

Name

Iconic Images: The Afghan Girl

The *Afghan Girl* is one of the most famous photographic portraits made in the 20th century. It features a young girl staring at the camera. She is wearing a large red scarf that covers her head and shoulders. There are several large holes in it, and the girl's green clothes can be seen through them. Dark hair surrounds her beautiful distressed face. This picture became famous because of the piercing gaze of her green eyes. In this photo, red and green colors contrast each other, attracting the viewer's attention. In 2002, the photographer learned that the girl's name was Sharbat Gula.

This portrait became the most renowned representation of Afghan female refugees. It was taken in 1984 during the Soviet Union's occupation of the country. The picture of Sharbat made the Western society feel sympathy towards thousands of girls and women who had to leave their homes because of the war. When the picture was put on the cover of a *National Geographic* issue, people started sending letters to the magazine, asking about the girl and offering help.

The war in Afghanistan lasted for over nine years, and this period was called the Second Cold War. The U.S. and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf were sponsoring the Afghan insurgents. The conflict escalated and turned into a confrontation between America and the USSR. During this war, everyone's attention was drawn towards political leaders, and the public knew little about the fate of numerous refugees who fled Afghanistan. The *Afghan Girl* reminded them that women and children were the real victims of the conflict. A lot of them lost their families; they had to leave their houses and homeland to survive. Sharbat's parents were killed during a bombing, and she had to cross the mountains with the rest of her family. The *Afghan Girl* symbolizes the struggle of thousands of people damaged by the war.

The picture was shot by Steve McCurry, an American photographer who was covering the conflict in Afghanistan. He visited several refugee camps, including Nasir Bagh where Sharbat was staying. The photographer wanted to show the refugee crisis from a female's perspective. McCurry entered a tent where an elementary school was located and saw a 12-year-old girl. She looked very distressed, and the teacher told Steve that her village was attacked by a helicopter. She was traumatized by her losses and a risky trip across the mountains.



Steve McCurry managed to get the girl's permission to take a picture of her. He used his Nikon FM2 camera and Kodachrome film to make the photo. He did not get the girl's name, and she was not aware that her portrait had become legendary. Later, she got married and had four daughters. McCurry saw her again in 2002 when he went back to Afghanistan. Several women claimed to be the girl from the picture, and the experts had to use the iris-scanning and face-recognition technologies to find out the truth. McCurry took another photo of Gula, and this second image symbolizes the continuous struggle of Afghan women who suffer from the civil war in their country.

The *Vietnam Napalm Girl* is an equally famous picture which represents the suffering of children affected by a military conflict. It shows a little girl who runs naked down a highway. South Vietnamese planes bombed her village, and she had to tear off her burning clothes to survive. This photo also aims to remind the audience about how military conflicts affect children and women. While the world focuses on political ambitions and statistics, thousands of innocent human beings actually suffer and die. Pictures like the *Afghan Girl* and the *Vietnam Napalm Girl* show the ugly side of any war where there is no glory, only pain.

