its heart.”

— *Publishers Weekly*

“An inspiring story of courageous community building. . . . [Lemmon] pays scrupulous attention to detail. . . [and] convincingly evokes the atmosphere of Taliban-era Kabul.”

— *Kirkus Reviews*

“[A] transporting, enlightening book. . . *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* is a fascinating window on Afghan life under the Taliban and a celebration of women the world over who support their loved ones with tenacity, inventiveness and sheer guts.”

— *People*

*Courtesy of HarperCollins*

## About the Author

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon is a Fellow and Deputy Director of the Women and Foreign Policy Program at the Council on Foreign Relations. In 2004 she left ABC News to earn her MBA at Harvard, where she began writing about women entrepreneurs in conflict and post-conflict zones, including Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Rwanda. Her reporting on entrepreneurs in these countries has been published by the *New York Times*, *Financial Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Christian Science Monitor*, CNN.com, and the *Daily Beast*, as well as the World Bank and Harvard Business School. She lives in Los Angeles.

*Courtesy of HarperCollins*

## Discussion Questions

### Questions for Discussion

1. Kamila studied to become a teacher and even earned a prestigious teaching certificate. Before she could complete her training, the Taliban took over Kabul and banned women from nearly all public places, including schools. How did Kamila adapt the skills she learned as a teacher and put them to use starting her dressmaking business, and later in her U.N. work?
2. At many crucial junctures, Kamila turns to her faith for guidance. What role does faith play in her personal journey?
3. Under the Taliban, Afghan women were confined to their homes and saw their lives transformed virtually overnight. Many women like Kamila still needed to support their families, though, and so found creative ways to work within and around these new restrictions. What would you have done under similar circumstances? Would you have dared to go against the Taliban's rules at the risk of your own safety?
4. Malekheh plays an instrumental role in teaching Kamila how to sew and in getting her dressmaking business off the ground. Kamila often seeks out the advice of her eldest sister, even though she doesn't always take it. How would you characterize the relationship between these two sisters? What role do you think this relationship played in Kamila's business success?
5. Lemmon paints a colorful, yet nuanced portrait of modern day Afghanistan. The story of Kamila and her family presents an alternative to the conventional image of women as victims of war. Did Lemmon's portrayal change the way you think about Afghanistan? Or about women and war?
6. Within a year, Kamila was able to transform a living room operation into a thriving dressmaking business—selling finely embroidered dresses to tailors throughout Kabul and providing meaningful work for an entire community of women. What do you think about Kamila's business practices? Why do you think she and her sisters were so successful? What lessons about entrepreneurship can be taken from their story?
7. In chapter 7, Kamila and her sisters work around the clock to make 6 dresses for a wedding party, only to discover that the bride is marrying a Taliban. How does this episode impact or cause you to revisit your view of the Taliban? If Taliban soldiers knew about the Sidiqi sisters' tailoring business, why didn't they shut it down? What did you think when you saw that there were Taliban who sent their daughters to work with Kamila?

8. How does Lemmon portray men throughout the book? Think of Rahim, Mr. Sidiqi, Ali and his brothers, and the Talibs Kamila encounters. Do these characters reshape or reinforce your impressions of men in Afghanistan?

9. Despite being faced with the daily perils of war and economic hardships, the Sidiqi family never completely abandoned their home in Khair Khana. What does that say about their commitment to their community? To their country?

10. How does Kamila's story affect the way you see the future of Afghanistan and America's presence in this war-scarred country?

*Courtesy of HarperCollins*