



# Marielle van Uitert

How far would you go to expose the truth? Dutch photojournalist **Marielle van Uitert** travelled to Afghanistan to document a unique healthcare initiative in the war zone - hiding her camera under a burka...

**W**hat was your assignment and who were you working for?

I was asked to document the midwives program, healthcare and mental health in Kabul, Jalalabad and Nangarhar on behalf of the Dutch non-government organisation HealthNet TPO (HN TPO). This is a knowledge-driven, non-profit organisation that works in areas disrupted by war, disasters and poverty. Working together with local populations, HN TPO channels emergency aid into sustainable healthcare development. It trains and encourages the local population to combat disease, provide psychosocial care and restore infrastructure.

**Weren't you worried for your own personal safety?**

Absolutely. Three social workers were killed the day before I took the plane to Kabul. HN TPO asked if I still dared go and I decided to do so because a story had to be told. Besides, the HN TPO offices in Kabul and Jalalabad

offered a degree of protection. I knew that I'd be guarded by unarmed social workers, and we constantly switched cars and changed routes the whole time.

**How did people react to you? Weren't they curious about a female photojournalist waving a large DSLR about?**

I tried not to be too visible, so bought Afghan clothes in Kabul and kept my DSLR under a burka - it's too dangerous to walk around with a camera on show. It was forbidden to take photos during the Taliban regime and this fear is still very visible. Some women veiled the small holes in their burka when they saw my camera; others were very curious and ushered me inside to take their picture. Despite the obvious anxiety, HN TPO is well known in Afghanistan and most knew of the project and were keen to help. I met a lot of women who were happy for me to take photos of them and their families, and they also laughed at the sight of a Western lady in a burka!

Above left: Women living in the Shinwar district are taught about family health matters. Young women who are not yet married don't have to wear a burka.

Above: Surgeons remove a tumour at Jalalabad Regional Hospital. The patient's hands are tied to a wooden frame and oxygen is delivered manually.

Right: A mother takes her daughter to the doctors for a health check in Afghanistan's Shewa district. The daughter doesn't look overly keen...

**PRO FACTFILE**



**Marielle van Uitert** is a Dutch photojournalist who is as widely travelled as she is widely published. She's carried out assignments in Zimbabwe, Botswana, Rwanda, Laos and Cambodia among others, and

her hard-hitting work has been showcased in *The Guardian*, numerous worldwide newspapers and magazines, and in various Oxfam and Unicef campaigns. "Dismayed by brutal violence, surprised by brotherly hospitality, touched by inspiration and inspired by the subject, I decided to dedicate my soul to photography and to not only search for, but extend my own limits, in order to send a message."

► [www.paralleluniversum.nl](http://www.paralleluniversum.nl)





"The birth was also surprising to me. The woman was cuffed with towels to a wooden frame and air was supplied manually"

Above left: A proud mother and her prematurely born child in Jalalabad Regional Hospital. Not long ago, this child wouldn't have had a future, but thanks to new and sophisticated equipment this is no longer the case.

Above: Afghan methods of restraint and anaesthesia may seem crude to Western eyes, but Marielle was pleasantly surprised by how well the system actually works.

Left: A newborn girl takes her first gasps of air as the surgeons clamp and cut her umbilical cord. If you're of a squeamish disposition, best look away now...

**What kind of images had you imagined before arriving?**

It's hard to imagine anything at all because in a war zone everything is possible. I knew that I wasn't allowed to leave Jalalabad city because it would be too dangerous, but I also knew that I'd leave Jalalabad anyway and so imagined shots of Taliban victims and psychiatric patients. What I didn't expect to find were women prepared to bare their souls; I was even allowed to photograph the birth of a child. I also knew that I'd have to fly back immediately if things got too dangerous, so planning anything besides my three main objectives (the midwives program, healthcare and mental health) was tricky.

**And what kind of images did you shoot when you were actually there?**  
Victims of domestic violence, victims of

Taliban attacks, the birth of a child, tumour patients, young students practising with dolls in order to become midwives... What most surprised me was the equipment they had to work with - the ultrasound machines were very modern. The birth was also surprising to me. The woman was cuffed with towels to a wooden frame and air was supplied manually. Even though in Western eyes this seems old-fashioned, it all worked very well.

**How do you distance yourself from horrific scenes of abuse and illness?**

It's very hard, but you have a job to do in order to show the rest of the world what's really going on. There's a switch in my head that allows me to do what needs to be done. I always talk to the patients and try to give them something in return. For example, a

**MORE OF MARIELLE'S COMPELLING SHOTS OVERLEAF**



Left: A woman arrives at Jalalabad Regional Hospital with a sizeable tumour in her stomach, having waiting far too long to seek medical advice and treatment.

Below: A victim of domestic violence allows Marielle to photograph her cuts and bruises. Domestic violence is common in and around Jalalabad city.

Below left: A young female patient in a mental health hospital in Kabul awaits the doctors' verdict as they discuss the most suitable treatment.

woman abused by her husband came to the clinic and, rather than take pictures, we sat and talked, with the help of a doctor who spoke English. I told her she was beautiful, which made her cry; it may not seem like much, but she'd never been given a compliment before. She then allowed me to take a few photos. Working this way helped me understand and deal with what I saw - I had some awful nightmares back in the Netherlands but the stories I can tell and the love of the Afghan women are more important to me. I realise mine isn't the easiest life to live but if my work gives Afghan women more faith, more strength, then it gives me the same in return. This is why I'm ready to go back and tell more stories.

**What are your lasting impressions of Afghanistan?**

Quite simply, the strength of the people after 30 years of war. Every mother and father I met had lost a son or daughter, either during the Russian war or during the Taliban regime, and yet they still try to carry on and rebuild their lives; they work so hard just to survive. And the midwives and hospital workers deserve special mention. Even though the hospitals receive daily threats from the Taliban (who don't accept the notion of women in hospitals), they fight for their right and show a great deal of emancipation. [2]

**TURN FOR STUNNING ORANG-UTAN IMAGES FROM INDONESIAN BORNEO**

"Every mother and father had lost a son or daughter during the war... yet they still try to carry on and rebuild their lives"

