

Resonating Voices: Afghan Women as Broadcasters and Radio Producers in the 1960s and 1970s

The Careers of Farīda Usmān Anwarī and Anīsa Latīf Durrānī

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Abstract

Following the 1964 constitution of Afghanistan, which conferred civil rights that included equal rights for women and freedom of the press, Afghan women capitalised on these opportunities to shape new directions in radio programming. They navigated and negotiated societal constraints to excel as broadcasters and producers, creating widely popular programmes. Their success, driven by diligence and ingenuity, is exemplified by the legacy of radio broadcasting pioneers like Farīda Usmān Anwarī and Anīsa Latīf Durrānī. These women used radio as a form of cultural and artistic resistance, transforming poetry recitation and integrating classical Persianate poetry into their radio shows. This article offers a brief overview of the role of Afghan women in radio broadcasting during the transformative decades of the 1960s and 1970s, highlighting how they navigated emerging media opportunities. In doing so, this study contributes to a broader historical understanding of women's evolving roles in media and emphasises their agency, innovation and resilience in challenging societal norms.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Afghan women activists, radio broadcasting, knowledge production, Farīda Usmān Anwarī, Anīsa Latīf Durrānī

In Afghanistan, the 1960s and 1970s marked an era of political experimentation and global consumerism that profoundly shaped the nation's trajectory. The 1964 advent of a constitutional monarchy ushered in civil liberties, particularly freedom of expression, which influenced radio, music and the arts. A 1973 coup transitioned Afghanistan to a republic, fostering formal cultural institutions for cinema, theatre and the performing arts. By 1979, the Afghan socio-political landscape intertwined communist and leftist ideologies with mass media, as exemplified by Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA), which promoted local and

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folk music traditions. This period saw Afghanistan at the heart of global ideological contestations, influenced by the Cold War, student movements, decolonisation, anti-imperialist sentiments and new identity paradigms (Behzan 2013, 2014; Leake 2023). These forces spurred revolutionary fervour across the nation even as radio broadcasts captured the spirit of the time, showcasing the people's artistic responses to these historical upheavals, particularly through music and poetry. Afghanistan's engagement with political and cultural changes during these decades was profound, reflecting a dynamic interplay of global and local influences.

Within this special issue of the *International Quarterly for Asian Studies*, which considers women and knowledge production in Afghanistan from a variety of perspectives, this article focuses principally on elucidating the pivotal and historical role women played in the development of the mediascape in Afghanistan, particularly through radio broadcasting. Central to this enquiry is the exploration of how these women revolutionised the airwaves, thereby exerting a profound influence on both the dissemination and production of information and the societal perception of women in public and professional domains. It presents two important figures, Farīda Usmān Anwarī and Anīsa Latīf Durrānī, who were radio announcers and producers for Radio Afghanistan during this formative period. While Anwarī recited the classical works of Persianate poets as a means of responding to the challenges of everyday life amid a growing atmosphere of authoritarian rule and Cold War politics, Durrānī built upon the efforts of Anwarī to create innovative radio programming that combined music with history, memory and listener requests. Anwarī's and Durrānī's contributions also underscore the pivotal role of radio as the most accessible medium for reaching diverse audiences, thanks to its focus on oral and aural communication, thereby overcoming literacy barriers and allowing for a broader dissemination of information and knowledge than traditional written forms.

By the late 1960s, Afghanistan's media infrastructure centred on Radio Afghanistan, based in Kabul, with only limited television and print circulation. Radio, broadcast in Dari and Pashto, reached both rural and urban audiences, though access was uneven and often mediated by gendered norms. Domestic listenership among women grew with the availability of inexpensive transistor radios, yet women's participation as audiences and producers remained constrained by region, class and social custom (Doubleday 1999, Dupree 1977, Emadi 2002).

It is important to note that Anwarī and Durrānī did not emerge in a vacuum. By the mid-1960s, there was a brief history of women's voices on the airwaves. A decade earlier, Latīfa Kabīr Sirāj would be the first woman to wear a *chādārī* (veil) before a microphone and recite the news on the radio; Mīrmīn (Madame) Parwīn was the first woman to sing on radio; Shafīqa Habībī, Shukrīya R'ad, Nafīsa 'Abbāsī, Fahīma Amīn and Nurjan Farhānī, amongst others, were all

pioneers of female representation on the national radio station (Daro 2008, Sakata 2013: 51–53). These women often came from educated, urban and middle-to upper-class families – social backgrounds that afforded them both mobility and access to employment in state institutions. Their presence on the radio reflected both opportunity and constraint: while they helped to push gender boundaries, their participation also aligned with state-led modernisation agendas that privileged the visibility of elite women.

These are but a few examples of the complex, engaging and largely unexamined ways in which women's voices resonated through the radio in the 1960s and 1970s. During this era, radio blurred the boundaries between public and private space and gave the female voice a heightened profile at a moment when Afghan women were demanding new rights, redefining norms and experimenting with self-representation.¹ However, the voices that reached the airwaves were far from representative of Afghan womanhood writ large. While they may have been listeners, most rural women, particularly those outside Kabul and other major cities, were largely absent from the medium as producers. Their exclusion from production roles was shaped by structural and ideological barriers – regional inequalities, limited access to formal education and entrenched gender norms around visibility and respectability. Nonetheless, many rural women actively engaged with radio as a medium, often negotiating listening times within the rhythms of domestic and familial life.² In this sense, radio extended beyond elite urban centres, fostering auditory publics that included women who were otherwise marginalised from direct representation on the airwaves.

Moreover, women's voices in this period did not manifest solely in radio. They could be found in poetry readings, school debates, political positions and organisations, women's magazines and even in public protests. The radio amplified some of these expressions, selectively curating which female voices entered the national imaginary. While it offered unprecedented visibility for women like Anwarī and Durrānī, it also reflected – and at times reinforced – the uneven terrain of gender, class and geography in Afghanistan's media landscape (Osman 2020). Understanding the social positions of these pioneering women thus allows for a more intersectional reading of radio's feminist potential and its limitations during this formative era.

This article has two aims. First, by examining how radio broadcasting during the 1960s and 1970s was made even more significant by drawing new publics into its fold, it reveals how broadcasting was used to directly confront traditional norms and values, especially those related to gender and to women's place on the air. Radio was not only a tool for communication, but also an instrument for

1 Cf. Osman / Bajoghli 2024: 3–5, Kandiyoti 2007, Burki 2011: 50–53.

2 Author interview with Lorraine Sakata, ethnomusicologist of Afghanistan, 20 June 2017. Lorraine remarked that in Hazarajat, where she conducted much of her fieldwork in the 1960s and 1970s, for women, listening to radio was often an activity relegated to the private space of the home and away from men.

restructuring the contours of gender relations between the public and private realms. As wireless radios and long-distance transmitters became more readily available in both city and countryside, they came to alter not only the physical but also the imaginative contours of Afghan connectivity to the world beyond Kabul. Second, this study argues that the radio programmes produced by women are examples of the ways in which Afghans used global technology, refashioning it to reflect local traditions and art forms that gained mass appeal. The recitation of classical poetry, as exemplified by female announcers on Radio Afghanistan, was and remains part of an older tradition of performance and narration characteristic of the broader sphere of shared influence, language and culture surrounding Afghanistan (Mohammadi 2012). The fact that women were testing the limits of female radio speech in the medium's formative years through their invocation of a traditional art form offers critical insight into how they were enacting a seemingly quiet social revolution on the soundwaves, subverting patriarchal notions of gender difference within the context of monarchy and state-directed "imaginings" about what it means to belong to an Afghan nation.

To distil these findings, I draw on a wide range of primary sources, including newspapers, women's magazines and archived radio programmes from the 1960s and 1970s. This corpus is complemented by oral history interviews I conducted with Farīda Usmān Anwārī and Anīsa Latīf Durrānī, two pioneering women in Afghan radio. These conversations – based on their personal memories and reflections – were crucial in recovering perspectives often missing from official state archives and male-dominated historical narratives. My approach combines close listening and textual analysis with a feminist historiographic lens, attentive to the gaps, silences and affective textures of women's media labour. As a diasporic Afghan scholar, my own positionality, shaped by distance from home, refugee displacement and a commitment to documenting cultural memory, inevitably informs the questions I ask and the voices I seek. At the same time, I recognise the limits of this research: the disparate archival holdings across the world from Afghanistan to America, the partial nature of surviving broadcasts and the challenge of accessing rural women's media experiences directly. While the space in this article does not allow a full description of the painstaking methodology necessary to piece together a history of radio in depth, I am inspired by Saidiya Hartman's (2019) "critical fabulation" to fill in the gaps of the historical record through my reliance on oral histories. In this context, fabulation does not imply fabrication but rather a method of narrative reconstruction – one that brings together fragmentary sources, oral testimonies, and historical context to render visible the lives and experiences otherwise obscured in the archive. This article is drawn from my broader ongoing book project, tentatively titled *Sounds of Kabul: Radio and the Politics of Popular Culture in Afghanistan*, which maps these dynamics more fully and addresses the complex politics of media, memory and representation in modern Afghan history.

Women and state-led reform in Afghanistan, 1953–1973

From the 1960s to the early 1970s, Afghanistan underwent significant political and societal changes, especially regarding gender roles. Under King Muhammad Zāhir Shāh and Prime Minister Dāud Khān, the country pursued a broad modernisation agenda that included economic development initiatives, such as industrialisation and foreign investment; educational expansion, including the establishment of coeducational universities; legal reforms that promoted women's rights and participation in public life; and infrastructure projects like the construction of roads, dams and communication networks. In 1959, Dāud Khān's announcement of the voluntary removal of the veil and the end of female seclusion marked a departure from traditional norms (Dupree 1978: 530–31). Unlike previous attempts, these reforms were aligned with Sharia Law to mitigate religious opposition (*ibid.*: 452, Poullada 1989).

Women began to enter various sectors, including radio broadcasting, despite ongoing social resistance. Female participation in the labour force increased, particularly in administrative roles. International support, most notably from the United States and the Soviet Union, encouraged women's workforce participation, contributing to the rise of female professionals such as nurses, teachers and doctors (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003: 6). Educational workshops and business courses provided new opportunities for civic and economic engagement – primarily to women from educated, middle- and upper-class backgrounds (Oksendahl 1961: 5–7, Crews 2015: 190). However, these developments did not reach all women equally. Structural inequalities, such as educational disparities, linguistic hierarchies and entrenched patriarchal norms, limited many women's access, particularly in rural areas, to the benefits of state policies and foreign-sponsored development programmes.

The 1964 constitution, while not explicitly guaranteeing gender equality, emphasised justice and individual liberties, fostering a consciousness of personal freedoms. It relaxed government control over the press, promoting social and political expression (1964 Constitution of Afghanistan). From 1965 to 1972, two women served as ministers in government: Kobrā Nūrzāyī was Minister of Health (1965–1969) and Shafīqah Zīyā served as a political advisor to Prime Minister ʿAbdul Zāhir (1971–1972) (Burki 2013: 113). Moreover, Radio Afghanistan played a crucial role in shaping public discourse during this period of liberalisation. From the time a radio transmitter was first introduced, the state relied on international support to build broadcasting infrastructure. This began with sending Afghans abroad to gain the technical knowledge required for radio broadcasting. In 1926, King Amānūllah Khān (r. 1919–1929), the royal architect of Afghan modernism, sent Engineer Ataūllah to Germany to receive the necessary training to establish and install a radio facility in Af-

ghanistan.³ After a year of dedicated study, he returned to Kabul along with German technicians and two radio transmitters. In 1927, for the first time, radio was broadcast from Afghanistan. The official radio station – *Rāḍiyyū Kābul* (Radio Kabul) – was housed in a small room of a building known as *Kūṭī Landanī* located near *Pul-i Artal* (Artal Bridge) in Kabul (Ghīasī 1970; Shākir 1968, Hūssaynzada 2011). Literally meaning “London Box,” the building’s name was inspired by its British colonial architecture. Some accounts indicate that *Kūṭī Landanī* was originally a café and later appropriated as the radio station (Hūssaynzada 2011). However, only a few people in Kabul, who could afford radio sets, were able to receive transmissions.

By the 1960s, radio broadcasting in Afghanistan had expanded to the entire country and globally as far as Japan and South Africa (Ministry of Planning 1961: 109). Once again, German technicians stepped in, to help the Afghans acquire advanced Siemens transmitters that allowed radio waves to reach longer distances. King Zāhir Shāh (r. 1933–1973) and Prime Minister Muhammad Dāūd Khān (1953–1963) revived Amānūllah’s vision for modernisation, placing a premium on radio as the prime instrument to educate the population, create a unified nation and propel it into the future. In 1964 with the construction of seven recording studios, two concert studios and a large auditorium, the Ministry of Information and Culture changed the station’s name from *Rāḍiyyū Kābul* to *Rāḍiyyū Afghānistān* (Radio Afghanistan) (Malyar 1977: 2).

It also became the centre for the patronage and promotion of new popular music suitable for radio broadcasting. In addition to content in Persian and Pashto, daily radio programmes from 60 to 90 minutes were available in English, German, Russian and Urdu.⁴ State support of these languages reflected Afghanistan’s bilateral relationships in the Cold War, in which they remained non-aligned.⁵ Moreover, the state invested in casting bilingualism as a vital survival skill in a twentieth-century world that would be defined by international trade and business. This was part and parcel of creating cosmopolitan and competitive citizen-subjects (Balibar 2016). As the airwaves opened up, women’s voices became increasingly prominent – not only as models of reform but also as producers, presenters and professionals, reflecting broader shifts in gender norms and aspirations.

The overthrow of King Zāhir Shāh in 1973 and Afghanistan’s transition to a republic under Dāūd Khān led to the drafting of the 1977 constitution, which more explicitly recognised women’s rights as integral to national development.

3 For more on the circulation of scientific and technical networks of knowledge exchange between Afghans and Germans, see, for example, Wardaki 2021.

4 A survey of *Pashtūn Zhagh*, a state-sponsored periodical produced by the Ministry of Information and Culture and Radio Afghanistan, reveals that these foreign languages were featured in nearly every printed radio schedule throughout the decades of the 1960s and 1970s. See also Ministry of Information and Culture 1977: 268–270.

5 For a historical discussion of Afghanistan’s entanglements during the Cold War, see, for example, Crews 2015, Nunan 2016, Westad 2005.

Unlike the 1964 constitution, which emphasised individual liberties in general terms without specific gender provisions, the 1977 constitution directly addressed women's political participation and affirmed their equality in public and professional life. Following these reforms, women assumed prominent roles in government and were appointed to key policy-making committees, signalling the regime's commitment to showcasing gender inclusion as part of its modernisation agenda. Women were hired to work in junior level positions for the state, including ninety-one women in the Office of the Minister of the State, fifty-four women in the Presidential Secretariat and three in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Emadi 2002: 98). Educational programmes and initiatives like the Women's Welfare Association (WWA) and the Women's Institute (WI) promoted financial independence and literacy among women, contributing to some level of societal progress. The Women's Coordinating Committee (WCC) was also established to promote women's issues and encourage their participation in public affairs. In particular, they sponsored a series of educational programmes on Radio Afghanistan that focused on family affairs and short dramas depicting family issues (Emadi 2002: 98, Burki 2011: 115). Nonetheless, these public displays of state support for women were socially limited, and did not reflect the conditions for most (Emadi 2002: 98–99).

These developments under Dāud Khān's republic built upon earlier decades of reform, particularly the period from 1953 to 1973, when foundational strides in women's empowerment were initiated through a combination of state policies, international collaborations and emerging grassroots efforts. While political reforms opened up educational and professional opportunities – particularly in urban centres – international organisations such as UNESCO and various foreign aid programmes also contributed to expanding girls' schooling and training for women, especially in health and social services. These efforts, though uneven, helped build the infrastructure for women's increased participation in public life.

At the grassroots level, Afghan women themselves began organising beyond state frameworks. While liberal women's groups like the Women's Democratic Organisation of Afghanistan (WDOA) supported reforms, they often worked within the limits set by the state and refrained from directly challenging the slow pace of change (Burki 2013: 116). In contrast, more radical activism emerged from women affiliated with leftist movements. Most notably, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) was founded in 1977 by a group of intellectuals led by Meena, a prominent activist later assassinated in Quetta in 1987. RAWA aimed to advance human rights and social justice for Afghan women by promoting secular democratic values. Its members engaged in a range of activities – from literacy programmes and health-care initiatives to political education and underground organising – laying the groundwork for a more confrontational and independent model of feminist

activism that would evolve under the pressures of war and exile (Mansoor 2002: 76–77).

Despite these achievements, significant obstacles persisted. Women entering public life faced ongoing resistance rooted in patriarchal attitudes, limited mobility outside urban centres and heightened scrutiny in professional and political spaces. Disparities between rural and urban areas remained stark, and even in cities, women often encountered harassment, unequal pay and tokenistic inclusion in state institutions. These unresolved tensions foreshadowed the complex terrain that Afghan women would continue to navigate in the decades to come. It is within this fraught sonic and social landscape that the work of Farīda Anwarī and Anīsa Latīf Durrānī is situated – not simply as acts of breakthrough or defiance, but as interventions that navigated the constraints of gendered expectations, institutional structures and the politics of voice in a rapidly changing media environment.

Afghan women on the air: Farīda Anwarī and Anīsa Latīf Durrānī

Farīda Anwarī and Anīsa Latīf Durrānī were pioneers of their time, disrupting the otherwise patriarchal soundscape and opening a new chapter in the struggle for women to speak and to be heard. Their voices represented the crucial ways that female identity was performed and perceived, while also challenging the entrenched prejudices against female representation in the public arena. When considering a woman's voice on the radio it is important to think of women's radio speech as a performance in an arena wherein women are disproportionately expected to be silent or quiet. Indeed, these women helped to gradually re-sound the modern public sphere and this had profound consequences for the conduct and experience of public life (Puwar 2004: 1).

Farīda Anwarī

In 1983, Farīda Anwarī left Afghanistan, one of many Afghans who went into exile in response to the communist government (Daro 2008: 231, Radio Āzādī 2021). In the years prior, she had become a prominent figure in Afghan broadcasting – a pioneer who rode the waves of radio's expansion and transformation, from its early experimental stages to its golden age. The length and diversity of her broadcasting career, which mirrored larger changes in Kabul, make her an ideal protagonist to begin this history. Her trajectory allows us to trace the broad contours of Radio Afghanistan's development: from its commercial, state-sponsored beginnings under a constitutional monarchy and later a democratic republic, to the Marxist revolution that imposed heavy censorship on nearly

all broadcasts. Finally, Anwarī's career illustrates the contested place of the female radio voice as it asserted its presence on the airwaves and within the public sphere. As a celebrated journalist, announcer, poetry reciter and speaker, her professional path invites new ways of thinking about sound and mass media at a time when these technologies were in flux and actively shaping – and being shaped by – modernity.

Anwarī began her broadcasting career in 1966 while she was still an undergraduate student studying journalism at Kabul University. Radio administrators, including her professor, Ḥusayn Rīyāzī, who oversaw the radio's *Prugrām-i ma'ārif* (Education Programme) recognised her talent for public speaking and recruited her to work for the station.⁶ She recalls how this happened:

I actually didn't listen to the radio; it was by sudden chance that I was asked to go to the radio station and this coincidence changed the path of my life. The incident that led me to this is as follows. It was the last day of exams at the university. The Education Programme at Radio Afghanistan was produced by one of our professors at the university, Ḥusayn Rīyāzī. We [colleagues at the university] had plans to go to a restaurant and the cinema after the exams were finished, and this was because we wouldn't be able to see each other for three months because of winter break from the university. But when I was in the hallway of the School of Literature and getting ready to leave, Husayn Rīyāzī came out of his office and asked for me. I went to him. He said, "You have to go to the radio station with me today. The host of the 'Voice of Education' programme didn't arrive and you have to go and take that person's place."⁷

In addition to Professor Ḥusayn Rīyāzī, another influential character that helped Anwarī advance her career was Karīm Ruhīna, the Manager of Programmes at Radio Afghanistan. Afghan men proved to be critical interlocutors to help women make inroads at the radio station. Anwarī recalls the following:

At that time Karīm Ruhīna was the Manager of Programmes or by coincidence he must have been in the recording studio during the time we were reading our scripts for the show. We were still in the recording studio when a telephone call came and we were told that Karīm Ruhīna wanted to come downstairs and see us and speak to us. Karīm Ruhīna came and we were very excited to meet with him because he was a very famous host and radio announcer. And often times when he would read the news, I liked listening to him and he had a great voice. When he came down he said, "Who is the person who read the news?" Mr Rīyāzī said, "Farīda read it." Karīm Ruhīna told me: "Please come with me to the office of the president." Actually we really didn't want to go, but we felt obliged. When we were inside the office of Mr Kushakī and he looked towards me and asked, "Are you not my student?", I said "Yes." He said "Good...Come work at the radio station and sign a contract with us and create a programme for us." This was what happened by chance, that by announcing the Voice of Education programme I found my way to the radio. But you know, from the first time I sat behind the microphone, I fell in love with this type of work.⁸

6 Oral history interview with Anwarī by the author, 26 February 2025, Manteca, California. This account is also detailed in her interview on Radio Azadi (2021).

7 Ibid.

8 Oral history interview with Anwarī by the author, 26 February 2025, Manteca, California. This account is also detailed in her interview on Radio Azadi (2021).

Although her family was initially not supportive of her working for Radio Afghanistan, she decided that she would not let the obstacles of living in a patriarchal society stop her from pursuing this career path. Considering the fact that Anwarī was allowed to go to school and obtain advanced degrees, it is interesting that her family had stronger opinions about her work as a “public” personality on radio. This example reveals some of the tensions that existed within Afghan families concerning their daughters, and more generally, women in public roles. The “dissonance” – the potential disruption of noise and the concomitant potential “danger” – of a woman’s voice revealed anxieties about the potential of women’s authority to defy and push back against patriarchy.

Anwarī took her first assignment at Radio Afghanistan managing the Educational Programme. Soon thereafter, she produced other popular radio programmes focused on literature, including *Az har chaman samanī* (Flowers from Every Garden), *Surūd-i hastī* (The Song of Being), *Tarāzū-yi tīlā’ī* (Golden Scales), *Naqd-i adabī* (Literary Criticism) and *Bāz-shināsī-yi khabragān honar va adab* (Getting Reacquainted with Experts of Arts and Literature). She co-hosted one of her most popular radio programmes, *Zamzama’ hā-yi shabhangām* (Nocturnal Whispers), with the noted Afghan writer and novelist Akram ‘Usmān.

Anwarī was not a self-proclaimed feminist, but her on-air personality certainly rubbed against traditional gender norms that relegated women to the private sphere and did not appreciate the amplification of female voices on radio. In her poetry recitations, she relayed strong emotion, changing the pitch of her voice to cater to the tone of the poem she was reciting and using her voice to connect with her listeners. She was a self-identified artist, and she imagined that her audience understood this, declaring in a 1973 interview: “[s]omeone who can recite a poem and attract listeners is a true artist, in the way that an actor in the theatre can capture the attention of the audience. The declamation of poetry is, for this reason, close to the performances of theatre and drama artists” (Zhwandūn 1974).

The recitation of poetry is part of an oratory tradition that long predates the advent of the radio. Zuzanna Olszewska describes how poetry composition and recitation has long been the most widely practiced form of art among both literate and illiterate communities in Afghanistan and Iran (Olszewska 2007: 205–206, and 2023). Poetry recitation was not only taught in schools, but informally practiced in households throughout the Persian-speaking world. Even among the illiterate, classical Persian poetry became popularised through oral traditions and passed from one generation to the next. In this vein, song(s) too, became a vessel for preserving poetry, folklore, stories and literature. Poets in Afghanistan possess an aura of wisdom and authority because, as Olszewska (2007: 206) contends, “oral literature in local vernaculars has been a medium of mass communication, a popular pastime and social activity, and a portable repository of cultural, historical and philosophical knowledge.”

In 1975, during a week-long seminar on the life and work of the seminal Persianate literary figure Mawlānā Jalāl ad-Dīn Muḥammad Balkhī (d. 1273), Radio Afghanistan featured songs, music and poetry recitations in his honour (The Kabul Times 1974).⁹ Anwārī's recitations of Mawlānā's poems became so widely popular that events celebrating the poet's life and work became a regular part of Radio Afghanistan's programming. These programmes not only raised awareness and literary appreciation among both the intelligentsia and the general public with access to radio, but also exemplified how Afghans were adapting global technology to reflect local image-making practices. Indeed, the strategic use of radio as a global technology influenced both the content of the programming and, ultimately, the producers' relationship with their listening communities.

In the 1960s, Anwārī's literary radio programmes reached a broad audience and gained popularity due to her ability to embody poetic forms that were simultaneously old and new – old in their lyrics, new in their mode of performance.¹⁰ While Anwārī's programmes did not formally serve as channels for political opposition, as their content was primarily artistic rather than overtly political, her choice to declaim texts by classical Persianate poets allowed her to convey subversive political commentary while maintaining plausible deniability (Siamdoust 2017: 63–85).¹¹

For example, Anwārī skilfully curated selections from the classical Persian poetic canon to resonate with the emotional and social realities of her listeners. During Afghanistan's turbulent decades of political transformation – from the 1964 constitutional monarchy to the 1973 republic and the leftist regime of 1978 – Anwārī turned to the mystical verse of early Persian Sufi poets as a framework for engaging with the trials of daily life. Her broadcasts often evoked emotional responses among listeners, particularly those for whom such poetry echoed personal histories of loss or displacement.

Marī Wāḥidī (b. 1950), a Dari instructor in the 1970s and Anwārī's contemporary, recalls how her illiterate mother, Bībī Lāl, was moved to tears upon hearing the opening couplets of Mawlānā's *Masnawī* recited on air:

Bishnaw az nay chun shikāyat mīkunad
Az judā'ī-hā ḥikāyat mīkunad

Listen to this reed flute's lament,
As it recounts tales of separation.

9 Mawlānā is traditionally associated with the Afghan town of Balkh, and is given the *nisba* (suffix) Balkhī, a name that holds particular pride for Afghans, in contrast to the Turks, who emphasise the “Rumi” part of his name.

10 Oral history interview with Anwārī by the author, 26 February 2025, Manteca, California and Oral History Interview with Anīsa Latīf Durrānī by the author, 26 August 2015, by phone. Both describe having received letters of support from throughout Afghanistan and neighbouring Tajikistan and Iran at the Radio Afghanistan station.

11 Siamdoust (2017) makes a similar observation in the case of Mohammad Reza Shahjarian's performance of his well-known ballad “Bird of Dawn”, based on a classical Persian poem, which became a song of protest.

Having left her native Badakhshan as a young bride to live with her husband's family in Kabul, Bibī Lāl experienced these verses as deeply personal. "Mīguft, in az man hast," she would say – "*this is mine*."¹² In such moments, metaphor opened space for multiple interpretations, especially around the resonant theme of separation from the beloved. As Gay Breyley notes, in Persian Sufi poetry, the figure of the beloved may symbolise not only a romantic or spiritual companion, but also loftier ideals such as justice, freedom or divine truth (Breyley 2013: 160).

This careful, yet deliberate, meditation on dissent reflected the shifting pulse of major political, social and cultural developments of the period. While political magazines employed novel tools – such as cartoons and caricatures, largely absent from Afghan print media before 1964 – to express political criticism, Anwarī, within the realm of mass media and the recording industry, made strategic use of classical Persian poetry to voice dissent without attracting censorship (Behzan 2013: 634–635). Anwarī capitalised on a shared language and literary heritage to create a forum for dialogue about life, spirituality, belonging, unbelonging and love. If the state was invested in creating a national culture based on the work of these poets, that goal was inconsequential for the larger work of Anwarī's recitations: giving people comfort in the face of political and social turmoil. Drawing from the canon of classical Persian poets afforded Anwarī protection from an increasingly authoritative state in the 1970s and, despite its restrictions, allowed her to embody indigenous literary traditions that both expressed and fuelled shared sentiments and the variegated experiences of her Afghan audience. For centuries, palaces, teahouses and private courtyards served as the venues for the dissemination of poetry in the Persianate world (Gay 2013: 164). By the 1960s, radio served as one of the venues that enabled listeners to take pleasure in the sounds and semantics of classical Persian poetry and music, while continuing to entertain and inspire.

Anwarī's contributions to Afghan radio and literature constitute a significant chapter in the history of modern Afghan media, exemplifying how poetic and performative traditions were mobilised to articulate cultural identity and veiled political dissent. While her strategic use of classical Persian verse offered some protection from censorship during the 1960s and 1970s, this space for subtle critique had narrowed considerably by the early 1980s, as Afghanistan's political landscape shifted under intensifying authoritarianism and Soviet occupation. The regime's growing intolerance for independent cultural expression ultimately compelled Anwarī to leave the country in 1983, highlighting both the limits of literary strategies under state repression and the escalating risks faced by women working in public media. Yet it is important not to overlook the enduring significance of Anwarī's position as an educated, elite woman

12 Marī Wāhīdī (Afghan school teacher in the 1970s) in discussion with the author, 28 January 2019. See also Massoumi 2022: 704–705.

who helped shape the literal and symbolic space of voice for Afghan women. Anwarī leveraged her privileged access to education and media not simply for individual expression, but to create precedents and possibilities for others – many of whom came from far more modest backgrounds. In exile, she continued this legacy by establishing Afghan radio programmes for diaspora communities in the United States. In the 1990s, she launched *Naqsh Ha-ye Jawidān*, a programme that reconnected Afghan expatriates in the San Francisco Bay Area with their cultural roots and fostered a platform for community dialogue. This initiative ultimately led to the creation of “24 Hours Voice of Afghanistan”, further solidifying her influence across national and generational boundaries, and laying the groundwork for future Afghan women journalists in both domestic and transnational media landscapes.

Anīsa Latīf Durrānī

Anīsa Latīf Durrānī was born in 1951 in Kabul and recalls how from a young age she developed an interest for the radio:

This is an interesting story: I was in the eleventh grade and I was interested in news broadcasting. Latīfa Kabir Sirāj – she was a pioneer in radio broadcasting for women – was my main influence. During the time she was an announcer on the radio, she would wear a veil, get behind the microphone and recite the news, and her recitation was so beautiful, and I must have been in sixth or seventh grade when I would listen to her and try to imitate her. She had a profound effect on me. When I used to play at home with my friends and all [...] I would stand on top of the *sandalī* [heater] and put my hands together over my chest and say, “The news of the youth is starting now. Your announcer, Latīfa Kabir Sirāj.”¹³

The reference to Latīfa Kabir Sirāj – Afghanistan’s first female radio announcer, employed at Radio Kabul in 1947 – illustrates how early female voices in broadcasting inspired later generations of women and helped to gradually expand the space available to them in the public sphere. In an interview with *Zhwandūn* magazine in 1970, Latīfa Kabir Sirāj describes how in the early years of radio broadcasting, the president of Radio Kabul at the time, ‘Abdul Ghafūr Brishnā, would send a tape recorder to her house so that she could record some of the programmes to be aired.¹⁴ She also recounted some of the challenges she experienced with her career on the radio: “The first reaction of my friends and relatives to my becoming an announcer was not favourable. They were scolding me for doing so, but my husband was the only one to stand firmly by my side and encourage me [...] You know I wrote some plays and even acted in them. This infuriated some friends” (Zhwandūn 1970). The mention of her husband as the primary supporter of her professional goals highlights how men also contributed to the women’s movement, even if implicitly. In fact, without the

13 Oral History Interview with Anīsa Latīf Durrānī by the author, 26 August 2015, by phone.

14 For more on ‘Abdul Ghafūr Brishnā (1907–1974), see Wardaki 2021.

support of men, including university professors and technicians at Radio Afghanistan, these women would not have been able to challenge gendered barriers in their professional fields and in society more broadly.

It was through the struggles and pioneering work of women in earlier generations that future female radio announcers found inspiration to pursue this career path, despite the continued challenges facing women in the Afghan soundscape. Anīsa Latīf Durrānī went on to follow her passion for radio broadcasting; after graduating from Zargūhna High School, she obtained a degree in Journalism from Kabul University in 1973 (Voice of America Radio Program 2018). While attending college, her close friend and colleague Farīda Anwarī introduced her to Radio Afghanistan and helped her secure a position in the “Voice of Education” radio programme. At the studio, Durrānī met the station’s president, Šabaḥaldīn Kushkakī, who praised her voice and encouraged her to become an announcer. After consulting her father, she accepted the role and began producing and announcing for the Youth Programme during her final two years of high school. Anwarī recognised and affirmed her talent in voice and poetry recitation.¹⁵

The extent to which women helped each other build opportunities for professional development, growth and the breaking of gendered stereotypes is evidenced by the relationship between Anwarī and Durrānī, colleagues at university who then became co-workers at the radio station. In 1974, Durrānī became the announcer for the programme, *Az Har Chaman Samanī* (Flowers from Every Garden), a programme originally launched by Anwarī. The emerging network of women committed to mutual empowerment opened up new possibilities for shaping the role and reach of women on the radio. In the words of Durrānī:

[...] in a way, we brought about a revolution on Radio Afghanistan. We had a large group interested in *farhang* [cultural] topics and it included Farīda, Mr Shāhzān, Latīf Nazanī, Bashir Rūygār, and many others. In summary this was a really great group of people who had a strong interest in culture. And wonderful programming was produced and edited at this time. And we really loved what we did.¹⁶

Radio programmes featuring female voices were among the most popular at the time and eventually elevated their presenters to celebrity status.¹⁷ In the 1970s both Farīda Anwarī and Anīsa Latīf Durrānī were frequently interviewed by local newspapers and other widely circulated media, including *Zhwandūn*, the leading pop-culture magazine of the period, published bi-lingually in Dari and Pashto. In 1972, the editor of *Zhwandūn* magazine, Shukrīya R‘ad, collaborated with the Volunteer Women’s Association to inaugurate an annual com-

15 Oral history interview with Anīsa Latīf Durrānī by the author, 26 August 2015, by phone.

16 Oral history interview with Anīsa Latīf Durrānī by the author, 26 August 2015, by phone.

17 Anīsa Latīf Durrānī described how the radio station would receive bundles of fan mail indicating what programmes they enjoyed the most, which were coincidentally those featuring female producers. The programmes were also reviewed by the listeners, indicating which were most popular.

petition for “Girl of the Year”. The objective was to recognise the achievements, service, education and talent of young Afghan women and to encourage their professional development. That same year, Anīsa Latīf Durrānī was selected as one of the winners – an honour that supported her career at the radio station, where she was entrusted with greater responsibilities and opportunities for advancement (Anis 1972, *The Kabul Times* 1972).

In 1975, both Farīda Anwarī and Anīsa Latīf Durrānī were part of a delegation of Afghan musicians and artists who travelled to Iran to celebrate the Shah’s birthday.¹⁸ In the late 1970s, as radio and television merged, both women were given their own programmes to manage and became among the first Afghan women to produce, create content and appear on television (Daro 2008). These opportunities emerged as they continued to push and struggle their way forward, creating space for not only themselves, but for other women to become a visible and accepted part of the public sphere.

Conclusion

Prominent female voices like those of Farīda Anwarī and Anīsa Latīf Durrānī transformed Afghanistan’s soundscape in the 1960s and 1970s, using the dissonance of the female orator as a means to preserve culture and promote literature, music and the arts. Their careers underscore the growing audibility of women alongside their increasing visibility. These stories reveal how modernity, mass communication and intersecting trajectories of feminism, popular culture and democracy shaped the gendered soundscape. Afghan women’s voices – refined, forceful and independent – challenged patriarchal norms by disrupting traditional listening practices that had deemed female speech inappropriate or vulgar. In crossing these boundaries, women became keynotes in the soundscape, transforming relationships to entertainment, information, politics and the public space.

As producers and creative directors, Farīda Anwarī and Anīsa Latīf Durrānī rose to influential positions in broadcasting, demonstrating radio’s potential to foster new notions of women’s citizenship following the civil rights, including the right to vote, that were granted in the 1964 constitution. Their programmes became spaces for navigating questions of national identity, cultural belonging and women’s place in the public sphere. Radio’s reliance on the evocative human voice fostered intimacy and imagination, amplifying women’s ideas and aspirations into the collective consciousness.

While this study focuses on a specific historical moment, its implications reverberate through later periods marked by war, migration and censorship.

18 Oral history interview with Anīsa Latīf Durrānī by the author, 26 August 2015, by phone.

As Afghanistan entered decades of armed conflict and political upheaval from the 1990s onwards, many women broadcasters were forced into exile. The diaspora has since become a vital site of sonic production, where Afghan women have continued to create, archive and disseminate media – through radio, podcasts, music and digital storytelling – often using sound as a means of resistance, memory and survival. In the absence of state support or public platforms within Afghanistan, exiled media makers have preserved the legacies of women’s voices while crafting new transnational soundscapes that connect displaced communities.¹⁹

The urgency of this subject is heightened by the return of the Taliban in 2021, whose regime implemented what many, including the United Nations, have recognised as a system of gender apartheid.²⁰ Women and girls have been systematically excluded from education, employment and almost all public life, including media production and artistic expression. The soundscape, once rich with female voices, has been silenced within Afghanistan’s borders. In this context, the sonic labour of Afghan women in exile takes on new political and historical significance, ensuring that these voices continue to resonate even as the state attempts to erase them.

19 Voice of America – Dari, Radio Azadi based in Prague, and BBC Dari have been important sources of news and information for the global Afghan diaspora.

20 UN Reports include U.N. Special Rapporteur on human rights in Afghanistan, Richard Bennett’s (2024) report.

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