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No cover-up: Burqa businesses go bust in Afghanistan



Afghanistan's homegrown burqa industry is facing a decline in demand, with fewer young women choosing to cover their faces.

Despite advances in women's rights, Afghanistan remains a deeply conservative country and most women continue to wear the all-enveloping garment.

But tradesmen say times are changing in the capital, Kabul, with the demand for burqas declining among young women who are increasingly going to school and taking office jobs.

75 year old Haji Hussain has been dying fabrics for burqas for the last 40 years and has noticed the change.

He used to dye between 30 to 40 burqas per day during Taliban rule, but now only dyes a few garments on a good day.

"The reason is that now more people are going out with bare faces and fewer with burqas, it is out of fashion," he explained.

China's entry into the market in recent years has also changed the industry dramatically.

"Compared to the past, Chinese burqas are outselling homegrown burqas... Business is down compared to the past. In the past, we'd sell lots but now it's much less," said young burqa seller, Mohammad Ashraf.

Even families that still make the burqa in Afghanistan use material from China or from neighboring Pakistan, in part, because it's easier to pleat.

Imported Chinese burqas also come embroidered, which means Afghan seamstresses only have to sew on the cap and netted veil for the garment to be ready.

This is a much simpler and cheaper process than making an Afghan burqa which involves a number of steps, including the hand embroidery of unique patterns on the sleeves and the cap.

While the demand for the burqa has lessened in Kabul, shopkeepers have seen an increase in demand from conservative societies in the provinces, in part because women welcome the anonymity of having everything covered, even their eyes, amid growing insecurity in the country.

35 year old Mohammad Akram owns a burqa shop in downtown Kabul and has noticed an increase in demand from unstable regions in the south of the country from where U.S. troops are withdrawing.

“The business is good for now. We do wholesale, we sell around \$1,000 to \$1,500 worth of burqas to provinces like Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul on a weekly basis,” he said.

Akram sells a variety of burqas in his shop, with Afghan-made burqas being the most expensive at 1-thousand to 3-thousand Afghanis (between \$20-60) and Chinese-made burqas costing between 500-800 Afghanis (between \$10-20).

For many in the West, burqas have come to symbolize the state of women’s rights in Afghanistan, provoking images of the oppression enforced on women by the strict Taliban regime.

But many women’s rights activists in the country have dismissed the West’s fascination with the burqa as the least of their problems, pointing out that they continue to battle with issues of domestic violence, forced marriages, and a society in which they lack full autonomy.