

London catwalk boost for Afghan seamstresses

Marie Colvin

AT a fashion show for the charity Afghanaid this week, models will swirl silks and satins worked by young seamstresses in Afghanistan, but the tone will be bittersweet. The loss of Karen Woo, the British doctor who championed the charity and had been expected to attend the show, will be keenly felt.

Woo, 36, was among 10 members of a medical team shot dead in August as they returned from a mercy mission to a remote Afghan province.

One of the last photographs of her was taken during a visit to a workshop that teaches impoverished women to make the clothes that will be shown on the catwalk in London on Thursday. Tickets are being sold to fund the charity.

Afghanaid works in some of the most conservative and isolated parts of Afghanistan. It operates "from the bottom up" to bring education and training to the most needy young women in this devastated land.

One success story on display last week came from a village in the Khoram wa Sarbagh district in Samangan province, 250 miles northwest of Kabul. It is reached by a narrow road through towering mountains, punctuated by rock slides and wandering goats.

Young women bend over black metal sewing machines as their friends spin bicycle wheels by hand to drive them because there is no electricity. They are part of a programme run by Afghanaid that has brought vocational skills to a bleak village of mud houses and dirt roads.

Amina Khan, 17, joined a year ago and learnt tailoring, cutting and sewing. "Before I learnt tailoring, I did not know how to sew my own dress," she said. "We could not even afford a dress because we're very poor."

She is shy and wraps herself in a dark shawl, but she has quietly moved on from the paralysis of ignorance that grips so many of the nation's women.

"I'm taking orders from the neighbours and I can sew the men's, women's and children's dresses," she said proudly.

Her story illustrates the tricky social quicksands that Afghanaid has to navigate. Women in such areas rarely leave the home and the villages are too remote for a permanent office. So Afghanaid has set up mobile centres that go to villages for

six months to teach practical skills, reading and writing.

It then moves on to another village, a journey of a day for an aid worker but a distance that few of the women they help will ever travel.

Lady Jackson, wife of General Sir Michael Jackson, former chief of the general staff, and Lady Cowper-Coles, wife of Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, the former ambassador to Afghanistan, are backing the Afghan Fashion Show on October 7.

"We're trying to give a positive message for Afghanistan to remind people of the history and culture and creativity of the country," Jackson said.

The task is huge: one in four Afghan children dies before the age of five, life expectancy is 44 and 88% of



Woo: backed charity

women in Afghanistan are illiterate.

"It's only when people start having hope in their future, in their children's future, that they can start resisting the pressures on them," said Farhana Faruqi Stocker, Afghanaid's managing director in Kabul, referring to the insurgency.

The clothes are by Zarif Design, a boutique fashion label founded by Zolaykha Sherzad, whose family fled Afghanistan following the Soviet invasion. She returned to Kabul after the fall of the Taliban.

Her designs combine traditional fabrics and old coins, used as buttons, with contemporary fashion.

"We're trying to bridge the past with the present," Sherzad said.

*Afghan Fashion Show 2010,
October 7, Porchester Hall,
London W2 5AS.
afghanfashionshow.org.uk.
All proceeds from the event
will go to Afghanaid and
the Soldiers' Charity*