

WITH THIS BREATH I FLY
Directed by Clementine Malpas and Sam French



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LOGLINE

With This Breath I Fly presents an intimate portrait of two courageous Afghan women fighting for their freedom after being imprisoned for “moral crimes,” while exposing the complicity of the European Union in censoring their voices, and how the international press – and our documentary – forever alters their lives.

SYNOPSIS

At the height of the international occupation of Afghanistan, two women – Gulnaz, raped and impregnated by her uncle, and Farida, on the run from an abusive husband – are imprisoned on charges of “moral crimes” by an Afghan justice system that is supported by billions of dollars of aid money from the European Union.

Shot over ten years, *With This Breath I Fly* follows these two courageous women as they fight for their freedom against a patriarchal Afghan society determined to keep them bound to tribal culture, while exposing the complicity of the European Union in censoring their voices, and how the international press – and our documentary – forever alters the course of their lives.

DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

With This Breath I Fly is an intimate portrait of two heroic Afghan women who have the courage to speak out against a male dominated society, who refuse to be silenced in the face of overwhelming pressure. The film also pulls back the curtain to explore the behind-the-scenes storyline of how the European Union tried to block the release of the film and censor their voices, and how the press surrounding this decision altered the narrative of the film. In doing so it raises larger questions of power and representation – who decides whose voices are heard, what role does the media have in exposing injustice and shaping the narrative, and what responsibility does the international community have to protect women's rights in a country like Afghanistan?

Farida's and Gulnaz' stories are not unusual. Over 50% of women imprisoned in Afghanistan are locked up for what society considers "moral crimes". Running away from an abusive husband or being raped are not criminal acts under the Afghan constitution. Yet the overwhelmingly male dominated justice system often follows tribal law, punishing and imprisoning women for the crimes that men commit against them.

With This Breath I Fly exposes this double standard and explores how difficult it is for women to fight for their rights in a society that disempowers them. The vast majority of women in Afghanistan do not have agency in the public sphere without the permission of men – they are not allowed to own property, they are forced into marriages, and they are denied ownership of their bodies. While many women are imprisoned by the justice system for "moral crimes," many more are imprisoned by the society in which they live.

This was supposed to change when the United States and the coalition forces ousted the Taliban from power. We promised to free women from brutal Taliban repression and instituted legal reform that protected their rights. But cultural and tribal traditions have continued to entrap women in subservient roles, and the international community has been hesitant to enforce cultural change. It is one thing to enshrine women's rights in a constitution, it is quite another to police the situation at the local level. This reticence has left Afghan women in limbo. Unable to speak out against the cultural norms that keep them subservient and bound to the whims of their male husbands and relatives, they have nowhere to turn and no one but a few brave activists and lawyers to protect their rights.

Because of the publicity surrounding the European Union's decision to censor the film, Gulnaz would not have become the international face of women's rights in Afghanistan. It was only this publicity and international pressure that forced President Karzai to issue an unprecedented pardon in her case. This set a precedent for future cases, and led Afghanistan's Attorney General to order a review of all moral crimes cases in the courts. It also helped push the Afghan parliament to pass the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) act. But Gulnaz's story was soon forgotten as the press moved on to more current matters. And Afghanistan's courts largely returned to business as usual.

With This Breath I Fly examines the role of the international community in safeguarding women's rights, and the limits of what can be accomplished. The film also explores how we impacted the lives of Gulnaz and Farida by making this film. We believe that our role is to amplify the voices of our subjects to tell their own stories - an act of empowerment in and of itself - but we cannot escape the fact that we played an important role in shaping their narrative as well, and we continue to struggle with whether our work has helped. Ultimately, our job is to tell stories. We believe this matters.

With This Breath I Fly could not be more relevant today. Thousands of women are still imprisoned for "moral crimes" in Afghanistan. And now that the Taliban have taken over Afghanistan's government, women's rights are under threat more than ever before. Many fear that Taliban rule will herald a return to draconian enforcement of sharia law, denying women education, forcing them out of public life, and instituting even stricter punishments for "moral crimes."

By shining a spotlight on this injustice, the filmmakers hope to remind the international community not to abandon Afghan women.

- Clementine Malpas & Sam French

THE WOMEN IN THE FILM

GULNAZ

On a summer night in Kabul, Afghanistan, 19-year-old Gulnaz is bound, gagged, and raped on the kitchen floor by her uncle. She tells no one of this crime, afraid that her family will punish her for this shameful act. But when a doctor discovers she is pregnant, she is forced to confess what happened. She is arrested, charged, and imprisoned for “forced adultery.”

But the courts give her a path to freedom – marry her uncle and become his second wife, and she will be released from prison. She refuses.

Instead, Gulnaz decides to speak to the press. Her story ignites a media firestorm. Represented by American lawyer Kim Motley, her case goes all the way to President Karzai, who bows to international pressure and grants her an unprecedented pardon.

But after she is freed from prison, Gulnaz languishes in a women’s shelter, disowned by her family and unable to leave because none of her male relatives will claim her. She faces a terrible choice: flee the country that imprisoned her and seek asylum abroad, or marry the man who raped her in order to give their daughter a future that has been taken from her.

FARIDA

Farida, forced to marry an older man she had never met, suffered horrible mental and physical abuse at his hands over the course of ten years of marriage. His beatings caused her to suffer five miscarriages, and he would regularly sleep with young male prostitutes in the house they shared. She finally seeks freedom by running away with Rahme Khoda, the man she loves.

But nowhere in Afghanistan is safe for a young couple suspected of sin. They are hunted down and thrown into prison, separated once again by a prison wall.

Farida’s lawyer Shakib fights valiantly against a court system that seeks to punish her transgression under tribal law. Her only chance for freedom is to convince her husband to grant her a divorce. But in a society where women are traded like cattle, this will come at a steep price.

Featuring exclusive access and never before seen footage from inside Afghanistan’s prisons, *With This Breath I Fly* takes you behind the headlines and the shocking statistics to investigate these two personal stories of hope and indomitable courage.

THE FILMMAKERS

Clementine Malpas - Director

Clem is a documentary filmmaker with over nine years experience in the developing world.

A self-shooting director, she was previously based in Kenya and Afghanistan, and has made films for Channel Four, NBC, PBS, Current TV, the United Nations and the Aga Khan Foundation.

Sam French Director | Producer

An Oscar-nominated filmmaker, Sam spent five years living and working in Afghanistan, where he produced and directed documentaries for the UN, NGOs, aid organizations and the media, including HBO, BBC, CNN, Channel 4 News and Al Jazeera.

He wrote and directed the Academy Award nominated short film “Buzkashi Boys,” which was the first narrative film since 2001 to be filmed entirely on location in Afghanistan.

Sam is back in Los Angeles, developing both narrative and documentary feature film projects. Sam believes in the power of storytelling to connect people across different cultures, and that if we share our stories we can change the world.

Leslie Knott Producer

Leslie is an award-winning filmmaker and co-founder of Tiger Nest Films.

Her first film, *Out of the Ashes*, the story of the Afghan Cricket team’s rise to success (BBC Storyville), won a 2011 Grierson Award. Her films have been broadcast on Netflix, BBC, ARTE, PBS, ITV, ABC, NBC, Channel 4 and CBC.

Leslie was the Associate Producer of “Buzkashi Boys” which was nominated for an Academy Award in 2013. The film was made in partnership with the Afghan Film Project, a non-profit NGO that Leslie co-founded in 2010 to help train Afghan filmmakers and foster Afghanistan’s film industry.

Farzana Wahidy Associate Producer

Farzana Wahidy is an award-winning Afghan documentary photographer and photojournalist, best known for her photographs of women and girls in Afghanistan. She was the first female photographer in Afghanistan to work with international media agencies such as the Associated Press (AP) and Agence France-Presse (AFP).

WITH THIS BREATH I FLY CREDITS

A Development Pictures / Dirty Robber Production

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In Association with
Tiger Nest Films

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END CREDITS

Directed by
Clementine Malpas and Sam French

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Produced by
Leslie Knott
Sam French

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Executive Producers
Martin Desmond Roe
Pinar Toprak
Chris Uettwiller
Jeff Zimbalist

--

Cinematography by
Clementine Malpas
Leslie Knott

--

Edited by
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Nick Bradford
Jeff Springer

--

Original Music by
Pinar Toprak

CRAWL

Associate Producer
Farzana Wahidy

Additional Cinematography by
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Sam French
Joel Van Houdt

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Miriam Arghandiwal

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Baktash Wali
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Farzana Wahidy
Ibrahim Amiri
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Nick Frew

Post Production Accountant
Karen Forchione

Re-Recording Mixer
Robert Roth

Production Legal
Tom Rosenstock
Alex Yousefzadeh