38 Unveiled Voices from Afghanistan

A selection of interviews from
“Unveiling Afghanistan: the Unheard Voices of Progress”
Campaign
The opinions expressed in this book do not necessarily reflect the opinions and policies of Armanshahr.

**Contact:** armanshahrfoundation.openasia@gmail.com  
**Website:** http://www.openasia.org

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**Interviewers:** Jawad Darwaziyan, Atiq Arvand, Zahra Yegana  
**Translation into English:** Khalil Rostamkhani  
**Editing:** Laura Grant  
**Photo editing:** Matthieu Hackière  
**Layout:** Rooholamin Amini  

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Editors’ Note

The present book is a collection of 38 interviews drawn from “Unveiling Afghanistan, the Voices of Progress” Campaign that was launched in mid 2013 by Armanshahr in a 50 day countdown to the third round of Presidential election in Afghanistan and profited from the support of the FIDH. The campaign sought to record views and opinions of more than 100 political, social and cultural dignitaries of Afghanistan who have played a role in shaping and influencing what is known as the unofficial history of Afghanistan. All the interviews were intertwined with human rights and women’s issues. The questions began with a biography and developed to human rights and subsequently women’s issues. The final questions were concerned with the personal aspects of involvement and commitment to human rights. The interviews were serially published in Dari and English in Afghanistan’s 8 Sobh daily, websites of FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights) https://www.fidh.org/en, Armanshahr http://openasia.org/en/?cat=222 and the US newspaper the Huffington Post http://www.huffingtonpost.com/author/unveiling-afghanistan and various social networks. Also a selection of long interviews were published on Armanshahr YOUTUBE Channel. SEE: goo.gl/8oUEOX. A documentary film entitled “Afghanistan; Unveiling a Never-Ending Tale” directed by Diana Saqeb has been produced by Armanshahr, marking with this publication, the end of the Campaign.
Ahmad Wali Massoud: “Those who look to the past cannot plan our future”

Ahmad Wali Massoud is a prominent Afghan politician and head of the Massoud Foundation. He is the younger brother of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the well-known resistance figure against the Soviet occupation and the Taliban who was assassinated by al-Qaeda operatives two days before September 2001. Ahmad Wali Massoud has been Afghan Ambassador to the UK, and Special Representative of Ahmad Shah Massoud in Europe. He was the government spokesman in Kabul after the fall of the Taliban regime. He obtained a Masters in Diplomatic Studies from Westminster University, London in 1989.

Can you give an example of a human rights violation that has directly impacted your life?

I was studying at the Esteqlal School, a prestigious Franco-Afghan school in Kabul, at the time of the Soviet occupation. I had to drop out of school and return to my home province of Panjshir. I couldn’t go to school for years
because of the war.

What are some important achievements in Afghanistan today?
The difference between today and 13 years ago is like that of day and night. Most importantly, a new system of governance has emerged in the country, based on modern principles, such as separation of powers, democracy, human rights and citizenship. We are looking hopefully towards the upcoming presidential election to bring further positive changes to Afghanistan.

What gives you hope for the future?
The awakening of the youth gives me some confidence. Young people make up 70% of the population in Afghanistan. Their awakening holds great promise.

What do you fear most today?
I am concerned about the traditional and ethnic leaders. I worry they might seek to re-establish the political mafia and push the country back into crisis. They can stir up conflict and turbulence to hold onto power that they have illegitimately gained. These possibilities are unfortunately not yet out of the question for us.

What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?
We haven’t done anything to nurture and keep our culture alive. Education is the best solution to this challenge. The other challenge is a political one: our political system is still extremely fragile. We need to give attention to re-enforcing the foundations of the system and achieving
political stability. Those who look to the past cannot plan our future. Our modern political system has nothing to do with the outdated, ethnic-centred mentality of traditional political leaders. We need to move away from politics based on ethnic divisions.

**Will the present-day Afghanistan allow schools to once again be closed to girls and women to be excluded from society?**
No! Women comprise half the population in Afghanistan. They would never allow it. They have established barriers of resistance and represent a strong force in the society. They will resist any regressive measures.

**Can you give an example of a human rights violation suffered by a woman in your family?**
One of my male relatives will not allow his daughters to go to school. He is stuck in the ways of the past.

**What are some factors limiting women’s participation in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?**
The dominant culture, inherited from years of war and confrontation, is one of the deterrent factors. Another is extreme poverty in Afghanistan. We know that poverty is the enemy of development: poor families cannot be expected to seek education for their children. Finally, the lack of knowledge and awareness about rights and responsibilities in society is the biggest obstacle to women’s participation.

**What are three major changes women wish to see?**
1. Improved access to education and knowledge;
2. Increased participation in politics and the economy;
3. The creation of a united platform for the defence of women’s rights in all areas of society.

**What do you wish for your daughters?**
I hope that they will make the most of their studies and stand on their own two feet. I wish that they will never need to depend on men to look after their needs, and that they will prove they can be even more useful than men in society.

**What have you done, personally and professionally, to eliminate discrimination in your society?**
We established the Massoud Foundation to challenge outdated ways of thinking and to open up knowledge for everyone. The Foundation engages directly with young people and hopes to create impact by changing belief structures.

**Is there a specific message you wish to share with the world?**
We only have this opportunity to build trust and shared values. We have to sit together and talk. I hope that we can use inter-Afghan talks, based on a national agenda to build sustainable peace and a bright future for Afghanistan.
Ismail Qassemeyer: “Poverty and unemployment have paralysed the lives of most Afghans”

Mohammad Ismail Qassemeyer is a jurist who formerly headed the Public Security and Public Rights Courts of the Supreme Court and taught constitutional rights at university for seven years.

Have your rights ever been violated?
I was head of the Public Security and Public Rights Courts of the Supreme Court under Mohammad Daoud Khan. Thirteen days after the communist coup led by Mohammad Taraki, I was dismissed and imprisoned for more than a year. After that, I was kept under house arrest for a considerable period of time.

What are the important achievements of the new era in Afghanistan?
The present is inextricably connected to the past. One of the major achievements we have seen during our lifetime was the people’s uprising against the Soviet Union, one of the major powers in the world which led to that power’s
disintegration. Our crusade against that power and its puppet regime in Afghanistan prompted revolutions by small and large countries around the world to claim their independence and sovereignty from the Soviets. We have also witnessed remarkable achievements in urban development, education, health services, and women’s issues. The most important achievement of the new era is the establishment of a government in accordance with modern criteria. For the first time in Afghanistan, a Constitution was established, based on the separation of powers and universal criteria.

**What do you fear most today?**

My worst fear is that the pillars of national unity may crumble. In that case, we would move towards disintegration, no matter what we wish. My other fear is that the mafia might gain more influence in the political and economic system.

**What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?**

One of biggest challenges is the absence of national sovereignty. Unfortunately, our politicians, led by the President, have failed to establish and develop sovereignty. Our system is plagued with extensive and systematic corruption. Nobody can deny this. Poverty and unemployment have paralysed the lives of most Afghans.

**Will the present-day Afghanistan allow a recurrence of the closing of schools to girls and the blocking of women’s social participation?**

That is very unlikely. I don’t think it will happen again.
Have the rights of any of your female family members ever been violated?
There is a mild type of violence in our family. By that, I mean that some members of the family behave in a way, for example raising their voice, swearing and making threats that have negative impacts on the women in the family.

Which factors deter women from participating in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?
One such factor is the tribal and ethnic structure that prevails in our social relations. Families adhere strongly to these customs and rarely allow them to be modernised. And in this way, the patriarchal mentality that underlies those customs has been sustained. Parents still decide who their daughter, or even their son, should marry and under what conditions they will get married. Extremist interpretations of Islam have laid the groundwork for the suppression of women and their subjection to violence.

What do women want?
They want to gain knowledge about Islamic rights. There are very few rights that Islam restricts for women. Women also aspire to better education, including about their religious rights, and employment.

Which sources and centres of power can women rely on to promote their rights and demands?
The Constitution is the most important source for women’s rights. Women can achieve their political, economic, social and civil rights by relying on the Constitution.
What have you done in your personal and professional life to fight against discrimination?
I have had an important role in all the processes of formulating the civil codes since the time of Daoud Khan. Under him, I was member of a committee that worked to develop women’s rights and status in the society. I have fought to fulfil the rights of women in the light of the sharia and Islamic values.

Do you have a specific message to share?
The key to our success, as testified by history, is our national unity. We must protect our Islamic unity and brotherhood and adhere to it.
Awtar Singh Khalsa is the President of the National Committee of Hindus and Sikhs of Afghanistan and the head of Kabul’s Dharamshalas Committee for Hindu worship centres. Singh served as the Sikh representative to the Loya Jirga from his home district of Paktia, and was appointed as a senator in 2004 for a five year term. He served in the Army from 1981 to 1990 and subsequently worked as a teacher of his mother tongue and Punjabi.

Can you share with us some memories of times when your rights have been violated and how they have influenced your life?
The government has never protected the rights of the Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan. We have visited the Parliament and the President’s Office several times and to demand our due rights. We once staged a peaceful demonstration and followed it up with a news conference. But despite all our efforts, nobody has listened to us so far.
During the Taliban’s rule in Kabul, they intended to implement a law with 16 articles limiting our rights, but fortunately not all of those regulations were fully implemented. For example, the law prohibited Hindus and Sikhs from building new worship centres, riding horses in the city, wearing clothes similar to Muslims, shaking hands with Muslims, and living in a house with Muslims. We also had to fly yellow banners above our houses and shops to distinguish ourselves.

**What are the most important achievements since the time of the Taliban in Afghanistan?**

We did not have many schools in Afghanistan in the past. Now, tens of thousands of private and state schools are operating in Afghanistan. That is a major achievement. There has been significant renovation and construction of infrastructure, such as roads, highways, and hospitals in the country.

**What has attracted your trust in the present system? What do you see as an innovation or a positive development?**

Unfortunately, in my opinion, nothing meaningful has been done. Under the previous regimes, the Hindu and Sikh brothers controlled about 50% of trading, but all this was lost during the wars. The government has not paid any attention to this issue. Furthermore, we have been burning our dead in the same place for the past 120 years. Now, the Muslim inhabitants who live in that neighbourhood are strongly protesting against our right to perform our mortuary rituals – they
want us out of there. The issue is still not resolved.
In 2002, we asked the Presidential Office for housing for the Sikh and Hindu communities. Although the Presidential Office approved our request, the Ministry of Urban Development and Kabul’s City Council have not yet given us a place to live. After much work, the City Council of Kabul has allocated some land to us in the Lattaband area, which is not even within the map of Kabul. Perhaps, they mean that we should leave the city. They gave the Hindus and Sikhs a place for rubbish disposal as a place to live.

Is it possible that girls could once again be banned from schools and women excluded from social participation, as was the case under the Taliban?
This won’t happen in my opinion, because the Taliban that ruled Afghanistan in 1996 will not come back with the same mentality if they are included in the government after 2014.

What are the factors that deter women from participating in social, economic, political, and cultural spheres?
It is a great shame for Afghans that most families do not allow girls to study. For example, in Kandahar, Helmand, Khost, Paktia and Paktika provinces, women are not even allowed to leave the home, let alone to go to school. In those provinces, even the Hindu and Sikh women wear burqas when they leave the house.

What changes to women want to see?
Women want to have a greater share of power. They
are present in most decision-making institutions – for example the Parliament and government ministries, the police and the army – but they expect more. They should be given up to 50%. The law has enabled them to study. The real groundwork must be done now to allow women to benefit from that right.

What have you done in your personal and professional life to fight against discrimination?
I have always endeavoured to eliminate prejudices. Basically, I believe that humanity is important, not religion. If humanity is the base, then religion will prosper by itself. I have worked as a teacher in two provinces: Paktia and Kabul. It is an honour for me that people who were once my students are now teaching other children and serving their society.
Batul Moradi: “A little light is better than absolute darkness”

Batul Moradi is a documentary filmmaker and writer. She came into the spotlight of human rights and civil society in Afghanistan by being the first woman to successfully challenge a baseless allegation of adultery made against her by her husband through the legal system.

Have your rights ever been violated?
I was forced to pursue a case through the courts and before the Independent Human Rights Commission in Afghanistan because of a human rights violation I personally experienced. I quickly found the challenges against me were enormous and I studied law in order to be able to better defend my case. I became very familiar with the judicial system in Afghanistan as a result of this case, and worked closely with many civil society organizations in pursuing the defence of my rights.

Can you tell us more about your legal case?
My husband and I divorced in 2008. After our divorce, my
husband denied that he was the father of our children and publicly denounced me as an adulteress. This is an extremely serious allegation in Afghanistan. It meant that my children no longer had the right to an identity card, which gives them the basic rights to travel, to hold a passport, to vote. And for me, not only did this accusation mean I would lose my reputation and work opportunities, it could even lead to imprisonment or death by stoning. There are many cases of Afghan men accusing their wives of adultery, but never before has a woman challenged the allegation in the courts. I knew that in falsely accusing me of adultery, my husband was actually committing the crime of Qazaf (a baseless and defamatory allegation of adultery) and that I had a right to demand the withdrawal of his accusation in the special court established by the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law. I knew I was the first to make this case, but I could never have known how much pain and harassment fighting the case would bring to my life.

My case took five years to be resolved, and only after I pushed it through all the possible avenues that I could. I endured humiliation by legal officers who said I should be “ashamed” for bringing the case. The Attorney-General accused me of committing “violence against men” by pursuing my case. I was frequently harassed by the Afghan police and even beaten by my ex-husband in front of the Independent Human Rights Commission. Finally, by using DNA evidence for the first time in Afghan history to prove the paternity of my children, I succeeded in defending my case. The court issued the maximum penalty against my ex-husband – two years imprisonment.
This was an achievement for the Afghan civil society as a whole, because the case exposed the way these false accusations are used by many Afghan men to harass their wives. In doing so, these men intimidate women into not pursuing their rights. Women’s honour is so very fragile in our society. The success of my case could even open the way for other complaints by women falsely accused; until now, nobody thought that a false accusation could be punished.

**What do you see as an achievement in Afghanistan since the time of the Taliban?**

A little light is better than absolute darkness. But Afghanistan today, compared to international human rights standards, is no stronger than a flickering candle. Not only women and children, but all people in Afghanistan, live in very difficult conditions with minimal respect for human rights. The denial of human rights is the most horrifying disaster faced by any society. Human beings are the most valuable assets we have. They must be valued and respected.

**What do you see as a positive development in Afghanistan? What gives you hope for the future?**

Although Afghanistan deserves to be recognized for its efforts to rebuild and protect peace, not enough has been done with respect to the development of culture. The government could have played a very active, constructive role, but unfortunately, it has given culture almost no attention. We can see this lack of attention when we look at the national radio and television networks: even though
they receive significant funding and have good resources, they are still amongst the weakest media in Afghanistan.

**Will present-day Afghanistan allow schools to once again be closed to girls and women excluded from social participation?**

I cannot imagine the Afghan people as a whole ever wanting the schools to be closed to girls. There could be demand for it in small tribal or rural communities. Indeed in some areas, the schools have been closed or they are run in very restrictive ways to accord with the so-called traditional customs of a particular area. This happens in places where the government is weak and lacks sovereignty. That is why it is so important to invest in the cultural development of Afghanistan, to combat these backward norms that persist in some rural areas.

**Can you give any examples of instances of human rights violations against women in your family or circle of associates?**

We have all been witness to many human rights violations in Afghanistan. In particular, I saw countless violations during the time I spent in the labyrinths of Afghanistan’s courts. One example I saw frequently concerns divorce cases. Custody of the child is routinely assigned to the father, usually without a thorough examination of the case or even asking questions, such as whether the father wants the child. I saw cases where children were separated from their mother and handed over to the father even though they had not reached the legal age of custody [7 for boys and 9 for girls]. For example, in one case, a child little
more than one-month old was taken from its mother and handed over to the father. When the mother demanded her legal religious right[dower or mahr], the judge told her that she must file an official petition. This isn’t a fair application of the law: giving custody of the children to the father also requires an official petition according to the law in Afghanistan. But the belief that children belong to the father is so strong that judges circumvent the legal procedure and hand the children directly to the father after a divorce.

In another divorce case, I saw a 13-year-old girl shouting in desperation that she had been abused by her father. The mother also gave evidence in support. Yet, when the father grabbed the girl and started to leave with her, the official security guards of the court even came to help him. There are many different legal cases which lead to violations of human rights. It is almost impossible, for example, for an Afghan woman to seek a divorce from her husband.

**Which factors deter women from participating in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?**

I see economic and cultural poverty as the two main factors limiting progress by women. But women are fighting for their rights in many different ways. A woman in a remote village who demands her inheritance rights, a girl who demands the right to choose her husband and to study, a woman who seeks the right to vote, a woman who demands to be allowed to drive or to choose her own clothing: these are all women from different geographical locations, cultures, and circumstances, but they are all
moving in the same direction in pursuit of their rights.

**What do you wish for your daughter?**
I don’t have a daughter, but I try to do my part by teaching my sons that gender is not a matter that should give you power or honour, and nor should it bring you degradation and desperation. It is no different to other personal attributes, such as the colour of your skin, your ethnicity, the language you speak, and differences in your appearance: none of these things are criteria for superiority and status. Respecting the rights of others is essential.
Partaw Naderi: “Democracies deal with citizens, not ethnicities”

Partaw Naderi is the one of the only Afghan poets whose work is widely translated into different languages. He writes frequently about democracy, human rights, particularly the rights of minorities, and the meaning of citizenship. Like many other artists and intellectuals of the time, Naderi was imprisoned in the infamous Pul-e-Chakri prison in Kabul for ‘anti-regime’ activities between 1987-1984, during the time of the Soviet-backed regime. He lived in exile in Pakistan for five years, working as a Dari reporter for the BBC World Service, and returned to Afghanistan in 2002. Through his poetry and his engagement with different civil society institutions, Naderi is a strong activist for democratic development and popular participation in Afghanistan.

What do you consider as an achievement in the current era?
In the past few decades, we in Afghanistan have witnessed numerous political upheavals. We have seen the period
known as the “Democratic Decade” (1973-1923), largely under the kingship of King Zahir Shah. We have witnessed the civil war, the era of the Mujahideen (1996-1992). We have experienced the tyranny of the Taliban (-1996 2001). In my opinion, the changes we have seen since the first Bonn conference in 2001 have, in comparison, been absolutely exquisite. To put it another way, Afghanistan has finally made her way into the modern world and set herself upon a path of democratic development. The fact that we can elect and chose our leaders is a great achievement in the history of our country. Even though our experience of elections so far has not always been fair or flawless, it has been a good place to start.

Of course, our democracy in Afghanistan is still far from perfect: many groups, including the mafia, have tried to use the system for their own benefit while suppressing the rights and liberties of others. We haven’t always been able to seize all of the opportunities that democracy has offered. But I do believe that building, reinforcing, and internalizing democracy is the only way forward for Afghanistan. Democracies deal with citizens, not ethnicities. We need to strengthen this idea of citizenship in Afghanistan.

Another great development of our time has been freedom of expression and particularly, freedom of the media. We have some high quality television networks, newspapers, and magazines. Of course, we cannot attribute all of these achievements to the government. As citizens, we have paid a high price for our freedoms: our journalists have been assassinated, beheaded, imprisoned, and forced into exile for the sake of our freedoms.
What do you fear?
The transition to democracy, and particularly the upcoming presidential elections, is a critical period for Afghanistan. There are some groups which are pressuring citizens not to vote in the elections. The future government’s legitimacy depends on holding fair elections with strong and representative popular participation.

What are the major challenges facing Afghanistan?
In Afghanistan, the level of political consciousness is low and people still vote based on their tribe, region, or ethnicity. There is not great awareness and understanding about the meaning of ‘citizenship’. This is a major challenge for us. Others are the general lack of security, and the absence of well-organized political parties and civil society organizations. All of these elements contribute to the building of a democracy.

Is it possible that girls could once again be banned from schools and women excluded from the social sphere?
Afghanistan is so weak and fragile that any external factor could cause such a tragedy. But I do believe in the ability and awareness of our youth in Afghanistan to prevent this tragedy unfolding.

Which factors hinder women’s participation in social, economic, political and cultural arenas?
The tribal mentality is one of the biggest challenges confronting democracy in Afghanistan. In a democracy, the role that citizens play in choosing their representatives is essential. But men who are rooted in the tribal mentality,
for example, might prohibit their young daughters from voting in the elections.
Lack of security is another issue which frustrates women’s participation, both at the elections and in the society in general. In fact, the simple lack of awareness amongst women about the importance of their rights as citizens is a significant concern for our nascent democracy.

What do women in Afghanistan demand?
Women’s greatest demand is their right to have access to modern education. For many different reasons, women have always had less access to education than men. There are, for example, fewer women in the higher education institutions and universities. The vast majority of women are illiterate. Education is everyone’s basic right. Still, even amongst the educated women of Afghanistan, many women cannot choose their own partner. In some parts of Afghanistan, women continue to be sold in the name of tradition and customs.
The right to work is another important right which many women are deprived of in Afghanistan. They have no share in the chain of production; the economic system is structurally dominated by men.

Which social forces can women count on?
Civil society organizations working for women’s rights, and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. The media plays an important role in promoting public awareness about women’s rights. But at the moment, all of these institutions are lingering in the realm of symbolism and clichés. I hope to see them rise above this
and become genuinely effective and national institutions.

**What do people need in order to realise a more prosperous Afghanistan?**

The most important factor is the rights of the citizen. The meaning of being a citizen of Afghanistan is recorded in the Constitution: citizens should all be equal and have the same basic rights. However, unfortunately, in Afghanistan, identities continue to be defined on the basis of ethnicity, religion, language, region, and mafia relations.
Torpikai Nawabi: “Popular uprisings against the Taliban prove that the people do not want them to rule Afghanistan anymore”

Torpikai Nawabi is an elected Member of the Kabul Provincial Council. She has an MA in Administration and Management from India. She has been a long-term activist in favour of women’s rights.

Have your rights ever been violated?
Violations of human rights occur every day in this country. I am a member of this society and therefore, a victim of human rights violations. During the election campaigns, I noticed that women’s pictures were torn down and pictures of male candidates were posted in their place. My pictures were also torn down. This is a clear violation.

What gives you hope for the future?
My very presence as a woman in the field of politics and my exercise of my rights. This is a positive development that gives me hope in the future.
What are some important achievements in Afghanistan since the time of the Taliban?
One can mention the remarkable activities of the civil society, the existence of freedom of expression, and access of girls to education in most parts of Afghanistan.

What do you fear most today?
My greatest fear is that we may return to the pre-1992 dark days with the impending withdrawal of the international forces from Afghanistan.

What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?
Firstly, the security challenge is clear for all to see. Another challenge is youth unemployment. They are seeking asylum in western countries and migrating to find work. Occasionally, you read reports of boats carrying illegal Afghan migrants sinking in international waters with all the people on board drowning. Economic weakness is another challenge, which leads to many other challenges.

Is it possible that girls could once again be banned from schools and women excluded from social participation, as was the case under the Taliban rule?
I don’t believe that anybody wants a recurrence of that scenario in Afghanistan, because the people have experienced it once and saw that it arrived at a very tragic outcome. Popular uprisings against the Taliban prove that the people do not want them to rule Afghanistan anymore.

Can you tell us about any specific occasions where the
human rights of a female family member or friend were violated?
The worst memory of mine and all of the female members of my family is that we were all deprived of the right to education and work for nearly six years under the Taliban.

Which factors deter women from participating in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?
One factor is the lack of security. Another are the repressive customs that don’t allow women to engage in political issues. Men always think that only the political parties can engage in political activities. And since the women are not in the political parties, they do not have the right to engage in political affairs. Finally, women do not believe the promises of the government made up of men, and of the international community.

What do women want?
They want to see security established so that people can enjoy the benefits and rights given to them in the law, both through the sharia and the Constitution. Secondly, they want to see a better economic situation for families. Poverty and underdevelopment prevents some members of families gaining their education. Finally, they want to see the reprehensible customs reformed and a society that functions in accordance with the rule of law, so that all people will achieve their rights.

Which sources and centres of power can women rely on to promote their rights and demands?
Civil society is the most reliable source for women to
advance their rights and demands. Through solidarity of civil society institutions which put pressure on the government, women can achieve their goals.

**What do you wish for your daughter?**
I do not have a daughter. All the girls of Afghanistan are my daughters. I wish that they will never face the challenges we faced and go on living, working, and studying in a humane environment like girls all over the world.

**Any final messages you wish to share?**
My hope is that there will be peace in the nation of Afghanistan, enjoyed by all its people. I wish there will be no more problems in this land. I pray to God for a good government to take office after the elections so that all the people will enjoy their rights equally and that the law will be implemented equally for all.
Suraya Popal: “They stole his sister, not his car”

Suraya Popal is a senior researcher and President of the Academy of Sciences of Afghanistan.

Can you share with us an example of a rights violation you have experienced in Afghanistan?
One day in early spring, I was waiting for a bus or taxi to take me to work when I heard someone shouting for help. I turned around to see what was happening, and saw an old woman trying to free herself from an armed man who was attacking her. I approached them and asked her attacker what he was doing. He told me that the woman was from the Kolali people of Dehmazang and that she was a spy. It took a lot of begging from me, and appealing to the man’s sense of respect for his mothers and sisters, before he finally agreed to let that woman go.

What are the important achievements since the time of the Taliban in Afghanistan?
The renewed presence of women in society; the opening of schools and universities to all children of this land,
especially girls and women; the participation of women in political, social, cultural and economic activities; and the freedom of the press.

**What gives you hope for the future?**
The underground mines that have been discovered in Afghanistan bring hope to all Afghans for a prosperous future. I hope that those mines will be operated effectively in accordance with international law in order to guarantee the economic future of the people of Afghanistan.

**What do you fear most today?**
I am worried that the international community might repeat the mistake it made when it left Afghanistan alone in 1993.

**What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?**
The absence of security, peace and stability; administrative corruption; the continued inequality of women, particularly in relation to their relatively weak participation in developing our homeland when compared to their brothers.

**Would today’s Afghanistan allow schools to once again be closed to girls and women to be excluded from social participation?**
No! Time does not move backwards. Women have displayed such brilliance in the political, social, cultural, and economic scenes that there is little likelihood of a return to the past. The people of Afghanistan, men and women alike, believe that education is necessary for
them to be able to contribute to progress in their country and play a worthy role in its development. Furthermore, women of Afghanistan are capable of defending their rights on the basis of Islamic principles – principles that have tasked women and men with the responsibility to gain knowledge. They have proved that they can defend their religious, cultural, and historical values. Not only is it impossible to close the schools in view of these societal developments – even the politicians in opposition to the government of Afghanistan do not subscribe to such an idea!

Can you tell us about any specific memories where the human rights of a female family member or friend were violated?
On a cold winter day, a friend came to our home. Even now, when I think about this, I am filled with such regret: I wished this had never happened and that I never knew about such a heart-breaking incident. My friend was crying; he said that people had broken into his house and stolen the car. I didn’t really understand his response. I was surprised to see him shedding tears over the loss of a car. At that time, the circumstances in general were so difficult that everybody was prepared to sacrifice their property in order to save their life. A few days later, we found out that they stole his sister, not his car. In those dark days of the civil wars, the women suffered the most harm. They lost their lives to protect their honour. They lost their children and are still mourning them. They lost their husbands and are suffering alone to earn their bread. They lost their homes, peace and
prosperity during the civil wars. That is why women need rule of law, peace and stability more than anything. I hope this dream will come true.

**What are the factors deterring women’s participation in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?**
The absence of security, the prevalence of illiteracy, and the lack of belief in women’s capabilities, all of which lead them to be deprived of opportunities.

**What are the major demands of women?**
Security, peace and stability, and the rule of law.

**Which sources and centres of power can women rely on to promote their rights and demands?**
The family and in particular fathers; educational centres, such as schools and universities; religious leaders; the government and the law.

**Do you have a specific message to share?**
I beg all Afghan men to support their daughters, wives and sisters and assist them to fulfil their religious and historical responsibility, in particular in the field of education. Let girls gain knowledge, and stand on their own two feet to serve their country and bring honour for themselves, their families and homeland.
Dr. Habiba Sarabi: “The existence of an independent Afghan identity fills me with joy”

Dr. Habiba Sarabi is the first and only woman to be appointed a provincial governor in Afghanistan: she served as the Governor of Bamiyan province from 2005 until 2013. She had previously served as the Minister of Women’s Affairs and the Minister of Culture and Education in the transitional government. After finishing her medical degree at Kabul University, Sarabi was awarded a World Health Organization fellowship to study haematology in India. During the Taliban rule in Afghanistan, Sarabi fled with her children to neighbouring Pakistan where she worked as an underground teacher for girls in refugee camps. She continued to return occasionally to Afghanistan in secret. Sarabi has been selected as second running mate to 2014 presidential candidate Zalmai Rassoul.

Can you tell us about a time when your human rights were violated, something which has influenced your life?
I was the only girl in my family, with four brothers. My father clearly preferred them to me. I would always get beaten up for no reason; whenever my father was cross with my brothers he would take it out on me.

I also experienced discrimination as a girl at school. The boys were often very violent towards the girls, and treated us unfairly.

**What are some important achievements since the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan?**

The new Constitution, in particular Article 22 on gender equality, is an important achievement. Women are playing a much more active role in society. There has been a huge increase in the number of female students at school, and more broadly in society, there are powerful movements seeking justice for women. Women are also playing a role in politics, even at the highest levels, including holding seats in Parliament.

**What gives you hope for the future?**

In the last ten years, Afghanistan has been the subject of much international attention. There have been numerous conferences on Afghanistan, which have been attended by the most senior politicians and representatives from around the world: Bonn I, Bonn II, Berlin, Istanbul, Tokyo. This is important for us.

Like thousands of other Afghans, I have lived the bitter experience of migration and exile, and the feeling of disconnection that comes with it. The existence of an independent Afghan identity fills me with joy.
What is your worst fear today?
My greatest fear is that extremism will re-emerge in Afghanistan, and that women will be once again excluded from society. As a politician and a woman, this is a great concern for me.

What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?
The lack of good governance in Afghanistan is the root of so many of our problems. Insecurity, unemployment, poppy cultivation, and administrative corruption: all of these challenges arise from the absence of good governance and the rule of law.

Will the present-day Afghanistan allow schools to once again be closed to girls and women excluded from society?
Never. The change in awareness amongst women, even just in the last three years, is phenomenal. Women have created remarkable networks, and are supporting each other to build skills and play a meaningful role in society. The international community would not allow it either. They have invested too much in Afghanistan. For years, the blood of their children has been shed to protect our freedom. It would be a tragedy for them to simply ignore a regression to the ways of the past in Afghanistan. The only way it could happen is if a dictatorial government were to take over.

Can you share with us a memory from a time where the human rights of someone in your family or circle of friends were violated?
The first thing that comes to mind for me is the way that my mother’s human rights were violated. She was a victim of the worst forms of domestic violence. Watching her suffer made me resilient and taught me to fight for my rights.

What are some factors deterring women’s participation in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?
Unfortunately, reprehensible and out-dated customs and traditions still hold more power in Afghanistan than the law and the sharia. We need to build more awareness around this. Poverty is another serious factor. Women are the primary victims of violence in poor families. Another factor that holds women back is the persistently low level of education for women. When they are allowed to attend school, women rarely study beyond the 10th or 11th grade. Then they are married to someone, and the education stops there: it is very rare for women to get permission to go to university.

What changes do women in Afghanistan want to see?
Economic self-sufficiency of women will be a major step towards equality between men and women. Women need more access to education and knowledge. They should be allowed to continue to higher education, so that they can be empowered and emerge on an equal footing with men in society. Alongside these changes, programmes raising awareness amongst women of their rights and capacities are extremely important, as are legal reforms in favour of
women’s rights.

What the sources and centres of power which women can rely on to promote their rights and demands?
The emergence of networks seeking justice for women within civil society and in the media are having an impact. Having good laws in place to support women is important and a good start, but laws are not enough in Afghanistan. As Governor, I witnessed so many violations of women’s rights, even within the justice system. Having accountable parliamentary committees is also important. Unfortunately, these committees have not played their fundamental role in a cohesive and active way in Afghanistan.

What have you done/are doing in your private or public domains, e.g. your civil and professional work, to eliminate the obstacles including discrimination?
In my family, I made no distinctions between my sons and daughters. My daughter’s upbringing was equal to that of her brothers. I have also tried to draw the attention of men in my family to their responsibilities towards women and girls. In the public domain, I have tried to stand up for the rights of women. For example, as Governor of Bamiyan province, I prevented numerous cases of forced and early marriage – I have so many stories to tell about that. I was also involved in establishing a civil society network for human rights and justice in Bamiyan. I was, and still am, one of their strongest supporters.
Hussain Fakhri: “The acts we see as ‘violations’, they see as exercising their rights”

Lieutenant General Sayed Ghulam Hussain Fakhri is the Director-General of the High Office of Anti-Corruption. He joined the Police Academy immediately after graduating from high school and later became a Professor of the Academy. In the 1980s until 1993, he served in a variety of roles in Afghanistan: he was the Head of the National Security Directorate, Deputy Attorney General, and Attorney General of the Armed Forces. He migrated to Peshawar, Pakistan with his family during the civil war. From 2001-1996, he was the manager of “Cooperation”, a magazine published by the NGO Cooperation Center for Afghanistan (CCA). Fakhri returned to Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban and rejoined the National Security Directorate, where he was appointed Deputy Director in 2010, before being appointed Director-General of the High Office of Anti-Corruption.

Have your rights ever been violated, and if so, how did it affect your life?
I was forced to migrate with my family to Peshawar in Pakistan during the Afghan civil wars. It was a terrible experience to be away from home; I felt a deep sense of lack of identity. I had lost my hope for the future. I had lost my house, my position, and my credibility in migrating from Afghanistan. I remember they once stopped me in one of the bazaars in Peshawar. They arrested and searched me because I did not have my identification papers on me.

**What are the most important achievements since the time of the Taliban in Afghanistan?**
The changes in the education sector are one of the biggest achievements. The enthusiasm of children, both boys and girls, to go to school and learn is unprecedented in Afghanistan’s history. Another major achievement is the development of democracy and its manifestation through elections. We have never seen this level of political participation in the whole history of Afghanistan. In this new system, everybody feels a sense of responsibility to choose their national leader.

**What gives you hope for the future?**
If all of the achievements I just described are developed consistently and reasonably, accompanied by a long-term plan to advance them, I would describe this as a confidence-building process.

**What do you fear most?**
My greatest fear is a return to the situation of the 1990s and the anarchism we experienced at that time.
Nonetheless, I am an optimistic person and think it is very unlikely we will return to those days.

**What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?**

There are major problems concerning the government, both regarding leadership and its administrative structure. The government is facing massive obstacles. One look at the justice and judicial system is enough to reveal the extent of the catastrophe. Unfortunately, we have not yet been able to establish institutions of administrative and military personnel, who remain impartial and do not change with the political ups and downs. Furthermore, we also lack a culture of tolerance. Tolerance was a common value of the Afghan population in the past; now our society is suffering from its absence.

**Can you tell us about any specific examples where the human rights of a female family member or friend were violated?**

Look! You and I, we see ‘human rights violations’ as violations. But people from the rural areas, they do not see things the same way. The acts we see as ‘violations’, they see as exercising their rights. Most instances of human rights violations have become a part of the customs and culture in the rural areas; they have been accustomed to them. For example, forced marriage is one of the important and widespread customs of the rural areas. I have even witnessed forced marriage within my own family.

**What changes are necessary to advance women’s rights**
in Afghanistan?
I think that women will not achieve any political and social change in so far as they have not achieved their economic independence. Work and employment opportunities need to be created for women. Girls need access to education. Women need to play a greater role in politics and actively take part in elections. They should exercise their right to vote to promote their interests.

Which institutions can women rely on to promote their rights and demands?
There are very few institutions domestically that promote women’s rights and demands. Until now, women have had to rely on international sources and have not been able to make effective use of the domestic institutions. There will not be any change until women themselves are mobilised and standing on their own two feet.

What have you done in your personal and professional life to fight against discrimination?
In my personal life, I have never been able to tolerate discrimination and injustice. I have never remained silent in the face of oppression. Whenever I have taken up a new leadership position, I have done my best to eliminate discrimination and inequality from my Department so that everybody would be equal. At the same time, I have written several books about societal reforms and the suffering of the people. Even though each book reflects my mentality at the time, you will find the traces of my quest for equality and social justice in each and every one of them.
Do you have a specific message?
I am not fully satisfied with what I have achieved in my work, neither in the public service nor in my literary endeavours. At work, I have always been troubled by a doubt that I have not served my compatriots in the best way possible. In my writings, I am never satisfied, even with the books I am most passionate about. Everything I have done, I have done in haste.
Humaira Qaderi: “When are you going to burn yourself?”

Dr Humaira Qaderi is a writer and women’s rights activist. She was a teenager during the years of the Taliban, when girls were forbidden from going to school and libraries were closed. Qaderi read whatever she could find and attended underground women’s writing classes, at great risk to her family and herself. Today, alongside her writing and activism, Qaderi is a university professor and senior advisor to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

Have your rights ever been violated?
During the time of the Taliban, the Herat Society of Teachers for Literary Theory, a male-only literary circle, heard rumours I was a writer and decided to read my stories at one of their gatherings. As a woman I couldn’t attend, let alone present my stories, so one of the men read them on my behalf. Eventually, a collection of my stories was published – the first collection of stories written by a woman to be published under Taliban rule. I’ll never forget how stressed and worried my father
was that day, how scared he was. He tried to buy all the newspapers in the city so that no-one would know I existed. It would be extremely dangerous for me and my family if people knew.

**What do you see as an achievement in Afghanistan?**

It is possible now to change the mentality of men in Afghanistan. But for me, the most important change since the time of the Taliban is the way I understand my own power. I am different now, and I can stand more firmly in combating discrimination against women. Women are strong now: their strength has forced men to abandon the Taliban mentality. No community and no woman in Afghanistan would tolerate the rule of the Taliban again.

**What are the most notable changes since the time of Taliban rule?**

I call this time ‘the era of awareness’. There is a new perspective in Afghanistan, and at the heart of it is awareness. This awareness is palpable throughout the entire country, from big cities to small villages, which once were dominated by the Taliban. The inhabitants of these cities and villages now want their kids to go school, something that was not possible under Taliban rule.

**What do you fear?**

My biggest fear is that, God forbid, some political parties will form alliances with the Taliban and re-introduce them to the political sphere. These are the games of politics – they are extremely dangerous games.
What are the major challenges facing Afghanistan?
The success of the new era of governance in Afghanistan depends critically on the active and conscious participation of women in social processes. This has always been a great challenge throughout the history of our country. Ethnic division poses another major challenge. Instead of developing a sense of nationhood and working on nation building in Afghanistan, the emphasis has always been on ethnicity and tribalism. We also face an economic challenge: Afghanistan still lacks an independent and working economy.

Is it possible that girls could once again be banned from schools and women excluded from the social sphere?
I am afraid that the dirty political games could lead to a return to the past. Maybe the exclusion of women will not be as strong and pervasive as it used to be, but there is a risk it could re-emerge to some degree. This is a particular risk in the Taliban-friendly regions. But the young girls I know today will resist the return of such outdated ways of thinking.

Which factors hinder women’s participation in social, economic, political and cultural arenas?
The first and the biggest problems come from tradition. There are those who support the oppressive traditions towards women in the socio-political structure of Afghanistan. Another major impediment is women’s economic dependence, which forces Afghan women to live under harsh circumstances and suffer ruthless crimes.
The incorrect interpretation of religion, and arbitrary religious practices, are further obstacles to women’s participation. The absence of reformist religious leaders has made it possible for certain groups to monopolise religion in Afghanistan.

**What are the demands of the women of Afghanistan?**
The dominant masculine interpretations of Islam need rethinking. Our economic model must be restructured and revised, so that women’s labour is fully recognized and supported. And the social, political, economic and cultural structures in Afghanistan, dominated by and oriented towards men, should be transformed into merit-based structures, which guarantee justice, personal security, and the right to work for women.

**Which social forces can women count on?**
I can rely only on my own capacity and abilities. There is no other institution or structure in which I can take refuge.

**How have you overcome obstacles?**
In the almost fifteen years that I have been a writer, I have always focused on women. Everything I have written is fighting for equality. I have had reason to rebel – for equality, not for dominance.

**Any final messages you wish to share with the world?**
During the reign of the Taliban, I had two close girl friends: Lida and Shakiba. Lida could have been a great poet, but she couldn’t bear the inequalities of our society. She killed herself by self-immolation. Shakiba did the same. Many
were waiting for me, the third corner of the triangle, to burn myself. I remember my little brother asking me once, “When are you going to burn yourself”? Losing my friends was painful, but it also taught me a lesson and made me strong.
Horia Mosadiq: “He said he would kill me if he ever saw me going to school again”

Horia Mosadiq is the Amnesty International researcher on Afghanistan. She was a child growing up in Herat province when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Soon after the fall of Dr Najibullah’s government, she was forced to stop her studies at Kabul University and leave Afghanistan. She subsequently obtained a Master’s Degree in Public Relations from Berkeley University in the United States of America. For the past 20 years, she has had a successful career as a journalist, political analyst, and has led several human rights groups in Afghanistan.

Can you give us an example of a time when your rights were violated?
Herat was very insecure during the height of the wars between the Mujahideen and the government forces. The mujahideen were burning the schools, killing teachers and poisoning the students every day. I was in the third class at the time. One day, I had picked flowers from our garden to give to my teacher. A man with a long beard appeared
in front of me in the street and asked where I was taking the flowers. As an innocent child, I said that I had picked them for my teacher. He slapped me in the face, took the flowers from me, and threw them in the gutter. Swearing at me, he said he would kill me if he ever saw me going to school again.

**What are the important achievements in post-Taliban Afghanistan?**

There have been many achievements. The most important are the constitutional allocation of 25% of the seats in Parliament to women, the establishment of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, as well as the free media and freedom of expression. There are others too, for example, the accession of Afghanistan to the International Criminal Court and the Rome Statute, and the signing and unconditional membership of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

**What gives you hope for the future?**

The government has not yet earned my trust. I think that most initiatives and achievements of the present are a result of the activities of civil society and human rights groups. International pressure has persuaded the government to respond to a number of demands from both local and international civil society. Therefore, government action has been as a result of external pressure. The government has not itself directly taken any initiatives in the interests of the people.
What do you fear most today?
My greatest fear is that we will go back to civil war. I believe if the present situation continues and the armed groups retain the power they presently hold, it will one day lead to the resumption of civil war in the country. The term of Mr Karzai’s government has seen an increase in the number of power players.

What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?
The lack of a fair, impartial, and independent judicial system poses a major challenge to establishing the rule of law and access to justice as a basic pillar of the society. Another challenge is the absence of leadership on all levels. There is no unified leadership, either in the government or in the political opposition. The political opposition is scattered and each section has its own specific mission. So far they have failed to penetrate the country as a whole, with the exception of a couple of provinces and regions, and to win the trust of everybody. The worst thing is the use of fascist and ethnic supremacist methods by the government leadership and the political opposition.

What are the major factors deterring women’s participation in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?
In my opinion, there are three factors. First is the prevalence of a fundamentalist and misogynist mentality amongst the majority of the population, in particular among the mullahs and others who think women can be treated as a commodity. The second factor is the
lack of political commitment within the government to implementing laws that can establish and provide for the rights of women. In our society, the traditional mentality persists even amongst judges and the police. Justice and enforcement of the law are always tinged with traditional beliefs. This means that we end up with what the men want, rather than what the law says. Finally, we lack a national movement of women in Afghanistan.

What changes are necessary to advance women’s rights in Afghanistan?

Women need to be politically involved at all levels of decision-making, including in the judiciary, the legislature and the executive. The laws, in particular the Law for the Elimination of Violence against Women, should be reasonably implemented. Meanwhile, laws that facilitate discrimination against women must be abolished or amended.

A special budget should be allocated by the Ministry of Finance to advance women’s rights, including their right to education, health and employment and the proper use of those resources. At present, there is a gender budget at the Ministry, but it is never used to advance activities related to women.
Khaleda Khorsand: “We should never be under the illusion that the Taliban’s return is impossible”

*Khaleda Khorsand is a writer and human rights activist with the Civil Society and Human Rights Network in Herat.*

**Can you tell us about a time when your civil rights were violated, something which has influenced your life?**

One day, during the time of the Taliban, I was going with a friend to a secret literature course for women in Herat. The course was called the ‘Golden Needle’ and officially portrayed as a sewing group, because as girls, we were banned from learning and going to school. Two members of the Taliban militia stopped us on our way there and asked what we had in our bags – they wanted to search them. We had writing blocks and pens, which were prohibited then for women. We said we needed them to take notes on dressmaking. I can still vividly remember my fear of those two men and what might happen to us. How frightful it was to try to convince them that our writing blocks were not for education. I’ll never forget that fear
What is your worst fear today?
As Afghan women, we carry a deep-seated fear in our hearts because, at the most fundamental level, we are not accepted and trusted in our society. When after 10 years, the parliament failed to pass the law prohibiting violence against women – even though women occupy more than %25 of the seats in parliament – it was a great disappointment. So much time, money, and attention – both domestic and international – had been concentrated on that law. The failure to pass it demonstrated beyond belief that women are not accepted within this society, and that at each turn, we can expect to face challenges of this sort. There was nothing in that law that privileged women; it was simply a law to prohibit violence against women.

What are the three biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?
First, a major challenge is the extremist interpretation of religion. Moreover, we are surrounded by neighboring countries with hard-line religious groups in power. The prevalence of extremist interpretations of religion in our surroundings has had a negative impact on otherwise positive social changes in Afghanistan. Just imagine, the provinces located in the west of Afghanistan are influenced by the extremist Islamic culture of Iran, and the provinces in the east are influenced by the undercurrents of the Taliban in Pakistan. Secondly, we have the problem of low-level literacy and illiteracy of our people. Thirdly, we face problems
of corruption, rooted in the government’s lack of competence and planning and the system of cooperation put in place by the international community.

**Will the present-day Afghanistan allow a recurrence of the closing of schools to girls and the blocking of women’s social participation?**

It is possible that the Taliban could return to power. The existence of the Taliban culture is more important than their physical presence. The Taliban culture and way of thinking persists today in Afghanistan, and it prepares the ground for their possible return. I, and many others, believe that that we must always keep an eye on the Taliban; we should never be under the illusion that the Taliban’s return is impossible. The Taliban culture is not an external phenomenon. It has originated in the patriarchal structures of Afghanistan; it developed and took power here. It could still re-emerge.

**What are three factors which deter women’s participation in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?**

First, there are the burdensome traditions and extremist interpretations of religion. Secondly, we have a certain cultural poverty, which prevents women from assuming their roles as equals in society. Thirdly, we are limited by persistent insecurity and the absence of a legitimate and effective central government to promote and defend the rights of women.

**What the sources and centres of power which women can rely on to promote their rights and demands?**
We need a liberal, democratic government, which believes deeply in women’s rights and their role in society. Further to that, there is a pressing and fundamental need to change and consolidate the laws and pass legislation in support of women’s rights. And then the government must take up the mantle of implementing the laws. Finally, we look to the educated intellectual population of Afghanistan, who have a valuable contribution to make in terms of developing a discourse on women.
Dr Daud Shah Saba: “The Afghan economy is a man’s economy”

Dr Daud Shah Saba was the Governor of Herat from 2010 to 2013. He resigned in July 2013, citing rampant corruption and the failure of the central government to bring about promised reforms. He holds a PhD in Earth Science from the University of Mumbai and has been a professor at Kabul Polytechnic.

Can you tell us about a time when your human rights were violated, something which has influenced your life?

One of my most bitter memories concerns the time when I was a student at Kabul Polytechnic. On three separate occasions, I was awarded scholarships, and each time, I lost them because of corruption in the system. I was winning these scholarships on my own merit: I didn’t have any ‘important people’ supporting me and I wasn’t a ‘party’ person during the time of the Communist regime. And so, each time other people would end up taking the scholarship which I had rightly won.
On one occasion, I had been selected as a distinguished student to take part in the International Youth Festival in Moscow. They prepared my passport and my suit – everything was ready. And then, just four days before the flight, the brother of the then Parwan governor, who was the secretary of the Afghanistan Youth Association, a government run institution, took my place and went instead.

**What are some of the most important achievements in Afghanistan since the time of the Taliban?**
The greatest achievement to date is that Afghanistan has come out of isolation for the first time in history. Today, Afghanistan can establish its place beside other countries. I applaud the emergence of a new generation in Afghanistan: our young people have clear ideas, are forward-thinking and aware, and connected with the rest of the world. And this has been made possible by education, another major achievement.

**What gives you hope for the future? What do you see as a positive development?**
I find hope in this new and aware generation, and the access they have to education.

**What is your worst fear today?**
I worry that we might fail to keep up the positive progress that has been made in Afghanistan.

**What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?**
The most fundamental structural problem in Afghanistan
today is the lack of a dynamic economy. Around 40% of young people are unemployed.

**Will the present-day Afghanistan allow a recurrence of the closing of schools to girls and the blocking of women’s social participation?**

No! The new generation has demands that are very different to those of their predecessors. Most of our young people today are educated. Education is a prerequisite for maintaining the positive conditions that we have achieved so far, and continuing to improve into the future. Women in Afghan civil society are stronger than ever.

**Can you share with us a memory of a time that the human rights of a woman in your family or circle of associates were violated?**

My wife was a doctor and worked in the hospital. When the Taliban took power, they expelled her from her work. She was educated and wanted to serve her people, but was forced to migrate to Pakistan instead.

**What are some key factors which deter women’s participation in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?**

The Afghan society is a male-dominated society, and, to be more precise, an old male-dominated society. The old people decide; they have the final say. Furthermore, women do not have fair or adequate access to education. The problem is also an economic one. Women’s access to economic resources is very limited; the Afghan economy is a man’s economy. So long as the women in Afghanistan
are not economically independent and able to produce and manage their own income, the society will face serious problems. In the rural areas, women work but it is the men who manage the resources. No matter how hard the women work, only the men decide how the rewards are spent. Women, although supposedly equal as human beings, are subordinate to men’s decisions.

**What do women want?**
Women want more and better access to education, the elimination of discrimination, and access to medical and health services.

**What do you wish for your daughter?**
I wish that girls, like boys, will achieve their wishes. Those wishes are higher education, respect for women, and their recognition as the equals of men. A good life and freedom is what everybody desires.

**What have you done in your personal and professional life to fight against obstacles to women’s participation in Afghanistan?**
The time when I was the Governor of Herat was the best period for civil society there, in particular for women. I supported the establishment of the Union of Working Women and participated in their decisions. It is now the biggest women’s union in Afghanistan.
In the private sector, I run a consultancy office and try to promote a new business mentality based on modern ways of thinking. In particular, I give support to a group of young boys and girls who are starting out in business.
These young adults started from nothing, and now they are running six companies between them!
Dr Ramazan Bashardost: “Our leaders push their people over the cliff”

Dr Ramazan Bashardost is a specialist in the politics of Afghanistan, with a wealth of academic qualifications and experience in Afghan politics and diplomacy. He fled Afghanistan following the 1978 coup d’état, migrating first to Iran, then to Pakistan, and subsequently to France. He studied law and political science in France, followed by a first master’s degree in political science and a second degree in diplomacy. His doctoral thesis, which he completed in 1995, is entitled “War and Diplomacy: War in Afghanistan and Diplomacy of the US, Soviet Union, Iran and Pakistan.” After returning to Afghanistan in 2002, Bashardost was appointed Director-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was involved in the creation of the Ministry’s Strategic Studies Centre. Subsequently, he was appointed Minister of Planning, but resigned soon thereafter under significant government pressure because of his critical stance on aid agencies in Afghanistan. He stood for presidential election in 2009 and finished in third place. He has served two terms as a
Member of Parliament.

What do you consider an achievement in present-day Afghanistan?
Compared to the past, everything is fine. It is often said that if we were to compare Mullah Omar [leader of the Taliban] with Mullah Karzai [the current president], the former had one eye but the latter has two. However, that is not how comparisons are made: the comparison is too easy and not at all satisfactory. We need to think about all of the resources, financial and otherwise that have been provided to Afghanistan. Taking those into consideration, my honest opinion is that we have not achieved a great deal. Except in relation to the media: there we see a number of achievements deserving of praise. But nonetheless, even our vastly improved media is only a candle flickering at half-flame.

What do you fear most today?
My greatest concern is that we won’t manage to evolve beyond our present conditions. My other major concern is that we might need to contend with three problematic leaders (that is, Mullah Omar [Taliban], Hekmatyar [Hezb-i-Islami] and Haqqani [Haqqani network]) in addition to the current trio of power (President Karzai, Vice-President Fahim, and Second Vice-President Khalili). I have said over and again that our nation is fed up with the current leadership; I don’t know what we will do if there are six of them remaining as political players.
What do you consider the three biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?
Our leadership. Leaders are meant to look after their people – save them from losing their footing and falling off the cliff, so to speak. Leaders in other countries protect their people. But not here. In Afghanistan, our leaders push their people over the cliff.
The cultures of centristm: ethnocentrism, religious centristm, language centristm, and organisational centristm. In each realm, there is one ethnicity, religion, language, or organisation that is considered and promoted as superior to all others. This culture of centralism will destroy the vast diversity of other cultures that exist in Afghanistan; they simply cannot compete. When someone is nominated as minister from an ethnic community, for example, all the other representatives of that community support him, not on merit, but because they are from the same community, speak the same language, and share the same religious background. Finally, I am disturbed by the extent to which empathy has disappeared from our society.

Is it possible that girls could once again be banned from schools and women excluded from social participation, as was the case under the Taliban rule?
Everything is possible in Afghanistan. If someone has a gun, they will close the gates of the houses, not to mention the schools. This nation has witnessed such terrible things, and is so wounded, that it will accept whatever befalls it. Our people are immobilised: I have seen people barely flinch while someone is beheaded in front of them. The Afghan people have had their willpower stolen from
them; the society has become numb.

Once, if I am not mistaken, a Hazara Hindu staged a hunger strike. The street was closed for three days as thousands of other Hindus came to support him in solidarity. Yet Ms Simin Barakzai went on hunger strike for 18 days outside the parliament in 2011 after she was unseated by the Independent Election Commission. She was on the verge of death. Her friends in the Coalition to Support Rule of Law passed by her and took part in the parliamentary sittings. Only three or four people supported her.

**Which factors hinder women’s participation in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?**

Look at the way men ‘participate’ in politics in Afghanistan: how can we possibly expect women to play a role in this game? If we had a society where honest and knowledgeable people were elected on their merit, where decisions were made based on reason and logic, the rights of men and women would then be guaranteed. Then, look at the way women ‘participate’ in their social movements. The female leadership working in the name of women in Afghanistan are just as bad as their male counterparts: they put their personal interests above everything else.

**What changes are necessary to advance women’s rights in Afghanistan?**

If the women of Afghanistan really want to see a change, they need to stop making decisions on the basis of gender. Afghanistan will only free itself from the problems of
inequality between men and women when the arbitrary criteria of ethnicity, gender, age, religion, language, and region are abolished and replaced with the criteria of merit, experience, expertise, and commitment. If these were the criteria, a woman could also become president of Afghanistan. If a woman is raped, nobody should ask which region or which ethnic community she came from: it is a crime regardless.

Ask the hard questions: What have the 68 female Members of Parliament done for the women of Afghanistan? If they supported somebody for the post of the speaker or deputy speaker, their candidate would certainly be elected. But these women are not looking out for the interests of women. As is always the case in Afghanistan, divisions based on ethnicity, religion, and language trump over everything else.

**Do you have any final messages to share?**

I am asking people to put aside the criteria of ethnicity, gender, age, religion, language, and region and adopt humanity as the criterion for organising their life, actions and behaviour. Furthermore, let’s make it our purpose in life to heal the wounds rather than add salt to injury.
Rahnavard Zaryab: “We are not free to think here”

Rahnavard Zaryab is an influential Afghan writer and scholar. He was imprisoned during the Taraki era in 79/1978. His work has brought him into extensive contact with democratic countries. He advocates for democracy and ideological freedom in Afghanistan. He obtained an M.A in Journalism in Great Britain and lived in exile in France during the time of the Taliban. He has worked as editor-in-chief of several newspapers and headed the Union of Writer in the late 1980’s.

Have your rights ever been violated, and if so, how did it affect your life?

My personal experiences are inextricably intertwined with the violations we have experienced collectively as a society. In my opinion, the worst human rights violations occurred during the Taraki era. It was during this era that the most significant event in my life happened – I was imprisoned. Nobody told me why I was in prison, and I have never found a reason for it. Another major period
of violations was during the Mujahideen era, when human rights were ignored throughout the country and particularly in Kabul.

**What are some important achievements in Afghanistan?**
Over the past 10 to 12 years, we have got closer to enjoying some measure of political freedom in Afghanistan. We can criticise the government and challenge those in power. However, there has never been any ideological freedom in this country. You cannot expressly discuss questions of ideology. This is why so many writers have been obliged to leave the country, fleeing oppression by religious leaders. We are not free to think here and our writers have had to escape in order to find ideological freedom.

**What is your worst fear today?**
I believe that presently we are in a state of crisis, and I fear that it will continue. We have no ideological freedom. There are no constraints on the powers of economic actors. I am also afraid of returning to the dark period of the Taliban. But unlike many others, I don’t believe we will see a complete return of the Taliban – if you ask me, the situation has changed too drastically for that. The Taliban would never be welcomed in the way they were at the time of the Mujahideen. Despite all our miseries and problems, people are more content now than they were in the past.

**What are the three biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?**
There are still many challenges in Afghanistan. Our society is in transition. It is transiting from one economic,
social and political structure to another. We have lost the previous institutions as well as the values of the old society, but the values and institutions of the new society have not yet taken shape or been institutionalized.

**Will today’s Afghanistan allow a recurrence of the closing of schools to girls and the blocking of women’s social participation?**

I believe that there are some Taliban-friendly tendencies in the government that has ruled Afghanistan for the last 12 years. And hence, the political and social changes seen between 2002 and 2013 have given support to the ideology of the Taliban. For example, women had more social freedoms in Afghanistan in 2003 than they do now, and they made better use of the opportunities available to them to achieve their rights. We have been witnessing the process of some kind of regression. Women are more reserved; they have been forced into submission and obedience. They are less prepared to stand for their civil rights. The forces allied with the Taliban in the ruling establishment have gained more power, while the democratic and moderate forces are growing weaker. We have to wait and see what the next government will do. If they follow the model and policies of Mr Karzai, this current state of crisis will continue, with the Taliban-friendly forces gaining increasing influence in the system. But it is also possible that we could see a backlash against the Taliban tendencies. A backlash would be very welcome.

Which factors deter women’s participation in social,
economic, political and cultural arenas?
The most important one is this Taliban ideology which exists within the government and is expanding within society. It has made women more conservative; they no longer consider themselves an active force in society. They don’t think they have a place to participate in civil society developments. This noxious Taliban ideology has persuaded women to unwittingly accept that they have to be obedient.

What are the major demands of women?
During the last decade, the government should have given significant attention to raising women’s knowledge and awareness of their rights and entitlements as citizens. Unfortunately, this has not been done. As a consequence, we see only a small group of women represented in the social arena. Even amongst the most progressive women in Afghanistan, there is an idea that Islam gives them sufficient freedoms, and they should want for and deserve nothing more. This way of thinking is a form of regression and backtracking. It’s evidence of the continued underlying influence of the Taliban mentality on the way women see themselves and their rights and entitlements.

Which resources and institutions can women rely on to promote their rights and demands?
There was an institution called the Women’s Democratic Organisation (WDO) in the 1960s, which did not receive financial support from any outside country. Its members were extremely clear-minded and conscious people; they knew what they believed in and were effective in working
together to fight for it. Even though today there are so many organisations working for women’s rights, I don’t know any group that is as effective as the WDO was.

**What have you done in your personal and professional life to fight against the obstacles facing women in Afghanistan, including discrimination?**

Through my work as a writer, I have had the opportunity to observe and analyse the government and societal conditions in many democratic countries, and to compare it with what I see happening in Afghanistan. It is a disappointing exercise to compare Afghanistan with places like France, Britain, New Zealand, and other democracies. The biggest difference is the lack of ideological freedom here, and without it, there is no possibility to fight. When you are deprived of ideological freedom, it is as if someone has cut out your tongue – you can’t do anything. The work of a writer, indeed any kind of creative production, is an intellectual pursuit. It needs a free environment, and above all, the freedom to think. If you are deprived of these things, you will struggle to produce creatively, and even if you manage to, you will face serious challenges in disseminating your work and reaching your audience. Any distribution you manage in these conditions will only be of a limited scale and won’t create much impact.

There is something else to keep in mind: the modern audience in Afghanistan is attracted by different things. The media has had an enormous influence on our young people. They are poisoning our youth with populist, capitalist, neo-liberal ways of thinking. The pressure from the media has a similar weight to that of the Taliban circles:
the media and the regressive policies of the Taliban are equally destructive forces in our society. Like most of my contemporaries, I have not done anything in my own private sphere to overcome the social hurdles. In this land, the private sphere never comes into question: it is considered a taboo.
Somaya Ramesh: “Things will get worse if the government sacrifices human rights for political interests”

*Somaya Ramesh is the director of the Nawandishan Social and Cultural Foundation and an independent candidate in the provincial council’s elections in Herat.*

**Have you experienced violations of your human rights in Afghanistan?**
Life in a traditional society like Afghanistan, in particular for women, is never free from violations of human rights. As soon as I step out of my house, I face violence and human rights violations. The society humiliates and threatens you in its actions, attitudes, speech, and looks. People regard you with hostility.

**What are the important achievements since the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan?**
One of the achievements is the arrival of relative security and peace. With respect to women, despite all of the dissatisfaction, it is a great achievement that women have
been able to be stand side-by-side with men on various political and social stages. The other major achievement is the emergence of the media and freedom of expression.

**What gives you hope for the future?**
On the whole, Afghanistan’s transition to political and social democracy has not been fully convincing. However, the fact that the present system has remained intact and the government has not disintegrated from within, that the various institutions, non-governmental organisations and civil society have been active and achieved progress – all of these developments are promising and have built confidence.

**What is your worst fear today?**
My biggest fear is that the Taliban might return to political power; that they could once again overshadow our fate.

**What are the biggest challenges Afghanistan faces?**
It is difficult for democracy to develop in Afghanistan. We still live in a society that is strongly rooted to its tribal and traditional origins. In my opinion, the modern democratic system has very little in common with the tribal society. This has led to confusion and disappointment as we try to move towards democracy but get held back by tradition. Another challenge is that the patriarchal society does not want to acknowledge women’s identity; in fact, it strongly resists it. There are also the problems of ethnic tension and fundamentalism. Most of our problems originate from the persistent tribal, fundamentalist mentality.
Is it possible that girls could once again be banned from schools and women excluded from social participation, as was the case under the Taliban?
Things will get worse if the government sacrifices human rights for political interests. I am worried that the government will approach the problem of the Taliban from an angle of ‘brotherhood’ and expediency. Then, it’s quite likely this scenario could recur.

Can you give us an example of a rights violation experienced by a woman you know?
I visited a friend of mine a few days ago and noticed that she was quite tired and depressed. I asked her what was wrong. She told me that her family will not allow her to continue studying. These situations arise too frequently for women in Afghanistan.

Which factors deter women from participating in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?
Patriarchy and the power of the elders. Also, women are limited by their own lack of knowledge and awareness about the rights and privileges they are entitled to under the law.

Which sources and centres of power can women rely on to promote their rights and demands?
There are many symbolic sources and institutions which promote women’s rights and demands. But in reality, very few of these sources mean anything in a tangible sense. For example, women are entitled to many civil rights under the present system and its laws. The Afghanistan
Independent Human Rights Commission has a mandate to protect and defend women’s rights. The problem, however, is that there are no guarantees for any of these mechanisms.

**What do you wish for your daughter?**
I never wished to have a daughter, but if I do have one, I wish that she will enjoy all her rights and be treated as a human being.

**What have you done in your personal and professional life to fight against discrimination?**
In my private life, I have always behaved in such a way that the members of my family and my relatives would know that I support them. Publicly, I have worked in different centres. In my own Foundation, I have tried to do everything to promote and defend women’s rights, for example, by holding meetings, roundtable discussions, conducting interviews, publishing articles, books and magazines. We have organised educational courses on the rights, responsibilities, and status of women. We organised the first Women’s Book Fair in Herat.

**Any final messages you wish to share?**
We are on the eve of the elections. I ask all the people of Afghanistan to take part in the elections and to decide their own fate.
Dr Sima Samar: “Human rights have a value now in Afghanistan”

Dr Sima Samar is the current Chairperson of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission. A doctor by training, Samar spent a decade in exile in Pakistan. It was during this time that she began her committed activism for Afghan women’s access to healthcare and education. Samar returned to Afghanistan to serve as Deputy President and then Minister of Women’s Affairs in the post-Taliban interim government from 2001 to 2003. Since 2005, she has also served as the United Nation Special Rapporteur on Human Rights for Sudan.

Have your rights ever been violated?
When I was seven years old, my family moved to Helmand province in Afghanistan, because of my father’s work. I was taught by a local religious teacher, and had no trouble when it came time to sit the first grade exams for maths and language. However, religion was a whole different question. Even though I was a Shiite-born Muslim, I was expected to adhere to the Sunni precepts and history.
There was no space for understanding the differences between these two branches of Islam.

**Have the rights of your family members been violated?**
My father was a polygamist. That was a direct violation of our human rights.

**What do you see as an achievement in Afghanistan?**
Human rights have a value now in Afghanistan; they are discussed within families and throughout the different regions of the country, even in the most remote areas. Speaking about human rights means breaking taboos in Afghan society. That we can do this now is, for me, one of the greatest achievements of our time.

**What do you fear?**
I have no fears anymore; I know now that nothing is impossible. I think of the days when I went to Jaghori district, my home town, and how I felt I was all alone in my endeavours. Today I enjoy the full support of the Afghan people. With enough collective effort and determination, things can be done; change can happen.

**What are the major challenges facing Afghanistan?**
We need a well-structured economic plan for an independent Afghanistan. If the foreign aid stops, even though Afghanistan has a large reserve of natural resources and mines, the people of Afghanistan will suffer from the lack of planning on their government’s part. The level of illiteracy in Afghanistan is an emerging social crisis. Although there has been considerable progress
in the area of education, the overall quality is still quite low. If this is not redressed, we will have a great number of Afghan people who are either completely illiterate or not sufficiently literate to participate effectively in their society. This will eventually lead to a social crisis.

Is it possible that girls could once again be banned from schools and women excluded from the social sphere?
No, I can’t see this happening again. From Shinwar district to Khost province, where previously schools were banned or burned, people demand schools for girls.

Which factors hinder women’s participation in social, economic, political and cultural arenas?
Gender-based distinctions exist at the very base of the social and cultural structure of Afghanistan. From the games children play in the playground to the books they read in school, we can see clear evidence of gender-based discrimination. It starts with the most simple factors and grows throughout society.

A family’s level of education also plays an important role. In better-educated families, the differences between the sons and daughters are smaller. In some cases, the daughters are even considered to be somewhat independent. But in the less-educated or illiterate families, as soon as the daughter turns fourteen, she is married. There is no question about it – from this point on, she “belongs” to her husband.
We must also not forget the important question of women’s self-esteem and the confidence this gives them.
to take bigger steps for change.

**What do women in Afghanistan demand?**
To live in a society where rule of law is effectively implemented; the Afghan leaders have a responsibility to deliver this. Furthermore, if we really believe in equality between men and women, women need to act as equals. In order to achieve a genuinely equal society, women need the space and opportunities to grow and participate in the social, political, and cultural domains of society.

**Which social forces can women count on?**
The Constitution of Afghanistan and increasing opportunities for women’s access to education are two key factors supporting a meaningful role for Afghan women in society. The women of Afghanistan are committed to positive change – this commitment is the greatest resource we have.
Shukria Haidar: “I was forced to leave my country”

Shukria Haidar is a human rights activist. She sought refuge in France following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and founded NEGAR, an association for the defence of women’s rights, after the Taliban seized control in 1996.

Have your rights ever been violated?
I was a professional athlete and member of the Olympic committee during the time of communist rule in Afghanistan (1986-1979). Because I dared to speak out against the government, I was dismissed from the committee and sent to prison. But it was when the Taliban seized Kabul, on 26 September 1996, that I, as a woman, felt that I had lost all of my rights for the first time. I was forced to leave my country.

What do you consider an achievement in Afghanistan?
The inclusion of gender equality in our constitution is a great achievement of our time. There have been specific budget allocations for gender equality and a stipulation
that at least %25 (and initially %30) of all positions in governmental departments and seats in the parliament and provincial councils must be held by women. Reopening the schools, made possible by the help of the international community and the will of the Afghan people, has been another major achievement of the post-Taliban era.

**What are your fears?**
What I fear most are the groups outside Afghanistan pressuring the Afghan government to share political power with the Taliban. This wouldn’t only be a terrible thing for Afghanistan; it would have drastic effects for the region, and the world. We must prevent this from happening, both for our own sake, and for the sake of future generations.

**What are the three major challenges facing Afghanistan?**
The first challenge is the upcoming presidential election of 2014. This election has great importance, both for the peaceful transfer of political power and the transition to a more stable state of affairs in Afghanistan. The issue of security is the second challenge for Afghanistan: Afghanistan needs the security agreement with the United States in order to manage future security threats. Unresolved ethnic issues are the third major challenge for Afghanistan.

**Is it possible that girls could once again be banned from schools and women excluded from the social sphere?**
Nationwide, we have 9 million school students. The
people of Afghanistan will not allow the tragedy of girls being excluded from schools to happen again. In some regions, girls are underrepresented in schools because of the lack of roads and means of transportation. However, there are some regions where the central government lacks legitimacy and schools get closed [by the Taliban]. If people are not opposing the closure of schools, it is because they are afraid. People have very bad memories of resisting.

**Which factors hinder women’s participation in social, economic, political and cultural arenas?**

A number of factors play a role in the inability of women to participate in social and political processes. One obstacle is the way that Islam is interpreted and perceived. Incorrect interpretations lead to dangerous norms and practices being imposed on women in the name of Islam. Illiteracy and the weak system of education are other obstacles. Most of our people are illiterate; the educated amongst us form a rather small group. And of course, economic factors also have a significant role to play.

**What do women in Afghanistan want?**

The women in Afghanistan are divided into two groups, the urban and the rural, each having their own specific problems. The urban women, for instance, are more affected by the wars. They demand access to work, and social and political freedom. The rural women of Afghanistan don’t face the same difficulties in trying to leave the house: they work and have a share in the family income. But they too have their own problems.
Their demands are primarily access to better healthcare, education and welfare.

**Which social forces can women count on?**
The constitution of Afghanistan is important for women. There is also a range of women’s organizations, be they economic, legal or social, which offer great support to women. And the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, even with all its shortcomings, deserves to be mentioned.

**What do people need for the realization of a more prosperous Afghanistan?**
First and foremost, people need security and a well-functioning government. The system of education must be improved: it needs significant and wide-ranging changes. Education is the only way forward. And we need to open up the space for civic participation to include a broader range of people, especially women.

**What are your dreams for your daughter?**
As a kid, I played a variety of sports. I was a scout, I took part in demonstrations, and on the weekends I picnicked and had fun. I hope that the girls of Afghanistan will have at least the same chance that I did to enjoy their lives.

**Can you summarise some of your contributions to change in Afghanistan?**
In the past seventeen years, both inside and outside Afghanistan, I have been working on issues relating to women. I have initiated numerous demonstrations in France, in Europe, and in the United States. In 2000, we
organised the first conference of Afghan women, including female refugees, held in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan. We launched the Declaration of the Fundamental Rights of Women at the end of this conference, as a way of pressuring the United Nations to find a political solution for Afghanistan. We collected millions of signatures from the US and the EU and also launched the campaign in Afghanistan, but our efforts were blocked by the events of 11/9.

In 2001, we held the second women’s conference, this time in Kabul. Many countries were represented in that conference. The same conference was held in eleven other provinces in Afghanistan to foster understanding of the importance of women’s participation in society. It was during these conferences that we succeeded in convincing the participants of the traditional Jirga, convened to consider the constitution of Afghanistan, that men too stood to benefit from gender equality before the law.

**Is there a final message you wish to share with the world?**

It’s a great shame that, even though we have many women sufficiently qualified to run for president, women are underrepresented in the upcoming presidential elections. There are, however, a few women who are standing as candidates for Vice President; that, in itself, demonstrates a social change. I hope that, by mobilizing and participating in the upcoming elections, women will be able to better defend their rights and show the world that real progressive forces exist within the Afghan society.
Shakila Ibrahimkhalil: “We have fought too hard for our freedoms to lose them again”

Shakila Ibrahimkhalil is an Afghan journalist. During the time of the Taliban, she was forced to withdraw from her journalism studies and get married. Four years later, she suffered the loss of her husband. Today, she works as a journalist for Moby Group, the largest media company in Afghanistan, where she has been working for the past seven years.

Can you share with us some memories of times when your rights have been violated and how they have influenced your life?

Under the Taliban’s rule, I was denied the right to study and although I was very young, my family forced me to marry. When my husband was killed, his family pulled my children out of kindergarten: they didn’t think I should be studying and working. Fortunately, following mediation by my family and the elders, they returned my children to me.
What are some important achievements in Afghanistan since the time of the Taliban?
Freedom of speech and the media; the presence of women in the media, in schools, and in other educational facilities; representation of women in the Parliament; the free movement of young people in the city: these are all important achievements. Such things were unimaginable 12 years ago. Human rights institutions that enable women to raise their voices are also very important.

What gives you hope for the future?
The media in Afghanistan is making an impact on the government, and on the world: this is a big change. Seeing the faith people put in the media makes me thoroughly appreciate my work. The Sahar Gul affair, the tortured Afghan child bride, is a clear example of a story that captured the attention of the international media and created a build-up of pressure to protect her rights. Also, although there are a host of related problems and challenges, the holding of elections is a new phenomenon in Afghanistan.

What is your worst fear today?
My biggest fear is to lose the gains we have made. I am also afraid of going back to civil war. We have made so much progress and I am afraid to lose it: children going to school, young people studying and playing sport, women working. We have fought too hard for our freedoms to lose them again.

What are the three biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?
The first challenge is insecurity. The second is the absence of the rule of law and lack of access to justice for women. The third issue is administrative corruption, which heightens insecurity and injustice. Reprehensible traditions and customs, which prohibit girls from studying and treat women as the ‘second sex’ must not be forgotten. In some regions, men do not even allow women to go to the doctor.

Would today’s Afghanistan allow schools to once again be closed to girls and women excluded from social participation?
The people of Afghanistan would never allow it. But things could be different if we go back to war.

Can you tell us about any specific occasions where the human rights of a female family member or friend were violated?
I have a close friend who was pregnant. A few months ago, her relationship with her husband seriously deteriorated. The husband’s family wanted her to abort her child; they had already taken away her other child. The family wanted a divorce between my friend and her husband. The problem was finally resolved, but only through the mediation of my family and I.

Which factors hinder women’s participation in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?
Governments in Afghanistan have always used women as symbolic tools. Women who work on the High Council of Peace and as Commissioners on the Independent Elections
Commission do not have real power to make decisions. There is not a single female judge on the Supreme Court. Furthermore, women do not have access to justice. Reprehensible traditions and customs, the rebellion of armed insurgents against the government, the absence of the rule of law and the lack of access to justice for women prevents progress on women’s rights.

**What solutions do you see for advancing women’s rights in Afghanistan?**

Women must have the right to make their own decisions, wherever they are. The president has two vice presidents. One of them should be a woman, and a woman who has the power to make decisions. People who perpetrate violence against women should be brought to justice before the courts and punished. Women should have more access to education and more employment opportunities should be created through programmes of affirmative action.

**What do you wish for your daughter?**

I hope that she will be able to become a doctor – that is what I wished for when I was a child. I wish that we lived in a peaceful and safe environment, where my daughter and other girls could study and achieve their goals.

**What have you done in your personal and professional life to fight against discrimination?**

There is no discrimination in our family. I studied and I worked, even when I had children. When I see women I am close to experiencing problems, I always try to intervene
and help to resolve their problems in a way that respects their rights. In my work as a journalist, I have sought to highlight the importance of women in society.

Do you have a specific message to share with the world? We are on the eve of the presidential election. My message to women is that they should participate in the elections and make use of their right to vote. I ask my brothers to respect the right of women to vote just like men, and to choose their own candidates. I ask all the candidates – regardless of who is elected president – to work for security and stability for women, to fulfil their election promises, and to serve the people of Afghanistan.
Sahraa Karimi: “The taste of freedom is a powerful antidote to oppression”

Sahraa Karimi is a young female Afghan filmmaker who grew up in Iran. In her early twenties, she migrated to Slovakia, and spent the next 12 years studying for Bachelor, Master, and Doctorate degrees in film and directing. When she returned to Afghanistan, Karimi co-founded the Kapila Multimedia House to promote independent cinema and has recently re-opened the Kaluch Kapila Cinema. Karimi continues to live between Kabul, Bratislava, and Tehran. Her films, mostly about civil rights issues faced by women in Afghanistan, have won international awards and are frequently screened in international film festivals.

Can you share with us some memories of instances when your rights have been violated and how they have influenced your life?

The most serious rights violation I have experienced happened to me while I was living in Iran. I passed the university entrance exam with high grades and was qualified to enter one of the best universities. But even
though I had grown up in Iran, they saw me as a migrant and gave my place to an Iranian war veteran. They tried to send me to another institution for a year to learn Persian before going to university – Persian was my mother tongue! That is the reason why I left Iran.

As a female artist and filmmaker in Afghanistan, I have to fight constantly against prejudice and violations of my rights. Women in other places face fewer problems. When I first returned to Afghanistan in 2006, I had made a successful film abroad and I screened it here. It is an intellectual, thought-provoking film. Some vulgar filmmakers parading as critics insulted my religious and ethnic interpretations, demanding to know what right I had to make a film in Afghanistan!

I don’t think our artistic contributions should be constrained by our origin, beliefs, or religion. I have been insulted so many times. My family has been forced to migrate twice. The first time was before I was born, when my parents left Afghanistan for Iran. The second time, I was an adult and I saw that I had no place in Iran as an Afghan migrant. I was deprived of everything I had worked so hard to achieve. There was no reason for me to stay. I wanted to go somewhere where I would have an identity and could pursue my dreams.

**What gives you hope for the future?**

The youth give me hope. They refuse to bow their heads and submit like the generations before them did. They do not blindly follow political and religious ideologies. They are yearning for education and are trying to change the world around them, even though the obstacles to change
are sometimes overwhelming. They give me hope to stay here.

**What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?**
The elders refuse to step down: they are determined to run the government and control all of the major political decisions.
The people of Afghanistan have lost their trust. They don’t have faith in the political groups. They prefer to stay silent and see escape as their best solution.
Another challenge is the brain drain. Young, critical people who could bring change are leaving Afghanistan because of the lack of security, stability, and trust in politicians.

**Is it possible that girls could once again be banned from schools and women excluded from social participation, as was the case under the Taliban?**
I don’t believe this thing we call the ‘Taliban history’ will be repeated in Afghanistan. Of course, this is an optimistic view of the future. But the people and especially the young people have tasted freedom in the last 10 years. When that happens – when people can sit freely in coffee shops, and talk, and laugh, and watch critical films or take part in political and social discussions – people will not easily allow others to chain them up again. The taste of freedom is a powerful antidote to oppression.

**What solutions do you see for advancing women’s rights in Afghanistan?**
I don’t think it’s helpful to take an extremist feminist attitude. We are living together with men in this society;
it doesn’t help us to set ourselves up as opponents to the patriarchal society. Rather, we should seek to portray ourselves as humans – focus on the humanity that unites us rather than the gender that divides us. Establishing competing fronts on the basis of gender in Afghanistan is futile. Men are expert warlords: they fight and suppress each other. What can women do under such circumstances? Our best chance is to look for cooperative solutions: let’s see how we can walk the same path with men as our companions, rather than trying to take extremist and oppositional views. These harm us more than they help us.
Seddiq Barmak: “I couldn’t speak up, I couldn’t breathe”

Seddiq Barmak fell in love with the world of cinema when he saw his first film, ‘Lawrence of Arabia’, at Kabul theatre at a tender 5 years of age. In the 35 years which intervened between Barmak’s first excursion to the cinema and his critically acclaimed first feature film, ‘Osama’, Barmak endured a -12year separation from his father, who was forced to flee when the Soviet Union invaded in 1979, fought with the anti-Soviet Mujahideen under Ahmed Shah Massoud, and finally fled Afghanistan on foot with his own young family after the Taliban took control in 1996. His film, ‘Osama’, was the first movie filmed in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, and won the Golden Globe award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2004. Barmak continues to direct and produce films, and is the director of Afghan Children Education Movement, an association which trains actors and directors for the newly emerging cinema industry in Afghanistan.

Can you share with us some memories of instances
when your rights have been violated and how they have influenced your life?
During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, I unwillingly accepted a scholarship from the Soviets to attend film school in Moscow because I knew it was the only way I would be able to learn the art of making movies. When I returned to Afghanistan after my studies, the Soviet-backed Communist regime had taken over everything. In addition to the psychological pressures that resulted from the complicated political environment, we were living under heavy censorship and oppression. I tried to make two short films but the government banned them both. However, the Taliban rule was the worst era of suppression and repression. I was forced to leave my homeland for many different reasons, including my love of the cinema. I couldn’t speak up, I couldn’t breathe.

What are the important achievements in Afghanistan since the time of the Taliban?
Apparently, we have many great achievements to celebrate. We have a constitution, we have elections, we have some kind of democracy, and the list goes on. But think for a moment about the cost of those achievements, and how they have been won. Were they demanded by the people of Afghanistan? Has everybody accepted them? Are all these notions of democracy really part of our culture now? Do our people consciously participate in elections? Do they have sufficient understanding of the political system of democracy and how it functions in Afghanistan? These achievements have been won by foreign boots.
As soon as those troops leave, can we really expect that our next leader will be anyone other than another Abdur Rahman Khan? [Emir of Afghanistan from 1880 to 1901, known as the ‘Iron Amir’, who led the Afghan government after the second Anglo-Afghan war]

**What gives you hope for the future?**
We have a young, educated generation, full of potential. They are dynamic, engaged, and active. But they are like pillars without a ceiling. It is not clear to me who or what could consolidate them, organise them, mobilize their potential. Nonetheless, the emergence of this generation is promising.

**What do you fear most today?**
My great fear is that there is no sense of moderation in Afghanistan yet; we are constantly caught between two extremes. We are, at once, the most and the least extreme nation in the world. Our social and political conditions are so unstable at this point in time that if the Western military troops were to leave the country, I am sure we would see our president become a dictator of the highest degree.

**What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?**
All our challenges originate from misplaced interpretations of tradition, religion, and modernity. For the last century, our politicians have been unable to form proper relations with the society they represent, because they do not understand their own society. This historical process has brought us to where we are now. A nation that has
always been kept in the darkness of poverty, illiteracy, and ignorance is drawn to religious fundamentalism. Meanwhile, our politicians benefit from the vicious cycle of war and violence, growing their own power and wealth on the backs of their people’s suffering. Our ignorance has prompted our intransigence and our intransigence has created our violence.

Is it possible that girls could once again be banned from schools and women excluded from social participation, as occurred under Taliban rule? The Afghan people are wary of politics and political dealings. They are disgusted by the Taliban, by extremism and violence. But they are also suffering from lethargy. One explanation for this could be that the media has projected so much terror and violence to the public that people are simply overwhelmed and tired of everything, particularly of war. I fear that this lethargy could allow the Taliban to take power again and people would be too weak and tired to resist. Unfortunately, our people’s historical memory is weak and fallible; this is a real danger for us.

Which factors are blocking women’s full participation in society? The improper use and interpretation of religion has had a devastating impact on our society. Even non-religious customs that pre-date Islam persist in a harmful way. Take the idea of ‘honour’ for instance. You can fully comprehend the extent of violence and breakdown in our society when you see that someone is prepared to kill simply because their daughter fell in love.
What do the women of Afghanistan want?
The most fundamental demand of women is a re-examination and re-definition of religious decrees and teachings. Women are trying to find their identity and status within religion. We have to combat the fundamentalist and misogynist interpretations of religion that persist. Women also want to cleanse the political power structure, to move towards a representative system rather than groups and leaders who think only of how their own circle can benefit. These are the people currently in control of political power in Afghanistan, and they are one of the biggest factors contributing to the persistence of patriarchy.
Sediqa Balkhi: “He said I would die if I went to school again”

*Sediqa Balkhi has served two-terms as a Senator on the Meshrano Jirga [Senate]. She was elected Chair of the Women’s Affairs Committee in the last Senate and is currently Chair of the Civil Society and Human Rights Committee. She is also as a member of the High Council of Peace. Balkhi is the daughter of Seyyed Esmaeil Balkhi, one of the most prominent reformist leaders, freedom campaigners, and a renowned poet and philosopher. Her family spent years living in exile in Iran.*

*Can you share with us some memories of instances when your rights have been violated and how they have influenced your life?*

When I was just eighteen months old, my father, Seyyed Esmaeil Balkhi, was imprisoned without trial. He was held in prison for 15 years for defending human rights, freedom of speech, and social justice. Shortly after his release, he was imprisoned again and ultimately poisoned. I had to marry at a young age because I was the oldest girl
in the family and we did not have a close male relative. I continued my studies while I was married and had children. My brother, Seyyed Ali Balkhi, an economics professor, was killed during the Taraki-Amin era [9-1978]. One day, as I was on my way to school, somebody approached me and asked me where I was going. When I told him I was going to school, he tried to slap me, but just as if God had prevented him, he didn’t. He said I would die if I went to school again.

**What are the most important achievements since the time of the Taliban in Afghanistan?**
The notable achievements include the Constitution, the representation of women in various fields, and the establishment of the three branches of legislative, judicial, and executive power across the country.

**What has attracted your trust and confidence in the present system?**
At the Bonn I Conference, we agreed that a stable regime should be established in Afghanistan with a Constitution and three branches of power. Furthermore, the extent of the international community’s investment in a stable Afghanistan has allowed us to believe in the reconstruction of the country that is underway.

**What is your worst fear today?**
I do not have any fears, because I come from a family of activists and resisters. I want us to have an independent, free, and developed Afghanistan with a clear identity.
What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?
There are a number of challenges, including a weak and dependent economy created because the promises of the international community have not been upheld, the lack of proper state planning to build infrastructure and the large scale population exodus to other countries.

Would today’s Afghanistan allow schools to once again be closed to girls and women to be excluded from social participation?
The nation of Afghanistan will never allow it. You can see the enthusiasm for education, even at the lowest layers of society, despite all of our problems and poverty. People are sending their children to school and seeking out knowledge.

Which factors deter women from participating in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?
The reprehensible customs and traditions are the first deterrent factor. Other deterrent factors include the patriarchal system, the lack of confidence in women’s management and leadership capacities, and finally the low level of literacy among women. The discriminatory attitudes of male members of Parliament have a direct impact on the laws which affect the status of women. Because of these attitudes, the mandated quota for women’s representation in the Elections Law was reduced from 25% to 20%. But we members of the Civil Society and Human Rights Committee of the Senate prevented complete omission of the quota system by insisting on its inclusion.
What are the key demands of women?
Women’s economic self-sufficiency, better conditions for women’s growth and development in all areas, in particular with respect to higher education and politics, and access to equal opportunities.

Which social forces can women count on?
The civil society, the Parliament, the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, and the exceptional women we have in our country. Despite our certain and not insignificant shortcomings, these are but a few of the sources of power we can look to.

What have you done in your personal and professional life to fight against obstacles to women’s participation in Afghanistan?
I hold meetings with the civil society, officials of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, and the judiciary, in particular the female judges, and we work collectively to eradicate violence. I have worked intensively with the media to inform people of women’s issues. I have travelled to other provinces and held meetings with governors, district governors, judges, influential persons and clerics, and discussed women’s status under religion. I asked the clerics to raise these issues with the people during their sermons; to speak about the equality of men and women from a religious point of view, and about human rights and values. The Law for the Elimination of Violence Against Women has been in the Wolesy Jirga [Lower House of Parliament] for the past four years; it has not been passed and it has
not come to the Senate. Laws have to be passed in the lower house first and then come to us. Only then can we discuss them in the Select Committee. Unfortunately, that law has not reached us because of the discriminatory attitudes of men, even though the law is currently in force by presidential decree.
Zia Moballegh: Anybody who fails to obey the law is a warlord

Zia Moballegh, director of Open Society Afghanistan, deems rulers who do not obey the Constitution to be warlords even if they have a technocratic background. “They put their personal power above the law. This is a part of another problem we identify as corruption. Organised corruption and administrative corruption have paralysed the country. The country has not had an opportunity for cultural growth. We remained behind the world culture and knowledge as a result of long wars.”

Tell us a couple of memories about violation of your human rights, which influenced your life.
One of my memories concerns the period I was a migrant in Iran. We did not live in good conditions as far as the right to live and work was concerned. Obviously as foreigners we were deprived of the rights and privileges that Iranians enjoyed in their own country. My other memory concerns the period after the fall of the government of Dr Najibullah. I came to Kabul at the time and intended
to engage in different activities, in particular in human rights work. Unfortunately, the country was engulfed in civil wars. I witnessed the destruction of beautiful Kabul with my own eyes.

**What are the important achievements of the new era in Afghanistan?**

One of the achievements is the transition from a retrogressive and tribal state to a democratic republic. The people of Afghanistan, who had been taken hostage by fighting groups during the -30year wars, have been able to master their own will under the new system and determine their life through elections. The other achievement is the maturity of the people. Even though we have gone through lots of ups and downs, the people take a different attitude to life and try to solve their problems by legal means not through war and bloodshed. Furthermore, during these years there has been an unimaginable enthusiasm for educational institutions.

What has attracted your trust in the new era, which you consider as an innovation or a good and positive initiative? I believe that the process of literacy and education in the country is one of the initiatives that will live long and no government will be able to block it. The other achievement, which is one of our ideals and we hope it will always be in place, is the establishment of the institution of republicanism.

**What do you fear most today?**

My greatest fear is that some groups and ideologies, which intend to take power by resorting to illegitimate
and illegal and even irreligious means, may employ all the means and achieve their goal, i.e. usurping power. Unfortunately, Afghanistan’s history indicates that it grapples with this destructive wave once every few decades. We are going through a confrontation between tradition and modernity. This confrontation is between those who are vastly interested in advancing the country in various fields and employee modern means to build a modern government on the one hand, and those so-called backward groups who were not able or did not wish to move in step with the first trend on the other. The backward current employs other means to gain power, including hardline religious positions, extremism and ethnic interests.

What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?
In the social dimension, we have not yet completed the process of nation-building and its components properly. We are a plural society, but there has never been an opportunity or there had not been any government to activate this potential energy. On the contrary, the plurality of cultures, ethnic groups and languages has become a bone of contention within the nation. In the political dimension, we are facing two major challenges: (1) Rulers who do not obey the Constitution. We deem them as warlords when they violate the laws even if they have a technocratic background, because they put their personal power above the law. This is a part of another problem we identify as corruption. Organised corruption and administrative corruption have paralysed the country. (2) The country has not had an opportunity for cultural
growth. We remained behind from the world culture and knowledge as a result of long wars.

**Will the present-day Afghanistan allow a recurrence of the closing of schools to girls and the blocking of women’s social participation?**

If corrupt politicians let it, Afghanistan has reached a degree of maturity that shall never accept it and this is not even in people’s minds. For example, a province such as Uruzgan has two Members of Parliament, both of whom are women. One of those MPs was elected by the direct vote of the people and managed to win the most number of votes among so many men. The other MP entered the Parliament based on the quota. No men managed to enter the Parliament from that province and nobody objected to this.

**What are the factors deterring women’s participation in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?**

The first factor is culture. At present, we have two dominant cultures in the country. One of them believe that women are the second sex and men are administrators of the social issues. Extremist interpretations that have gained a religious basis constitute another deterrent. Unfortunately, I think that will be one of the major problems that women will have to grapple with in the future, to confront the people who are trying to block women’s participation in social and political activities by resorting to religious and Koranic issues. Economic poverty and unemployment is another deterrent factor.
What are the major demands of women?
The first demand of the women is that the present sphere not be tightened but increasingly open up. There second demand is an increase in women’s quota. The Constitution has only provided for women’s quota in the Parliament. That provision must extend to all state structures, in particular the government departments, so that women will be able to occupy at least 30% of positions in all government organisations and departments. The third demand of women is a redefinition of their status in the family.
Adela Mohseni: “Any people who are not aware of their rights will not live in peace”

Adela Mohseni is a jurist, and activist for human and women’s rights. She migrated to Iran in 1978 with her family, aged just six years old, where she grew up and obtained her BA degree in judicial law from Tabriz University. She returned to Kabul in 2001 and actively worked for the human rights of women and children. Because of threats from the Taliban, she was forced to leave Afghanistan for two years. She is currently active in pursuing her work in favour of women’s rights in Kabul.

Have your rights ever been violated?
It is not possible to live in Afghanistan as a woman and have your human rights respected. Men feel it is their right to violate the rights of women. My rights were violated, even by those who said they were standing up for them. The police concluded that it is not safe for me to live in Afghanistan because of serious threats from the Taliban, but nobody supported me and I was forced to leave the country. I worked with the Canadians from 2012-2007
and my life came under threat because of the work I did with them. But they did nothing for me – they completely failed to support me, despite all endeavours by me and my lawyer.

**What are the important achievements of the new era in Afghanistan?**

Even though there is much wrong-doing, one cannot ignore the achievements. Many of them are superficial, and they might disappear when the international community leaves Afghanistan. But, some of them are real.

Nowadays, many girls go to school. The Law for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, now implemented in the courts with the President’s signature, is extremely important, as is the quota enshrined in the law for women’s political participation in elected bodies and finally, women’s rights to work.

**What is your worst fear today?**

Everything the international community has achieved in Afghanistan lacks solid foundations, whether we are speaking of infrastructure, health, education, and everything else. The government of Afghanistan believes in the philosophy of ‘come what may’ and does not think about anyone’s future. What good is having a diploma without being literate? My greatest fear is: where is an illiterate society heading?

**What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?**

The first challenge is people’s illiteracy and lack of
awareness. Any people who are not aware of their rights will not live in peace. We lack a caring leader, who really loves this land and its people. Finally, we lack proper humanitarian laws.

Is it possible that girls could once again be banned from schools and women excluded from social participation, as was the case under the Taliban rule?
This is a difficult question. I have a negative opinion and viewpoint. I don’t think there is a civil society in Afghanistan. There are many people from overseas who are working in Afghanistan, but they will leave as soon as there is some turbulence. Most of the people in the country are not sufficiently committed to take civil action. There are very few people who are really committed. We are being naive if we say that the Taliban couldn’t close the schools and kill people just because democracy has arrived. The Taliban are still stoning the people, and killing them. They still have prisons. It’s easy for them to close and destroy schools.

Which factors deter women from participating in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?
The first is the misuse of the sharia and people’s beliefs, especially those rooted in a patriarchal mentality. The proponents of patriarchy believe in the supremacy of men and the wretchedness of women. This is the origin of all violence against women. This is compounded by a lack of awareness amongst women, which allows the retention of taboos.
What are the major demands of women?
Women still have problems in their families. They are still beheaded in what should be the safest place of the world – their beds. Honour killings are common in Afghanistan. I think the first demand of women would be to have a safe environment in their homes. Their demands should be: registration of marriage and divorce as well as date of birth; having a family law and a law for the prohibition of violence against women; and having the right to work, study, choose their husband and have satisfaction in their marriage.

Which sources and centres of power can women rely on to promote their rights and demands?
At present, only the civil society institutions and occasionally the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission are dependable, even though the Commission does very little. However, at the very least, it records complaints and it is a place for women to relieve their psychological pressures. The NGOs are the ones who do the most work: they provide lawyers, organise safe houses and try to attend to problems.

What have you done in your personal and professional life to fight against discrimination?
We made lots of efforts, however social actions, in particular in Afghanistan, need time to bring results. My friends and I tried to organise a movement amongst the women and unite them together. We told women that they are women first, before being Tajik, Hazara, Pashtun or any other ethnic group, and that they have
common problems regardless of their ethnicity. We tried to establish certain institutions, such as the Women’s Political Participation Committee and the Women’s %50 Campaign.
Asef Hosseini: Onslaught of free market has paralysed the indigenous small economy

*Asef Hosseini, political and cultural activist, is now a student of doctor’s degree in International Crisis Management in Germany. He believes in the impact of the civil society and fears lack of plan most of all, i.e. lack of a proper political will to resolve the crisis in Afghanistan. He explains his outlook of the economy as follows: “The indigenous small economy of Afghanistan was fully paralysed as a result of the onslaught of the free market economy.”*

What are the important achievements of the new era in Afghanistan?

One of the achievements is the emergence and growth of the civil society, which can establish a balance of power in any country. I hope that will also happen in Afghanistan. The other issue is the women’s rights. Even though the issue was approached as a project, it is still a kind of achievement, because it is talked about and is important for the politicians. This commission-based and show approach to women of Afghanistan is still worthy of
appreciation, because they have a share in the Parliament as well as the government. That is excellent. The third achievement is freedom of expression. Even though, it is not efficient in our country, nevertheless it exists.

What has attracted your trust in the new era, which you consider as an innovation or a good and positive initiative? One of the issues is the civil society. I emphasise that we must protect it. Another issue is the presence of the young people in different areas. We have a young country and we feel that the young people are gradually gaining political power. Most of them have academic education and that is promising. Even though, some of them still defend reactionary ideas and join fundamentalist ideologies.

**What you fear most?**
Lack of plans is my greatest fear, i.e. lack of a proper political will to resolve the crisis in the country. Afghanistan is a country in crisis. Post-crisis countries have all extensively used a reasonable political will to regenerate their society; they had a plan and persevered to the conclusion. I fear that our politicians may sacrifice the nation’s interests at the altar of political interests.

**What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?**
The first challenge is lack of a political will. The second is the economy. The indigenous small economy of Afghanistan was fully paralysed as a result of the onslaught of the free market economy. Free market economy is a poison for a country that lacks any economic foundation. The government must have employed a specific mechanism to control the free market. Unfortunately, the government
does not have a specific economic plan for the financial market. The third challenge can be the issue of security.

**Will the present-day Afghanistan allow a recurrence of the closing of schools to girls and the blocking of women’s social participation?**
The people are subordinate to the prevailing conditions and they cannot go beyond them. A minority has everything in its hand at the top. Recently, in addition to the political domain, it has taken control of the economic domain as well. Complex mafia gangs have infiltrated all places and help each other. It is very difficult to combat them. If they plunge the country in crisis, the common people cannot do anything about it.

**What are the factors deterring women’s participation in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?**
Women are the first victims of the conflict between three value systems in Afghanistan: religion, customs and international values. It is interesting that Afghanistan supports all these three. In my opinion, the legal system must be cleansed. Do we follow the international legal system, the Islamic legal system or the customary legal system?

**What are the major demands of women?**
Their most important demand is their right to education. The others are right to health and right to work. The rural women work as much as three men: they manage the house, keep the children, maintain the cattle and work on the land and in the farm. Urban women like to work,
have an income and be economically independent. Their demand is the right to work and ownership of income.

**Which sources and centres can be relied upon to promote women’s rights and demands?**

Afghanistan is a rural society. Whatever happens in the village, everybody goes to the elders. The elders take the men’s side, because they are patriarchs. Governmental bodies, e.g. Ministry of Women’s Affairs, are but names and they are not efficient. The only course open to women is to go to NGOs and international bodies, because the latter do not adhere to the musts and must-nots of traditional and patriarchal society. They do comply to some extent with the rights and demands of women. The least they can do is to make the voice of victims of violence heard in the world, which can bring pressure on the government of Afghanistan to undertake reforms.
Aziza Khayrandish: “If the price of peace is sacrificing justice... it will be catastrophic for the women of Afghanistan”

Aziza Khayrandish is a human rights activist and the director of the Civil Society and Human Rights Network in Herat

Can you tell us about a time when your civil rights were violated?
During the time of the Taliban, I used to have to wait a long time for my bus. It was often full when it arrived, with just one free seat at the front. The men wouldn’t allow me to sit there. In those days, it was very clear that women were considered second-class citizens. One day, I decided to sit in the front seat anyway. An angry man sitting behind me said, “We men fought a life-time in the jihad, and you women have no shame. How dare you sit there in the front, next to the driver?”

What are some important achievements since the time of the Taliban in Afghanistan?
The influx of financial aid and the increased focus on women has given rise to a number of positive developments for women in Afghanistan. The culture of violence is losing its power. And we are enjoying a greater measure of democracy in the country.

**What gives you hope for the future?**
There are a number of things, particularly regarding the changes we see in families. For instance, families, whether they are rich or poor, are increasingly interested in and pushing their children towards education. At the same time, the birth rate is decreasing. All of these examples indicate the movement towards urbanization and modernization in Afghanistan.

**What is your worst fear today?**
There is still some cause for concern, especially in relation to the peace process that is supposed to lead to reconciliation with the Taliban and the withdrawal of Western military forces. If the price of peace is sacrificing justice and all the progressive values that have started to take root in our society, it will be catastrophic for the women of Afghanistan, just like it was before. If those who oppose even the essence of a female identity enter the government, we will lose everything all over again.

**What are the three biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?**
Corruption in the administration, a weak rule of law, and the continued presence of warlords in the upper echelons of power are the major challenges we face. The warlords will always seek to put themselves above the law, and the
law becomes a tool that is only applied selectively against the weak.

**Will the present-day Afghanistan allow a recurrence of the closing of schools to girls and the blocking of women’s social participation?**

I am not too pessimistic; I don’t believe we’ll see a repeat of those dark days. But, if the Taliban entered the government, I expect they would try to implement Article 3 of the Constitution, which says that “no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam”. Since the Taliban take an extremist interpretation of Islam, this could see a bitter repeat of the exclusion of girls from schools and women from society.

**What are some factors which deter women’s participation in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?**

First and foremost, we are confronted by an extremely male-centric and patriarchal culture, which says that men are superior to women and that women’s rights count for only half that of men’s. Furthermore, this misogynist mentality is bound up in, and reinforced by, extremist interpretations of Islam. At the same time, the economic dependence of women acts as another deterrent to their participation.

**What do women in Afghanistan want?**

Though the status quo is far from ideal, women hope it will not deteriorate or regress and that they will at least retain the achievements and progress they have made to date.
Secondly, we need to move away from these misogynistic interpretations of Islam and change the culture that supports them. Without combating the misogynist culture head-on, nothing will change in the society. More needs to be done for the financial independence of women. They need opportunities to build their skills and have access to employment.

**What the sources and centres of power which women can rely on to promote their rights and demands?**
The presence of the international community in the country offers a great deal of hope and opportunity. Unfortunately, the government has not worked to gain the trust of the international community, even though this trust is fundamental to strengthening the government’s actions and legitimacy. The women’s rights and human rights organisations are also key support systems.

**What do you wish for your daughter?**
I wish that all the girls of my country could enjoy the same rights as their brothers do.

Do you have a specific message? I have two messages: one for the women and one for the men. To the women, I say, become aware of your own power. When we believe in ourselves, our power grows enormously, and in this way we find the strength to play a more active role in society. To the men, I say, support our women. Let your wives and daughters study and continue their education.
Fakhera Mousavi: “The Afghan woman rests in the coma of her predecessors”

Fakhera Mousavi is a doctoral student in political science at the University of Lyon in France. She offers her views as a woman who has always lived in exile and has had a different experience of life from that of other women of her homeland.

Can you give us an example of how your rights have been violated?

As migrants not linked to any particular powerful group, our right to education has been threatened and sometimes denied. The hijab is another human rights issue which I have confronted in my life. Whenever my relatives and acquaintances wanted to put pressure on me, they would tell me to observe the hijab, even within the privacy of our home or my own room. Even my mother’s suggestion as to how I should rearrange my headscarf annoyed me. The neighbours who came to our house for prayers also tried to suppress me with their remarks about the hijab.
What important changes have you observed in Afghanistan?
This is a time of striving for change and reconstruction. From my perspective, taking account of social psychology, I also see the traditional mentalities and moralities wavering in the face of change.

What gives you hope for the future?
I have noticed that peoples’ lifestyles have changed considerably. People are now accustomed to using the Internet and other communication technologies. They have greater access to the news and the media in general. This phenomenon has found its way even into the rural homes.

What do you fear most today?
I do not have any fears. The only worry that I have concerns the political elite and the people’s fate, and I hope that this will gradually disappear as a fear. The people of Afghanistan have lived many different political experiences. I hope a new political elite, who will put rationality at the top of the political agenda, will soon take the stage.

What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?
The biggest challenge is the lack of education. Political, social and cultural behaviours, all of these need to be re-learnt in Afghanistan. We all suffer and live with illusions that lead us to distrust the people around us. The perpetual lack of security contributes heavily to this distrust, which is present even at the highest-levels of
political decision-making. Any time that a new political candidate arrives on the scene, they make sure to take their share, because nobody knows whether they will still be able to benefit from this share tomorrow. Our current conditions are clearly unreliable.

**Is it possible that girls could once again be banned from schools and women excluded from social participation, as was the case under the Taliban?**

Anything is possible. But the Afghan society has undergone many changes. Nonetheless, the hesitation and reluctance that lingers amongst the men in Afghanistan is a major factor holding women back. I can see that the women of Afghanistan, in particular the educated women, are more determined than they were in the past. In the past, the politics of silence dominated; now there is a women’s movement.

**Which factors hinder women from participating in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?**

The biggest hindrance is the Afghan woman herself. She rests in the coma of her predecessors, her mother’s generation. Unfortunately, the previous generation of women in Afghanistan created serious obstacles for the women of today. During their generation, the idea of male domination became entrenched and internalised as a belief in the society and culture. The only way to combat this belief is through education. But then, we need to ask who provides the education in Afghanistan? Even education is part of the patriarchal system in Afghanistan. The mother who educates her children is not herself
empowered; she does not occupy a prominent role in the society or a central role at home. It is the father who makes the decisions in Afghanistan. Patriarchy also prevails in the legal and political system. Look at the female politicians: they still regard political questions through the lens of patriarchy and take a pro-male attitude in their decision-making.

**What do women in Afghanistan want?**
Educated women demand justice and equality at all levels of society. They demand a justice-based approach to the basic laws in force in Afghanistan. Above all, the new generation of women demand gender justice and the eradication of discrimination at all levels of society.

**Which sources and institutions can women rely on to promote their rights and demands?**
I do not know of any sources women can rely on. All of the institutions take a patriarchal approach. The only time they act in favour of women is when they are pressured to do so by the international community: I fear that if the international support were withdrawn tomorrow, the small gains being made on women’s rights would also come to an end. Some time ago, during the session on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women in Geneva, I saw some women who were begging the foreign powers to support them, saying that without this support they would not be able to continue. I don’t think there is even specific funding for women’s rights in Afghanistan. Or, if there is, the only organisations who benefit from it are those who act
exactly in accordance with the power holders’ wishes.
Farkhunda Zahra Naderi: “A culture of war is not the Afghan culture”

At just 32 years of age, Farkhunda Zahra Naderi is a Member of the Afghan Parliament, elected to represent Kabul. After starting her education in Kabul and Baghlan provinces in Afghanistan, Naderi completed her baccalaureate and A Levels in the UK and obtained a Bachelor of Arts in Legal Studies from Westminster International University in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Naderi joined the National Unity Party of Afghanistan to encourage women and youth to participate in politics and was appointed Head of the Party’s Women’s and Youth Committee in 2007.

Can you give us an example of a time when your rights have been violated?
When I was growing up, my brother used to boast about how he went out with his friends, played chess, and was generally free to do as he pleased. He wanted me to see and accept the vast differences that existed between men and women. These discriminatory ideas pervade all aspects of our life in Afghanistan; we see and breathe
them every day. If men had less of a free hand, and men and women were punished equally for wrongdoings, we would not have any problems. Our society is still a long way from ideas of human rights, equality, and women’s rights.

**What are some important achievements in Afghanistan since the time of the Taliban?**
At least now we are talking about women’s issues and rights; this is a major achievement in itself. Other achievements are the growth of the media, the holding of elections, and people’s participation in their political system by exercising their right to vote.

**What gives you hope for the future?**
Democracy is the gate of hope for the people of Afghanistan. Democracy is the reason I can talk about women’s rights today. Were it not for democracy, there would not be no space to voice demands for rights and equality for youth and women, or for freedom of expression or anything else. All of these rights originate in democracy. This didn’t exist in Afghanistan in the past.

**Is there something you are afraid of today?**
I am worried by the level of apathy towards the elections in the population. I also worry about security for Afghanistan. But my most fundamental fear is that if people miss the opportunity to go to the polls on election day and cast their vote, they will destroy their own power and the future generations of Afghanistan will look back on them in condemnation.
What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?
Though we do have a system of democracy in Afghanistan, there has not been enough energy invested in developing our institutions. For the last 12 years, most attention has gone to individuals not institutions. It is the institutions of democracy that provide services to the people, and ensure that governance is for the benefit of all.
On the level of culture, the biggest problem is the persistence of traditionalism and a belligerent mentality. Some people mistake this for ‘Afghan culture’, but a culture of war is not the Afghan culture. War is an immoral practice imposed on our people by oppressive leaders for the past three decades. But we have 5,000 years of culture to draw upon. We need to look to our history to clean up the present mess and undo the damage done to our culture in the last 30 years.

Which factors are blocking women’s full participation in society?
Our institutions are steeped in patriarchy. I can’t see how women will achieve their basic rights as long as the Supreme Court has not opened its doors to women. Women’s rights are imprisoned in that institution and it is men who define those rights. Identifying the existence of patriarchy in our system is not to say that we ignore the rights and wellbeing of men. I advocate for women’s rights in parliament because women are oppressed. But I also represent and advocate for men’s rights. If men are being oppressed, I won’t just stand by and ignore it. But our statesmen do exactly this when it comes to women’s rights being violated: with respect to half the Afghan
population, they keep silent. They do not see; or at least, they don’t want to see.

**What changes are necessary to advance women’s rights in Afghanistan?**

Women need to be represented on the Supreme Court. Violence must be recognized as a national concern. Women need to be recognized in roles beyond being mothers. It is the greatest honour to become a mother, but women are human beings just like men, and they have a right to enjoy a range of roles in society, including and extending beyond parenthood. Women’s problems need to come into the spotlight, so that we can understand the causes and find solutions.

**What have you done in your personal and professional life to fight against obstacles to women’s participation in Afghanistan?**

Democracy finds its power in peace, not war. When people stand together against oppression, this is true power. My role is to speak out against oppression. Even when I am speaking to the strongest opponent of democracy and women’s rights, I still stand for what I believe in. I tell them: “I respect your views, and you need to respect mine”. I combat monopolies on discourse and action. I also work for the empowerment of women by pushing for women’s representation on the Supreme Court. This was a taboo subject before, but now it is on the table for discussion and many people are speaking up in favour of it.
Fawzia Koofi: “I am afraid to see the world and its progress from behind a chador again”

Fawzia Koofi grew up in a traditional polygamist family with seven wives. Her mother tried to abandon her for being born a girl. Her father was a Member of Parliament for 25 years and was assassinated by the Mujahideen when she was just 4 years old. Koofi convinced her mother to send her to school – a family first – and she later went on to graduate from law and political science at university. Koofi, a widow and mother of two children, commenced her political career in 2001 after the fall of the Taliban. She was the first woman to be elected Deputy of the National Assembly. Today, she chairs the Women’s, Human Rights, and Civil Society Committee of the Parliament and is serving her second term as Member of Parliament, representing Badakhshan, a remote and poor province situated close to China and Tajikistan.

What gives you hope for the future of Afghanistan?
Developments in our society and especially, freedom of speech: the freedom that is pursued through the
media, speech and writing. In my opinion, the freedom of speech and of the media has reached a point where no government could restrain them, even if they wanted to. Our people have experienced the power of freedom of speech. They have seen that making contact with a Member of Parliament or a Minister does not solve their problems. But, when they present their problem through the media, a wider and more influential range of people and groups hear it.

What do you consider important achievements of the new era in Afghanistan?
The existence of the Parliament, the Constitution (though it is not without its problems), and finally, the increased participation and representation of women in society.

What is your worst fear today?
My greatest fear today is a return to the past – to the Taliban. I fear that I might wake up one day and see that all the people of Kabul are going about in the streets wearing white pakols [hats]. Even though I don’t really think this will ever happen, I still fear it.

If the Taliban were ever to come, they will have to realise that developments in society have advanced rapidly and Afghanistan will no longer tolerate the Taliban. But I do have these fears, because change in Afghanistan has always happened overnight. The government and state power have usually changed hands through coup d’états; the people’s power has rarely been influential. This is why sometimes I am afraid to see the world and its progress from behind a chador again.
What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?
The most important challenge is the persistence of repressive traditions in Afghanistan politics. Certain concepts have been traditionally inscribed in our minds. For example, we have traditionally accepted that the president of Afghanistan should be a man and that he should come from a specific group. And if he didn’t conform to those expectations, the belief is that the president would not be successful.
Structural discrimination – the visible and the invisible structures against women – is another challenge. This discrimination is rooted in our history. It constitutes a silent violence against women: the violence is not always tangible, but you can sense it.
The final major challenge, which should change in my opinion, is the absence of reading.

Which factors deter women from participating in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?
First, the patriarchal culture. In Afghanistan, men interpret ‘power’ to mean that they should exert greater pressure on women. Similarly, the heavy reliance on tradition and custom-based interpretations of religion place limits on women’s participation. Finally, there is the inferiority complex of women. As women, we ourselves have accepted that men must always be present at high levels of decision-making and decide for us. Traditionally, we have lived in families where the father has had the final say. We have lived in a society where a man has always spoken the final word. It is very rare to see the necessary leadership aspirations or self-confidence that would
direct women to take up powerful decision-making roles.

**What are the major demands of women?**
The most fundamental demand is that women be respected as human beings. Secondly, women want to play a meaningful, not symbolic, role and participate in political power, decision-making, and especially in the peace process. If women do not participate meaningfully, they and their rights will be the biggest victims in the peace process. Furthermore, women want to see real economic changes in their lives. As women are not yet involved in making important decisions, women suffer from great economic inequalities today.

**Why has the Law for the Elimination of Violence Against Women not been approved by the Parliament?**
Some people believe that some articles in the law contravene the sharia. This notion is completely misconceived. Similar laws has been approved in most Islamic countries and are binding. Furthermore, the prevailing culture tells us that if women are granted just a little social freedom (for example, if this law is approved), Islam itself will be under threat. When some of our “brothers” fear they would lose their power, they cling to it with all their might. Another reason is that the female Members of Parliament also have different opinions about the law.
Kazemiya Mohaqeq: “We cannot even begin to list our demands if we do not shake off the straitjacket of illiteracy”

Kazemiya Mohaqeq is a Professor at Kateb University. She holds a master’s degree in international relations and is studying for her PhD in the same field. She has written textbooks on women’s issues, political science, and international relations for the Ministry of Education.

Can you share with us some memories of times when your rights have been violated?
A couple of years after I returned to Afghanistan, I was going to Panjshir province with my family. I was one of the few women who drove a car at the time. The policeman who guarded the checkpoint to enter the province would not let me drive into Panjshir. “Women do not drive in our homeland”, they told me.

On a professional level, we female professors are never seen as equal to the male professors. In this patriarchal environment, a female professor needs to lift herself up from sub-zero to zero level. There was a time when
the university management allocated land for housing construction to the professors, but they didn’t give any land to the women. When we asked why, they responded: “You are women. What do you want land for?”

**What are the most important achievements since the time of the Taliban in Afghanistan?**
One of the most important achievements is the emergence of the newly born and still fragile democracy in Afghanistan. When we ask students today how a government is created, they all believe that it is the people who build the government. This is the progress of democracy in Afghanistan.

Another important development concerns the role and status of women. Furthermore, there have been positive legal developments, for example, the Law for the Elimination of Violence against Women and the Family Law.

**What gives you hope for the future?**
The growing quest for knowledge in Afghanistan.

**What do you fear most today?**
I fear a return to the 1990s. I also fear the significant political instability that is spreading into the social and cultural spheres.

**What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?**
Unfortunately, we have not previously experienced power transitions and power-sharing in our political system. Since the fall of the Taliban, we have had two terms of
Mr Karzai’s presidency, and now it is time for him to hand power to somebody else. With respect to cultural and social challenges, unfortunately our culture is based on patriarchal beliefs. Creativity and merits hardly have a role to play in this society. Everything is interpreted from a male point of view.

Is it possible that girls could once again be banned from schools and women excluded from social participation, as was the case under the Taliban? Our society is still splintered; it has not adequately consolidated to combat the problems it faces. Fear has been instilled in our society for reasons related to pressures and the prevalence of fear propagated in the last four decades. It is difficult for the people to initiate change when the political system is organised in a way that may take us back to the 1990s.

What are the major factors deterring women’s participation in social, economic, political and cultural spheres? Reprehensible traditions and widespread illiteracy amongst men and women are the most important factors. Another factor is the lack of initiative by women, which originates in their lack of economic independence, the absence of support from the community and the lack of knowledge and awareness among women. Finally, violence against women plays a strongly limiting role.

What changes are necessary to advance women’s rights in Afghanistan?
Most importantly, we need education, both on general and specialised levels. We cannot even begin to list our demands if we do not shake off the straitjacket of illiteracy. Furthermore, women need to play a more significant role on the decision-making level. It is easy to see that parliament legislatates in favour of men. A glance at the list of administrative reforms in the past three years reveals that only a handful of women have been appointed to decision-making positions. Plenty of women apply for such positions, but there is an obstacle blocking their progress. Having good laws for women and implementing them in favour of women are also important steps. Another point to remark is the presence of misogynists in the courts: they should not be allowed to be there.

**Which sources and centres of power can women rely on to promote their rights and demands?**

We have to establish these centres: they do not exist yet. For instance, we have demanded certain amendments to the Personal Status Law for the Shiites. However, in the absence of dependable centres, we have managed to resolve the problem to some extent with the help of the international community. The women’s movement needs to evolve beyond its current membership of elite women. It must extend to all pockets of society; we need to establish some kind of unity among women. It is not enough for us to depend on the centres of power that are established by the international community. They will look out for the women of Afghanistan only so long as it is in their interests to do so. But, when the interests of foreigners are seen to be threatened, they will desert us.
We should also encourage women to educate themselves about religious issues so that they can effectively defend the rights of women in the religious domain.

**What have you done in your personal and professional life to fight against discrimination?**

At university, I try to share my experience with the students and promote a transgender approach. I tell the girls to demand the rights they are entitled to rather than expecting pity. I teach the boys that everybody is equal. In my private life, I work and think independently and do not allow anybody to place restrictions on me because I am a woman.
Kaweh Jobran: “Allow me not to wish for my daughter”

Kaweh Jobran is a professor in literature in the State University in Kapisa province and works as a journalist with national and international media based from Kabul. A published poet and essayist, he is an active blogger and influential young thinker.

Can you tell us about a time when your civil rights were violated, something which has influenced your life?

There was one time when I was teaching a course at the university and during roll-call, I noticed two female students who were so heavily veiled that all I could see was their eyes. During that class, I spoke about the different interpretations of the question of the hijab in Islam. I asked the two students to show their faces so that I could make sure that they were my students! A couple of days later, I heard rumours about myself – rumours which could be dangerous in Afghanistan. They said that I was opposed to the hijab and rules about women’s dress. The university rector called me in for an explanation. A few
days after that, I learnt that some extremist students had been planning to beat me up.

**What are three important achievements since the time of the Taliban in Afghanistan?**
Our relationship with the international community has been very important. So has the flourishing of our education system, both schools and universities. And though it is as yet half-fledged, the experience we have gained of democracy in our country is significant. Being realistic, this is a completely unique experience in the history of Afghanistan.

**What gives you hope for the future?**
I am inspired by the way young people have leapt at the opportunity for education and knowledge. Over the past 10 years, they have rushed to schools and universities. I trust and believe in this generation. It is a generation which has some familiarity with the democratic system, has experienced freedom of speech, and is accustomed to the role of the media.

**What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?**
The biggest challenge for Afghanistan is an ideological one: fundamentalism. If you asked me about the 100 biggest challenges facing Afghanistan, I would answer you 100 times over: fundamentalism, fundamentalism, fundamentalism!

**Will the present-day Afghanistan allow schools to once again be closed to girls and women excluded from social**
participation?
Afghanistan is a new and vulnerable society. It has just managed to emerge from the debris of war and bloodshed. It is extremely fragile. In these circumstances, the fear of returning to the past is nothing short of a nightmare.

Can you tell us about any specific occasions where the rights of a female family member or friend were violated?
The young daughter of one of our relatives was forced to marry a 35-year-old man in order to settle a dispute. This is the way it goes according to the tribal customs and traditions. Somebody from the girl’s family had killed a person in the man’s family, and so the young girl was forcibly married as a conflict settlement. Her marriage allowed her family to resolve the problem.

What are some factors which deter women’s participation in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?
Misogyny and fundamentalism have permeated our culture. They have penetrated the family, the clan, the ethnic group, and the society as a whole. These forces promote an extremely negative view of the status of women in all aspects of society.

What the sources and centres of power which women can rely on to promote their rights and demands?
I don’t trust any of the institutions working in the field of women’s rights. Most of their work is just for show. The government, despite having a Ministry of Women’s Affairs, has made no fundamental achievements for women. It
is obvious that all the actors are playing in superficial and short-term games, but the basic and fundamental problems of women are not being resolved. Neither civil society organizations nor the Government and Ministry of Women are paying attention to the root causes of the problems women face in this country.

**What do you wish for your daughter?**
What do I wish for her? Allow me not to wish for my daughter, because I first have a duty to serve for her. I would like to prepare the ground, as best I can, so that she can achieve all of her wishes. I would like to see her make her own wishes. Let all women have their own wishes. In our society, when an Afghan man has a wish for his daughter, he is putting obstacles on the path to her achieving her rights.

**Do you have a specific message you wish to share?**
The only way out of the present crisis is to build knowledge and to spread awareness. I believe that nothing will change until both the victim and their oppressor seek knowledge.
Maria Bashir: “He threw my documents back in my face, and shouted: ‘Go and stay at home!’”

Maria Bashir is the Chief Prosecutor General of Herat province. She was the first woman to be appointed Chief Prosecutor in Afghanistan, and is the only woman serving as Chief Prosecutor in any of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces. During the Taliban’s rule, when women were forbidden from working or going to school, she ran an underground school from her home, wanting women to be prepared to rejoin the workforce if ever the Taliban should fall. In 2011, she was awarded the US Department of State’s International Women of Courage Award and listed in Time magazine’s 100 most influential people in the world.

Can you tell us about a time when your human rights were violated?

During the time of the Taliban, women were completely banned from working. Until that time, I was a Criminal Investigator in the Attorney-General’s office. Like all other women in Afghanistan, I was laid off my job and forced to stay at home. One day I went along with a group of
400 other educated women; we took our diplomas and protested outside the Governor of Herat’s gate. I was in the front row of the protest. When I saw the Taliban-appointed Governor, I reached out to him and waved the copy of my diploma, demanding the right to return to my job. He threw my documents back in my face, and shouted: “Go and stay at home!”

**What are three important post-Taliban achievements in Afghanistan?**
President Karzai’s enactment of the Law for the Elimination of Violence Against Women in 2009 is our greatest achievement. Furthermore, we have seen enormous change in the living conditions for women, and their ability to participate in political domains. For example, women now hold roles in the Parliament, the Senate, and the provincial councils. We have also made great advancements regarding freedom of speech.

**What gives you hope for Afghanistan? What do you see as a positive development?**
After 30 years of war, people have come to understand and value their political and civil rights. Especially the youth, they have really taken it upon themselves to understand their rights as citizens and spread this awareness in society. The heightened level of awareness in society about rights and politics does give me some hope.

**What is your worst fear?**
I fear that the international community will desert Afghanistan before the country is self-sufficient, before
our security forces are adequately strengthened. The growth of corruption in the administration also worries me a lot.

**What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?**

Blind prejudices in Afghanistan have allowed for ugly traditions and customs to get mixed up with, and legitimated as, religion. There’s a general lack of knowledge about the real principles of Islam, and this leads to all kinds of mistaken and damaging interpretations. I also think that, as a people, we are lacking a spirit of patriotism.

**Will the present-day Afghanistan allow schools to once again be closed to girls and women excluded from society?**

I hope we won’t let this scenario be repeated once again in Afghanistan, but at this point it can’t be ruled out. Right now there are many risk factors: some people are too readily inclined to fight others; neighbouring countries keep interfering in our affairs; and poverty and unemployment continue at worrying levels. If we don’t resolve these fundamental challenges, there is always a risk of returning to the errors of the past.

**Can you share with us a memory from a time where the human rights of someone in your family or circle of friends were violated?**

Most of my memories of human rights violations date back to the dark days of the Taliban. One incident that has never left me is something that happened to my brother. He used to work for the government, but had lost his job
after the Taliban came in and was making his living by driving taxis. One day, he made the mistake of parking his car in front of a car belonging to a member of the Taliban. They beat him so badly that he came home in a terrible state. I will never forget that night.

**What are some factors which deter women’s participation in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?**

There is a lack of trust from society in women’s abilities, even amongst the intellectuals. Among women themselves, there is a lack of trust, and of cohesion. Another major deterrent is the fact that the government and the international community have forgotten their promises of support for women.

**What are three major things women are seeking to change?**

Women want to see the laws being implemented and enforced. Laws must not just be confined to paper – they have to be put into practice if they are to mean anything. Until today, the role of women in Afghanistan is still too symbolic. Women need to be recognised as citizens of Afghanistan, and have their rights as citizens and as human beings respected.

**What the sources and centres of power which women can rely on to promote their rights and demands?**

Women can depend on some sections of the police, the Prosecutor’s Office for Combating Violence Against Women, the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission.
What do you wish for your daughter?
I wish that my daughter will reach the status that other women around the world have reached. That she will enjoy the right to choose her own husband, to own her house, to work, and to enjoy all the other human rights to which she is entitled.

What have you done in your private and professional life to eliminate the obstacles for women such as discrimination?
In my life, I have tried to respect the rights of others, to appreciate and value the capabilities of women, and to encourage these capabilities in other women. When a woman comes to me to seek redress for violations of her rights, I try, with the help of my colleagues, to solve her problems in the shortest time possible.

Do you have a specific message?
Women need to carefully protect the power of their vote in the elections by making precise and informed choices. They must not allow other people, whether they be their parents or prominent people in their district, to interfere in their decision. Women should take part independently, diligently, and freely in elections. They should go to the other women who are active in the cultural, social, and political domains in Afghanistan; these women will be able to help them get accurate information about the candidates standing for election.
Mohammad Farid Hamidi: “Your children are the backbone of a strong and progressive Afghanistan”

A well-known lawyer in Afghanistan, Mohammad Farid Hamidi is Deputy Director of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, where he has been a Commissioner for the past 11 years. Before joining the Commission, he was responsible for developing the electoral rules for the Emergency Loya Jirga to elect the transitional administration in 2002. Hamidi also currently serves as chair of the presidential advisory board for senior governmental appointments, and co-founder of the Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan. He has worked closely with the Judicial Reform Commission in training lawyers and judges on international human rights law and standards.

Have your rights ever been violated, and if so, how did it affect your life?
The first thing that comes to mind is the way the wars have affected my education. I was graduating from high school
in 1982. Because of the war, there were no university entrance exams held that year. All of the young people my age were prevented from continuing with higher education: this destroyed our ambitions for the future. Later, in 1990, when I was studying International Relations, the government shut down the Institute of Social Sciences (where I was studying) to merge it with other schools. We organised a non-violent civil demonstration in defence of our rights. But the government didn’t see it that way: they violently suppressed the demonstration. I spent a year in prison in Kabul for participating in that non-violent student demonstration.

**What are the important achievements in Afghanistan today?**

The new constitution is a great achievement. Freedom of speech and the development of the media are others. And the creation of proper channels for people to participate in their governance, particularly women, is another great development in our history.

**What gives you hope for the future?**

I believe that the decades of war and bloodshed in Afghanistan have raised the level of political consciousness in Afghanistan. Rationality has taken the place of raw emotion.

**What is your worst fear for Afghanistan?**

I am worried about the politicians at the helm of our national policies and developments. They are not in step
with the changes in the society; they cling to mentalities of the past. They don’t understand people’s needs and demands in Afghanistan, nor do they comprehend the prevailing international human rights standards and geopolitical dynamics.

**What are the major challenges facing Afghanistan?**

The educational system in Afghanistan is both one of our greatest opportunities and challenges. Education is a highly influential force for shaping public opinion. Our newly established system is still far from proper academic standards. If we want to address the problems in society, we need to start by completely renovating and restructuring our system of education. Furthermore, we find ourselves in a state of deep distrust as a nation. This is typical for a post-war country, but poses an extreme challenge. How should the government move forward with its policies and civil society with its activities when there is such a pervasive situation of distrust? This is our greatest challenge to overcome.

**Is it possible that schools could once again be closed to girls and women excluded from social participation, as was the case under the Taliban?**

Afghanistan is not the same country that it was 10 or 12 years ago: this is a fact that needs to be realized and accepted. Today’s Afghanistan will not allow the school gates to be closed to anyone. In the last year, we’ve seen several popular uprisings against the Taliban’s policy of burning schools. The problem is that politicians do not want to acknowledge these changes in our society.
Which factors hinder women’s participation in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?
Despite all the government and non-government action – to reduce violence against women, to increase the representation of women in government departments, in leadership roles and in decision-making – the condition of women in Afghanistan has not fundamentally changed. The patriarchal mentality that permeates all aspects of our culture has a lot to answer for.

What solutions do you see for advancing women’s rights in Afghanistan?
We have succeeded in passing laws that ban discrimination against women and envisage equality between men and women: this now needs to be reflected in social attitudes. This is the way to build a level of trust and understanding between women and men as equal citizens.

What have you done in your personal and professional life to fight against discrimination?
All of our activities at the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission aim to combat violence and discrimination and ensure the protection of people’s rights. I have always stood for these principles in my personal and professional life. Whenever I see the opportunity, I raise issues of women’s rights and discrimination.

Any final messages you wish to share?
Difficult years lie ahead of us in Afghanistan, and wishful thinking will not get us anywhere. Change demands serious work from all of us. We will need to persevere and
show firm determination in confronting each and every obstacle in our path.
I also have a message for the families in Afghanistan: Parents, I ask of you, please remember the weight of your responsibility in raising your children. Your children need a proper upbringing, for they are the backbone of a strong and progressive Afghanistan.
Massoud Hoseyni: People should co-operate with journalists to soothe their pains

Massoud Hoseyni says: “If people co-operate with journalists to disseminate information and raise consciousness, it can soothe the nation’s pain to some extent.” He also calls on Afghans residing abroad not to sever their relations with Afghanistan and not to leave the country on its own again.

Tell us a couple of memories about violation of your human rights, which influenced your life.

One of the problems occurs when there is a suicide attack. When we arrive at the location, we encounter the police. I remember when we went to cover such an attack at Dar ul-Aman Street, police prevented us from taking photographs and reporting. A policeman attacked and hit me with his rifle butt on my head and hands. My jacket was torn.

What are the important achievements of the new era in Afghanistan?
Despite the numerous problems we are facing, the great achievements of the new system are freedom of the press and freedom of expression. Another achievement is that the government recognises the people’s voice.

**What do you fear most today?**

Unfortunately, our society has been widely politicised and this has separated the various social groups. For example, the issue of elections created division among sincere friends after they came to know each other’s political tendencies. In addition, unemployment and loss of social identity is a very troubling issue for young people. They are unemployed, depressed and tired of war. I fear that the government may be unable to keep the society away from politicisation and aggressiveness and fail to bring change to the tragic conditions of the young people.

**What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?**

One of the challenges is the class and ethnic society. The ethnic community is incapable of integrating within the nation and identifying with a single homogeneous society. The young people are unable to liberate themselves from this ethnic society. Another structural and crucial challenge, which may push the country to the precipice, is the economic crisis. The government can be strong when it has a strong and sustainable economy. Unfortunately, western countries pay %90 of the government’s budget. Dependence on foreign aid has brought the biggest harm to our political and economic independence. Economic anomalies shall aggravate the social conditions. A hot topic in this field is the management of national resources. The
third challenge is the widening intellectual gap between the old and new generations. The old generation does not wish to share power with the new generation. It cannot understand the demands of the new generation.

**Will the present-day Afghanistan allow a recurrence of the closing of schools to girls and the blocking of women’s social participation?**

When the new government was being established, the majority of the people developed a historical demand for education. Unfortunately, this demand was met with inattention and unwillingness on the part of the government. The government did not provide for the required resources and general security, in particular in the countryside. Thus, the insurgent Taleban took the opportunity to exert pressure on the people. I will give you an example, which I personally witnessed: the Canadians built a girls school in Helmand a few years ago. It cost around 30 million dollars, but it was never used because the insurgents were in the region. Initially, the school served as a military base for the Afghanistan army, which camped there to fight the Taleban. Subsequently, the Taleban captured the school and used its rooms, toilets and halls. At the request of Canada, NATO sent its war planes to bomb the school.

**What are the factors deterring women’s participation in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?**

The first factor is the absence of collective consciousness and the low level of literacy among women. When there is scant literacy and knowledge among the people,
religious and customary superstitions will fill the void. These superstitions and customary commands play a big role towards violation of women’s rights. We suffer from a cultural tradition that pushes us towards extremes. A second factor is the weak role of the press and media in promoting and publicising women’s rights through the mass media. Our media are strongly politicised. They care only for reports and news that would bring them economic success. The media must assume a more committed role vis-a-vis the equal rights of men and women; they must organise educational programmes in this respect.

What are the major demands of women?
One of the most important demands of women is respect for their human rights, which will be achieved through culture building. This has to be done through proper education, comprehensive publicity and conscious raising and a change in school curriculum. Their other demand is recognition of equal rights in all professional areas. They demand the right to work and the right to choose their occupation. They also demand their political rights.

What have you done/are doing in your private or public domains, e.g. your civil and professional work, to eliminate the obstacles including discrimination?
As a journalist and a human rights activist, I have done my best to give a public and audible voice to women and to report any problems they face.

Do you have a specific message?
I ask the people in the country to compare Afghanistan’s
progress with other Islamic countries. I ask them to cooperate with journalists. If people co-operate with journalists to disseminate information and raise consciousness, it can soothe the nation’s pain to some extent. I ask Afghans residing abroad not to sever their relations with Afghanistan and not to leave the country on its own again. I ask Afghanistan’s friends not to leave us alone both economically and culturally and to help us with cultural, social, economic and political growth.
Malek Setiz: “We must move with the times”

Mr Malek Setiz is an international relations adviser to the Foreign Ministry of Afghanistan. He sought refuge in Denmark after the civil wars and has been living there for the past 20 years and working for the Danish Institute for Human Rights. Setiz received a Master’s Degree in International Relations from the Higher Institute of International Relations in Moscow and his doctor’s degree from Denmark’s International Strategic Studies Institute. He has worked in several different countries in Central Asia. Despite his international involvement, Setiz has always remained invested in Afghanistan. He assisted in establishing the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and is a founding member of the Civil Society and Human Rights Network in Afghanistan.

What are some of the most important achievements in present-day Afghanistan?
I could list many clichéd examples, such as freedom of expression and freedom of the press, but in my opinion, one of the greatest achievements, both for the
government and the people, is the new Constitution. Another achievement is the emergence of new and innovative ways of thinking amongst the youth. They are increasingly critical and mobilised, and this change is evident in all areas and at all levels.

**What gives you hope in the future?**
In light of my experience overseas, I must say the biggest change – I cannot call it an achievement – is the extent of the international community’s attention to Afghanistan. Ever since the first foundations of government were established in Afghanistan 250 years ago, Afghanistan has never received such attention from the world powers and the international community. Afghanistan’s present-day status in the world is a massive change in its history.

**What do you fear most today?**
My biggest worry is that we in Afghanistan might fail to comprehend and progress in step with the prevailing international values. We must move with the times. I worry that we might fail to convey a proper understanding of modern values so that they can be absorbed into popular opinion in Afghanistan; that we might fail to convey the values of globalisation to the people. That we might not keep up pace with modernity, and that in doing so, we will block the path of progress of Afghanistan and destroy all its structures in the name of the religion, fundamentalism and ethnocentrism.

**What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?**
Religious institutions (Pakistani madrasas) are one
of these challenges. They are very active and quite dangerous. Another challenge is the widespread presence of fundamentalism in politics. Most political parties are fundamentalist parties. They keep violence as a second option should politics fail them: that is a very dangerous phenomenon for Afghanistan. The Mafiosi structure of the economy is another challenge: it will gradually develop to a regional imperialism. It has already swallowed the domain of politics. From a social perspective, tribalism is a major challenge. Tribal policy has paralysed all political structures.

**Will the present-day Afghanistan allow schools to once again be closed to girls and women to be excluded from social participation?**

It is already happening! There are reports now that many schools are being closed to girls in the eastern and southern parts of the country and the students and their parents are being threatened with death. If the discontented allies of Mr Karzai manage to infiltrate the political and security structures more than before and consolidate their military-political power, schools will be closed all over the country; this influence will even reach the gates of Kabul.

**Which factors deter women from participating equally in social, economic, political, and cultural spheres?**

Structural violence has deprived women of opportunities to flourish and participate in society. By this, I mean that violence is intertwined with the structure of the system and the society. It originates from above and is imposed
on women. In our society, women depend heavily on men and continue to be deprived of economic, intellectual and social freedoms and independence. That is, they lack their most basic rights. The lack of awareness and knowledge about rights in the society, especially noticeable amongst the women themselves, is another deterrent factor to their effective participation.

**What changes are necessary to advance women’s rights in Afghanistan?**
The most critical process in Afghanistan, in my opinion at least, is to develop a national plan. A government that derives its legitimacy from the people and has an accountable and efficient leader can meet the demands of its people. Such a government can prioritise the goal of eliminating gender discrimination and move towards the realisation of equality and justice. Legal reform should also be a priority. So long these reforms are not on foot, women will lack the tools necessary to overcome the challenges they are facing.
Nader Nadery: “These freedoms are the most precious gifts to the people of Afghanistan”

Nader Nadery is the Chair of the Free and Fair Election Forum of Afghanistan and the Director of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. He was studying law and political science at Kabul University during the civil wars and the subsequent seizure of power by the Taliban. Despite significant obstacles, he continued with his studies, completing them over the course of eight years. He subsequently gained a Masters Degree in International Relations from George Washington University in the United States of America. Nadery served on the Emergency Loya Jirga’s constitutional commission, established the Human Rights International Legal Group, and served as a Commissioner on the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission.

Can you share with us some memories of instances when your rights have been violated and how they have influenced your life?

The burning of the primary school where I was studying
was the first and one of my most shocking experiences of violence. Later, when I was studying at university, we organised demonstrations calling for improvements in university education. This was during the time when Dr Najibullah was in power and civil and political freedoms did not exist. A couple of people from our group were imprisoned and we all experienced harsh violence from the officials. Then came the civil wars. Under the Taliban, I personally experienced torture and beatings because of my lifestyle and ideas.

**What are the most important achievements since the time of the Taliban in Afghanistan?**
The civil and political freedoms we currently enjoy are without precedent in Afghanistan. These freedoms are the most precious gifts to the people of Afghanistan in the past 12 years and so far, we have managed to hold onto them. As a citizen, I do believe that some of these freedoms have been sufficiently institutionalised so that any system that wishes to curb them in the future will not have an easy task. The other achievement are the changes in the overall political system. When we wrenched the system from the rule of the Taliban, the system was disintegrated and in pieces. From those conditions, where there was no real system or institutions in existence, we have created an actual system of government.

**What gives you hope for the future?**
In my opinion, freedom of the press and expression are a solid part of our society, matters which can be sustained,
even though the government may not always be in favour of these freedoms.

**What is your worst fear today?**
My greatest fear is that we may fail to properly transition power from one person to another, from one administration to another; that we may fail to comply with the mechanisms determined in the Constitution as the mode of operation of our political system. The polity have remained as individuals; they have failed to become political institutions. Individuals can easily and quickly go astray. However, if they become institutionalised, if they operate as part of regular structures and under concrete criteria, even if the individual performance leads them in a different direction, they will not be so likely to be distracted and taken off path by personal temptations.

**What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?**
Our deepest challenges lie in the aspects embedded in our culture that block social development and change. A part of this culture has consistently turned the society back towards the past. Unfortunately, the mixing of this part of our cultural structures and values with religious beliefs has given it particular power, even though often the reprehensible aspects of culture contradict religious principles.
A second challenge is the economy. The structures built in the past 50 years have prevented us from transitioning from trade facilitators to serious investors. In particular, in the past 12-10 years, our economy has become a static, dependent, and even illegal economy. Unfortunately, there
is a collective idea that people can become capitalists and rich by two means: being a part of the governing system, or having relationships with groups that facilitate the distribution of money through government channels.

Is it possible that girls could once again be banned from schools and women excluded from social participation, as was the case under the Taliban rule?
I believe that would be very difficult. What gave me great hope in relation to women’s rights in 2004 was that women in all provinces of Afghanistan made similar demands in relation to the Constitution. Their wordings may have been different, but the primary goal and demand was the same throughout the country.

What changes are necessary to advance women’s rights in Afghanistan?
The most important thing is to retain the social position of women and to expand the space for their balanced participation in social, economic, and political growth and development. One of the concerns of women nowadays is that there should not be any political talks and even movement towards compromise with the Taliban that would result in the partial loss of women’s rights. Women are also increasingly and persistently demanding economic empowerment to enable them to independently and equally participate in economic domains.
Hengama Anwari: “10 years is only a drop in the ocean that is the process of changing a society”

Hengama Anwari is a Commissioner on the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and the founder of the Women and Children’s Legal Research Foundation.

What gives you hope for Afghanistan’s future?
The strength of the women’s movement in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban is important. Regardless of whether you are speaking of the movement as a government or non-governmental initiative, or as a social or political movement, the persistent belief amongst women that they have equal rights with men and their efforts to achieve their rights have been remarkable. They have acted collectively when women’s common interests have been threatened. On the whole, the awakening of women and the collective action of the movement have been positive developments since the time of the Taliban.

What is one of the best achievements since the time of
the Taliban?
Article 22 of the Constitution on gender equality is the best achievement. It allows us to take more meaningful and efficient steps to fulfil women’s rights.

What is your worst fear today?
In order to have a healthy and discrimination-free society, we must first prepare the ground for both women and men to grow and be empowered, and to work collaboratively with each other for societal development. Doing this requires a significant shift and reorientation in prevailing ways of thinking, and the breaking up of traditions. 10 years is only a drop in the ocean that is the process of changing a society. It is an extremely short period of time to achieve such a lofty objective. My worst fear is that the achievements we have made so far are fragile.

What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?
Our first and major challenge is the issue of security. After this, it is the lack of clarity and certainty around Afghanistan’s future. Although we are all talking about the transition of power and peace talks, the Afghan people lack vision regarding their future and this will prevent any truly strategic initiatives. Racial, ethnic, and linguistic disputes are other threatening issues that have often been stirred in recent times.

Will the present-day Afghanistan allow a recurrence of the closing of schools to girls and the blocking of women’s social participation?
If we consider the people as a whole, such a situation
is very unlikely. In the past, political pressures and the ruling system’s structure prevented girls from going to school and prohibited women from working. It was never families choosing not to send their daughters to school. If Afghanistan does not have a powerful system to protect and retain the achievements, because our governmental structures are not strong enough and the social structures have not yet adequately developed, these achievements could be lost. But the people of Afghanistan have reached a level of consciousness about the importance of seeking education for girls.

**What are the major factors deterring women’s participation in social, economic, political, and cultural spheres?**

In addition to the challenges I have already mentioned, a lack of political commitment, and reprehensible customs and traditions deter women’s participation.

**What are the major demands of women?**

First, there should be emphasis on retaining and implementing article 22 of the Constitution. Legal equality between men and women is central to many societal problems: legal equality ensures gender equality in practice. Based on that article, plans and strategies can be developed to promote equality.

Secondly, women demand equal access to opportunities for girls and boys. Unfortunately, we see a real inequality in opportunities in favour of boys, both in the family and the society. Another important demand is respect for women’s dignity.
Which sources and centres of power can be relied upon to promote women’s rights and demands?
Many organisations, mechanisms, and institutions have been established in the past 10 years, which we can refer to as reliable sources. Civil society is one of the solid supports for women. The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, the Ministry of Women’s Affairs and other institutions working for women are dependable sources. We should also remember that all of these institutions are new and need technical and political support in order to become powerful.
Vaheed Kaacemy: “I belong to the land called Afghanistan”

Vaheed Kaacemy is a musician and folklore music scholar. He has worked as a singer and composer since 1977 and has conducted extensive research in native folklore music in different regions of the country since 2002.

Have your rights ever been violated?
I was forced to leave Afghanistan with my family. We spent many years living overseas in exile, far from my native environment and all the values and things that meant home to me.

What are the important achievements since the time of the Taliban in Afghanistan?
Freedom of expression is an important milestone of democracy. Furthermore, I support the holding of elections as part of the democratic process; even if they are not held perfectly it is better than nothing. The development and increased participation in sport promotes a healthy
lifestyle for the young people of Afghanistan, and our professional athletes represent Afghanistan positively on the world stage, in a different light to how the world is accustomed to seeing us.

**What gives you hope for the future?**
The awakening of youth and intellectuals, and Afghanistan’s gradual transition from conflict to relative peace, stability, and security – a situation where people can have hope for their lives – these are two key promising developments. I believe this country has a clear future. The most fundamental challenge that motivates me to work for progress in Afghanistan is to move us beyond the anxiety of 2014. As a citizen of this country with great hope, trust, and respect in my fellow citizens, I wish to help my country come out of the 2014 impasse.

**What you fear most today?**
There are many things that I fear and worry about, for instance, the level of hypocrisy and discord amongst people. But if you are asking with respect to my own work, I am most afraid of experiencing again the kind of cultural invasions and restrictions that have previously limited all aspects of cultural life in Afghanistan.

**What are the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan?**
The biggest structural challenge is lack of attention to standards and professional rules in any field. We hardly pay any attention to ensuring that structures abide by well-defined and homogenous standards and that is what makes us vulnerable in Afghanistan. Another major
challenge for our society is the persistent attempts to re-enforce ethnic divides in this country. Everybody will suffer if this way of interacting continues, even those who fuel the fire.

Much can be said with respect to culture. Even before thinking about the influence of foreign cultures, a major challenge that we face is that the youth of Afghanistan don’t know anything about the cultural wealth that resides in our country. It is very difficult to find a single young person that fully grasps the Afghan culture he has inherited. This is a source of great concern for me.

**Would today’s Afghanistan allow schools to once again be closed to girls and women to be excluded from social participation?**
I don’t believe that the people of Afghanistan would ever accept this again.

**Can you tell us about any specific occasions where the human rights of a female family member or friend were violated?**
During the reign of the Democratic People’s Party in 1981, when my wife was at school, she and her classmates were imprisoned by the security service in Kabul for opposing the government.

**What are the major factors deterring women’s participation in social, economic, political and cultural spheres?**
Patriarchy; the persistence of the ideology of the Taliban; and the low representation and participation of women in
our country’s cultural life.

**What are the major demands of women in Afghanistan?**

Women demand freedom. They want equal rights with men and the abolition of customs that violate their rights, such as forced marriages.

**Which sources and centres of power can women rely on to promote their rights and demands?**

The terrible events that women suffer everyday in Afghanistan demonstrate that women do not enjoy their human rights in this society.

**What have you done in your personal and professional life to fight against discrimination?**

In all the years I have worked as an artist, I have sought to eliminate discrimination. I belong to the land called Afghanistan and this is our common home. I have performed songs with messages of solidarity, reconciliation, and equality, and dedicated them to my people. I have done everything possible to promote equality amongst my fellow citizens and my determination has never been swayed.