

**From hidden struggles towards
political participation**

Afghan women's perspectives on peace
and security beyond transition

The Heinrich Böll Stiftung (hbs) is a German foundation and part of the Green political movement that has developed worldwide as a response to the traditional politics of socialism, liberalism, and conservatism. Our main tenets are ecology and sustainability, democracy and human rights, self-determination and **justice**. We place particular emphasis on gender democracy, meaning social emancipation and equal rights for women and men. We are also committed to equal rights for cultural and ethnic minorities. Finally, we promote non-violence **and** proactive peace policies. In Afghanistan we have established our work since 2003 and are currently focusing on the fields of democracy, ecology as well as peace and security policies. For detailed information on our work and our partners in Afghanistan, please visit: www.af.boell.org, to contact us please write to info@af.boell.org.

Rahe Madanyat (Civilization Way Weekly Magazine) is a non- partisan and independent weekly magazine established in 2012 by a group of young talented journalists, writers and university lecturers in Afghanistan. The magazine aims to promote rule of law, citizen's rights, civilized values and social relations and concentrates on gender equality and social acceptance of women. Rahe Madanyat has been working with the Heinrich Böll Stiftung since mid 2012 and has become well known throughout Afghanistan for the project of publishing portraits of women and their role in strengthening peace and security in Afghanistan. For more information visit <http://www.rahemadanyat.com> or contact at info@rahemadanyat.com.

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Afghan women's perspectives on peace and security beyond transition**

By Rahe Madanyat Weekly Magazine (2012-2013)

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Foreword by Dr. Sima Samar

In the name of god of equality and freedom

Afghanistan is a poor and underdeveloped country, situated in the heart of Asia. It is known as tribal and conservative society and patriarchy and domination of the society by men has always been part of the culture during the at least the recent history.

Most of the people of Afghanistan are illiterate and uneducated. Despite that, in the seventies (1970), there was some progress on the rights of women and on women's participation in social activities. The 1978 coup by the pro USSR regime, have diverted the history page in Afghanistan and massive human rights violations have been committed by the regime. This has caused the people to denounce the government and begun resistance against the pro soviet regime.

In order to cease the rise of socialism and the USSR's influence in the region, the western and conservative Arabs countries stepped in, supported and armed the most conservative and fundamentalist groups among the resistant movement. Afghanistan has engaged in a conflict that has lasted for three decades and that, after a very brief break, continues to date.

The war with the pro USSR regime and the red army has lasted till 1989. As a result of support of the conservative and fundamentalist groups, these groups have nurtured as the dominant groups and gained lots of power in Afghanistan. This situation and a growing culture of armed conflict, have given powerful positions to men and have naturally boosted the social status of men in society.

The women of Afghanistan were completely forgotten during the conflict.

Even basic social services such as education, access to basic health services and facilities were not available. War and absence of security places women in isolation and in an environment with limited activities. In such circumstances, it obviously limits their rights of free movement as there are fears of not to be sexually abused .

After withdrawal of soviet forces, unfortunately the conflict continues to this day in one or another form (civil war, terror of the Taliban regime and the war against terror). The violence against women and abuses of women's rights have been present and still continue in a brutal way and make headlines every day.

Lack of access to education, basic health and reproductive health services caused that women gave birth to many, sometimes six to eight children. It is a difficult task to take care and provide for such a large number of children, and it increases the poverty in the country. None of the warring factions paid attention to an improvement of the situation of women's rights and human rights in general.

Other devastating effects of long lasting conflicts are the collapse of all moral, social and cultural values in the country. In the past week, as we were celebrating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), we have witnessed a heinous crime and a very obscene form of violence against women in Afghanistan: a girl was gang raped in public and another woman's ears ,nose and lips were cut off by her addicted husband. These are inhuman and terrible crimes that are committed against women.

Unfortunately impunity, and wide spread corruption within the legal system, makes the perpetrators to run free and even get more courage to repeat such crimes and violence, as they are getting light verdicts and are often getting free after few months of imprisonment. Or they are not even captured and brought to justice at all.

Despite all the suffering, problems and short comings, and witnessing of the loss of their loved ones, women of Afghanistan are strong and continue to struggle to survive.

Fortunately after the fall of Taliban regime, women have gained a lot. Now, they can go out and work, they can go to school and pursue their higher education and have relatively acceptable access to health services. We have successful women which occupy senior posts. There are women in the ministerial position in the Afghan cabinet as well as in the private sector. There are successful women who are leading and running NGO's and we have female diplomats. There are women judges and prosecutors.

I am one of the women, that has been active during the entire period of conflict and was involved in the political, social and humanitarian activities such as providing medical and health services , education and skill training

to the refuge masses in Pakistan and also inside of Afghanistan since 1982. I'm confident that with strong political will and self-confidence, we Afghan women will and shall overcome all the obstacles we are facing today.

Commonly, rights are not given as a gift. In order to gain our rights, we therefore should continue to fight for them. This wish will come true, when women honestly work together with a sense of cooperation. This struggle should go on to secure an environment in which women and girls enjoy their basic rights without facing any discrimination and un-equality in the future.

I would like to thank the Heinrich Böll Stiftung for publishing interview of women who are a good role model for the young girls in Afghanistan, and who are representing the millions of women in Afghanistan. We need solidarity and support of other women around the world to help us to walk the road ahead of us.

I'm sure that we will succeed in this struggle. The road is long ahead of us, we may face obstacles and serious problems, but we will surely overcome them. It might be difficult but it is not impossible.

Dr. Sima Samar

Chairperson of Afghan Independent Human rights Commission

December 2013

Foreword by Prof. Sayeda Mojgan Mostafavi

Women movements in the geographical region where Afghanistan is located have historical significance, especially in Afghanistan itself and have definitely been accompanied by numerous triumphs and at the same time challenges.

It might be quite useful if we throw a light over the movement of Afghan women over the past hundred years. The post-independence movement aimed at giving women their due rights and on strengthening their social presence. Although such efforts did not lead to significant achievements, as Afghans' cultural, traditional and religious norms were not taken into account, initially some major developments took place like the establishment of the first girls' school, the first cinema for women named as "Cinema-e Zainab", the reconstruction of Shahr Ara – the women's garden, the inaugural of a women-specific center (the current building of the Ministry of Women Affairs) and publications such as *Irshad-ul-Naswan* and *Mairman*.

Since then, the struggles of Afghan women for achieving what is their rights have continued despite countless challenges and obstacles. The history of Afghanistan has gone through many ups and downs. The country has witnessed eras of governments that have treated women's rights in a radical manner. There have been governments that snatched the hijab from women conceiving it as the greatest and the only problem of Afghan women. There also came times, when darkness ruled the country and women had been confined to the walls of their houses and were deprived of all kinds of social, economic, political and cultural rights – rights that have been considered for them both by Islam and humanity.

Unfortunately, injustice in respect of women's rights persists even today. Some conceive that women's development and progress are in contradiction to our social norms while others think keeping women

incompetent and deprived is legitimate. The latter group, knowingly and unknowingly, believe that such a way of thinking is based on the principles of Islam. Nonetheless, Islam has considered certain important rights for women in all areas of human life such as: the right to get education, the right to alimony, dowry, inheritance, and possession and also the right to having social presence.

In our belief both the above ways of thinking about women are unacceptable and based on cruelty as unfavorable and un-Islamic social customs and traditions have led to such ideologies. It has to be mentioned here that the foundation of women's rights in Muslim countries such as Afghanistan is Islam and all must respect it. The Islamic framework has recognized all legitimate rights for women. Thus, women as a part of human society who follow Islamic principles deserve to have access to their full rights. Giving women their due rights is an Islamic and a human obligation within a Muslim society.

Despite much difficulty, Afghan women over the past one decade have had praiseworthy gains in various areas, some of which are unprecedented in the history of Afghanistan. A decade of efforts to alter the situation of women has resulted in their development in almost all fields. In this period, both print and electronic media has had creditable focus on issues pertaining to women. Moreover, the roles of freedom of expression and certain civil society organizations that work for women's development cannot be neglected. Although gains are limited and expectations are high, it can be said with confidence that the last decade was one of the brightest decades in regards of development of women in the history of Afghanistan. In spite of challenges and problems, an open environment of discussing issues pertaining to women was created and has led to a formation of certain individual and collective movements. Establishment of the Ministry for Women Affairs and its directorates in all provinces, presence of women in the cabinet, appointment of women as deputy ministers and in other high positions, election of women for provincial council and parliamentary seats (women form 27% of members of the Afghan parliament), implementation of laws like that of elimination of violence against women, the family law and hundreds of other policies and strategies in favor of women, approval of a -10year national working plan for women, establishment of more than 20 women-specific gardens in provinces, formation of 550 women organizations, growing presence of women as teachers and students in schools and other educational organizations, decrement of mother mortality rate and increment of an average life span of women all indicate that development has occurred. However, it has to be re-stated that still women in Afghanistan face countless social, economic, educational and political constraints. There is

a pressing need for addressing challenges like violence, poverty, illiteracy and lack of access to basic health facilities in remote regions of the country. This is the responsibility of all segments of our society and the support from international community can lead us to better and satisfactory outcomes.

I credit the Heinrich Böll Foundation for it has been concerned about the above mentioned issues, for being an exemplary partner and supporter of Afghan women since 2003 and for publishing the current book in this respect.

This book comprises experiences and opinions shared by certain notable Afghan women on various issues. At some places, the views expressed in the interviews appear to be opposite to each other and even I might not agree with some of them. But this contrast in opinions is what makes this book beautiful and can help us explore better ways of moving forward.

I have to admit that after reading this book I was impressed. It gave me a dual feeling of happiness and sorrow. Expression of opinions by these notable women on various issues in a very sincere way and without any kind of exaggeration indicates their pure soul and a patriotism that is matter of pride and happiness for me. I feel proud that my country has been able to provide an environment so that women can show such competence. In order to continue its way forward, our society is in dire need of efforts and activities of these women. I wish every Afghan woman to have opportunities like these distinguished women, to prove their abilities and their competence. I wish the women of my country had not suffered from poverty, illiteracy and etc and could devote all their energy for the development of Afghanistan.

Prof. Sayeda Mojgan Mostafavi,
Technical and Policy Deputy Minister, Ministry of Women Affairs & Lecturer,
Kabul University, January 2014

Introduction

Women in Afghanistan have achieved significant progress in terms of working in public life since the international intervention in 2001. Despite of insecurity, patriarchal attitudes and discriminatory mindsets they have effective presence in parliament, media, government and civil society to contribute in democratization and stability of the country.

Portraying the story of their public life seems important because of certain interrelated reasons: to motivate other women to enter into public life, to promote women's social acceptance and to strengthen their role in the traditional society of Afghanistan. In order to address these issues, Rahe Madaneyat Weekly Magazine and Heinrich Boell Stiftung (HBS) decided to highlight the individual and social role of Afghan women and to enhance awareness on the fact that there are successful women in Afghanistan who contribute towards democratization of the country and towards peace and stability through this series of interviews of "Successful Women".

This publication combines all 31 interviews portraits published in Rahe Madaneyat Magazine during 2012 and 2013 as well as 4 interview portraits were published before the start of the project.

The portraits include stories of women artists, film makers, and business women, women in the police, young leaders, and women members of the parliament and cabinet ministers, women rights activists and poets. They are friendly dialogues reflecting the visions and practices of Afghan women from a very personal level to socio-political affairs and they discuss their administration and working environment. The women interviewed describe how they interact with their husbands and govern their family. They describe how women fight against discrimination and injustice and how they support democracy and its values throughout their work. The interviewees present how women could play an effective role to safeguard the achievements made over the last 12 years also in the future.

The interviews portraits were published in local Farsi language and attracted many readers within Afghanistan. It is hoped that this booklet translation in English will also attract an international audience interested in the stories of successful women in Afghanistan.

I would like to take the opportunity and extend my thanks to Dr. Sima Samar, the chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) and Ms. Mozghan Mostafawi, Deputy Minister for Technical and Policy at the Ministry of Women Affairs for providing the introductory chapters for this publication. I would also like to acknowledge Mr. Asghar Eshraq, Editor in Chief of Rahe Madaneyat Weekly Magazine for his creative ideas, efforts and successful implementation of this so important project. Above all, I would like to thank all women who gave their valued time, shared their views and experience and made this publication possible.

Abdullah Athayi

Program Coordinator for Democratization & Foreign/Security Policies

Heinrich Böll Stiftung

December, 2013

Fatima Gilani is the president of the Red Crescent Society in Afghanistan. She is the daughter of Sayed Ahmad Gilani. She was born in Kabul in 1954 and was a student at the Lycée Malalai. She went to Iran where she completed a degree in Persian literature and history and a post-graduate degree in literature and the history of Sufism. With professors such as Dr. Zareen Kob, Sayed Sadiq Jawhari, Ms. Aryan, Dr. Ali Azarakhsh, Dr. Ali Fazil and Reza Shabani, Fatima Gilani was able to learn from some of the greatest scholars of the 20th century. She describes her studies abroad as a turning point in her life.¹



“Humans need peace in their life”

Please tell us about the people who have influenced you.

One of the people who has influenced me is my mother. Her uncle was King Amanullah Khan. My grandmother was the youngest daughter of the king and passed away a few years ago in London. She was a strong woman and also a Red Crescent volunteer. I remember during the drought in Chaghcharan how my grandmother took aid to the victims using mules. I had a very privileged upbringing. I never suffered from hunger or lacked clothing. I never had to do any housework. There is a great chance of someone growing up in such an environment going astray. The one person who has made me stay balanced and keep my feet on the ground is my mother. She always said that people do not give you credit for your wealth and social status but for your behaviour, good manners and modesty. I learned a lot from my mother and grandmother. My father too has played an important role in my life. He never allowed gender discrimination to flourish in our family and never differentiated between boys and girls. He believed that girls are gifts of God as the Prophet Muhammad was

also blessed with daughter. Another person who influenced me was Ustad Khalilullah Khalili, one of Afghanistan's contemporary poets and a close friend of my father. He always gave me encouragement. Shaheed Muhammad Musa Shafiq was also a close friend of my father who always encouraged me. He was very knowledgeable about western civilization. He used to say that one should never get familiar with western civilization through the window of east.

What dreams did you have as a young person and how many of them have come true?

Since there were so many people who encouraged me, my dreams were about Afghanistan not about myself. I have never compared myself with people belonging to renowned Western, Arab and Iranian families. I have always focused on my surroundings. Fortunately I had everything and that led me to think more about others. I wanted everyone to be literate. Illiteracy in Afghanistan has always upset me, even as a child. I remember hundreds of people living in a large house that we inherited from my grandfather Naqib. We also lived in one wing of the house. My mother always said that if the son of our cook became a cook and the son of our driver became a driver, we would be to blame. And today they all have good professions. They are all well educated because we were all taught together like brothers and sisters. My mother used to ask me about my studies and she did the same for them. She hired a personal tutor to improve my weaknesses and she did the same for the children of our cooks and drivers. It was then that I started to realize the importance of education. Today I feel ashamed when I see our society still suffering because of illiteracy after almost 40 years. One of my other dreams was to see Afghanistan as a country attracting large numbers of tourists from around the world. We used to travel quite often and I saw how countries invested in their tourism industry. I wanted my country to be like them. I also thought a lot about politics. I wanted to be a parliamentarian and take part in politics but that did not happen. I got some political experience abroad but when I returned to Afghanistan after 24 years, I had lost my interest in politics and wanted to do social work instead.

Why did they name you Fatima?

There are so many people in our family called Fatima that it was difficult for me to find an email name for myself! My aunt's name is Fatima, my

uncle's Ali and father's Ahmad. My aunt was named Fatima because of our family roots. It is an ancient Arabic name. Not only was the prophet Muhammad's daughter called Fatima but also his mother.

Why did you decide to work for people in humanitarian affairs?

Unlike my sister Maryam who has worked for people since she was a teenager, I was more political. I thought the solution to our country's problems lay in politics. That was one of my biggest mistakes. Women's rights should have been more important to me. Meanwhile Maryam had been helping in schools since she was really young. However, I did become a Red Crescent volunteer when I was 12 because my mother and grandmother were volunteers too. I thought being a volunteer was part of life. In other words, the culture of voluntary work was something inside me. I grew up in a very wealthy family and much of that money was used for helping thousands of needy people in the form of food, clothing and other daily requirements. Working for a formal organization was my own choice. I've been president of the Red Crescent for about seven and a half years now. I'm pleased to have had the opportunity of successfully heading a national and international organization. I was always confident in myself but I never knew I was capable of something like this. So I am happy and satisfied with my work.

Please tell us something about your husband Mr. Ahadi. How did you meet and end up getting married?

I had been reading articles written by Anwar ul Haq published by the Christian Science Monitor. He was writing a series of articles under the title 'Dr. Anwar ul Haq Ahadi, Professor of Economics.' It will probably surprise you to hear I thought he was a Bengali writer. That's because there was a Bangladeshi president who had been assassinated and there was 'Haq' at the end of his name. Ahadi's articles were all about ideas based on justice, so my belief was further supported. And that's what I believed about him until I met him at an international conference. That's where we got to know each other. I told him what I thought about him. It surprised me to find out that he had an Afghan passport although he had lived in the US for about twenty years. I asked him why that was. He said he saw his future in Afghanistan. We have many professors who have studied in the West but few of them are real professors like Dr. Shahrani who teaches in the US. You can see the difference when you are in the US. There is a

lot of difference between a professor and a professor with a real degree. Besides learning much from the West, Ahadi had not forgotten everything he knew about his own country. This is what interested me about him. It was indeed the starting point of our relationship.

Who proposed first, you or Mr. Ahadi?

I wanted to propose first but he was quicker than me. He proposed first.

What did you feel the moment he proposed to you?

He proposed to me on the phone. I could not believe it.

Both of you have important professional positions. How does that affect your personal life?

We discuss a lot of issues. Once we were at the Norwegian Embassy and we were disagreeing about something. We discussed it long and hard. I kept saying that I didn't agree. I told the ambassador that I didn't necessarily agree with Ahadi's every word. He was amazed.

After living together for so many years, can you sum up Mr. Ahadi in one sentence?

Once you become a professor, you are always a professor. And Anwar ul Haq is a highly polite man.

What upsets you the most?

I am very upset by people living in poverty and the seemingly never-ending war. The years of war in Afghanistan are equal to the age of my daughter, Humaira. My daughter was born in Tehran in April 1978 and the war began the next month. Every year my daughter's birthday approaches but the war still goes on. Now Humaira is a mother and I am a grandmother, and the war is not over yet.

What difference do you see between a holiday and a working day?

If you have a bad day at the office, you need to have a break to restore some happiness. Humans need peace in their life. This can be achieved through positive activities such as reading poetry, listening to music and meeting up with friends and family. What one does during one's time off is important for restoring energy so that one can be effective working for the people and the country.

What are your hobbies? Reading books, poetry and novels, recreation or travelling?

Travelling has turned into a working activity for me. I used to read poetry a lot. By the time I graduated from university I had memorized four thousand poems. I also read many novels. One day Mrs Thatcher, who had just recently become Britain's prime minister, said to me, "When you head off home from work, say goodbye to it and be calm." She suggested I read novels during my spare time. When it comes to music I love classical western and Indian music. I do not like pop and Iranian music. I lived in Iran for seven years but I never liked the voice of Googoosh, although I enjoy classical Iranian music. At that time, I enjoyed listening to Haida. I still like her songs today. I never liked Mahasti as much as I liked Haida's voice, although I knew both of them.

What qualities should an Afghan citizen have in your opinion?

I have thought a lot about this issue. Actually I think about this issue everyday on my way to the office. Above all, an Afghan citizen should consider his or her city truly his or her own and keep it clean. When I see people throwing empty drinks cans out of expensive cars, it hurts me a lot. Love for one's country or city cannot be expressed in this manner and this is not the way one should live in a city. We often say 'This is Afghanistan – it is the honour of every Afghan.' But we have to uphold this honour. We can only call ourselves good citizens if we maintain our cities properly and keep them clean.

The Red Crescent is a global family involved in humanitarian activities. As head of the Afghan Red Crescent Society you must think beyond ethnic, religious and linguistic borders. What is your opinion on this?

In an interview with the Red Crescent Magazine exactly five years ago, I said that you become a good manager or officer in the Red Crescent family if you have certain good qualities. A poet must have a talent for good poetry. In other words, you cannot learn how to not be prejudiced in the same way that a poet cannot learn to write good poetry. At the Red Crescent, there is no place for discrimination and humanity is the highest standard.

Can you read us one of your favourite poems?

*Last night, my venerated friend,
Wandered around the town,
A lantern in his hands, he went on:
“Of the beast and the bestial, I am tired!
Finding a human, a human is my only aim!”*

And finally, is there anything else you would like to share with us?

The improvement in women’s rights is one of the biggest achievements of the last decade. As an Afghan woman, I deem it a great achievement. This achievement has been possible through much sacrifice and so we must put a great deal of effort into maintaining this development. We must not cease in our efforts - women in Afghanistan still have a long way to go. We must stand united whatever happens.

Fawzia Koofi is the head of the parliamentary commission for women's affairs. She is from Koof in Badakhshan province. She has been elected to parliament twice. Her father was also an MP. Fawzia Koofi is a thoughtful woman and has proved herself an accomplished politician whose goal is the development of Afghanistan. In a country where even being a man in politics is fraught with difficulties, such female politicians must be credited for their courage.²



“Politics must be modernized”

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Ms. Koofi, how do you describe yourself?

This is quite difficult – how can one describe oneself? You might think you're a good person, but other people might judge you differently. I'm a sincere, serious and at the same sensitive person.

How did you become an MP?

There were many reasons. My success in the first parliamentary election was due to my political family background. However, my success in the last election was largely down to my reputation. I wanted people to vote for me based on my achievements. In traditional Afghan society, family background is hugely important but I wanted to gain people's support because of my own abilities not because of my father or anyone else. And despite many difficulties, I eventually managed it. In the second parliamentary election, I was elected on the basis of my own political identity and my commitment to the voters.

What is the most important quality a lawmaker can have?

Being available for people! People in the Eastern world including

Afghanistan are very emotional. They don't appreciate it if you do not help them or if you say 'That can't be done.'

What's the difference between a normal MP and an MP who heads a commission like the parliamentary commission for women's affairs?

All MPs are representatives of the people and answer to the people. A lawmaker's professional capabilities are not defined by a commission but by their personality. Inside parliament, responsibilities are more administrative. But out of parliament, people expect you to work for them since you are their representative.

There's been no high-level focus on development in the Koof valley. What made you decide to serve the whole nation of Afghanistan?

That's an interesting question! My father was from Koof and he was twice elected to be an MP. My second election was the fourth time a person from our family and from Koof became a lawmaker. This is quite extraordinary considering the difficulties one faces as a politician. In the past, public expectations and an MP's powers were different. MPs had more power. There was a parliamentary system and we had a prime minister. Today people have greater expectations while the MPs' powers have diminished. I decided to serve the people through politics because firstly, I was following in my father's footsteps, and secondly it was an opportunity for me to work for the welfare of the people.

Is there a point in women participating in politics in a society where there are men who can but do not want to serve the people and men who want to serve but are not given any opportunity and face great obstacles?

You make a good point. Female politicians who want serve the country face far more challenges than their male counterparts. I've been asked this question often, even by my family members. The way I see it, if we have the chance to participate in politics and can have at least a small part in serving the people, then why should we not utilize it? After all, life is full of obstacles. We might well face obstacles in politics but it is not just about facing challenges. We must make the most of the trust people have invested in us to serve our country. It's a fact that in parliament women who believe in their abilities and believe they can bring change face more challenges.

What should Afghan women do to overcome the difficulties they face?

Politics must be modernized. Unfortunately in Afghanistan politics are practiced in a very traditional and tribal way. I mean it is dominated by custom and traditions. In Afghan politics women are always treated as women not as people, regardless of their potential for contributing to growth. Therefore politics must be modernized if the situation for women and for Afghanistan in general is to be changed.

Do you like being well-known?

No, because being well known causes a lot of hardship especially for women in Afghanistan. But I would like to be popular. I want the people to like me.

How do you define happiness and how can one be happy?

Happiness comes from contentment! But contentment does not mean that a person shouldn't strive for change. Anyone who is contented with what they're doing holds the key to happiness.

How important is positive interaction?

I am all for positive interaction, but not for compromising on important issues. Politics in Afghanistan has been about compromise and traditions. That is why we should now be heading towards standard interaction. Standard interaction is based on commitment and cooperation right until the end. In Afghanistan political parties engage in interaction but after a while that interaction breaks down because there are no standards. I favour interaction based on certain standards. I always avoid making compromises just to please someone or for personal benefit.

What is your opinion on individual freedom?

Considering the prevailing condition in our society, which is quite traditional, it is still too early to move toward a modern society where one has individual freedom. I personally believe in individual freedom. But we should strive for that by maintaining the positive aspects of our society. One of the positive aspects is family. Over the past three decades of war, our social and family structures have helped us a lot. There are not as many children on the streets here as in other countries in post-conflict situations. It is the same case with women without a guardian. If you lose someone here, there are always family members who will support you.

The main reason for that is that we have maintained the values of our family system. Striving for modernism should not mean abandoning the positive and useful social values we have.

Do you recognize different beliefs?

I am in favour of pluralism. We cannot institutionalize democracy unless we recognize differences in beliefs.

How do you stay calm?

I usually only get angry at work when I encounter cases of injustice. There's a lot of discrepancy between the way men and women are treated. This upsets a lot of people and so it is unacceptable. If I get angry about something, I prefer to be alone in a room and think for while. I always get quite emotional. In my personal life, there's nothing that makes me angry.

How many children do you have and what are their names?

I have two daughters, Shehrzad and Shehra. They are studying at the Afghan-Turk School.

How would you like your children to be educated?

I would like my daughters to get a higher education. They're both talented. They are both top of their class and speak the national languages. However, I'll leave it up to them to decide. I always wanted to become a doctor and so did my mother. But today I have no medical knowledge. The political situation in Afghanistan didn't permit me to become a doctor. I was in my first year of medical school when the Taliban took over the country and after that I had to stop. One of my mother's wishes never came true. But coming from a large family with a background in politics, I eventually got involved too. I am sure that even if my daughters choose other fields they will end up in politics as well.

Shehra is your youngest daughter. How would define her smile?

I define her smile as the best moment of my life. At that moment I feel there is nothing in my life except her.

You have also written a book. What was the motivation behind it?

Yes, it's called "Letters to my Daughters." So far it has been translated into 16 languages. It has had quite an impact on my personal life. I get at least

ten emails a day about the book from abroad. There were two motivations behind writing this book. Firstly, I wanted to convey my political and personal memories and experiences of my life to my daughters. They are growing up in a different environment and won't experience what I have experienced, so it was important for me that they should know what difficulties their mother and grandmother faced in life and that despite those difficulties that they were able to realize their potential. Secondly, I wanted to show what Afghan women are capable of. Despite much adversity, Afghan women are capable. That is reflected in the story of my mother and me. If you read the book, you might think it's just a story but actually it reflects the truth about the life of hundreds of Afghan women.

In your opinion, what term most accurately defines a woman?

I do not favour many terms like subtle, elegant etc. At the same time, I have to say that life without women has no meaning.

And finally, would you please read us your favourite poem.

*Life has been placed on your shoulders, Bedil!
Live it! Live it cheerfully or live it miserably*

Shukria Barakzai is the head of the parliamentary commission for defence affairs and territorial integrity. This is her second term in parliament and she has played a significant role in forming the Third Line Party. Shukria was born in Kabul where she attended the Lycée Malala. She graduated in geology at Kabul University. She is one of Afghanistan's foremost women's rights activists and has been active in the media for some time. She is a straight-talking and articulate woman, a female politician who believes in modern political practices.³

“Politics is a crucial part of my life”



Please tell us about yourself.

I see myself as a defiant woman. I'm bold and straightforward.

How do you start your mornings?

Each day of my life is a different colour. Undoubtedly, I am eager to see each day of my life brighter and each morning more beautiful.

Do you set out to achieve your goals or just wish for them?

Wishing something is a part of being human, but if you want to achieve your objectives then you must set out to do that.

How successful have you been in achieving your stated goals?

Well, reaching high objectives is not an easy job and stating those goals is not enough to achieve them. Nevertheless, I have not fallen behind in achieving whatever I have wanted.

You have been elected as an MP for the second time. What is the secret of your success?

Yes, I am very proud that people elected me a second time. There is no secret. My success is a reflection of my performance. I have done what I promised I would do.

Is there any special skill required for the kind of work you are doing?

I do not think any particular skill is needed in politics. But if you have high objectives, boundless aspiration, you're open-minded and your politics are not based on Machiavellian methods, lies, fraud, hatred, prejudice and corruption, then people who think differently will have respect for you.

How did you end up choosing to work as the head of the parliamentary commission for defence affairs and territorial integrity?

Joining this commission was part of my career plan. Afghan women should not be seen from the perspective of their weakness but from the perspective of their strength. That's why I chose one of the most challenging commissions. Many people were not even aware that the parliament has a commission for defence affairs and territorial integrity. I'm highly committed to Afghanistan and since I've headed this commission a lot of work has been done. During the past year it has achieved as much as it did in the five years before. I just wanted to show a positive image of an Afghan woman and her capability for doing work that is unprecedented in the history of Afghanistan.

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How do you manage to balance your political life with your personal life?

Becoming a politician does not mean ceasing to be a sympathetic and humane person. Politics is a crucial part of my life in addition to various activities like writing, housework, public gatherings, media work and taking care of my kids. But compared to most other things my political work takes priority.

What is more important to you: professional activities or being with your family?

I pay equal attention to both. Being a lawmaker is far different than being a civil servant. I have total belief in the importance of my job. Therefore

both are equally important to me. Sometimes I have professional and personal engagements at the same - then I choose the most important one.

How do you define marriage?

I think marriage has no proper definition in our society. In general marriage is an understanding between two people who form an agreement for the present and future. Unfortunately, a difference of opinions and a lack of trust can always arise. A marriage takes more than merely the meeting of two bodies, and having a husband and children. Two mentalities, two beliefs and two humans bound by trust and commitment to the present and future, and remaining with one another forever are what gives real meaning to marriage.

How did you meet your husband and why did you decide to marry him?

There was no particular reason. I was so young when I got married that I didn't even know how to define marriage. I was still getting to know myself. After I got married, things changed completely for me. I was a schoolgirl who loved reading books, sports and music and grew up in a family that didn't distinguish between boys and girls. Now I think that if I hadn't got married so early, I never would have done it.

What is your husband's profession?

My husband, Mr. Dawee, has followed in the footsteps of his father. He is a businessman. His grandfather is a well-known figure in Afghan history.

He is a businessman and you are a politician. How do you reconcile your differences?

Well, I am more secular but do not try to impose the same on him. He inherited his business from his father because he was frustrated by politics and this caused him to follow in his grandfather's footsteps. Personally I do not support the transfer of political power from one member of a family to another. Every human has his or her own thoughts and strategies and therefore he or she must choose the way they want to go. It doesn't matter which way you go. What's important is to support those things that Afghans have made sacrifices for throughout history.

Your spouse is a businessman and you are a politician, how are your working relations?

I am independent in my thinking and it's the same for him. I want to maintain my freedom in politics and I do not want to interfere in my husband's business affairs. Undoubtedly, he wouldn't want me to interfere in his work either since he made the choice himself to go into business.

How many children do you have and what are their names?

I have five children: Fatima, Sara, Muskan, Darran and Usman.

What is your aim for your children?

I have been able to create an environment that encourages my children to flourish, and in which every family member can live in peace and contentment. I want my children to know who they are and to believe themselves.

How is your emotional relationship with your children?

I have never treated my children according to their gender. My eldest daughter is more like a good friend and a colleague. And she is also a good example for my other daughters. But a mother cannot divide up her feelings for her children. I love them all equally. However, I do treat them differently according to their age.

What is the key to being a good person and being successful in life?

Being good requires sincerity and contentment. The same qualities are required for a successful life.

It is often said that women are meticulous and men are pragmatic. What is your opinion?

That's interesting. Margaret Thatcher, a famous British politician, once said, "If you want something said, ask a man; if you want something done, ask a woman." Men rely more on words while women are more pro-active. That's my opinion.

Have you ever felt jealous of someone?

Never! Jealousy is a kind of disease that should be avoided.

Where do you find your dignity?

In freedom, self-confidence and self-esteem.

How do you control your anger?

With a smile.

How well do you know yourself?

Little! I have always tried to do my best as a sister, a wife, a mother, a work colleague and a politician. You have to get to know yourself throughout the life. The better you know yourself, the more empowered you will become.

How much work have you done for gender equality?

I have never missed an opportunity to work for it.

What will be your priority if you become president or prime minister?

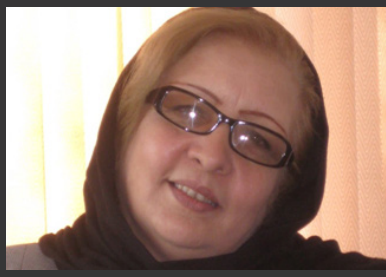
Justice.

And finally, could you please read us one of your favourite poems.

My fingers!

[*These dry branches... cry!*
We are memorials of lack of a loving hand
Ah!!!
My God!
Please give me a hand again
In every corner of the city
I searched for the loving hand
But did not find one as yours]

Najiba Ayubi is the head of the Killid Group. She is involved in the important field of journalism. Her work with the media and in civil affairs has already taken her to 47 countries of the world. For nine years she has worked at a children's support organization and she is also an active member of the Afghanistan National Journalists' Union (ANJU). Najiba loves poetry and painting. She studied literature and is currently studying journalism at Ibn Sina Institute of Higher Education.⁴



**“In a community,
you must behave
socially”**

Please introduce yourself.

I am a professional Afghan woman who respects the values of Afghan society. I am patient, sincere and optimistic. I hate telling lies. My family is very important to me, and sometimes I enjoy music.

How many brothers and sisters do you have?

I have four sisters and two brothers.

You seem so confident. What is the reason behind that?

My satisfaction with work, the support I get from my family and my hope for a better future.

How different are you today compared to 20 years ago?

I'm very much today the person I was back then. I thought about becoming a journalist when I was a kid and today that makes up about 80 percent of my work. The writings of a seven year-old girl have turned into the poetry and stories of a 37 year-old woman.

How much importance do you give to your profession?

A lot!

How did your skills of journalism develop?

I started reading newspapers when I was in second grade and at seven, I already wrote something for the 'Parwan Newspaper.' Then I started writing poems and stories, and in 2004 I started work as a professional journalist when I joined the Killid Group. I'm still there today.

You mentioned the 'Parwan Newspaper.' Who was its editor-in-chief and where was it published?

It was published in Parwan. Now it has become a weekly. Its editor-in-chief has changed. Mr. Ahmadi held overall responsibility for a long time. Then it was Mr. Zahir. I can't remember the names of the others.

Where were you born?

Charikar, Parwan.

Please tell us more about Parwan.

Parwan province is the garden of Afghanistan. It is beautiful in spring. Many kinds of fruit, berries and grapes grow there. Every season brings a variety of natural gifts and allows no visitor to go empty-handed. The people of Parwan are sincere, friendly and have generous hearts. They're also very patriotic. There hasn't been much development work there but it has the potential for developing rapidly.

What do you feel when you hear the name Parwan?

Although Parwan is a very beautiful natural region, I am more motivated by hearing 'Afghanistan' than 'Parwan.' I love thinking about Afghanistan and working towards its development.

What about the development of your birthplace?

Undoubtedly one's birthplace is important to everyone, but for me Afghanistan as a whole is more important. My work is for the good of all of Afghanistan, not specifically for Parwan.

What memories do you have of your childhood?

I grew up in the tiny environment of my home and did not have the opportunity to play with children in the street. My childhood world was

confined to the balcony of our house from where I heard other children playing in the street. My sisters and brothers and I were not allowed to play outside because my mother was worried about us getting dirty.

In your view what makes for a happy life?

I deem life so short that it is not enough for happiness. I try to enjoy every tiny moment of life.

What do you think of Afghan women's managerial capabilities?

If they are provided opportunities, they can fulfil major managerial roles with success. But the problem is that Afghans in general aren't trusted to be capable.

What about your managerial capabilities?

In my first managerial post I had eight people under me. They all had different abilities. The experienced I gained from this post taught me to take a moderate approach with employees. By that, I mean taking a reasonable approach towards the people working under you. As a supervisor you have to lend support and cooperate with people, not be harsh with them and controlling. On the other hand, humans are not machines that can be turned on and off with the flick of a switch. My feelings, my emotions and my taking into account of the environment have all helped to widen my managerial skills. Although I have made many mistakes, I have never been put off by them and have used them to put things right and improve myself.

When you make a mistake what do you feel?

I have to emphasize that there is a lot of difference between theory and practice. When you start working in practice, you make mistakes. But these mistakes open up your way forward.

How do you manage time when you're under pressure?

That depends on whether it's pressure in my personal life or my professional life. If I encounter hardships in my personal life, it often seems difficult at the beginning but it becomes easier as soon as I decide to resolve it. One of the most difficult events in my life was my father's death. After he died I used to wake up in the middle of the night and I hated my life. But with the passage of time, the pain subsided as I realized there was no other way than to accept it. But my work and professional life are different. I get

very upset when things don't go to plan. I lose my temper and that has been my weakness as a manager because anger is futile. Over the past few years, I have put a great deal of effort into dealing with my weakness but with no success. Management theory teaches us that as a manager you face hard times occasionally. But in practice, I forget it all.

People say you will be more successful if you avoid rivalry and judging the work of others. What is your opinion?

I only compete with my rivals if they know more than me. But I do not like judging others' work. This causes you to go astray.

How much value do you place on positive thinking?

A great deal! It's all down to my childhood, family background and the environment I grew up in. I have never witnessed violence in my family although it is common in our society. I have never felt what it is to be a woman confronted by violence. I belong to a middle class family and my family always responded positively to my desires. I think that has helped me to think positively about others. My parents always said there is good in everyone. We should always look at the positive aspects of one's personality and respect them as a person. Positive thinking also depends on one's personality. When you enter a community, you must behave socially. It's vital for one's social life. Therefore, I put a lot of importance on positive thinking.

Please tell us something about your marriage. How did you feel when you found your partner for life.

*[Of your first loving sight
I have made a story
In the darkest nights, I think of it
I will take with myself
The memories of your first sight
To my own world
To my golden world
To a world filled with grape and azurite
To a world where forever I will remain
Dreaming of your eyes]*

That was a very thorough response. Now, how much importance do you give to the present time?

The present time is important for every human's life. For me it is important because my today will become my past, which will reflect the experiences of my life and will be important for my future.

What is the most beautiful event in your life?

There have been many memorable events in my life. It is difficult to say which one is the most beautiful. However, I think the most beautiful time was when I fell in love.

What is your outlook on life and what goals do you have?

I am always full of hope. I would like to see the creation of a peaceful and open society where everyone is free to live as they want. I also envisage a time when I look at myself in a mirror and I am standing there with a stick, thinking back about the past. I want to do things that are worthwhile thinking about when I'm old.

Shah Gul Rezai has been re-elected by the people of Ghazni province to serve as an MP for a second term. She has a Bachelor's degree in law and political science and is currently doing her Master's degree at Kabul University. She is one of a rare breed of lawmakers who is consistent in their work. Shah Gul Rezai considers sincerity to be the foundation of her work and she never remains silent when it comes to defending the rights of the people.⁵



“How democratic is Shah Gul Rezai?”

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Please tell us something about yourself.

My name is Shah Gul Rezai. I've been elected to parliament for a second time to represent the people of Ghazni. Before my election as an MP, I was headmistress of a girls' school in Jaghoray district. The school continued to function even during Taliban rule without any official support. At the same time, I worked on the editorial team of the Jaghoray Monthly Magazine. I was also a member of the cultural and arts centre in Jaghoray. I studied law and political science at Kabul University and am currently doing my master's degree at the same university.

What personal factors were involved in your election as an MP for the second time?

In the first parliamentary election, I was the only female from two districts, Jaghoray and Malistan, to participate in the election. My first success was down to my professional experience at the school, my knowledge about education, good people skills and my self-confidence as a woman. I think my election the second time was based on my record in parliament. The people voted for me although I didn't have any political support and had no funding.

Were you ever afraid to take issue with or express your views on certain sensitive matters?

Being an MP is being in a position of influence. The moment I'd consulted with my family and decided to stand for election as the first woman in the area I accepted all the consequences of that decision. That's why I was not afraid to take my chances; I am not afraid and will never be afraid. But one must bear in mind that the job of any politician, especially the female ones, is very difficult in Afghanistan. Despite that, I never remain silent when it comes to defending the rights of the people.

How honest are you with yourself?

Being true to myself has been the most important issue of my political life. During election campaigns, I have tried never to promise more than I am capable of as an MP. I want to remain as honest with people as I am with myself. My commitment to the people is that I will always stand up for their rights. I have never promised to them that I will construct roads for them... If I am not true to myself, I cannot be true to the people either and I will lose their trust.

How are you when it comes to accepting your mistakes and weaknesses?

I consider accepting one's own mistakes as taking a step towards success. Afghanistan's political history, especially over the past few decades, has been full of mistakes. The 15th term of parliament was the first to convene after a decades long hiatus. Therefore it must be accepted that mistakes are made. I believe I can be successful if I take into account people's opinions, my past experience and mistakes.

How important is it to respect the rights of others?

To respect the rights of others is to respect your own rights. If someone only respects 50 percent of my rights, I will try to respect 100 percent of theirs. I see this as my personal responsibility. It's also part of an MP's duty to support others' rights.

How democratic is Shah Gul Rezai?

I decided to run for election as the first woman in the area because of my belief in democratic principles. My will to be sincere with and committed to the people is borne out of a belief in democratic principles. My will to speak in parliament as a representative of the people of Afghanistan regardless

of their ethnicity is also based on a belief in democratic principles. I have always strived to pursue a democratic path in my thinking and my actions. Indeed, a democratic society is one that benefits women. That's why I am democratic. For a woman to participate in politics, she must believe in democracy. There are no fraudulent politicians in a democracy. The basis of democracy is the rule of law and supporting the rights of others. To uphold the law and uphold civil rights is indeed to uphold democracy. Therefore, I believe in democracy and being democratic.

What is your view on illegal courts in Jaghoray?

If a society exists under constitutional law and has elected a government according to its own will, then it should accept all constitutional demands. Normally, due to some personal relations, laws are bypassed and neglected. The rule of law must be upheld. Civil rights are defined by law and so are restrictions. Therefore everything should be done to uphold the framework of law. The presence of illegal courts undermines the legitimacy of the government and is against the law.

How do you tread the line between the traditional Afghanistan and modern Afghanistan?

The definitions that have so far been presented in Afghanistan about traditions and modernism vary greatly. I don't support measures that restrict the rights of people and cause conflict. Today, Afghanistan needs to prepare to adopt international values. If we say that tradition means not allowing a girl to attend school, that's a violation of human rights. So I suggest that our society should use Islamic values to help move towards global and human values.

How important is nature in your life?

The importance of nature is not a secret. Everything that exists in nature is beautiful. If you imagine waves on the sea, it gives you a lovely feeling. I love the beauty of mountains and the rivers in my country.

Is change important in your life?

I think change is essential in life. In fact, if two days are the same for me, I find it difficult. I don't feel like I have achieved anything much. A positive change is always beautiful.

What is your definition of marriage?

I give marriage a proper religious definition, not a definition that merely seems religious. Marriage is where both sides have mutual respect and respect each other's opinions.

How important to you is the beauty of a flower and a beautiful landscape?

The beauty of nature is important in two aspects: Firstly, it has been made by the Creator who is capable of everything, and secondly, nature is a good way to escape from the horror of the explosions and other terrible incidents that happen on a daily basis.

What do you say about colours?

All colours are beautiful and one can interpret them in many good ways.

You always wear white. What is that a sign for?

I consider white to be the colour of purity and sincerity. For me it stands for sincerity because I always strive to be sincere in my job. I wore white when I was a headmistress and now that I am an MP, I like to wear it too. Although my responsibilities have changed, I don't believe I am above everyone else.

What effect do colours have on one's personality?

I don't pay much attention to appearances. A person's point of view and their way of thinking are the most important things. Some colours are more pleasing, while others are less so.

And finally, please could you recite your favourite poem.

*If there is struggle and effort
Healing can come from pain
From a vast desert of disillusionment
A colourful garden can be made
There is no such thing in life as 'cannot do or cannot be done.'*

Masuma Ibrahimy studied theatre directing. She's co-founder of the Afghan Cultural House in Kabul and also writes stories and blogs. Masuma is an active member of Kabul's arts scene and civil rights movement.⁶



“Theatre is the most audience-dependent art”

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Please tell us something about yourself.

My name is Masuma Ibrahimy. I was born in Bamiyan in 1981. I was just one when my family migrated to Iran. After I finished study accounting, I returned to Kabul. Since then I have been in Afghanistan with the exception of two years during which I returned to Iran to complete my master's degree in theatre directing.

What work do you do?

Writing! I started writing when I was still at school. I would have liked to study graphics in higher education but I couldn't because my family couldn't afford it. So I studied mathematics and physics because in Iran if you study these two subjects you are allowed to choose any other field of study. For my university entrance exams my first option was art and the second was accounting. I was selected for the latter. Then when the opportunity arose, I went to Iran to continue my education in the field of art and got my master's degree. My specialty is art, actually.

What is your definition of art?

The real world is quite violent. It's very difficult to face the facts. In Afghanistan too, we encounter issues such as war, insecurity, ineffective

politics and social measures and so on. Art is a way to escape all this and it's also a solution. To escape the violent facts, you seek refuge in writing, painting, music, graphics and theatre and create your own world within them. Art can help us escape the violent truth by taking us into a more pleasant environment. This is what I think of art.

The world of art is very broad. What kind of art do you focus on professionally?

Writing is what I have always done, although I haven't had much published. I am very serious about writing and get more serious about it as time goes on. Some of my short stories have been printed by various publishing houses in Iran and one of my stories was published in Afghanistan but blogging is what I do seriously. My other focus is on theatre. Theatre is an art that one should start in childhood. While I was doing my Master's degree in theatre, one of my teachers told me that at my age, I wouldn't become a good theatre performer but rather someone who knows about theatre. In art, the people who criticize and analyze a work are sometimes more important than the work itself. If an artwork isn't noticed by society, it's as though it was never created. I hope to become a theatre critic.

You're well acquainted with theatre. What do you think about theatre in Afghanistan?

Unfortunately, there is nothing you can really call theatre in Afghanistan. This art hasn't been developed in Afghanistan and so it's hard for me to give an opinion on it. At the moment theatre groups depend on funds from various organizations. If the funding is cut, it could be the end of theatre in Afghanistan.

What are the prospects for theatre in Afghanistan?

About 30 or 40 years ago Afghanistan had the kind of theatre that no longer exists today. Theatre is the most audience-dependent art. If there's no audience theatre cannot evolve. Other forms of art are different. You can make a movie and keep it archived and release it after several years. It's the same with music, painting and other kinds of art but theatre is different. First you need an audience and then the theatre can be performed. At the moment only the government is capable of creating the environment for that to flourish. Establishing theatre halls would be the first step. We certainly have the talent. We have arts faculties and

theatre departments. I'm not so concerned about their quality but about the fact that they exist. And there are people who appreciate art. But the government hasn't stepped up to the plate. The Ministry of Information and Culture has failed to do its job in this regard. If the government started giving it some attention, there would be hope for the development of a professional theatre scene in Afghanistan. It's the same in other countries: theatre cannot flourish without support from the government.

Bearing in mind your knowledge about theatre and story-writing, what is the difference between a scene presented in writing and a scene presented in theatre?

Story-writing is essentially individual art. One sits at home alone, imagines things and writes them down. Theatre is an audience-based art form. It's impossible for someone to perform theatre for him or herself. Even in shows where only person performs, there is a support team at work. The presence of an audience is equally important. Undoubtedly writing is intended for reading but it is not important for a writer and their readers to both be present at a specific time and location. A story written ten years ago can still be read today. Theatre is not just the imagination of a single person. It requires teamwork. A scene can never be the performed twice the same way. It can never be repeated.

Do you still write stories?

Yes, even more seriously than before! I hope to be able to publish them and capture the imagination of the readers.

Could writing be an accepted profession for you?

It's a recognized profession in all parts of the world but in a country like Afghanistan unfortunately, books are regarded more as something decorative and have never been looked upon as a necessity. Until book reading is regarded as a cultural activity and people feel the necessity to read books, writing will not be recognized as a profession.

Could you earn a living from writing?

I don't think so. In Afghanistan, an author has to have another skill besides writing if they want to make a living.

Please tell us about your personal life.

I got married four years ago. My husband is an engineer. After my parents,

my partner is the second pillar in my life. He gives me his full support although in traditional Afghan society, women are regarded as inferior to men. That kind of thinking even exists among the educated classes, including women. Women are always called as so-and-so's daughter, or so-and-so's wife, or so-and-so's mother. Women don't have their own identity and that's sad. But I was treated differently. My father treated me and my brother equally. I contributed to family decision-making. I was allowed to take decisions about my personal life the same as my brother. It was quite unpleasant to see that the father or the brother in other families always made the decisions about the life of a daughter or sister. When I got married, my spouse accepted me as an independent person. Unlike those who say a good wife obeys her husband, my husband believes that if a woman is independent and can undertake responsibilities, she can provide good support for her husband during hard times.

What's your husband's name?

Muhammad Anwar Salehi.

Who was more influential in your decision to get married, you or your family?

I was the main decision-maker but if my parents had opposed it, I would never have entered into this marriage. I was allowed to choose, but my parents had the right to accept or reject my decision since they are more experienced and know me better than I do myself. After my parents' approval, I said yes.

Who proposed? You or your husband?

My husband.

Why not you?

I was worried I might make a mistake. His proposing to me would never be counted as a mistake. Before the marriage, I did not know him well and wasn't sure about living with him and whether he was a good match for me. If I had felt the opposite, I might have proposed him first.

What sort of person are you?

You'd have to ask others about that. I think that I give the impression of being quite serious. But at the office and with family, in general, I'm quite a gentle and kind person.

Can you define life in one sentence?

Life is a game - that's the way I see it. When you play a game, it's not the winning or losing that matters. What's important is playing the game. I never take life too seriously because games are never serious. We don't know what the future will bring and we can't bring back the past. All that matters is the present. There are thousands of ideologies but none is completely satisfying. I think everyone should play their own personal game. They have to play a good game without worrying about winning or losing. The result is not important but enjoying the game is.

What is the most important skill in this game?

Sincerity!

What kinds of jobs have you done in your life?

I started working when I was very little, although my family did not force me to do it. In Iran there were domestic jobs like doing embroidery, which I did for a daily wage. I used the money I earned to buy books and other things I liked. That gave me an early sense of independence. But my first proper job was when I started teaching at a private school during my first two years of university. It was good experience for me. I worked there for one year. Then I started filming and taking pictures at parties and gatherings. I was very interested in that. I also worked as a finance manager at various offices until I returned to Afghanistan and established the Afghan Cultural House.

How did you feel when you received your first salary?

I had a feeling of independence! As an individual you cannot claim to be intellectually independent until you are financially independent. If you are financially independent, then you can think and make your own decisions.

What is your opinion on freedom of the individual?

It is different in every society. Individual freedoms are very limited in Afghanistan, both for men and women. We've grown up in a family system where decisions are not made by the individual. When a man and woman decide to get married, they have to get consent from their families first. But I see this as something positive point, because it means the responsibility of making the decision is shared with others. They can help but in the end it's the individual who has to accept or reject it. In

a society like Afghanistan's where friends and relatives are involved in decision-making, one has to use this custom to one's own benefit. The final decision must be made alone. In the case of marriage, others are involved in the process of decision-making but ultimately the decision is yours. Although individual freedom is limited in Afghanistan, personal decision still matters. If you do not surrender until the last moment, your individual freedom will not be questioned.

How did you come to establish the Afghan Cultural House?

When I returned to Afghanistan in 2003, I found it difficult to integrate into society. My social experiences were quite different; in my experience women had a different sense of dignity. First I started writing blogs. It was easier to find like-minded people in other parts of the world than in Kabul. After years of writing blogs I realized social integration was impossible via the internet alone. But I didn't feel at home in Kabul. When I went out in the streets and to the bazaar sometimes I got the feeling people looked at me strangely. I didn't feel like any part of the city was mine. I was a stranger. But at the same time I noticed there were many people like me. I refused to live anywhere else because I was as much an Afghan as anyone else. That's why I established the Afghan Cultural House. I regard it as part of the prevailing environment now in Kabul city. When you enter, no one asks what you're doing here. Everyone who comes here says the environment is quite different here. The women feel relaxed and have free access to the internet and the library. I wanted to define my ideal environment. There are thousands of centres around the world that are like our Cultural House. It's nothing new. Here students can use the internet for free and enjoy a different environment. It's not like working in a coffee shop for example. In a coffee shop females don't feel relaxed because it's usually a male-dominated environment and they're the exception. But here they feel normal. That's why I established the centre and I hope it will serve as a model for other cities and provinces.

How successful has the Afghan Cultural House been in creating social change?

It has been very successful in some areas, while in other areas progress has been difficult. It has attracted a lot of students. When I founded the centre I hoped it would be welcomed by authors, poets, filmmakers and other people involved in the cultural and arts scene, but it didn't happen.

Perhaps we will eventually gain public appreciation though.

What goal do you hope to achieve through your job?

It might be a lofty goal but basically I want to be the best person I can be. I do whatever makes me a better person. If one day I realized I was better at housework and should be a housewife, I would switch to that. I am not concerned about what others say. My goal is to be the best person I can.

What is your biggest wish?

I do not wish much. (Laughing) The brick you lay today will build your future. If today is good, my future will probably be good too. You have to be pro-active.

Roqya Nayel was born in 1978 and grew up in a liberal, educated family. She's married with a child and has a Bachelor's degree in Political Science. She has twice been elected to the House of Representatives. Before becoming a lawmaker, Roqya Nayel was active in medical and social services and was a member of the emergency loya jirga. A firm belief in social values, democracy and merit helped Roqya come from a remote province in Afghanistan and overcome some tough competition to be elected as a female MP to the National Assembly not once, but twice.⁷



**“I am confident
in my political
activities”**

Please tell us about yourself.

Thank you. You might know my name. I am Roqya Nayel, MP. I was elected in Ghor province. I was a lawmaker in the 15th term of parliament and people trusted me and re-elected me for the 16th term as well. Currently, I'm a member of the parliamentary commission on financial and banking affairs.

You have been elected twice despite some stiff male competition. Why were you successful?

Election for the 15th term of parliament wasn't that tough. However, there was tough competition when I stood again. I was emotional because I was a female candidate competing against men with more resources than me - it was very tough. Also, security issues are more sensitive for women than men. But overall the election result showed that the people of Ghor had faith in me. If the people had not trusted me, it would have been difficult

for me to win the election. My success was down to the faith that the young people, the women and civil society organizations put in me.

You were elected in a remote province. Do you think the people of Ghor have taken a positive step towards gender equality?

Every province has its own customs and traditions. But the national constitution foresees a quota for women, which promotes them even in the presence of male rivals and in a traditional environment. You're right though, the people of Ghor have shown that they're striving towards social change and are trying to abolish unacceptable practices. This shows an optimistic outlook and that new ideas are flourishing.

How do you see your political future? Do you envisage being re-elected again?

If you study a certain school of thought you realize that when challenges arise in any area during a country's democratic process, the leadership must implement reforms and use past experiences for the development and benefit of society. The current situation suggests our country's political rulers need to take serious action and address the challenges. Therefore until the job is done and to enable people to get through the period of transition better, they must draw on past experience to push forward and achieve more success. Based on my performance during my second term in parliament, I am confident about the future and my political activities. Bearing in mind the kind of conditions we have put behind us, we have to keep thinking seriously about striving for an Afghanistan that is equal to other countries.

How do you deal with negative criticism as a female politician?

A member of the national assembly encounters many kinds of criticism. This job comes with a lot of responsibility. Being in a responsive environment definitely means you have positive and negative critics. The situation simply demands that you have a lot of patience and treat people in an appropriate manner.

How much have you worked for justice?

The discussion over justice in post-conflict countries is a very important one. The same kinds of conditions prevail in Afghanistan. Still, justice has not been implemented according to the will of the people. Injustices

arise mostly out of social inequality. Working on and developing justice is not the responsibility of one person or a single group of people alone. Everyone should work together to fight injustice. As far as my work is concerned, I have always tried to promote justice. And in Afghanistan's new era, people have shown they support good monitoring by judicial authorities so it's essential that the system fulfils public expectations.

What is your definition of Afghan society?

Various customs and traditions exist in Afghanistan and some of those customs and traditions have become ingrained in our culture and law. It's difficult to present a general definition of Afghan society. The large number of ethnic groups means there are many different ways to define Afghan society. It is a complex society with many specific customs and traditions.

Bearing the presence of specific customs and traditions, what should be done to move towards positive social change?

Although there's a long and difficult way to go, civil rights activists are acting effectively and with a plan. Another effective way is through the implementation of law. If laws are implemented correctly, that would cut down on criminal opportunities. This is one way of removing obstacles to social development. If laws are respected, civil rights can be institutionalized and this will pave the way for positive social change and development. If laws are implemented, there would be no grounds for forced marriages or for girls to be traded to settle disputes and debts, there would be no gender-based discrimination and illegal courts, and there would be no scope for depriving people of their rights. Another effective way is to increase people's awareness, and to promote civil affairs and the activities of social organizations. The literacy rate must be improved. People who are educated and socially aware have stable and violence-free families. We must recognize that the presence of stable families is crucial for social development.

What role can stable families play in bringing about this change?

Having stable and developed families are undoubtedly a requirement for a stable society. Stable families, stable villages, stable districts and stable provinces will ultimately lead to a stable and moderate country. This also has a crucial role in people having rational thinking.

Please tell us about your own family experiences, your partner and children.

The basis for starting a family has to be the consent of both wife and husband. Strong foundations can be laid for a family that will allow that family to grow even without unpleasant customs being applied. A husband should also be a good friend. My husband is actually a good friend of mine and he understands me well. Although he is a very busy man he also supports me. We have one child whose name is Framarz.

When your child calls you mother, what do you feel?

It makes me understand my own mother more than before.

What kind of social environment do you hope your children will grow up in?

As a representative of the people, I would like a good environment not only for my child but for all children in Afghanistan.

How do you reconcile your professional life with your family life?

You have to have a plan. My professional life and my family life are two separate things. Within the intimate environment of one's family, you have to live as a family member and keep professional matters out of it.

How do you encounter difficulties in your life?

Naturally when we talk about life, we talk about family issues. A family should be founded on sincerity and mutual understanding. There should be a mutual understanding that cooperation is the way to deal with family issues. If a family lives along those lines, there won't be any serious problem. But of course if family life is weakly managed, it will be hard to overcome life's difficulties. An environment of mutual understanding and a collective belief in family can also help in dealing with matters outside the home. It's an advantage to a woman who is engaged in professional and political activities outside the home.

And finally, violence against women and children has increased recently but the law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women has yet to get parliamentary ratification. What's your take on this?

Offenders should be brought to justice and face the law. Governmental and non-governmental organizations that work in this area must put more focus on increasing the level of public awareness about it. Employment

opportunities should be made available to women so that the economic growth of families can be helped. We need to resolve the dispute over some of the articles of the law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women and the law needs to be implemented formally and practically.

Zubaida Abkar is a dedicated civil rights activist. She is one of the founders of RED - Road to Equality and Development and the Hadia-Afghan Youth Volunteer Group for Social Reform. Her family and especially her sisters are also involved in her civil affairs work, and she is also supported by her husband. Zubaida is optimistic and has great dreams about the future.⁸



**“Family is a
hope-giving
entity”**

Please tell us about yourself.

My name is Zubaida Akbar. I am a law student and a member of the Hadia organization. Hadia is an organization that works for social change in Afghanistan. I was born in Kabul and my parents are from Jawzjan province.

What do you do with the Hadia organization?

During my time abroad I encountered many new values. I experienced a different world, which was sometimes hard to take on board. At the same time I kept hearing bad news from Afghanistan. That’s when I started wondering what work I could do for Afghanistan. I talked to my friends about it and decided to set up the Hadia Organization. I started by working in the Shahid kindergarten in Herat. Since then, I have worked with many women including those in prison and safe houses as well as women and children facing prosecution. I work for social change. We want to encourage young people to be aware of their civil responsibilities. We want young people not to just think about themselves but about others and the bigger picture.

How can new experiences be applied to Afghan society?

Once a French teacher asked me whether I could imagine marrying a man of another nationality, religion and language. I answered that I couldn't. So you see how I used to think back then. Some time later, the same teacher asked me the same kind of question and I said, "Human is human. It does not matter where he is from and what language he speaks." Then I realized my thinking had changed and that now I accepted others. All young Afghans have to learn a culture of tolerance and mutual respect. Unfortunately we Afghans have little understanding of co-existence let alone thinking of living with someone from another country.

What is your definition of change?

Change comes when we feel it is necessary in our life. It comes when we realize change brings values to help us live a better life, a life not accompanied by regret and one in which we can make use of our energy and the opportunities available to us.

Can destiny be changed?

I think life is in our own hands. God gives every human the right to live and the right to decide. Although life has its difficulties, this depends upon how we see them. We can see them as a challenge that can be overcome, or we can see them as a wall that will forever remain an obstacle in our path. Humans have the capability of overcoming difficulties and obstacles. I do not believe that everything is pre-destined.

How do you see life in Afghan society?

Life in Afghanistan has its own merits and setbacks. You see and hear about incidents that make you fed-up with life here at the same time as encountering incidents that give you hope and a sense of belonging. You don't get this sense of belonging anywhere else. This is the feeling that encourages us to put in more effort, to work harder and to overcome challenges. That's why we must start from zero and build this place. That's the feeling that adds beauty to life.

Are you single?

I am married and live with my husband.

Please tell us more about your partner.

There are two role models in my life: my father and my husband. If all men

could think like them, the women of Afghanistan would be very lucky. My husband's name is Tamim Amini and he works for the UN.

Please tell us more about your family.

My family is an exceptional family and I have had opportunities that other women haven't. My mother is a highly capable woman. She is so patient and wonderful - there is no one like her. My mother is always the first to give me encouragement. She has sacrificed a lot so that we can move forward. I feel lucky to be part of such a family.

What is your definition of a sound or balanced family?

Family is an environment in which individuals feel relaxed, and respect and support each other. A family like that is a hope-giving entity and can be called a balanced family.

How effective is the structure of a family in social growth?

A lot of value is put on family in Afghan society. But work still needs to be done to family structures and relations because Afghan society remains so male-dominated. There's only one decision-maker in the family. There's still a lack of equality and justice. Women do most of the housework in a family. Giving birth to children and looking after them and doing all the other household tasks is a lot of work. My own family is one of those rare families where my husband also contributes to the housework. Both of us work in an office and when we come home, we do the housework together. If you don't set an example, children will grow up thinking that mothers must do the most work at home and fathers must go to work and earn a living. We have to change this mindset.

What about your friends?

I only have a few friends but have many acquaintances.

What is your most important personality trait?

Sincerity! I hate lies.

Do you drive?

Yes.

Do you obey the traffic laws?

I try to follow them. But when you see you are the only person obeying

the traffic laws or you see an accident about to happen, or the cars behind you start hooting, then you feel forced to ignore the traffic lights. But everyone should obey the laws.

Who has been the biggest influence in your life?

My parents! My father always says, “You are my most revolutionary child. I have much faith in you.” These words have been a great source of strength for me. He always supports me.

Your father Ismail Akbar is one of the liberal personalities of Afghanistan. How do you describe his liberalism?

In his personal life, he always showed us children the difference between right and wrong. He never forced us to do anything. Liberalism and open-mindedness flourish when you do not force others to follow your way of thinking.

What are you interested in the most?

When I was in Switzerland I used to go jogging a lot. Maybe that was because I was a woman born in Afghanistan who had been suppressed by others outside my family. The more I ran, the freer I felt and the more relaxed. But there’s no such environment in Afghanistan.

What do you do in your leisure time?

I love cooking.

Is music important in your life?

I love music very much. I tried to learn piano and guitar. I like to listen to Zahir Huwaida and Indian devotional music.

How much do you want to remain young?

It’s important to stay young at heart. I am surrounded by people who are inspiring and so I think I’ll always remain young at heart.

How much time do you give to looking beautiful?

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. I sincerely believe that. When people regard you as beautiful, then you are beautiful. But what’s more important is what’s on the inside.

What is your most memorable event in your life?

My wedding day.

If you are harrassed by men when you're out and about, how do you respond?

It depends on my mood. Sometimes I say to them, "Your sister might be out, and someone could be harrassing her too." We are all human. I don't know why they like doing that. Why do they make life difficult for themselves? I don't know if my words have any impact though.

Do you enjoy studying and doing research?

I study very little. My father says I am a good analyst but do not study much. I love to watch movies rather than studying books.

What kind of movies are you interested in?

Historical movies. But after work, I watch family films and comedies.

Which figure from history inspires you?

Martin Luther King's words always move me: "I have a dream." I also have a dream and will not give up.

What would be your ideal life?

I envisage living in a peaceful country. I have a child who lives in peace and I run a flower shop. My other ideal is to live in a time where women are not abused. Society recognizes the right of women to exist and not to be abused, murdered and tortured. Women should not be compelled to self-immolation. I want to be recognized as a human.

What is your favourite saying?

The further I go from you, the more vastness I find in you.

And what are your final words, poem or stanza?

In the scripture of the world, our everlasting is written.

Shinkai Karokhel has twice been elected a member of parliament. She's a member of the Afghan Women's Network and also a member of the South Asian Women's Network. She studied medical science at Kateb University and graduated in political science at the Kateb Institute of Higher Education. She was awarded the 'Better Leadership' award by a leading US think-tank and is deeply involved in political and social affairs in Afghanistan. Ms. Shinkai accepted our request for an interview with pleasure.⁹



“The freedom of women does not mean the promotion of irregularities”

Please tell us about yourself.

Thank you for admiring me as a successful woman with something to say. The media plays a crucial role in changing the way people think, and I'm sure the Afghan media will help change Afghanistan for the better by broadcasting information properly.

I don't quite know how to introduce myself. I don't have anything in particular to say. My name is Shinkai and my last name, Karokhel, is from my father. In our society we take our last names from our father - or husband, a tradition which I am against. Sometimes I think that's part of the reason that women do not have their own independent identity. I was born in Kabul and I have four children. Ever since I was a child, I have tried to fulfil my responsibilities. I have been always been a social worker but fulfilled various roles. I am the founder of an organization that works with refugee women and children. My sister Mahbooba Karokhel helps me. Our organization's objective is to assist refugee women. It arranges

training and awareness programmes for women and children. I was elected to parliament twice by the people of Kabul. I'm a member of both the Afghan Women's Network and the South Asian Women's Network.

What does Shinkai mean?

My father chose the name Shinkai. I don't think the name is as important as the person who makes it good or bad. 'Shinkai' means green, fresh, young and beautiful. Sometimes my friends ask why I wear green dresses so often. I say it's because I am Shinkai. Maybe my name is what inspired me to be so pro-active. But as I said, a name is not good or bad in itself. I try to live up to my name through my actions.

Please tell us about your children.

My daughter Mena is studying for a Bachelor's degree in Environmental Studies at one of the universities in the US. My sons are called Haseeb Ahmad, Wali and Baheer. They're all still at school.

Do you like your daughter or your sons most?

That's difficult to say. I love them all. But when I travel I miss the youngest one most.

In most families, mothers get on best with their daughters and vice versa. What is your opinion on this?

It's the opposite. People are always inclined towards their opposite sex. As a daughter, I got on with my mother but could be more frank with my father. I love my daughter because in Afghan society, the birth of a girl is not always welcomed, but women should want more attention to be given to girls.

How did you end up in parliament?

Actually, I wasn't interested in politics in the beginning. I wanted to stay in social work and work with women and children. Ever since I was a child, I had wanted to study law and become a lawyer. I was interested neither in social activities nor in politics. But life took me on a different path. After I completed my medical studies, the civil war started and we had to migrate to Pakistan. There I founded an educational centre for women where they were able to get some schooling and learn how to be self-confident. Gradually the women at the centre realized that they could have an active role in society. They also learned not just to rely on their housework skills but to also make use of their abilities in other areas. When I returned to Afghanistan, I founded educational centres in Kabul

and Paktia where students could compensate their lost school years. With time, we broadened our activities and encouraged women to participate in elections and get involved in politics. Ultimately, with the encouragement of my friends, I decided to enter the world of politics.

How did you feel when you heard that you'd been elected as an MP?

The first time I was busy at work as usual. I was in Paktia when my friend called me and said I had been elected. But on the day of the inauguration I was very emotional. After years of war, Afghanistan was finally moving towards having a parliament. That day I cried a lot. The second time, the competition was tougher and I really wanted to be successful. With the help of God, I was successful.

How do you see your professional prospects?

I am optimistic. In a society where women face gender-based discrimination, it's a great achievement to overcome the limits enforced by tribal customs but that is the process we are going through now.

Recently you were given a 'Better Leadership' award. How did you feel about that?

I have never worked to win awards. I have always worked towards a political goal. This award was given to me at a huge gathering. They announced three names. One was the Japanese foreign minister who had accomplished a lot, the other one was Pakistan's female speaker of parliament and the third one was me - an Afghan woman. At that moment, I was thinking more about Afghanistan than myself. I was thinking about how Afghanistan, a country fraught by troubles, had produced a woman successful enough to win an award.

Time for some personal questions... what things do you enjoy the most?

I really enjoy it when I can solve someone's problem, however small.

Do you like listening to music?

I prefer classical music and love *ghazal*, especially those sung in Urdu because I can understand them.

Who is your favourite singer?

I like those who sing the best poetry: Awalmir, Nashenas and Jagjit Singh.

Please define life.

It is very beautiful and short – you must grasp every opportunity.

Who is the most influential person in your life?

I am influenced by different people: my mother for her sincerity; my father for his love of human beings; my uncle Shaheed Wali Khan for his great support of women although he was a Pashtun. Gandhi and Nelson Mandela were great political activists and there are many other people in various walks of life who have impressed me.

Who is your most sincere friend in parliament?

You have to bear in mind that parliament is a place for exchanging different points of views. Sometimes we are in favour of an issue and sometimes against it. That's why you can't find a sincere friend in parliament. Sincerity is found in interpersonal relationships, but you can't expect to find it while discussing serious political issues.

Do you accept criticism?

Sometimes criticism makes me angry but in general I am open to it.

You make a very pleasant impression. Do you always come across like this?

I sometimes give people the impression that I'm angry, racist, selfish and proud. But when they get to know me they often change their minds. In general I am a kind person.

What's the best ever gift you had?

My children!

What are your most important personality traits?

Courage, sincerity and kindness.

How much importance do you give to dressing well?

I prefer mental beauty to a good appearance. Those who only wear beautiful dresses but don't have a beautiful mind should know that dresses alone cannot make you beautiful.

What's your take on gender equality?

Everyone should be given equal rights and benefits. I reject favouritism.

What is your definition of freedom, especially women's freedom?

The freedom of women does not mean the promotion of irregularities. It means accepting that women also have the right to make decisions and express themselves freely.

Najla Habibyar was born in Kabul and lived as a refugee in Pakistan. She studied Management and Administration at Kabul University and also taught IT. Currently she heads the Export Promotion Agency of Afghanistan. A few years ago, she established the Paiman Charity foundation, which is dedicated to helping street children and has provided many with an education. Thanks to the charity's support many parents have pledged not to send their children out to work or to beg. Najla is a sincere and optimistic individual who has high hopes for the future of Afghanistan.¹⁰



“What is Najla’s definition of a happy life?”

Please tell us about yourself.

My name is Najla Habibyar. I am currently the head of the Afghanistan Export Promotion Agency and manage the Paiman Charity Foundation. I sometimes also give lectures at educational institutions.

Could you please tell us about your education?

I have a Bachelor’s degree in Management and Administration from Kabul University. I got my professional experience in Thailand and have attended a number of short-term training programmes in Turkey and Bangladesh.

Tells us about your family.

My father is a finance officer with Afsoter at Camp Phoenix. My mother was a teacher but left her job two years ago. One of my brothers runs a charity and the other is still a student.

You are head of the Afghanistan Export Promotion Agency. How do you feel as head of this agency?

It's interesting. Although the job is challenging and full of responsibility, I'm very happy. You can learn a lot when you face difficulties. Before I took this job, my area of work was mostly related to NGOs. But this is very different and I've been successful in this new position. The head of an organization has to work hard to achieve the company's success because they're the first port of call if the company's performance is called into question. If middle or lower management fails to complete a task, it's up to the upper management to complete it. I enjoy taking on that responsibility.

How do you balance your personal and professional life as a woman?

That's a difficult question! When a woman has a career, her personal life takes a backseat. It might be different for others but for me, there is no personal life. My career has taken the place of my personal life. But it's indicative of the limitations on working women. A female CEO is under pressure to put in an extraordinary effort. If not, people say she's not performing well and her position ought to be given to a man. So women have to put all their energy in to being successful. If a woman is appointed to a post she has two major challenges: firstly, she has to successfully fulfil her responsibilities and secondly, she has to prove that women are capable.

What are your responsibilities at the Paiman Charity Foundation?

Despite a busy professional schedule I still work with the Paiman Charity, which I founded with the help of my friends. Our main objective is to provide support to the young generation. The current generation is the generation of war. Our efforts are aimed at making the future generation well educated and open-minded. The charity is also a way for me to spend some time with my friends and enjoy myself outside my professional life.

How do you reconcile what is needed with what is available?

Undoubtedly, access to public services paves the way for fulfilling our needs. We also know that in our society access to services is quite limited for women. Nevertheless the effective use of opportunities, resources and public services can take us nearer to fulfilling our needs.

How much support do you get from your family?

It would not be an exaggeration to say they support me 100 percent. My family has been supportive ever since I was a child. When I got admitted to night school at university, the biggest problem was transportation. I decided to quit university. But my father saw what the problem was and helped getting me to university and back home. My father's encouragement and support have enabled me to get where I am today.

Are you married?

No.

Are you thinking about getting married?

Not at the moment. I still think there's a lot for me to do. I've come up with a two-year plan for my organization. It's one of the key tasks I have yet to complete. So for the next two years, my priority will be working on this plan.

What is important to you in a marriage partner?

He has to be smart enough to accept me as a person, not a submissive woman. He has to recognize I am a person with her own thoughts and behaviour and who is not compelled to follow his directions. It can't be someone who would want to limit my freedom of thinking.

How do you make your work environment a pleasant place?

By being open with my employees. I do not look down on them as the boss, but treat them all as my co-workers. Our relationship is based on openness. An open and pleasant environment gives me an inner peace and has increased the number of my friends.

What do you think about happiness and unhappiness?

The moment I heard these two words, a picture of unhappiness appeared in my mind. That could be because there's more bad news than good news published in newspapers in this country and Afghans witness more terrible incidents on a daily basis. But there are things that make one happy and create hope, such as the country's economic growth.

What is your definition of a happy life?

Seeing smiles on other people's faces. Our life is a mirror that reflects our condition. The condition of the people of Afghanistan has a great impact

on me. When I see smiles, especially on the faces of children, I shed tears of happiness.

How does your faith in God help to make a happy life?

God is the light that brightens the darkest moments in life, and gives hope and happiness. I hope our tomorrow is better than our today. Such hope is what causes us to welcome life with waves of happiness.

Do you enjoy doing what you do today?

Sometimes I think I do, but not always. Often, I cannot attend family gatherings and that upsets me. I like to have time for family as well as my social affairs. When I can do that then I am happy.

What makes you feel fortunate?

Achieving your goal.

To what extent have you achieved your goals?

Nothing in life comes for free. In order to gain some things, you have to let go of others. In the past, I wanted to study medicine but I didn't have the chance. I worked in various different fields until I was appointed as head of this agency. During that time, I thought I had moved far away from my goals but today I realize that working in those areas helped me get where I am today. Now too, I am thankful to God and I am satisfied.

What about yours and your family's financial situations?

I've been working for 12 years but I don't have any money. I have to support my family as much as I can. I grew up in a middle class family and now I am supporting it.

What is your main objective at the moment?

To increase Afghanistan's exports.

What do you do in your leisure time?

I play chess and go horse riding. I'm generally interested in activities that society thinks are for men and that women cannot do. I am also interested in IT programs. I have a thirst for technology.

What is your secret of success?

Good planning.

How do you keep your temper when things anger you?

I don't lose my temper but instead give the other party the chance to realize their mistake. As a child I learned to be straight with people even if it is hard. If the other party isn't aware of their error, I will tell them. If someone is creating problems at work, I will talk to them about it. If they don't accept my criticism, they risk losing their job.

Raihana Azad is a female member of the national assembly. She is a third year student of political science at Kateb Institute of Higher Education. She was also a member of the Daykundi provincial council. She was the first woman from Uruzgan province to become an MP. Raihana believes in democracy and is committed to its advancement in Afghanistan.¹¹



“Democracy is a principle for me”

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Please tell us about yourself.

I have had a challenging life. I’ve been involved in the political struggle ever since I was in school. I was a member of a local women’s council and was the first woman from Uruzgan province to work with the United Nations. For four years I was the member of the provincial council with the highest number of votes. I was the council’s deputy head, and I dealt with international relations affairs. Then I decided to run for a seat in parliament. It was hugely important to me to prove that a woman from Uruzgan province could get into parliament. The competition and rivalry was very tough. And there were other challenges such as the lack of security and the prevalence of some undesirable traditions. But fortunately I won the election and was given the opportunity to become the people’s representative in the parliament.

Please tell us about your family background and its role in supporting you?

I grew up in a family that has always been involved in politics. My family background is probably one of reasons that I got involved too. Because of its political background, my family has faced many challenges and had to

make many sacrifices. My father worked very hard and was the founder of the first girls' school there. He was greatly concerned about the discrimination of women. There was a time when people couldn't imagine a woman working outside the home. Today every woman tries to get an education and a job. So today especially in Daykundi more women than ever are getting involved in social activities. The number of girls going to school and on to further education shows that even in remote provinces people have seen what's going on and their way of thinking has changed a lot. I am thankful to my family, especially my father who has been my teacher for years.

Can you define yourself in one sentence?

One whose father was a free man and one who struggles for justice and equality.

Please tell us about the members of your family.

My father, Ishaq Azad, has been a teacher all his life. He always says that he fell in love with the chalk dust. He has been offered employment in other areas but he has never given up teaching. My brother, Abdulhaq Azad, completed his education in India and is currently working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After she graduated my sister, Latifa Azad, worked as an adviser at the Ministry of the Interior for two years. She currently works for a UN office. I have another sister who is studying in Kazakhstan. My brother Wahid Jaan and another sister are preparing for their university exams. I have two other sisters as well who are in seventh and ninth grades at Maarifat Lycée while my three younger brothers are in first, second and third grades.

Why did you decide to become an MP?

One of the reasons was to show that women can participate in politics. Based on my experiences as a member of the provincial council, I thought if I become an MP, I would be in a better position to serve the people especially in the crucial area of education. I can also work in a professional capacity to improve the situation of women, especially in the area of healthcare. I work in these areas in addition to my main responsibility, which is monitoring the performance of the government and the implementation of legislation for the benefit of the people.

Are you representative of the people of Daykundi or Uruzgan?

I am from Daykundi but I am a representative of the people of Uruzgan.

How did you come to stand for election in Uruzgan province?

This was a purpose-based decision. Many of my friends suggested I stand in Kabul so they could also vote for me. But I wanted to contest an election in a province where it wouldn't be an easy task to get votes if I was standing among male candidates. In Kabul people are more open-minded about women being in a political environment - people there believe that women are capable and can perform. I wanted to work in a place where people don't share that belief so that I could prove them wrong. In Uruzgan there were no women standing for election. But I took the decision in the hope that I would motivate other women to make their presence felt and exercise their rights.

Have you got as far as you want to be?

I am not unhappy with my situation, but there is still a long to go until I've achieved my goals.

What are the differences between Raihana Azad MP and Raihana Azad?

That's a difficult question. As Raihana Azad, I am only responsible for myself. But as Raihana Azad MP, I also have public responsibilities. If I'm only responsible for myself, I can do as I want. However, as an MP, my personal wishes have nothing to do it. As an MP I'm working for the people and the will of the people becomes my will. Being an MP is a responsibility not an award.

Ms. Azad, there have been so many obstacles in your path. Please tell us how have you overcome them.

Thank you. That's a very good question. Uruzgan province faces countless problems ranging from difficulties in the education sector to its highways remaining blocked for months due to heavy snowfall. The central government has never tried to address these problems. We could only convey the concerns of the people to the relevant authorities and make them aware of the challenges, and ask them about their lack of attention and what they planned to do to improve the situation. To improve living conditions in the province, I have been cooperating with its representatives in the parliament and senate. To improve education in the province, I have

been working together with the Australian government. Our work has focused on better local governance, increased funding and roads for the province.

How do you evaluate women's rights in Uruzgan over the last decade?

Over the last decade, the situation for women has not only improved in Uruzgan but all over the country. This is undeniable. There has been progress in Uruzgan province where we now have female teachers. That was not even imaginable before 2001. But my expectations haven't been met yet. I want a situation in which people can enjoy their full rights. Unfortunately, many problems still remain unaddressed.

How much have the MPs and civil rights activists been effective in opening the minds of people in Uruzgan about women's rights?

Bearing in mind the challenges faced in the provinces, there's still a shortfall of civil rights groups. Many organizations say insecurity is the main reason. Undoubtedly, insecurity prevails in some parts of this province but not to the extent that it should put off these organizations. Using *Rah-e Madanayat Magazine* as a platform, I would like urge the civil rights movement to give their attention to the provinces where the situation isn't good for women. In Uruzgan traditions have more clout than the law. Women do not have access to legal services to achieve what is their right.

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How much work has there been to improve human rights in Uruzgan?

Very little. At local level in particular, the human rights situation is not satisfactory at all.

What are your interests?

Studying and watching political movies.

How much time do you give to reading newspapers?

Almost every morning, I read them to keep up with local and international news stories. If I'm short on time, my assistant reviews the newspapers and gives me a summary.

Which print and electronic media are your favourite?

I would rather not say.

How much time do you give to studying each day?

Studying is my habit. If I don't have time for it during the day, I spent at least one hour studying at the night. I like to study biographies of politicians and also current affairs.

Which political figure inspires you most?

Gandhi. I'm very interested in Gandhi's memoirs and his life story. I find it utterly inspiring and motivating. When it comes to nation building he was the greatest politician. He was able to unify his country by completely dedicating his life to his nation. At the end, he had no personal property except a pair of glasses, a walking stick and a pair of shoes. That takes a huge amount of self-sacrifice.

How do you define political success and failure?

It depends on what they do for society. A real politician focuses on bringing positive change to people's lives. A politician is a failure if they forget the people. A politician is successful when people are satisfied with their performance.

Does luxury have a place in your life?

I'm more focused on the world my people are living in. I like my environment to match theirs.

Do you ever think about being wealthy?

I am only concerned with sharing wealth with everyone. A politician is someone who moves together with the people. In a society where the people do not have enough food to feed themselves, how can I think of being wealthy?

How much importance do you give to democratic values?

Democracy is a principle for me. Until democracy governs a society, an oppressed person will never enjoy full rights and freedom. We're putting a lot of effort into developing democracy because our economic, social and political wellbeing depends on it. In a democracy everyone is allowed their rights. Only democracy can bring change to the lives of our people.

Will we ever see a stable society?

When democracy matures in our country.

When someone calls you Raihana, how do you feel?

It reminds me of my childhood.

Who do you like to talk with mostly?

Anyone who is interested. I give importance to everyone.

And finally, do you have a poem or message you'd like to share?

Despite impossibilities, one who loves their country can bring about change.

Nahid Farid is a member of the parliamentary commission for international relations. She was born in Herat and attended the Mehbooba Herwi Lycée in the same province. In 2007 she graduated in law and political science from Herat University. Then she left for the United States where she obtained a Master's degree in international relations from George Washington University. After her return to Afghanistan, her family suggested she stand as a candidate in the parliamentary elections. Nahid Farid went on to become the youngest member of the National Assembly, gaining herself a reputation as a highly conscientious politician.¹²

“I believe in green”



Can you introduce yourself?

I'm an MP and one of the representatives of people who has great hopes for their country. Nahid is the name of the morning star that appears first in the sky, but is the last one to disappear. I see myself as a hardworking person who is more committed than anyone.

How did you get into politics?

Afghan politics touches all parts of people's lives. After completing my Master's degree in the United States, I returned to Afghanistan and my family suggested that I stand for the parliamentary elections. I was interested in doing that even though my family had more confidence in me than I did myself. I gradually started getting involved in politics at a practical level. My idea of Afghan politics was quite different from

reality. Since entering politics, I've encountered issues that have made me concerned about the future of the country. But rather than those concerns putting me off, they have encouraged me more to fulfil my responsibilities in addressing the problems of the people.

Now that you have entered the world of politics, how successful are you?

I have tried to be a positive and liberal critic in Afghan politics. Positive criticism is not meant to wipe out achievements but instead to further strengthen them. And being liberal doesn't mean taking an irresponsible position on bad social practices. But how successful I have been is a question that should be judged by the people.

You are the youngest member of parliament. What made you start politics so early?

I didn't even know I was the youngest lawmaker until our identity documents were checked in parliament. When I found out it worried me because in Afghan politics MPs are usually over 40. That's not just the case in politics, but other fields too, especially in the universities. So I decided to make it my aim to represent the voice of young people on the administration committee and other parliamentary commissions.

What does being a lawmaker mean: trust, authority, service or responsibility?

I wouldn't say trust and authority. There are many politicians who are qualified to get other jobs if they were looking for trust and authority, but instead they chose to become MPs so they could work for the people. Being a lawmaker entails accepting certain responsibilities, but not service. I have not come here to serve. Looking at the past decade, everyone claims to have served the people. Service is something you do to help an already existing society. But I want to work towards reforming society. Reform is what creates the growth and evolution of a society. At the moment, service won't help to change people's situations.

How did you feel when you found out you'd been elected to parliament?

In Afghan society, there's no official recognition of women and young people. I had just returned from abroad. My thoughts were different than the traditional thoughts of ordinary people and that worried me when I won the election. However, when I found out that I had won the highest

number of votes of all the female candidates in Herat, I realized people trusted me and I should not break that trust.

Do you enjoy literature?

Very much! Sometimes I read and write poetry. But the political environment is so difficult that I find very little time for literature. Nevertheless it is an important part of my life.

Is there a relationship between politics and literature?

It is very difficult to talk of a single truth in politics, while one can express the facts easily through literature. However, literature has still to find a proper place in our society.

You're obviously interested in literature. Why did you study political science and international relations?

I was more interested in political science and international relations, and thought I could achieve my dreams if I studied them. Currently, I'm working for my doctorate.

Please tell us about your partner and how supportive he has been in your life.

Early on my parents worked hard for me and it is difficult to go into details. My husband has supported me on political issues especially during the election. He tipped my decision to go into politics. If it were not for his support, I would not be a representative of the people today. He has impressed me by his sacrifices and consistent support.

How many children do you have and what are their names?

I have one daughter. Her name is Sara Jan.

How do you define life?

Life is like a work of art with everyone in it. Everyone has a role to play. Our success relates to how much we know about the artwork. The artwork will always be there. What's important is what we leave behind us.

What should be the goal of life?

That depends on one's personality. Until you really know yourself, setting yourself a goal for life will be difficult.

What is the importance of equality and the need for equality in a society?

These are values that have been set out in the Afghan constitution. The constitution formally recognizes equal rights for all Afghans. That's a benefit to all citizens of Afghanistan.

What's your favourite colour?

My favourite colour is green. You must have noticed that I always wear symbolic green clothing.

We heard that you are one of the female Afghan MPs who wears green.

What does it mean?

Green is a symbol of my belief and my presence in politics. There are many theories about the colour green but mine relates to history. In the past few years, our people have experienced black and white; a black and white that resulted in our destruction. But now it is time to think green. In addition to green being a peaceful colour, it is the colour of renewal. Today's generation does not accept black and white. If we start seeing things in black and white again, it would be a stain on the contemporary history of Afghanistan.

Finally, what are your last words?

*Life would be the unique scene of art
You sing your song and depart
The scene is eternal
Greet the song that stays in the people's memory to infinity*

Munira Yousafzada is 27 with a degree in political science. She is an independent thinker and an articulate writer. She regularly writes a blog called 'Shiddokht'. Munira has been a refugee and has a long working history.¹³



“The emotion has been lost in the struggle to earn a crust”

Please tell us something about yourself.

I'm pleased to have the opportunity to share my thoughts with people who know me and also those who don't through your esteemed weekly magazine. My name is Munira. I had a difficult childhood. I lost my father when I was very young. I wanted to become what my father had dreamed of but at seven, I was already weaving carpets. People say necessity is the mother of invention but I say necessity is what increases one's abilities. I started working at that age either because of economic need or out of interest. As a 9 year-old refugee, I won a writing competition in Iran with an article about Afghanistan. I couldn't stop crying whenever I read the article. My writing awards were what made me enter the world of culture. That's when I wanted to discover who the real Munira was. I worked in addition to my schoolwork. I was top of the class throughout school. My teacher used to tell the other kids, "Look at this refugee girl, and how she studies with such great desire and interest." But some people were jealous of my success and so for many years I had to put up with their insults. Later I established a school for Afghan refugee children in one of the provinces. On the first day I had five students. But in a very short time, their numbers had risen to 3,000. Two other branches of the school were established and its name was formally registered with the Embassy of Afghanistan. I have a bachelor's degree in political science.

What about your family?

I'm proud to call my family 'the little Afghanistan' - my father was a

Hazara and my mother is a Pashtun. My father had an education so did my mother. They had a very good relationship and so have all my other family members. I think that my parents are one of the reasons I've been successful. I am the youngest in the family. My brothers and sisters all went to school. But the difference between us is that I started working when I was very little. I was never told that I was incapable of a job because I was a girl. My mother respects my aspirations. I am glad I fulfilled her hopes for me.

What are you doing at the moment?

The chapter of our life as refugees ended about six years ago and now we live in Afghanistan. Since then I have worked at various different places. For two years, I served as a legal adviser for a US office. I have also worked as an arts manager at the Afghanistan Contemporary Arts Centre. For the past three years I've been working as executive manager at the Independent Directorate of Local Governance.

Please tell us about your characteristics.

It would be wrong to say I am perfect. I admit that I have both good and bad habits. Sometimes I say things without caring about how people will interpret them and whether our society, so dominated by custom, would tolerate them. At the same, I am confident enough to stand up for positive customs and traditions.

What's the key to a good relationship?

It has to be based on understanding and the recognition of differences. It does not mean a woman's behaviour should be the same as a man and vice versa, but they should accept each other's differences.

What are the conditions for a successful marriage?

Marriage is an understanding between two souls, not two bodies. In my belief when two persons do not have such an understanding they cannot be successful and cannot care for their children properly. In marriage, maturity in years is not important but mental maturity is. People always talk about what age is best to get married, but little importance is given to mental maturity. It's time that Islam put more emphasis on intellectual growth.

What do you think of change?

I would have failed if I hadn't changed from the person I was yesterday. Every day, it is my aim to be different from the Munira I was the day before. I like change in my life, the clothing I wear and the way I think. I am not an inhibitive person. I do not hide what I am. I believe in being myself and not being affected by what other people think about me.

How do you see the changes that have occurred for women in recent years?

In Afghanistan, women have been represented as lacking and incapable to such an extent that now women doubt their own capabilities and have the wrong perceptions about themselves. Unfortunately, the attempts to change the situation for women have also been purely symbolic. We're happy to have a female quota in parliament, for example, but we give no importance to knowing which women's group these female MPs belong to. When we report back to the international donors, it seems the number of women is the only important thing. It's a fraudulent way to get more funds. At major international conferences on Afghanistan, there's always an emphasis on women's rights. But it's just symbolic.

People regard you as a staunch feminist; what do you say to that?

Yes, people criticize me because of what I write. But feminism is wrongly interpreted. I'm not necessarily saying that every woman who works for sexual equality has to be called a feminist or that her initiatives are beneficial. But we must be allowed to do our work – society really needs it. If men were ever deprived of their rights, they'd certainly form such groups. I am against the idea of women only working for women's rights. It's my job to know what my rights are, but it's also important to be aware of how men will interpret an issue. If a woman in a remote district of Kandahar province says she has the right to work, a man won't listen to her, and this is what leads to violence.

What is the most memorable job you have done so far?

My work with destitute children is the best, the most beautiful and the most memorable work I have ever done. When I talk to people I often mention these children because I always think of them. I have also published a book entitled 'Kochek, bozorg ast' (Small is Great). I've collected their life stories and will publish them as a book in the near future. It has been

my most memorable job because for the first three years after I returned to Afghanistan, I regretted coming back and suffered seriously from depression. I thought everything I'd ever thought had been useless and meaningless. I continued feeling that way until I started getting into my work. We selected 650 kids from orphanages. Listening to their stories was unbearable for me. They smiled as they described the violence they had faced, how their mothers had beaten them and other such heart-wrenching stories. I asked one of them to draw the person who murdered his father, for instance, and he only drew a black dot. I believe that people who kill others are not even worth a dot. But the child pointed at the dot and said, "That's my father's killer." Then he drew a bigger circle and said, "That's my father." That is a story I will never forget. For a time whenever I thought about that child, I used to cry. I was amazed at what those children had put up with. I also asked the children what they needed. None of them said they needed money, food or clothing. Instead they said they wanted to study and become doctors... Although their wishes are unlikely to be fulfilled, I found it very interesting. By contrast, the children of MPs, ministers or other high-level officials often wish for more money, despite being sufficiently well off. But these children never said they wanted money...

What do you say about empathy?

Empathy involves a number of steps. The first step is to listen to what the other is saying. Without listening, empathy is impossible. The second step is to have trust. Something that has grown a lot in Afghanistan is mistrust. The third step is to help others. Just taking a tiny step to help solve someone else's problem might not seem great to some people, but it can be a great step towards empathy.

What section of society you would like to work for the most?

I love children. I think my biggest contribution to them is through my writing.

How do you go about reaching a goal?

By being consistent. People say, "Slow and steady wins the race." If you're not consistent, it's difficult to reach your goals. And often it's not money and wealth that drives us to achieve our goals, but instead having nothing. If you have nothing, you're motivated to work harder for what you want.

My experience of poverty has helped me a lot.

What is the most important right still being denied to women?

Being labelled ‘girl or woman’ does indeed mean women are deprived. For example girls are often told to speak quietly, not to laugh loudly, not to leave their homes too often and not to work. Such rules lead to a loss of identity – women forget that they, as human beings, have the same rights as men. The most important right that has been snatched from women is their freedom of expression. The fact that we cannot voice our rights is the most crucial right that we are denied.

You have written one book and you first won a writing award when you were a child. Do you still write and what is the reason behind this?

Whenever there are listeners, one can convey his or her message via various means: painting, photography, calligraphy or music. I opted to do it through writing.

I mainly write as a form of compensation for other things. One of the things I have been deprived of is my father’s love. As a result my mother had the responsibilities of both a mother and a father. Also, we were refugees. The fact that I was from Afghanistan but could not live here was a reason for me to start writing.

How has writing helped you express your feelings?

Many people read my writing and the first question they ask is about my field of study. When I say I studied law and political science, they’re surprised. They think I must have studied literature. They say political science is factual, but my writing is emotional. Although some of my writing is academic, most of it is emotional. The lack of feelings and emotion is the reason for many problems in Afghanistan. Everybody is trying too hard to earn a crust. I receive many comments on my Shiddokht blog, which not only pleases me but also shows me I’ve been successful. Even if just one person reads my blogs, I regard it as a success.

What do you prefer most, literature or politics?

Well, I do not believe that a passion for politics and an interest in literature are mutually exclusive. I believe that a successful politician is one who has feelings and emotions for his or her country, and that’s something that we do not have today. Most of our politicians are negative about Afghanistan

because they see themselves as being related to other countries. Politics however is not about becoming a minister or a parliamentarian - it is about how we live. I'm also against the idea that men should study politics while women should study literature. Women are people too. Men and women have equal learning capabilities. I think politics relates much to how it is implemented.

Do emotions play a role in good management?

A good manager should be a good friend. But unfortunately in our society, most managers ignore that kind of suggestion. I'd say around 80 percent of people in management positions, from the lowest levels right up to the top positions such as CEOs and deputy ministers, are unsentimental. In developed societies, a lot of importance is given to management having a good relationship with their employees. Without having a good relationship with your staff, you can't be a successful manager. Unless you develop a relationship with your employees, you can't know what their strong points and weak points are, and use that to give them support and encouragement.

How do you see nature?

A person is either an artist or an art lover. No one can look at a beautiful painting and not like it. People become interested in artists through their love for art. And nature is an artistic masterpiece itself. I love nature very much. I have a need for nature.

Why do you like art?

I like art because it energizes me and instils me with a sense of peace.

What is your favourite colour?

My favourite colour changes all the time. Currently it's blue. I find blue very peaceful.

How blue are you?

Very. Indeed my writing is mostly blue.

What do you enjoy doing most?

Being with friends.

What is better, inner peace or luxuries?

Inner peace. Without inner peace, luxuries cannot fulfil our inner desires.

What makes you happy in your life?

First and foremost my parents. The second thing is that I have been able to study and the third is that I live in family where I've never witnessed gender-based discrimination.

Do you have a favourite sibling?

I love all of them, but I'm emotionally closest to one of my brothers. There's not much age difference between us. I can talk to him about my feelings. He's always there for me.

And finally, could you please recite one of your favourite poems for us?

*Life is beautiful, hey! Lover of beauty
Those with living thoughts reach the beauty
So beautiful it is not to return from there
That one could give a life for it*

Anarkali Hunaryar is a dentistry graduate. She has worked for the Women's Rights Development Section of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) in various provinces and has been a member of all the traditional Jirgas held in the post-Taliban era including the Jirga held for the endorsement of the Afghan constitution. Currently, she's a member of the upper house of the parliament (Mesharano Jirga).¹⁴



“We cannot progress unless there is peace”

What made you seek a profession that focused on human rights especially women's rights?

I first started asking myself why women were discriminated against when I was a child. I saw women facing all these problems, violence, and having their rights violated by their families. I used to ask myself, “Are they not humans? Do they not have the same right to dignity as any other human?” Such thoughts prompted me finally to decide to work for women's rights.

How do you see the current situation regarding women's rights?

Undoubtedly, there has been some progress but at the same time challenges remain. One of the reasons for human rights violations especially regarding women is the security situation here. In the absence of widespread peace it is quite natural that human rights violations occur. There is no rule of law and in such a situation people whose rights are violated don't have any legal support.

Over the past ten years or so, there have been costly efforts to bring peace to Afghanistan but still there is none. What is your opinion on this?

We shouldn't ignore the gains Afghans have made over the past decade. Afghanistan has experienced three decades of war and therefore challenges are not easily overcome. There are consistent efforts to establish nationwide peace. One can view the peace process with optimism or pessimism, but if we want peace, we must also be able to nurture what we have achieved so far. That's what gives us hope for the future. The people of Afghanistan, but especially the vulnerable people in society such as women and children, need peace the most. We need long-term peace if we are to create a society where human rights are respected and there's no violence or discrimination against women.

Recently there has been a considerable focus on the peace process but despite that peace remains a pipe dream. As a woman who sees the position of women as vulnerable, how do you analyze the current situation?

We want peace and women feel the need for peace more acutely than anyone, but we must strengthen the peace process so that we can avoid losing the gains we have made. The country's constitution is one of the greatest and historic achievements of the past decade and it is crucial to upholding those gains. In other words, obeying the constitution and remaining committed to it are key to making peace and stability possible. Under the constitution, the people of Afghanistan are granted equal rights without any prejudice while also being committed to respecting the rights of all other Afghans. The words 'man' and 'woman' are used in Article 22 of the constitution and that's quite an important point. Another hopeful point for the future is female representation in both houses of parliament by MPs who lobby for women's rights. If things continued in this direction, many women like me would be reassured.

Every transitional process faces challenges in the initial stages. The same goes for the peace process. There are many problems and obstacles in the way of efforts to bring nationwide peace to Afghanistan. The efforts of the High Peace Council are commendable. I hope the peace process triumphs because we cannot progress without peace.

At the moment there's a minimum level of security in a number of provinces. Under such conditions how can the peace process help the growth of social structures?

There are female lawmakers in both houses of parliament who represent various provinces of Afghanistan. There are major security issues in some of these provinces. Despite that their representatives never give up their work. The lack of security is one of the main hindrances to the progress of women and society. There are other obstacles that also hinder the social activities of women. Afghan women are often victims of unreasonable traditions and practices that prevail in our society. Such conditions are actually to the disadvantage of everyone. Therefore until we have a comprehensive peace, everyone will continue to suffer from the negative impact of instability.

Bearing the current situation in mind, what are your hopes for the next ten years?

This is a very important and difficult question. Based on our experience over the last decade, I would hope to see more development but on the condition that the gains we have already won are not lost. Everyone needs to cooperate in various processes.

You have been active in various areas and undoubtedly your experiences have been positive, but what should be done so that every Afghan can live in peace and face no discrimination?

Afghans have to recognize their own responsibility towards their country and act accordingly. Every Afghan has a role to play in the peace process and in all the other important issues. Government authorities and other public figures must recognize their responsibilities in the same way normal people have a certain responsibility they should fulfil.

As a member of the Sikh community in Afghanistan, do you feel that you have equal rights to people of other religions in this county and that you can contribute and take part in various important activities?

Throughout my life and in all of my social activities, I have never felt that people are not of my religion. I value humanity. I respect human rights. People's religious beliefs have to be respected as they are their own personal matter. What we all must think of is our national interest because we live under one flag and have one constitution.

Please tell us about your family.

My father is an engineer and my mother is a housewife. My elder brother graduated in Dari literature and my younger brother is currently studying medical science. One of my sisters graduated in gynaecology and is married now. My other sister is studying law and political science.

Are you married?

No.

If you ever got married, what qualities would you look for in a husband?

Well, I don't know yet. When people decide to get married I'm sure they think about certain things.

What do you like to do outside work?

I enjoy my leisure time but official and political activities greatly limit my time. In my small amount of free time I enjoy studying books on various topics.

As we can see you are very well dressed. What is the importance of dressing for a person and his or her social life?

Wearing decent clothing has an impact, as does colour. Psychologically, humans intuitively make choices. Those choices have an effect on people's personalities. If you're able to choose what you wear it can affect your happiness, which is essential for personal and social relationships. I hope that one day all Afghans will be able to afford to dress how they want to.

How much importance do you give to beauty?

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. I try to look nice and neat since physical appearance is an indicator of a person's sociability and way of thinking.

Nilofar Ibrahimy is an MP from Badakhshan province. She grew up in a prominent and liberal family and has worked steadily to achieve success in her own right.¹⁵



**“The participation
by women
in the peace
process remains
insignificant”**

Please tell us what your name means.

It is blue and a flower-covered sky.

What is the connection between a blue, flowered-covered sky and your life?

It is very vast and also complex.

Please tell us more.

During my childhood, I lost my father while we were in Badakhshan. My sister and I stayed with my mother. I was two and my mother was 16 years old. When I was five, we came to Kabul. I am thankful to my grandfather and uncle who brought us up then; it was the beginning of my life.

What were the things that influenced your life?

As I grew up, I started asking certain questions: Why was my father killed so brutally? What decides someone's fate like that? Why does humanity value some people and not others? What sin could be so bad that someone

deserves being killed by another human? These are the thoughts that motivated me to get involved in social and political affairs.

Was your family involved in politics before you?

My grandfather was elected as an MP three times. My family was prominent and liberal, though not affluent. But it held a position of respect among our people and society. One of the reasons for the deaths of my father and grandfather was their social and political engagement and open-mindedness.

How did you pursue your life's goals?

To begin with I focused fully on my education. I was always top of my class except in 12th grade when I was second. After my university entrance exam, I got accepted into the Faculty of Medical Science in Balkh. My mother said that was my father's wish but I also was interested in learning medical science. During my studies I also studied political writing and other material as I knew that my grandfather and uncles had been connected to politics. I often read Jawaharlal Nehru's book of letters he had written to his daughter while he was in prison. I always felt I could relate to this book. Gradually my reading led to my motivation to get involved into politics. Despite all the difficulties I managed to continue my education. My studies were interrupted when the Taliban regime took over the country. During Taliban rule though, I didn't stay home. I worked in a hospital. I completed my one and final year of education in 2003.

Having faced such difficulties, especially in Kabul, how did you end up being elected by the people of Badakhshan?

I was the only woman from my home province of Badakhshan to graduate from a faculty of medical science. In 1993 when I got admitted to the aforementioned faculty, it was a very difficult time. People didn't even allow their male children to get an education. But I continued to study while I lived in a hostel far away from my family. I was something of a role model for other women. By taking on such a challenge, they saw that they too could be educated and play a role in society. I wanted to show that women could leave home, work hard and gain equal rights in any situation any time. After I graduated I wanted to return and work in Badakhshan and show that after a lot of hardship and difficulties, I was back to work for women and the society. So from 2003 I worked in Badakhshan until I

decided to run for a seat in the parliamentary election.

Currently in some provinces women face various restrictions. How do you keep working despite these restrictions?

In the districts I worked in for some years there was no such thing as 'International Women's Day' and women never got together to talk about how they could promote their role in society. In addition to my medical and professional duties when I was working in the hospital, I also set up various women's health and sanitation programmes under the umbrella of the public health councils. In addition to treating women, I also encouraged them to send their children to school and have more social presence. I used to tell them that I was just like them and had come to serve them. For the first time, we celebrated March 8th in the area where I worked. Although Badakhshan is a cultured society and it is quite liberal, there are problems in some of its remote districts problems and women aren't given the opportunity to play a role. I think these are the places where we have to campaign and gradually change people's thinking.

Bearing in mind the limits imposed on women, why did you decide to stand in the parliamentary election and how did you become successful?

Well, bearing in mind the environment I already described, I felt that women needed help to be better represented in society. I didn't want women up in the mountains and rural districts to have to accept their situation. I wanted women's problems in general to be addressed. There were no job opportunities for women, except for teaching. But today girls and women from Badakhshan go to university and work at different organizations. An Afghan woman is defined as a human being with rights. That means she is not subjected to unfair restrictions. Anyway in the end I decided to contest the election. I was among sixteen women from Badakhshan to stand. Most of my votes came from women I had been in direct contact with through my work. My success was a result of my work. In fact every woman who elected me voted for me because I was a woman.

What's your view on the protection of women and their mental peace?

Restrictions on women have declined considerably in central Badakhshan province. But unfortunately, recently political challenges in and beyond the region have meant increased security concerns. This is not only

worrying for women but for every individual living there. However I aim to fulfil my responsibilities in this regard. We will get the message across to the relevant authorities, human rights groups and UN organizations. The situation is relatively good in Badakhshan at the moment. Badakhshan is one of the provinces where women and girls play an active social role in various areas. In Kabul as well as in central Badakhshan and some of its other districts women and girls can exercise their rights. If other Afghan women were given the opportunity, they would perform better than other women around the world.

How have measures to improve peace and security over the past years helped women’s involvement in various fields?

Peace is crucial. In every post-conflict country, peace is the foremost requirement of its people. There have been many efforts to further the peace process. But peace remains elusive. Despite that, we will continue our struggle – we owe it to the people. In parliament, we act together on that because we have a unilateral view on peace. We also work for women’s rights without allowing anybody to use women’s issues for their own personal interests. We have always raised the issue of women being inadequately represented on the High Peace Council. Everything should be fair and impartial in the peace process. Although our efforts have been fruitful, we are still not satisfied because the participation by women in the peace process remains insignificant. We are also campaigning for the presence of high-level female members at the Supreme Court. In short, if you want the peace process to work, more women need to participate.

Indeed, there are a number of women MPs from Badakhshan with modern attitudes. And when it comes to university, there are significantly more female students than males from Badakhshan, and their attitude is quite modern. What is your view on this?

I relate it to gender. Compared to males, females are more open to change and are more interested in development, in being different, in strengthening social ties and getting involved in society. The people of Badakhshan province love culture, writing, poetry and literature. If you look at the statistics, you’d see that most students from Badakhshan especially the girls study Persian literature. Of course the cultural, historical and environmental beauty of Badakhshan has shaped the thoughts and attitudes of its people especially the women. In other words, the people of

Badakhshan are beautiful by nature and have been positively influenced by the cultural heritage of their province.

Outside politics, do you find time for writing?

I haven't entered the world of writing as it requires a specific kind of environment. I am extremely busy with political issues and have studied medical science but I cannot claim to have a strong connection to writing. Nonetheless, I am highly interested in it. Occasionally, I write about extraordinary incidents in my personal life. So there is a place for writing in my life. The best recreation for a busy politician is being able to read literature such as poetry and short stories, and writing a diary during his or her spare time.

Please tell us about your partner and family.

I got engaged during the early days of the Taliban government. My husband is from my father's tribe and studied pharmacy. With regards to marriage I have been very lucky. My husband has been a great supporter of my work and he has always been on my side. He has never put up obstacles. I don't remember having an argument with him that lasted more than ten minutes in the past ten years. We both see that as a success. We have five children. My eldest child, Ariana Jaan Kawsar, is nine years old and I have twin sons, Mohammad Ibrahim and Ismail Jaan.

Sahraa Karimi is the first Afghan woman in Afghanistan to get a PhD in film directing from the Academy of Music and Performing Arts in Bratislava, Slovakia. "Afghan women behind the wheel" and "Light Breeze - Memories from the diary of an immigrant girl" are among the films that Sahraa Karimi has directed. The autobiographical docudrama "Light Breeze - Memories from the diary of an immigrant girl" was awarded Best Short Fiction Film by the Slovakian Film and TV Academy. The award is the Slovakian equivalent of the Cesar Awards in France and Italy's David Awards. Sahraa Karimi's knowledge of film theory, art and professional directing makes her a unique Afghan woman, with an exceptional sense of independence and individualism. Now she wants to become a serious filmmaker in her own native Afghanistan. By establishing Kapila Multimedia House, she hopes to promote the development of professional and independent cinema in Afghanistan. She is also currently working on a feature film entitled "A Pianist from Kabul" as well as lecturing in eastern cinema at the Film and Television Faculty (FTF) of the Academy of Music and Performing Arts in Slovakia.¹⁶



a refugee girl living in a country where there were around two to three million Afghan refugees. I started out studying mathematics and physics and wanted to become an architect. When I was 16 I happened to meet a female director on the street who wanted an Afghan girl to act in her film. I don't know where I found the courage but I said yes! Everything evolved from that coincidental meeting on a hot summer's day. I did an audition. My character was pretty close to the character in the film. My life took a

"I do not accept Afghan TV channels"

What made you enter the world of cinema?

Some people make the decision themselves, and for others the decision is made. I was one of those for whom the decision was made. My world was quite distant from the world of film and cinema. I was

new turn and I pursued the path that had been chosen for me.

I played the main role in the film “Daughters of the Sun” and was the first Afghan girl to star professionally in Iranian cinema. After that, I played the main character in another film entitled, “*Khaam-e Safid*” (“*White Raw*”). Getting acquainted with the world of cinema, art and artists opened another door for me, a door through which I could see an artistic future. There was also another reason: Even as a child I read many books. No one in my family had been in higher education but they were literate. Reading books and turning pages were as common in our home as eating meals. Having read many books during my childhood gave me the idea that I might be accepted in the world of cinema.

“Daughters of the Sun” won many awards including the best film award at the Slovakian film festival. I was invited to attend the event since I, as an Afghan, had played the role in the film, which was particularly interesting in 2001. People’s idea of Afghan women was a woman covered by the *burqa*, a prisoner in her own home. They were fascinated by the fact that an Afghan woman had played the film’s protagonist. Since my childhood, I had always had a particularly strong sense of individualism and independence. My role models were self-reliant women, women for whom work and social activities were enormously important. That’s what made me want to take the risk. In 1979 and 1980, getting into university in Iran was quite difficult. But I had been lucky enough to get a UN scholarship thanks to my good grades. However, I was about to relinquish all those benefits and embark on an uncertain journey. Would I be successful or not? Finally I accepted the invitation to the festival and went to Europe. After the festival ended, I didn’t return but decided to stay and study film directing. I studied for 12 years. I integrated myself into that society, made films and became a director. All that began with a small wish. Now I’m in my thirties, I see myself as an independent person not as a woman.

Now that you have come so far, what is your biggest goal apart from film and cinema?

I am quite stubborn. If I want something, I put every effort into getting it. When it comes work, I am very ambitious. I like to be successful. I got my doctorate but I don’t expect people to address me with my title. Now that I am in my thirties, I think I’m on track to a new destination. I want to be an active and successful filmmaker so that when an Afghan girl or woman

watches my films, she too is motivated to become a filmmaker although the profession is taboo for women in Afghanistan.

What do you prefer, TV or cinema, bearing in mind the surging popularity in TV in Afghanistan?

I prefer cinema. I don't like Afghan TV. I don't watch it because their stuff is so primitive. The programmes they show are so superficial. I appreciate broadcasters that follow a specific line and deliver better programming. Media is the fourth pillar of society. Unfortunately media can inject society with the wrong kind of cultural values, facts and beliefs. They create superheroes but neglect the real heroes.

But generally I regard the medium of cinema as holy. Philosophical and intellectual views can be better conveyed through the medium of cinema. It's the medium that matters. It determines how independent you are to act, how much freedom you have as an artist or an author. In the medium of television, you are not free. Television is more like a factory where you are among thousands of people contributing to what it manufactures. In cinema, by contrast, you are an author and creator. I should emphasize that when I say 'cinema' I do not mean commercial cinema. In television, you are not a creator but a manufacturer. There's a lot of difference between creativity and manufacturing.

What is your opinion on the cinema audience in Afghanistan?

Cinema has no audience in Afghanistan. The greatest challenge to cinemas and filmmakers is the lack of audience. There is triangular relationship between filmmaker, film and audience. If one corner is absent there is no triangle. And that applies to cinema. Afghanistan is the worst place for cinema because there is no audience. Even if there were better films and filmmakers, there would still be a lack of audience. You can't call it an audience when you invite 100-200 of your friends and family to watch your new film and give you a round of applause. Audience means general audience, the people in a society. In our country, there is no tradition of cinema-going and film is not considered a worthwhile art form.

Afghan cinema is like a poor copy of Bollywood and Hollywood movies. Some of our commercial cinema owners offer the lowest quality of copies of Indian movies. Instead of trying to understand the difference between Bollywood and Hollywood movies, the general public judges everything

on face value. When they see cinema, they think it's cinema and that's all. Such thinking has become deeply ingrained over many decades and it seems very difficult to change that thinking. And then the greatest enemy of cinema is television. Afghanistan has more than 52 TV channels. Although they don't broadcast quality programmes, they have huge audiences. Another issue is that of security. Families don't feel safe enough to go to cinemas. There is no cinema-going culture here and no one values film as an art form in Afghanistan. For me and other like-minded people who want cinema for the enlightenment of society, Afghanistan is a very difficult place.

In your view what quality should an artist possess?

An artist must be committed and an expert in what he or she does.

How can an artist become popular?

One can become famous and popular, but trust is another matter. Some people are famous and popular but not trustworthy. To me, people's trust in my work is more important than fame and popularity. You have to work very hard to get people to trust you. A good work will find its audience even in a country like Afghanistan. You can become infamous through negative work, but positive fame is much more difficult. There is no simple recipe to achieve popularity. Fame can be related to the demands of society. However, trustworthiness is more important to me than fame and popularity.

What can be done to foster public trust in filmmaking?

There's a long way to go and there are many obstacles. Although I'm very optimistic, I can't offer any concrete suggestions. Today's audience today is different to the audience ten years ago. Ten years ago, people probably accepted everything since they didn't have anything else to watch and they were not as informed as they are today. Today people's vision has expanded. At least some TV channels have had an impact. Now people can travel and see that there are better possibilities, and that has made today's audience more discerning. So perhaps ten or eleven years down the line, people in Afghanistan will be demanding better TV and cinema. But what is our responsibility as filmmakers? Our responsibility is to create an environment so that we can meet their demands. That's only possible by making better movies.

The role of an actor is important in a movie. What qualities does an actor need to be accepted by an Afghan audience?

There are many factors that make a good movie. One is good actors. One part of acting is art while the other part is talent. Some are only interested in acting. What's important is talent. There is a need to discover talent. Afghans are talented just like other people. However it's down to a director to boost the quality of his film by selecting a talented actor who best suits the character in the film. But how can you expect a director to choose an Afghan actor who has never studied acting and doesn't know anything about showbiz? What's worse is that actors only see themselves as artists. But acting is very complex work. Actors need to have an attractive personality, at the same time as having a strong sense of responsibility towards their profession.

In your point of view, what is the current status of cinematic art in Afghanistan?

We can't expect Afghanistan to become a great place for cinema any time soon. That's not to say that the development of cinema is impossible. Work has begun. There are many talented young people who have great ideas and stories. It feels as if we are on the way to towards creating an environment in which cinema can be truly appreciated.

How much attention has been given to this art in the recent years?

No attention has been given to art generally, especially to filmmaking. The films that have been made have been supported by foreign organizations with their own agendas. One can't expect too much from the government authorities either. If you look at the national budget, funds are allocated for almost everything except cultural and cinematic projects. Nonetheless, we should continue to lay the foundations for filmmaking in the country. It will all depend on how Afghan filmmakers cooperate with each other.

What impact can cinema have on stability, given the current situation?

Cinematic work can be a bridge to reaching peace through its depiction of social values. The focus should not just be on depicting negative aspects of society but also focus on positive aspects. A good cinematic work must be able to reflect everyday social realities and depict how important peace is for our life.

Please name some of the best Afghan films.

Siddique Barmak is among our most competent and well-educated filmmakers. Barmak wrote the script for the 1992 short film 'Shadow.' It was a very nice movie.

Who is your favourite international actor and director?

I like the French actress Juliette Binoche but Al Pacino is my favourite. Italian Michelangelo Antonioni is my ideal director. I also like the French New Wave.

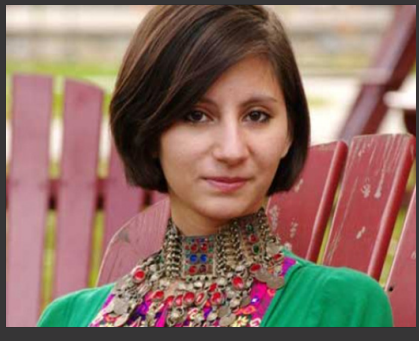
Who has influenced your work?

My family has played a great role. If it were not for my mother, I wouldn't be the person I am today. Intellectually I am influenced by my father. No one has given me confidence as much as my father. My father encouraged me to be self-confident while my mother taught me to be independent. In Afghanistan, my partner has been a very good friend to me. He has campaigned against traditional attitudes towards Afghan women filmmakers so I will always be thankful to him. While I was studying, three of my teachers were great supporters. Another thing that has helped me a lot while pursuing my career is my rejection of collectivism and my faith in individualism.

And finally, please would you recite one of your favourite poems?

*Life is beautiful, hey! Lover of beauty
Those with living thoughts reach the beauty
So beautiful is not returning from there
That one could give a life for it*

Noorjahan Akbar is mostly known as a civil rights activist but she also campaigns strongly for women's rights. Although she currently lives in the US where she's studying sociology, she also writes for online magazines and blogs in articles that are straightforward and to the point. She's a firm believer in equality and her biggest dream is to see Afghanistan prosper.¹⁷



“I believe in human equality”

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How would you define yourself, Noorjahan?

I'm a woman who loves being a woman and doesn't like to hide herself away. I'm energetic, stubborn and impatient and have a strong, amazing feeling of connection to Afghanistan.

Could you tell us a bit about your family please?

My father, Ismail Akbar, is a great lover of Afghanistan who taught his children how to fight for what you want and to remain committed to it. My mother, Azima Hamidi, is a teacher and she taught me to always remain hopeful about life, to work hard and be tolerant. My aunt is sympathetic and benevolent. My sisters, Rada, Shehrzad, Zubaida and Fatima, are all striving for a better Afghanistan and equality in their own ways. They are my role models and give me strength. My brothers, Ibrahim and Zabih, always cheer me up and make me laugh.

What about your educational background?

I started school while we were living in Pakistan as refugees. I continued

my education after we returned to Afghanistan. I studied at Kabul international school for two years before getting a scholarship in the United States where I completed the 11th and 12th grades. I'm at university in the US now where I'm soon to start my fourth year in sociology.

What's your take on women's rights?

I believe in equality for all people and believe that equality and independence of women is pivotal for Afghanistan's development and independence. Equality for women and their participation in society's development are crucial for all developing countries. As a person, I do not consider myself less important than any other human based on my gender. I am a self-confident woman and don't see why I should be disadvantaged because of my gender. I hope to encourage other women in my country to feel the same way. Women's rights are human rights and I think that regarding women as 'inferior' disadvantages both men and women. Everyone – at family level and a wider social level - can benefit from gender equality.

What is your greatest motivation?

I'm working towards a day when men, women and people of all races and ethnic backgrounds have equal rights and respect in Afghanistan, and no child is discriminated against or disrespected because it's a girl or from a particular minority. That's what motivates me to be stronger and not to lose hope.

What is your definition of 'feminism'?

Feminism is a belief in human equality and the struggle to abolish discriminatory traditions and laws. Feminism is a campaign against the kind of thinking that deems women inferior and restricts them from exercising their rights and utilizing social, political and economic opportunities.

In your view, which theory of feminism is most important?

Although all feminist theorists believe in equality, throughout the ages writers and scholars around the world have presented various explanations on the root causes of inequality. Susan Bordo, a feminist philosopher, is of the belief that inequality is rooted in the fact that throughout history, men and women have been divided into two categories: while men have

historically been associated with the intellect and the mind or spirit, women have long been associated with the body, the subordinated and the more negatively imbued term in the mind/body dichotomy. According to Bordo the main reason for inequality is that women were not given the opportunity to participate in human thinking and philosophy, and that is why they were treated as decoration or a reproductive tool. The notion of the body (but not the mind) being associated with women has served as a justification to deem women as property, objects, and exchangeable commodities among men.

The same structure is a cause of inequality even in today's modern world. However, another group of feminist philosophers and theorists are of the belief that the root cause of inequality lies in patriarchal literature. Men have used literature to reflect women as dishonest, irrational, emotional, aimless and weak. Therefore, they say, language and literature should be criticized. Others perceive economy as the basis of inequality. From the start men engaged in business and as a result received money or goods, while women were responsible for taking care of household duties or were engaged in negligible kind of works. Therefore, men had more authority. These theorists say that inequality still persists thanks to an economic inequality founded on low salaries given to women, the little importance placed on household work performed by women, and unpaid work at home and in the fields. Nonetheless, feminist theory cannot be summed up simply by citing inequality in literature: gender discrimination has existed throughout many centuries. In my view, all these theories are valid to an extent. Literature and philosophy, or economy, are not the only reasons for inequality. There are many reasons. Generally though patriarchal social structures and the way people think lead to the discrimination of women, a lack of belief in gender equality and the belief that women are somehow weaker and inferior.

How do you see tradition and feminism?

Some traditions do not favour women's rights while others are unrelated to them. It's impossible to look at every Afghan tradition in that respect, let alone every tradition in the world. The tradition that a woman is asked her consent for marriage during *nikah*, if applied, provides her with an opportunity to reject the marriage. To me, feminism does not mean opposing each and every custom and tradition, but it does mean questioning and discussing the habits of society at large.

What is important, supporting only women or all people?

Women are people.

What led you to become such a renowned women's rights activist?

When I was very young, I used to teach English language and computer to girls and women at a centre, which was established by our family. When I was 13, I volunteered to teach a literacy class to girls and women in a refugee camp. Experiences like that made me feel responsible and want to help others while I was a teenager. Now as a woman myself, I am personally confronted with discrimination and that leads to my sense of solidarity with other women and motivates me to work for more than myself and my own personal interests.

What is your key plan for the protection of Afghan women?

In my opinion, women should make up a major part of the workforce so that they can participate in important political decision-making processes, so their well-being and their security issues can be defended. Then the government would not be able to make decisions without the participation of women. If women had more roles and greater representation they could defend their political rights through sit-ins and demonstrations. But before we reach the situation where women can raise their voices and force the government to listen to their demands and implement measures for their protection, it is crucial that women across the country are provided with employment opportunities and are given the support they need to achieve economic independence.

Which personalities inspire you the most and have shaped your thinking?

I think it is the average men and women who I meet on a daily basis that inspire me more than famous figures. I learn truthfulness from brothers and kindness from my sisters. My friends and colleagues have more influence on me than historic personalities and famous people.

What's your relationship to the writings of Simone de Beauvoir?

When I started reading books and theories about feminism, de Beauvoir was my first teacher. Her work provided me with the answers to my biggest questions. Her writing encouraged me not to feel repressed as a woman, but to see it as something to be proud of.

Whose work do you favour among successful Afghan women?

There are so many women active in so many areas that it's difficult to say I prefer one or the other. I love the graphics and paintings of Shamsia Hassani as much as I love the writing of Munira Yousafzada and the films of Diana Saqib and Alka Sadaat.

What do you do to change the negative mindset towards the women?

I am always writing but my work isn't in reaction to anything in particular. I try to touch upon issues that circulate in my and others' minds – such as gender and being a woman. I believe that for long-term change it's essential to work on how people think and to question the beliefs that underpin women's inferiority.

What positive changes have you and your colleagues brought to the life of women?

A year ago I was doing practical work together with some other young women, which led to direct positive changes. For example we helped a woman in Kabul establish a tailor's shop. We set up literacy and computer classes for women and held discussions with school students on sexual harassment etc. Now that I work independently, I'm more focused on my academic work. I feel there is a need for independent thinking in Afghanistan and I hope my writing will be effective in this regard.

What else are you interested in apart from women's issues?

I think a lot about economic inequality and I believe it is essential that this inequality is not ignored, especially in Kabul. I write for myself. I read poems. I love music and reading novels, although these days I don't have enough time for novels. I love watching movies with my younger brothers.

What is your definition of 'politics'?

Politics is a structure for the distribution of authorities and building space or influence among the public.

Is it possible to exist without being involved in politics?

All humans, even those who do not talk about politics, are political because not taking part in politics is politics in itself. However, I think being politically aware is different from being involved in political activities for the purpose of gaining authority and becoming a politician. Being political

aware can give people a role in decision-making and prevent them from being misused. It's my aim to be politically aware but not necessarily to become a politician.

How do you see the political and security situation for Afghan women?

Women's rights have been used over the past 11 years by the Afghan government and its international counterpart and the Taliban as an instrument both in politics and war. Therefore, women's participation in politics and their security in the country is still an issue that could be compromised when it comes to making a deal in the so-called 'peace process.' In addition, women who are involved in politics don't have enough clout and have not been given a proper environment in which to work efficiently. The representation of women has been largely symbolic and only on paper. Nonetheless, I have to admit that there are some women who, despite the lack of support, have been effective and have brought about social changes for which they should be commended.

Do you regard writing as literary work or a way of conveying messages?

Although I use the pen to convey my message, I enjoy reading non-political and social poetry. Whenever, I want to escape from the daily grind of the real world, I seek refuge in Persian romantic poetry.

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What style of writing do you enjoy most?

I prefer to write in a way that everyone can understand. I detest hypocritical writing.

What do you think is the role of the media in strengthening social relations and moving towards an open and civilized society?

The media is playing a crucial role in creating an actual democratic system in Afghanistan because it tries to create public awareness. Democracy can only be a success in our country if there is high social and political public awareness, if people have adequate knowledge about what's going on in the world and above all, if they feel a responsibility towards their own country.

You have travelled a lot. What have you learnt from your travels?

The most important lesson I learned is that in every corner of the world the potential for humans to co-exist outweighs their differences. Those who always differentiate human beings and categorize them as westerners and

easterners, Afghan and non-Afghan, Muslim and non-Muslim and so on, are either not aware of other human beings or are intentionally provoking divisions and hatred among peoples for their own political aims.

Something else I learned that has greatly influenced my thinking is that all hardliners in every part of the world have similar demands. For example, two months ago, a German priest said that decent Christian women should not go to work but instead increase the number of Christians by getting married and having children. You see the same kind of ideas in Taliban statements in Afghanistan and *fatwas* (religious decrees) by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. At the same time, narrow-minded mullahs hate the priests and vice versa. Both groups are wicked and both are involved in the sexual abuse of children. They all try to promote the same kind of thinking and use religion as a tool for political purposes to keep certain people in power. That's why anyone who believes in equality must take a stand against such groups.

Which is your favourite art form?

I love music. I studied music for a couple of years. Although I enjoy singing, in recent years I haven't been able to concentrate on music. However, I do try to listen to music.

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Should art only be for art's sake or should it be for society?

Both have their own value and importance but art cannot remain for art's sake only. Ultimately, society will observe it and evaluate it and that creates emotions.

What do you look for in your partner?

Firdaws is kind, he makes me laugh and most importantly he supports my work and thinking. Even before I met him, I hoped my future partner would have such traits - kindness and laughter are a necessary antidote to pain in life. His support and encouragement help me to work even more determinedly.

Is there any shared ideology between you, a sociologist and Firdaws, an engineer?

We have the same ideas about gender equality, economy and other major issues, although we sometimes disagree on smaller issues like a paint colour when we're decorating or what to eat.

What is the importance of poems and their messages about humanity to you?

I like poems on humanity by poets like Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Balkhi and Bedil Dehlavi, contemporary poets like Shamloo, Bertolt Brecht, Raziq Faani, Wasif Bakhtari, Fereydoon Moshiri, and feminist poetry by Forough Farrokhzad and Faraiba Sheshboluki. Poetry is one of my main inspirations in my struggle for equality.

How do you explain this poem from Omar Khayyam?

*I think the Vessel, that with fugitive
Articulation answered, once did live,
And drink; and Ah! The cold Lip I kissed
How many kisses might it take - and give!*

I think this poem is about existentialism, like many of Khayyam's poems. Reading Khayyam actually injects me with a feeling of happiness and I try not to worry about the future or to think of the past. It makes me enjoy being with people that I love, eating my favourite foods, going for walks, listening to music and above all living.

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Please tell us about the best moment in your life.

There's not one specific moment but among the best times in my life are when I was reading poems with my friend, Maryam Hotaki, in a bookshop in America, playing cops and robbers with my brothers and my sister, Fatima, the first time I flew a kite and when my father read Masnavi-I Ma'navi to me.

If someone harasses you on the street, how do you react?

Unfortunately women in Kabul face harassment on a daily basis every time they leave their homes. Every time I encounter it, I try to say something so that at least culprit and any witnesses are aware that not every woman will sit back and accept such abuse by remaining silent.

What is your final message?

I arrived in Faryab two days ago and will remain here for some time. From talking to women here, I realize that people haven't forgotten the suicide

attack that took place on Eid-ul-Adha. They are still in pain. Talking to these women has made me more angry than ever at the Taliban, Hezb-e Islami and other groups that practice violence. The fact that people remain silent and surrender to the situation is very concerning. I hope that one day our people will stand together against narrow-minded people and terrorists so that those mothers who have lost their beloved children in Faryab and across Afghanistan can find some relief.

Zahra Mousavi is a civil rights activist who has worked for the past ten years for various media in Afghanistan. She was a presenter on 'Morabi-e Morchi' ('Pepper Jam), a satirical programme broadcast by Azadi Radio. She was producer of political programmes on Tolo TV and has produced programmes like Kankash, Presidential Election 88 and Siyah Wa Safid, also aired by the same channel. Mousavi also writes film scripts and stories. She's a consistent and modern writer, whose focus is on realistic events. She is a speaker who is familiar with philosophical concepts. She believes in women's participation in society and says that self-awareness is key. Zahra is also PR manager at Kardan University.¹⁸



“My concerns are the concerns of a modern woman”

Ms. Mousavi, could you introduce yourself?

That's very difficult. I am not sure who I am but I am sure of who I want to be. People's view of me is far different that my own view of myself. I'm still learning about who I am. But yes, I know what I want to be. I aim to be a person who is not inhibited either by my own limitations or by geographical, tribal, religious, gender and hegemonic restrictions. I want to live a good life before I leave this great world. That's all I want.

In the current situation, isn't it hard to live a life without restrictions?

I agree with you to an extent. When someone's life and interests are connected to the interests of a particular ethnic group, tribe and gender,

it's not easy to ignore the collective interest and establish an individual existence. In a traditional and restricted society everything boils down to the interest of a tribe or group, and people are forced to consider themselves part of the collective interest. In the current situation aspiring to a life of individual freedom is a very difficult task. It's considered unorthodox and reprehensible.

Nevertheless our country will in future move towards inclusiveness in terms of social and intellectual structure. Then, the short-term memory of this society might remember that it moved in opposite direction at times when all others were on the other side.

You talk about a society where you are seen more as a woman than a person. To what extent does that view challenge the way you want to live?

I and many other women like me were born in the same kind of environment. If we were to categorize societies, ours would be traditional, backward and patriarchal. In such a society, being a woman brings different challenges than being a man. These challenges are long-standing and historical. They are closely linked to religious, traditional, social and gender values, as well as the interests of a particular group of people. If the majority accepts the situation of women, it becomes the norm. But if a woman tries to free herself of these limitations, she's criticized. Even just thinking about overcoming these limitations is met by challenge. Great effort is made to stamp out this kind of thinking, to stop it from growing and spreading. But individual thinking can lead to the gradual decline of prevailing norms and culture. But one or two women can't do it on their own. We need individual efforts to come together and form one strong collective group.

How do you think values create challenges?

I'm talking about structures and social psychology. Do and do not, may and may not, normality and abnormality and acceptance and rejection are all identifiable in a socio-cultural structure. Our society's structure requires a woman to assume a certain traditional role. That means she can only be somebody's daughter, sister, wife or mother, and is always defined through a man. In such a society there is no recognition of the individual unless she is attached to others. In other words, a female personality is not formally recognized but only given a label. This is done

so that women are not given the opportunity to grow and develop their abilities and become female rivals. In a society where superiority is not defined by physical strength, social status is instead determined by other qualities such as ability, creativity, thoughtfulness and other skills. But in the present situation it's still the case that individuals who think differently face limitations in life.

Bearing in mind the situation our society faces, how certain can women be that they are moving towards a desirable situation?

I look at what other societies have gone through. Other societies have experienced civil wars and territorial wars, political conflict, religious wars and revolutions. They have seen catastrophes, instability, conflict and violence. But eventually they reach a point where they say, "That's enough!" Women took their opportunity to institutionalize their roles at the point when violence-based structures were on the decline and new reform-based structures were developing fast. I'm talking about a far-reaching movement and awareness of women leading to women starting to take on modern social roles as previous traditional structures break down. This was impossible once upon a time. Today we have female pilots, university lecturers, civil rights activists, journalists, managers and politicians. This is the best-ever opportunity for active women to find empowerment in an organized movement.

You have spoken of women's roles that are regarded by some as purely symbolic. Couldn't women have achieved more over the past 12 years?

Yes, their presence in some areas has been purely symbolic. That's because we have what claims to be a democratic system, and one indices of this system are the levels of female representation in various social, cultural, economic and political spheres. This system, whether intentionally or unintentionally, is obliged to have symbolic appointments in order to maintain its honour and status.

But even a symbolic presence of women can be effective and become irreversible. In politics there are probably many women who know nothing about politics and the same goes for other areas. From a political point of view, some important decisions are being made in Afghanistan. The Taliban claim they are not as radical and strict as they used to be. Any political system that is installed in the country must be made to realize that it cannot trample over the rights of the people, especially women.

So I repeated the pressing need for a far-reaching movement that can convert the symbolic presence of women into an institutionalized one.

Let's change the topic. Please tell us about your working background.

I live in two worlds. The first is my day-to-day life, and the other is my intellectual one. I've worked in the media for ten years now, first for state television, then at Azadi Radio and finally at Tolo TV. At Azadi Radio, I was a producer, writer and director for the social-political satirical programme '*Morabi-e Morch.*' For two years, I was a newscaster with Tolo TV on the news at six. Then I moved behind the scenes and worked on some of the same broadcaster's political programmes. I was directing programmes about the election such as *Kankash*, *Election 88*, *Munazira-e Intikhabati* and *Siyah Wa Safid*. At the same time, I have always tried to fight for new social values as an independent human being. I know many men and women who got into this kind of work so they could leave the country at some point. But I opted to stay – you can escape anything but not how you feel inside.

What job are you doing at the moment?

I am public relation's manager at the Kardan Institute of Higher Education. Sometimes I write. I have also prepared a collection of short stories.

What made you change your area of work?

There are two reasons. Firstly, I realized that staying in media was a waste of my time, energy and motivation. That's because the top management doesn't appreciate the efforts of the individuals who work tirelessly for them. All the work is secondary when it comes to their interests and capital. In an environment like that you start losing touch with real life. Secondly, I ended up just covering mundane stories like who killed who, who met who and other things like that.

I had wanted to work as manager on these political programmes because of my political convictions. But when all your energy, skill and ability is wasted on mundane things, and the management is only interested in material values, then it's time to make a change.

How different is your current job to what you did before?

I currently work at a university with more than 9,000 students. Even my job benefits them. It's very satisfying to see seminars, ceremonies and

programmes being held for this most worthwhile part of society. It's no mean feat to introduce 9,000 men and women to a new world through programmes aimed at boosting creativity and skills.

The other thing in my life is writing. I have written a collection of short stories called 'Empty Cube'. It hasn't been published yet and I'm not sure whether I will send it for publication or not.

Why aren't you sure?

I think the literary market in Afghanistan is so full of books like mine that it would attract little or no attention. Sometimes I post excerpts from my stories on the internet and get very frustrating responses. That shows our society is not mature enough for work like that, especially by a woman. I also wrote a film script, which was filmed by some friends who are filmmakers. It's called '*Be Shabahati*.' It deals with the concerns of modern and middle class women, and not women living in poverty and suffering social hardship. It deals with the concerns of women like me.

So a lot of work must be done so that women like you find their audience.

I agree. But people like me need a modern-thinking audience, not an audience that responds violently to a collection of stories. But I'm not giving up that easily. We need to move slowly but steadily. Bringing about social change is a long process. People are shocked if you criticize the facts in a patriarchal society. So if a woman tries to show the true face of this male-dominated society, it won't be accepted at all. We have to be calculating and make tactical moves. A thousand mile journey can't be made overnight.

How important is it for people like you to make a safe environment for themselves?

People who don't find a safe environment in society have to make their own private ones. For artists, writers, intellectuals and activists who do not have emotional protection from others, a personal environment is the best place for them to think and work. If you face risks in a social environment, then you have to build a personal environment for your own protection and peace of mind.

What kind of personal environment you are talking about?

I am a mother of two and anywhere that a child lives, talks and exists is full

of emotion. So my home environment is my emotional one.

And finally, is there anything else you would like to share?

Until the women of Afghanistan join together to give voice to their concerns and problems, their situation will never change and they will continue to be treated as inferior and unimportant.

Freshta Hazrati is well-known through her writing and her political and cultural columns that have been published in various media. She is author of the book 'Bazkhani Yak Buhran' (Reviewing a Conflict) that is based on a collection of her essays. Freshta went to the Zarghona High School and studied medicine in Ukraine. She migrated to Europe and after living in Germany for a while, she sought asylum in Sweden. She has been significantly involved in cultural and social activities. She made a great contribution to setting up Afghan women's groups abroad and the establishment of the radio programme 'Payam-e Zan' (Woman's Message). She has organized and hosted a number of seminars on Afghan issues in Sweden. Currently, she is in Afghanistan working on social and cultural projects for the Afghan people.¹⁹



**“We need to fight
for equality and
respect for all”**

Please introduce yourself.

The best way to get to know a person is through their writing. My writing says a lot about my personality. It's difficult for anyone to talk about themselves. However I'm just an average Afghan woman. My work is mainly concerned with the identity of women in traditional Afghan society. I do not want women to be known only as wives or sisters or as a member of a tribe, but as a person in her own right, who can be herself and thrive according to her own abilities.

Bearing in mind the history of Afghanistan and its social situation, how much have women been allowed to act according to their individual capabilities?

As I mentioned in one of my essays, the history of Afghanistan must be reviewed and undergo serious analysis. Its history is full of fake personalities and heroes because its writers were under the direct influence of the rulers and kings of their time. The history was written according to the rulers and kings, not the facts. The women must enter the scene with bravery. The least I can do as a woman is to review and analyse the history of our country. If history is defined by someone who has no fear of a rival, and no one contradicts it, it is presumed to be true. Critical analysis is better than accepting something because it produces constructive discussion.

Please tell us about when you were young.

I was successful at school. I could speak three foreign languages. I took part in sports and completed school in nine years. Then I started studying medical sciences but after one semester, we had to migrate to Pakistan.

Who do you live with?

I live with my two children, Hamasa and Samim

Please tell us about your life as a refugee.

I was a refugee for almost 23 years. But everyone yearns for their own country. I was never truly happy while I was in other countries although they were comfortable, civilized and beautiful. Eventually I decided to return to my own country and serve my people.

What is it like bringing up children in a country that is so different from Afghanistan?

I have tried my best to give them a good education. Today society needs more educated and professional people. Fortunately, my children are hardworking, talented and most surprisingly they are great believers in Islamic teachings and principles. Although they've grown up in Sweden they have a positive view of Islam.

What is your definition of happiness?

People can be divided into two groups. The first group is made up of those who have a goal in their life and other one is made up of people who just wish for things. I am a person with a goal. The nearer I get to my goals, the

happier I feel.

In your view, how much importance should be placed on other people's rights?

Our society has had problems throughout its history, and working and fighting for equal rights are the responsibility of everyone. We must make history together by triumphing against inequality.

What is your goal in life?

Inner peace! And I find it in the happiness of others. I feel satisfaction when I help needy people. Although my writing and research keeps me very busy, I think we should give more practical help to society.

What is your view about the past, today and the future?

The past provides a background for future projects. To be successful in future, we need to closely scrutinize the past. Studying history helps us to find the roots of our troubles. This is one way of encouraging mutual tolerance and the respect of others' rights, and to building a better future.

You have spent much of your life abroad. What difference do you see between yourself and women in Afghanistan?

Women in Afghanistan are constantly struggling against obstacles and hardship. Often their work is dangerous but valuable compared to my work. I've found the environment for thinking and working is better and more peaceful when I'm abroad. If I can work well and accomplish more that will result in more awareness. Women living abroad can certainly do a lot for women in Afghanistan. By using the means available to them they can do great service.

How do you see the current process of Afghan women's participation in social and cultural activities?

Although women's rights have mainly been used as a political tool, there are grounds for optimism. There's a significant presence of women in parliament, civic meetings, in ministries and in the media. This relies on women recognizing and believing in their abilities and utilizing them to exercise their rights. The participation of women in society will be long-lasting, as long as it is in accordance with the beliefs of the people in our society. As we've seen in history, the abrupt implementation of freedoms to women has been shortlived and unsuccessful.

Do think Afghan women feel reassured?

Women have made many sacrifices throughout the history. As we move towards 2014, there is a fear that women might lose the gains they have won so far. But with self-awareness and a good education, women can work anywhere and can prove their abilities under any circumstances. That was proved even under the Taliban regime by women who worked tirelessly for education and other social projects.

And finally, do you have another message?

I like flowers for their fragrance and people for their thoughts. But unfortunately today the intellectuals of Afghanistan think too little about how they can really be productive.

Basigul Sharifi is best known for her poems. She has written both tragic and love poems. She has a delicate feeling. When talking to her, one will find her placid and lively. She experienced living a refugee life and seems to be quite confident. Sharifi talks of human and social pains.²⁰



“Peace is only a word but has a great meaning”

Please introduce yourself, Ms. Sharifi.

Being honest, I am a paradox. My life is full of paradoxes. I regard myself as a little selfish. I’m very analytical. I determine my own path. In our society, there are only a few people who can fully shape their lives the way they want to.

I am far from perfect but I want to develop according to my own beliefs, and with them being in harmony with social, cultural and religious thoughts.

So, that means your thoughts, poems and activities are all about your own aspirations?

Yes. Outwardly I am a typical woman, but I am quite temperamental. Sometimes, I have very dark moods and I can be very pessimistic. At other times, I’m happy looking after flowers, although I might scatter them when my mood changes. These are the kind of paradoxes that fill me.

What kind of work are you involved in?

don't have a permanent job. I have days when I'm extremely busy in my personal life. Sometimes I start working and when it peaks I just need to take a break. My work fluctuates. One of my projects was working for the Dur-e Dari House of Culture. My life is full of literature and poetry.

What is the relationship between poetry and politics?

They are nothing alike. A poet can only become a politician if they abandon writing altogether. However, I do think poetry and politics can be good together. You can use poetry to express your political views. At the same time, poetry reminds you of the world of human emotions and values and stops you from losing yourself in the dirty world of politics. Both, poets and politicians are sad people when they are alone. Poetry and politics are nothing alike. Nonetheless, it's still possible for a poet to write non-political work, romantic poetry about love for example, and still participate in politics.

Please tell us about what you are working on at the moment.

At the moment I'm participating in a lot of social events where I can network with people and find out what kinds of groups I want to work with. Kabul is like a TV to me. I observe people, offices, locations and the activities going on in this city.

You are best known for your poems. What inspired you to become a poet?

At school, I always got good marks in literature-related subjects. Then gradually I started studying collections of literary works, which naturally reinforced my connection with literature and poetry.

How did you feel when you wrote your first poem?

I was proud of me. I read it many times - it seemed so beautiful to me. I never felt the same about any of my later poems though.

Which one of your poems is your favorite?

It is hard to say. Among the poems I wrote in Iran, I like 'Pari'. Of the others, I like 'Quetta' and 'Baba'. They are poems from different times in my life.

What do you think are the major problems facing Afghan poets?

Making a living! On the other hand, the lack of proper income is good for

a poet since too much comfort makes them uncreative. Nevertheless the majority of Afghan poets don't have proper work and have a difficult time. It encourages them to take up jobs that don't allow them enough time for poetry.

What's a poet's most important quality?

It depends on what the poet wants to express and what maybe sensitive and important social issue he or she wants to address.

What makes a good poet?

Good poets are those whose poems you are reading with joy and that enable the sharing of emotions and ideas, and those who bring about a new spirit.

What is your main social concern?

My general concern is poverty. Seeing drug addicts under the Pol-e Sokhta bridge, and kids helping drivers to find passengers just to earn five Afghanis makes me really angry. Another issue I am very concerned about is the inequality the Hindu population of Afghanistan suffers from.

What is your opinion on peace?

Peace is only a word but one that has great meaning. I have not experienced peace in my life: neither as a refugee in Iran nor in Quetta, Pakistan. In Afghanistan peace is merely considered a word and its meaning is barely understood. I try to at least have peace in my own personal life, but that's difficult because that requires a peaceful society and that is dependent on others. I have been looking to find peace but without success.

What role can poets play in promoting peace?

If we take poetry merely as words, nothing can be done. But if it inspires social action and engagement it can trigger a progress towards peace. I spent quite a time with reading poetry written for peace and revolutions and my conclusion was that it is the poets who lead the revolutions. A politician may deliver a two-hour speech but a poet only writes a few stanzas that are capable of bringing about great change. The poets of today, however, can play an effective role in promoting peace by taking the first step and by organizing a movement.

How is feminist poetry related to peace?

While feminist poetry is always accompanied by a struggle, it has also a calm beauty. Women seldomly take up arms for their struggle. They do not talk of violence and death as their poems are all peaceful. They want peace and invite people to become part of humanity. Equality and justice mean peace. Women hardly ever make their demands by taking up arms. There might be exceptions but generally women stand for peace. Like beautiful doves, the beauty and calmness of women bring peace. Also feminist poetry brings peace.

Do you believe in feminism?

Yes, but not to an extreme extend. Many of its points are legitimate but even if you don't agree with it, you can't disregard it. Unfortunately our society has unrealistic feminist views: we mostly don't want equality but superiority. But true feminism demands equality and emphasizes the need of engagement of the people in a society.

What is the most favourable remark you ever heard about your work?

The following remarks stick in my mind: The first is, "Blood-stained words of Quetta have come out of Basigul's mouth." And the second was the term "Cherik" (irregular troops) used to refer to me by the poet Jibran Kawa at a gathering of the Qalam association.

What is a recurring phrase with you?

The phrase that forms the basis of my thinking: "Free, free, free me."

What are three important things for being happy?

Family, money and society.

Are you satisfied with your life?

That depends on whether I have achieved what I have wanted.

What is the best gift you can have from someone?

Respect, love and trust. Many spend a lot of money but never achieve these.

When you see look in the mirror, what do you feel?

I know the value of my beauty. There is beauty in the face, but it doesn't

tell you where you stand in the world you stand and where you want to go.

What would you like to see from your window?

I want to see a city where many people come and go and I can see the way each of these people walk.

What is your definition of youth?

Our society does not allow children and young people to live the way they want. We all have to get old too quickly. Even when we're young, we want to act like grown-ups. I love to live according to my age. Young people should not think like their elders... then they would enjoy life while they were young.

What do you do to remain young?

I keep the child inside me alive, and I try to keep my thoughts up-to-date.

Sahra Mausavi studied directing and documentary filmmaking at the University of Arts London where she graduated with top honours. Sahra is currently teaching at the Faculty of Arts at Kabul University. She has already made many of her own documentaries and is currently collaborating with a group of documentary filmmakers.²¹



“Let’s talk instead of fighting”

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Please tell us about your personality.

I am a hardworking, patient and sincere person with other good, bad and complex kinds of qualities. I have an unrelenting sense of attachment to Afghanistan, and its untold stories never leave me. They accompany all the time, everywhere.

At 29, where do you see yourself on the ladder of success?

Your age and where you are is not important if you’re serious about starting something. I don’t see any difference between 29 or 49. The important thing is what you want today and how serious you are about achieving it.

You were selected as one of the best students by the University of Arts London. How hard did you work to achieve that?

I loved the environment I was studying in. My teachers were very special. Their knowledge and understanding impressed me. I wished I could have stayed at that university forever, first studying and then teaching. But that was impossible. People don’t stay in the same place forever. Now I try to convey that feeling to my students at Kabul University. At the end of the

day, I want all my students leave here with satisfaction and happiness.

What made you study the field of cinema and documentary filmmaking?

I first did a Bachelor's degree in Marketing and Management. During my studies I also worked as journalist. Although I loved journalism, I didn't enjoy the field I was studying. I often thought about giving up and starting cinema studies. But I couldn't switch subject and ended up getting my first degree in business management and marketing. Partly that was because I didn't really want to give up halfway through, and partly because the degree meant I was expanding my knowledge and abilities. When I got to Europe, I decided to pursue my true interest and got my Bachelor's degree and then a Master's in the field of cinema.

What is the scope of documentary films in Afghanistan?

Where you have society, media and cinema, you have documentary films. Documentaries are like holding a mirror up to society so people can see their true image and status. Documentaries can help people wake up to their duties and responsibilities towards issues such as war, violence and children and women's rights.

How many documentaries have you made and on what subjects?

I am very sensitive about my work and view my films critically. However, all 11 films that I have made are good. I didn't make them for material gain or under pressure from a higher authority. Whenever I find something or someone who really interests me, I start working on it. Sometimes I can't stop thinking about it. Then I spend days or months thinking and doing research work until finally I pick up the camera and start shooting.

I love the documentary '*Madrassa-e Kalu*' ('The Madrasa of Kalu') because its main protagonists are children. I really enjoy working with children in documentaries. Kids are so innocent. Their world takes me away from the turmoil surrounding me. But it's upsetting when you realize that children don't have equal opportunities to grow. It's all about where they live and their ethnic background.

My documentaries have been shown at various festivals including the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, the Middle East Film Festival in Italy and the One World International Documentary Film Festival in Prague. '*Madarass-e Kalu*' was selected as one of the top documentary

films by Boston University, in the US. The documentary '*Pas-e Burqa*' ('Behind the Burqa') was selected for the American International Film Festival. My documentaries were also shown at other festivals held in other Asian and neighbouring countries like India and Kazakhstan.

How do you see our society's acceptance of cinema and documentary films?

Documentary filmmaking is still a relatively new art form here. Many societies including ours are unfamiliar with such filmmaking. Sometimes filmmakers have false expectations about documentary filmmaking. They expect that people who watch movies and TV for entertainment will pay attention to documentary films. This is completely mistaken since only people who are seeking answers to questions will be interested in documentaries. It seems to me that Afghanistan is a difficult place to find a niche for documentary films because our media is largely focused on entertainment. Unless we create questions in the minds of audience, they will not look for answers.

And how do you see the future for such films?

Documentary films have had a huge impact on our world. For example, films and photos of Hitler during the Second World War have been used to make anti-Hitler documentaries so that people know what he was really like. Another example is the current situation in Afghanistan. If the US either wants to legitimize the presence of NATO troops in Afghanistan or to pull them out, it will rely on help from documentary makers at CNN and the BBC and so on. With their films, we can either be portrayed as a civilized people who are victims of fundamentalism, or as an impoverished and uncivilized people. Films can work both ways. A one-hour documentary film has the potential of changing a nation's destiny.

How has your gender affected your work?

For an artist it's important not to consider gender as an obstacle or it will be difficult for him or her to think independently. Unless you are a woman in a country like Afghanistan you don't realize what it's like and how many restrictions there are on women. On the other hand, there are male filmmakers who have depicted the feelings of women very well (and better than women filmmakers). For example, in '*Rosemary's Baby*' Roman Polanski depicted the behaviour of women and the pain they

suffer during pregnancy in a very artistic way.

Who depicts the situation of women best in cinematic and documentary films, males or females?

Knowledge is the only limit to a person's freedom of expression - their gender is a meaningless. We must realize that being human and having freedoms goes beyond definitions of gender. With regards to your question, women feel more comfortable to say what's on their minds when they're in the company of female directors rather than male ones. The literacy rate is quite low among our women and therefore they have no meaningful definition of what being a woman means. The educated section of our society sees uneducated women as weak and troubled, but actually it is the educated women who have problems with defining themselves.

What is the most important principle to uphold when making documentaries?

The principle of ethics is important and discussions about ethics are often quite intense and complex. Sometimes someone might say something or do something in front of the camera that could cost them their honour or even their life. I would never jeopardize someone's reputation and their trust in me just to get a good shot or scene. Once I was shooting a documentary and the main protagonist was a woman. Suddenly she took out her breast and started feeding her baby. I turned off the camera immediately because I knew she was only doing it because she trusted me. Another issue is that I never cross personal lines no matter how close I get to the people I am filming. Personal issues are a matter of people's pride and no one has the right to ignore them.

What is the status of documentary films on Afghan TV channels?

By making better documentaries we can change society, energise our young people and provide politicians with food for thought. Unfortunately TV channels here make useless reports that they call documentaries just to fill air time. There are so many kinds of documentary films that cover so many different subjects. But Afghan TV channels are clueless about the world of documentary and so the power of documentaries remains unrecognized.

What should be the aim of a serious documentary film?

Traditions and human relationships are changing rapidly. I believe through documentary, experts, analysts and filmmakers can work together to inform society and keep social disadvantages to a minimum. A filmmaker aims to depict those ideas through social and emotional documentaries. Documentary films should highlight the harmful outcome of social disadvantages that are created by unethical traditional ideas.

How do you regard the role of films including documentaries in fighting issues like religious and ethnic discriminations?

Documentaries are important tools for creating awareness among people and increasing their information, knowledge and understanding. The best way to understand them is to watch them in groups as part of a programme at a film festival for example. This allows the audience to take part in a discussion with the filmmaker after they watch it. The audience has the chance to ask the maker to shed light on any questions that arise on the subject of the documentary. This gives the audience the chance to give a critique of the documentary.

In my view, a knowledgeable but biased filmmaker is more dangerous than a warlord. A filmmaker is someone who endeavours to depict society's ills, but can choose to show them or hide them as they wish. A biased filmmaker sells their art in order to gain the support of a particular group of people and to further their own personal interests. That kind of filmmaking only adds to inequality and discrimination in society.

Our history is full of stories about inequality but promoting more disunity isn't the solution. Why should we pass our negative qualities down to the coming generations? Wouldn't it be better to allow them to grow up without any hatred in their hearts? Is it not cruel to ask future generations to take revenge for deeds committed by past generations?

Why should our children not focus on developing their abilities to make a better future for themselves, rather than becoming victims of our personal conflicts? The past cannot be changed. Today is the future we have been waiting for and there is no longer any need to take revenge. Let's find a rational way to meet the challenges that our society faces. Sometimes filmmakers are criticized unfairly and they are labelled as biased. This kind of thinking won't help us to change our situation. It just creates more obstacles to our development and keeps us going round in

circles. We should be competing with other filmmakers in the region and our neighbouring countries, rather than remaining confined by our ill-founded ethnic and tribal beliefs.

Some people appreciate filmmaking that thrives on religious, ethnic and tribal discrimination, but in reality that work is futile. We need to utilize cinema and other media for general social development, not for our own personal development or that of a particular group. Politicians might appreciate and accept such a trend but for artists to exploit biased views is shameful.

What's the response to filmmakers in Europe who make such films?

If there's evidence that a filmmaker is working deliberately to incite ethnic hatred, they will find their work banned. If a filmmaker is judged to be biased, they will lose their audience and won't get any funding for future projects.

How can artists you like contribute to peace in a country?

Our films show that there are many ways to live a more stable and peaceful life. In the world's industrialized nations, documentary films on various issues are shown to school students and they are encouraged and helped to make their own documentaries. In this way, they can present their own perspective of their world and the world outside. This kind of activity promotes intellectual development. Complex philosophical discussions aren't what's required for greater progress – in the long term, small-scale and simple projects such as these can also have a significant impact on society.

Are you married?

No.

If you marry, will it be your decision, or will you leave it to the family?

The decision will be mine but I will seek advice from my family too.

What qualities would you like your future husband to have?

He must be hardworking, sincere and respect my family.

What's your interest in writing?

I write a blog about my research projects, with articles about my

documentary films. I hope one day to publish them in the form of a book. I hope my experience can help others who are pursuing careers in the same field.

Whom do you tell your secrets to?

There are some people who are very close to me and have been with me all the time. I'm very close to my family. I always talk to them whenever I need to talk. My mother always encourages me and she has been my guide.

What role does nature play in your life?

Nature and its beauty is an essential part of my life. Unfortunately, our people have had their right to enjoy nature snatched away from them. I can't forgive the people who cut us off from the beautiful mountains, fields and forests.

Do you relax when you're out in the green countryside beside a river?

When I'm there I can forget all the wickedness and lies that exist in the world. I feel life is worthwhile it despite all the pain and suffering.

What does the rain make you feel?

In Europe, it was mostly cloudy and rainy. We always wished for a sunny day because we were fed up with it raining all the time. After I returned to Kabul, when it rained I took photographs. The whole city smelt awful smell and it looked disgusting. People found it difficult to get home and I hated it. Artistic question, dry answer!

And finally, is there any other message you would like to share with us?

The best way to reach mutual understanding is through negotiation and mutual respect and tolerance. We have many religious differences and it won't be easy to settle them. That's why we should talk instead of fighting.

Husn Banu Ghazanfar takes her surname name 'Ghazanfar' from her ancestors who were emirs in northern parts of Afghanistan. She is a descendent of Shah Rukh Mirza and Queen Goharshad. She was born in Jawzjan and attended the Sultan Razia Lycée in Mazar-e Sharif. She started studying at languages and literature at Kabul University and after a year, she went to Russia where she completed her Bachelor's and Master's degree. After returning to Afghanistan, she worked for two years at the Faculty of Languages and Literature at Kabul University before leaving for Russia again. In Russia she completed a PhD in linguistics at St. Petersburg State University. As Afghanistan entered a new political era, she took up a position heading the Faculty of Languages and Literature at Kabul University. In 2006 she was appointed Minister of Women's Affairs, a post she still holds today.²²



“I am committed to meeting my responsibilities”

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You were a professor of the arts. In which field do you find yourself most competent and creative?

It's difficult to say in which field I am most competent. My field was linguistics and the subject of my thesis was the lexicology of colours. I studied 76 colours in literature from a linguistic, psychological, etymological and physiological point

of view. During my studies, I determined that there are five million colours in the world. What is amazing is that we can only see 500 of them. There are 250 names for colours in European languages. But when I studied words for colours in our own language, I could not find more than 24 colours. Other languages have more than 100 words for different colours. With great difficulty, I managed to find 100 words for colours in the Persian language by translating them from European languages. It saddened me

to know that in other languages there were more than 100 named colours while in our rich literature very few colours were named. Nevertheless I was satisfied with my research. I had been interested in literature and languages ever since I was a child. I was always better at literature than other academic subjects.

What is your favourite color?

My favourite is light blue.

Why did you choose light blue as your favourite colour?

A preference for a colour is in one's nature. I have learned a little about astrology and parapsychology. Aquarians have a natural tendency towards blue. I feel relaxed and calm when I wear blue. Some people have the view that humans are not merely a physical body. Some believe humans are 98 percent soul and two percent body. In his book Yousuf Qarzavi says people are souls not bodies. According to him, the soul surrounds a person like a bright aura or flame that relates to one's spiritual and mental state. This state relates to one's experience, self-discipline and virtues. Depending on this state, the aura adopts various colours. If the aura turns blue, then a person will be attracted more towards that colour.

What led you to get involved in politics?

During school, I was interested in literature and also in politics. I used to read addresses during ceremonies at our school in which high-ranking government officials were present. When I was in grade one, I became the first student to deliver a speech in front of the Minister of Education. I also gave a speech in front of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. Eventually I became spokesperson for school programmes and gradually started managing them myself. When I was in sixth grade I started writing poems and essays. In my first essay I wrote about how to be a successful student and gain support from one's family, teachers and the school authorities, and how to be of benefit to his or her family and society. Issues like this were what influenced my involvement in politics.

In addition one of my ancestors, Mir Ghazanfar, was an emir in northern parts of the country. His wife's name was Padshah Khan Shah Rukhi. They are buried in Baba Wali Andkhoy. My parents were also born in Andkhoy. Padshah Khan Shah Rukhi was from the family of Shah Rukh Mirza. In other words, Shah Rukh Mirza and Queen Goharshad are my ancestors.

Mir Ghazanfar ruled the northern provinces 150 years ago. Before him, his father and forefathers were the emirs of the northern provinces (ancient Turkistan). They ruled for five generations. So I think my family background and ancestral relationship to Padshah Khan Shah Rukhi and Queen Goharshad probably also played a great role in my decision to become a politician.

How do literature, a woman's nature and fundamental politics all correlate with one another?

I believe that a good knowledge of literature and culture of a society can help a woman strengthen her political voice and actions. Women are more sincere in their work compared to men, and that's a helpful quality to have in politics. Having said that, with such morale a human becomes a true politician and a true politician acts based on her/his conscience. Therefore, they are undoubtedly compatible with one another.

When you're with relatives and family members, are you more political or more of a literary person?

Neither. It depends on the situation. I prefer the company of litterateurs because I've had such a long involvement in that field. But generally my family likes to discuss all kinds of issues. My family members are involved in various circles encompassing business, politics, culture and literature. I find these discussions quite interesting.

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How much do you believe in feminism?

I have never been a feminist. I am not in favour of radical feminism. I believe in mutual understanding between men and women. Men and women must recognize their responsibilities and obligations as human beings.

Were you more popular as a university lecturer or now as minister?

I don't remember getting any awful remarks while I was a lecturer but as a minister I have heard the most outrageous comments. Although a politician expects to be confronted by criticism, I have often experienced the difference between being a lecturer and a minister

What is better: fame or popularity?

Popularity of course! Becoming famous is easy but becoming a person who is admired and loved by the people is very difficult.

Are you more famous or popular?

I don't think I've done enough work yet to have a place in people's heart. But at the same time, I'm not interested in being famous. I am committed to meeting my responsibilities properly.

Have you accomplished anything that history will remember you for?

I can't comment on that. I have to leave that up to the people. Society still has many problems and we still have a great deal to do. Allow me to quote Hafiz:

*O Holy Bird! (the perfect Murshid) please bless this path I am on
For I'm new to this travelling and it is a long way I have to go*

What is your message to the women of Afghanistan?

They have to work with sincerity, consistency, modesty and patience to prove their ability. Ability will bring self-confidence. Self-confidence will develop positive thinking and positive thinking is the key to success.

And finally, would you please read us one of your favourite poems?

*O brother, you are what you think
The rest is just your flesh and bones
If you think you're a fresh flower, you'll be placed in a flower
garden.
But if you think you're a dry thorn, you'll end up inside a wood-
fired oven.*

This poem by Rumi suggests that attitude is what counts most. If we have positive thoughts about ourselves and others, our deeds will be positive and good as well.

Rababa Darvesh is an MP in the Afghan parliament. She grew up in a culture-loving family and had a basic Islamic education from her father. She also taught Islamic studies for about 18 years to thousands of students. She is more commonly known by the name Ustad Rababa. One of the reasons she decided to stand for election was the encouragement from her family and students. Unlike with other candidates not a single picture of Ustad Rababa appeared during the election campaign. Instead Rababa relied on the reputation she had built up through years of voluntary work. She also served as head of religious affairs at the Guidance for Women Society, and even during the Taliban regime, held special gatherings promoting the awareness of women, work that still continues today.²³



“Woman is the continuation of human creation and life”

What made you switch from the respected field of teaching to politics?

In the name of the One who created the Heavens. In response to your question, allow me to quote from the Holy Quran: “Are those who know equal to those who do not know?” In this sense, those who do not work to eliminate ignorance are not equal

to those who work to eliminate ignorance and convey knowledge. In other words, those who work for education are dignified members of society. As you said, teaching is the most respected field but education requires a specific kind of environment. A teacher needs security, peace and support to carry out his or her duties successfully. And that was my motivation to get involved in politics.

What does it mean to be a woman, more specifically a woman in Afghanistan?

I see women as the complement of men. A woman is a human being that

in God's view should be treated as an equal. In my view women are the continuation of human creation and life. Women are the first teachers of humankind. But I have to say as far as women's rights go there are many kinds of restrictions on women in Afghan society. But although Afghan women have suffered much hardship, there are women in Afghanistan's history who have been models for others.

Is there any place for the school of feminism in Islam?

This question requires consideration. In societies that follow this school this thought, the position of women sometimes crosses the boundaries of moderation, which is not in accordance with the nature of women. What was the reason behind the creation of women? God created both the sexes, each with their own responsibilities. Radical treatment of any sex will result in their deprivation.

To realize women's rights fully, many activists rely on changing the view and nature of women. Is that right?

A woman will only be able to exercise her rights when she has self-respect and others respect her. There have to be opportunities to achieve that. But I want to emphasize that women should seek to exercise their rights at the same time as respecting what the Creator intends for her. That is because the rights granted by God are more sublime than the rights granted by humans. How can a human define the rights of another human when both are the same? Rights are granted by a superior being who knows one's inner being. With this in mind, a woman's own nature is what defines her rights.

What should be done to reach a situation where a man looks up to a woman?

That is my goal, in a society that has been dominated by men for centuries. I hope they will recognize the presence of women one day.

Do you mean that there are still problems with the social acceptance of women?

Although much work has been done, I think there is still a need for more public awareness of the situation of women. After all women are people too and must have equal rights. We can achieve equal rights if people weren't prejudiced.

You are on a parliamentary commission for women’s affairs. How do you see the activities of this commission improving the situation for women?

The parliament is a legislative body and isn’t responsible for executing laws. But the parliament, especially the women in this commission, have always supported the implementation of laws on issues pertaining to women. I hope this process continues and more attention is given to women’s affairs.

And finally, could you please read us one of your favourite poems?

This is a poem by Maulan Jalaluddin Rumi Balkhi

*Show your face, for the orchard and rose garden are my desire,
Open your lips, for abundant sugar is my desire.
I am weary of these tearful people so full of complaining;
that ranting and roaring of the drunkards is my desire.
Last night the sheikh went all about the city, lamp in hand,
crying, “I am weary of beast and devil, a man is my desire.”
They said, “He is not to be found, we too have searched.” He
answered, “He who is not to be found is my desire.”*

Fauzia Habibi was born in Kabul. She attended the Aysha Durrani High School and graduated in 1988 from Kabul University. From 1989 to 1991 she served as vice principal at the Tahya Maskan High School. She later served as head of education and then as deputy of the Afghanistan Women Council whilst living in exile. Fauzia has been a regular participant at many international conferences on women and the elimination of violence against women. In 2007 she became head of international relations at the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) before later taking up the post of Deputy Minister for Women's Affairs.²⁴

“Demanding rights doesn't mean promoting irregularities”



What did you feel when you were appointed deputy minister?

In the name of God who has set virtue as the highest standard for prominence and peace be upon His Prophet who has considered an honorable status for women... It's natural to feel glad when you triumph and be upset if you fail to achieve something so of course I was delighted. The appointment increased my self-confidence and made me realize that you can reach your goal if you really try. My experience and my knowledge also played a great role in my appointment as deputy minister.

Given the current situation, what's your most important responsibility?

We must work to move towards a situation where programmes are Afghan-led, where responsibilities are completely transferred and Afghan women can assume leadership roles. Most importantly we have to think how women can be empowered so they can realize their full potential in administrative roles. There is a pressing need for the coordination of

international aid, a combined effort and the proper execution of plans if these goals are to be achieved.

What qualities does a female manager need to be successful?

She must be aware of her abilities. She must be self-confident and have a good knowledge of the various aspects of her work.

Is your focus more on monitoring and controlling, or on evaluating and supporting?

Monitoring and controlling are the traditional methods of management. In the modern world the latter approach is more common. Without evaluation it's impossible to recognize someone's strengths and weaknesses. By supporting your employees you can motivate them and develop a feeling of mutual responsibility. There's no doubt that encouraging qualified and hardworking employees can improve their confidence.

Are you a successful woman?

That's a difficult question. I think it's up to others to judge the positive and negative aspects of my personality and behaviour. I am as successful as I can be. I believe that God gives you tasks according to your capabilities. I accept failure, but then strive to make calculated steps in order to move forward.

You have done a lot of work on gender-related issues. Can you summarize them in one sentence?

Participation, balance and equality with a focus on legal capacities.

What has been the impact of your work?

It is not just my work but the work of a group. Before I took up my position, my duties were carried out by a foreigner. Now Afghans are in charge. And I think people give us recognition based on the positive impact of our work.

What is your opinion on gender equality?

I am against gender differences in society and patriarchy urgently needs to be dealt with. Our religion opposes all injustices and puts an emphasis on human equality and dignity. At the same time demanding rights doesn't mean promoting irregularities but it is the only way to achieve a developed society where standards are based on human values.

Some critics say the MoWA is merely a policy-making body. What is your view?

Policy-making is more important than implementation. Without proper planning and policy, implementation will not lead to the desired outcome. For the first time the MoWA has presented a two-year working programme to the government aimed at furthering women's rights. The government has largely begun to implement this programme. Today women are better represented in various sectors especially in government than at any time in the history of Afghanistan. Undoubtedly the MoWA leadership has played a key role in this regard along with parliament, media and civil society organizations.

What kind of situation do you foresee women facing after the end of 2013?

Opinions are divided but I believe the situation will improve if our leaders act in accordance with the constitutional law of the country.

Have you ever wished to be like someone else or in other words, do you have an ideal?

I can confidently say that my ideals have been women who played great roles in the history of Islam such as Fatima, our Prophet's daughter, and his wife, Khadija. A woman has every right according to Islamic principles. It is important that she has awareness of Islamic values.

In your opinion, who should manage expenses at home: the man or the woman?

Men are clever because they have given this responsibility to women. They know that women spend wisely and are thrifty. Although it should be a shared responsibility, women are better at it.

What have you done for your financial growth?

I have not made any investments. My focus was on the growth of Afghan children and women when we were living as refugees. When I returned to Afghanistan I formally established the first private school. It was called 'Aryan Kabul'. Teachers at the school were all recruited according to merit and their qualifications.

Are you interested in leisure and arts?

Yes, very much. But I don't have much time for recreational activities.

What is your favourite recreational pastime?

Spending time with my children and family. I also like to read.

How much do you spend on recreational activities?

You can't put a price on reading because what you learn from books far outweighs the money you pay for them. Sometimes when I buy books my family says I've spent too much money. But in my view the value of a book should not be judged by its monetary cost.

And finally, would you please read us one of your favourite poems?

*[Refrain from all greed Bedil, if it is dignity you seek
These two images no mirror together reflects]*

(Bedil)

Fatana Gilani is the head of the Afghanistan Women Council (AWC). She has worked unremittingly for women and children's rights for the past three decades. She is currently overseeing some major projects.²⁵



“Symbolic efforts for peace are meaningless”

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Please describe yourself.

Humanity and courtesy are integral parts of my life and I try to live my life based on these principles.

What does the name ‘Fatana’ mean?

When parents choose their child's name, they give it their full consideration. My late father gave it a lot of thought before choosing it for me. *Fatana* means ‘attractive’ and ‘sensational’ and I love it.

Why is your surname ‘Gilani’?

My maiden name was Saeedi. When I got married, ‘Gilani’ was added to my name. My spouse Sayed Ishaq Gilani is one of the sons of Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani who was a respected *sufi* of his time. My married name therefore is Fatana Saeedi Gilani.

You said your surname was Saeedi before marriage. Did your family have any relationship to your husband's family?

No, there was no relationship. My maternal grandfather Mir Waeez Kabuli was a religious leader in Kabul, while my paternal grandfather Mir Ghulam

Saeed Saeedi was an army general under King Amanullah Khan.

Please tell us more about your grandfathers.

Mir Waez Kabuli was a religious leader. Students of Afghan history will be familiar with him and his personality. He believed in his own way of thinking. Mir Waez was not selfish or greedy for power, but he loved freedom. And Mir Ghalum Saeed Saeedi rose to the rank of general during the reign of King Amanullah Khan. At that time military generals were trained in Turkey, which means that they were professional and well qualified. Both of my grandfathers were advocates of freedom and honour for our country.

How did you come to marry Mr. Gilani?

Love is a heavenly gift. We both loved each other. We got married seven months after our engagement. We have a happy life because we didn't make a mistake by choosing each other – childhood friendship turned into a lifetime friendship.

Can you describe your husband in one sentence?

He is someone on whom you can count.

How much do you consult your husband on civil and political matters?

When we started getting involved in civil affairs, there was a lot of discrimination against women. People were highly sensitive about European culture and modern attitudes. Earlier the Europeans and the Communists had implemented many measures in the name of democracy and women's rights, many of which weren't accepted. Many schools of thought stood in conflict with each other. At that time discussing women's rights and other related issues wasn't very easy. But with my husband's consent, I established a school for Afghan refugee children. Throughout my life I had always been involved in legal affairs, rights advocacy and humanitarian work. Initially I needed a lot of advice, but later on, my husband's support encouraged me to be more confident with my decisions. Even today Ishaq is my partner but not my boss. I didn't want him to have to take on more work since he was already busy with other social and political activities. I didn't want him to be exhausted at home so we could focus on family issues together. But in general, we do consult each other on major national issues.

Can you tell us about your school and education?

I attended the Malalai Lycée. After I got married, I was supposed to travel to Iran to continue studying but the Saur Revolution started and it was impossible. That is when Afghanistan's tragedies began. We had to emigrate to Pakistan where I studied a lot. I studied the history of Afghanistan and its social condition. I read about different political theories including Communism. I also completed short courses in management, language and some other subjects. But the situation was not ideal because I couldn't study properly.

How many children do you have?

I have two daughters. One of them is married and lives in the US. The other is studying at Kabul University. She also writes about various issues. And I have two grandchildren.

During your time as a women's rights activist, what have you done for women?

I have devoted 30 years of my life to serving Afghan women. During Soviet occupation, we had three million refugees in other countries of the world. The Jihadi organization that had established their offices in Pakistan had no programmes for Afghan women and children. That's why I decided to work for them. Our programmes were quite simple. The first area we focused on was education. Our projects incorporated economic programmes, women and children's rights and civil rights in general. During those 30 years, I've gained a lot of important experience. Currently, I'm overseeing education and awareness programmes for nearly 4,000 women including the poorest and the most deprived women. Our support programme also helps women who used to be beggars. I also have plans for the next five years.

You mentioned the name King Amanullah Khan. If his reform efforts had continued, where would Afghanistan be today, do you think?

We held meetings with a number of historians for a period of nine months to review the history of Afghanistan from the rule of Ahmad Shah Abdali up to the time of the Taliban regime. In short, there has been a lot of conflict throughout the history of Afghanistan. At these meetings the general consensus found that Amanullah Khan was the greatest champion of Afghanistan's development. Unfortunately, the enemies of Afghanistan

who harboured deepseated resentment because of past wars did not allow the late king to implement his programs. If the enemies of Afghanistan had allowed it, Afghanistan would be the strongest country in the region today.

How do you view the current situation for women?

There has been little significant achievement over the past few years. 65 years ago my mother was able to go to school. Having a school education is not an achievement in itself. Ever since the coup that overthrew Sardar Daoud Khan, civil war and political manoeuvring in Afghanistan left Afghan women with nothing. A generation grew up in the shadow of war. And even today, deprivation and discrimination are significant and exist in various forms. The women's situation has not been changed simply by the implementation of a few projects. One of my colleagues who recently visited Bamiyan province said that in some remote districts there, many women do not even know what an election is and have not registered themselves as voters. I hope the government will think about how it can save this country. Conditions will only be feasible for development, especially that of women's rights, when the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan is ended. We have to have promote education and awareness for women and violence must be eradicated.

How do you view the next election and women's role in it?

It will be just like the last one: rife with fraud, corruption and limited to just a few provinces. What is democracy? It means a government of the people for the people and of the people. The conditions ahead of the next election seem no different to me than the last one. People are prepared to sell their voting cards for \$20, so what kind of election result do you expect? We don't have any well-known leaders who are sincere about working for the people. Do you know any leader in Afghanistan whose shoes do not cost thousands of dollars? I cannot think of any one who could lead our country out of the challenges it is facing.

Peace and stability are basic necessities of life. How can they be brought about in Afghanistan?

This depends on the politicians governing Afghanistan. To achieve peace and stability we need authorities that are sincere and committed to the people. This is an issue in the upcoming election. We must vote for

candidates who can bring peace and stability in real terms. We must not repeat past mistakes. Our politicians must cease engaging in cynical politics and must follow political ethics. At a meeting with one of the candidates, we asked him, "What's your plan? When you talk of consensus, what do you mean by it? Can national consensus be reached by a PhD graduate from abroad, or by ministers and other high government officials and individuals involved with *jihad* and who trample all over people's rights? Why do people like you, who claim to be experts, only start taking action when an election approaches? If you don't have any common ideology, how can you offer anything to the people? What have you done to boost political awareness and what did you do to change the situation of women over the past four to five years?"

We need authorities and leaders who can bring peace and stability to Afghanistan and can put an end to the violence that's being blamed on the Taliban and terrorists and so on. I am against politics that allow instability to last from one generation to the next. Symbolic efforts for peace are meaningless. If a politician's wife and children and home are all in foreign countries then their slogans for bringing peace to Afghanistan are meaningless. With politics like that, how can women in provinces like Daykundi, Uruzgan, Paktia, Kapisa and Helmand be living in peace and stability? How many ministers have we seen with different plans and thoughts over the past 12 years? Under this system dismissals and appointments are routine. Our politicians do nothing to help women at a practical level. Have you seen our president's wife doing any social work? There are many individuals who claim to be working to modernize Afghanistan but their wives and children all live in abroad. Can women attain their rights while such politicians are in power? This itself makes things very clear.

What would you choose to be if you had the choice: a minister, a judge, a teacher or a housewife?

I choose teaching. Teaching has been my job for almost thirty years. Based on my experience, I would say it's an invaluable profession. If a teacher performs his duties well he contributes to the education of a nation.

How do you interpret the following poem?

*Last night, my clever fellow – went on to let me know:
Hafez! I shall confide in you – the wise ways of my sage – and
then turn the page:
Take life easy, let go!
Or the whole wide world– responding in kind, evens the score!*

It has been taken note, in all the records!

One should submit to the consent of God. Although this is a mystical poem, submission to the consent of God does not mean people should be passive.

Starting in this edition, Rah-e Madanyat is publishing interviews with women working with the Afghan National Security Forces. The interviews will feature in our ‘Successful Women’ section, given that the presence of women in the security sector is crucial to the country’s current situation. The presence of more women in the military and in areas of security is a sign of the move towards equality in our country. Their presence is also a sign that women are beginning to confront the traditional norms in our society.²⁶

“We need the active presence of policewomen”

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Ms. Wazira, can you please introduce yourself?

I am Wazira Hassanzada, officer at the Ministry of Interior Affairs.

Why were you called Wazira?

My parents chose the name. Perhaps they hoped that one day their daughter would serve our country as a *wazir* (minister). I like my name and am proud of it. I hope one day that I will serve this country as a minister and make my parent’s dream come true.

What qualifications do you have and what did you study?

I went to school in Daykundi province and graduated with good grades from the Ghaaf High School there. Then I studied at the Institute of

Journalism but later graduated as an officer from the Police Academy.

What made you join the police force?

Fortunately the situation for girls and women has improved over the past few years, and they can choose to study in any field and enter any kind of profession. Based on the opportunities available, I decided to become a police officer and serve my people. Although the situation is sometimes difficult for women, I love my work.

Did your family agree with your decision?

Of course, they agreed and encouraged me. Their encouragement helped me move towards my goal with more confidence. Motivated by my family, especially my elder sister, I completed my military studies successfully and became a competent and committed member of the police force. I am grateful to my whole family for their invaluable support. I hope I can pay them back by serving society.

How does the pay you receive contribute to the financial wellbeing of your family?

When I initially chose this job, I wasn't thinking of the pay and the allowances. I was attracted first and foremost because of my passion for the job. Everyone has to work to earn money. Whatever you choose to do, find a job or study, it should be your own decision. No one else should decide for you. I chose this field because I thought I could work more efficiently as a police officer and the pay is enough to cover my personal expenses. At least I'm not reliant on others to cover my personal expenses, I'm glad about that.

What do you feel when you put on your police uniform?

I feel a great responsibility and I feel honoured and proud. I feel honoured because in our traditional society it's difficult for girls to get even civilian jobs. We live in a society where honour killings, incidents of violence and thousands of other issues relating to women make the headlines on a daily basis. It takes courage for a woman to go into a profession like the police. That's why I feel pride in what I am doing.

What is your military rank?

I am a second lieutenant. The other thing I'm proud of is being able to serve people from all sections of society. You don't need to be attached to

a specific group. You can serve the people anytime, anywhere. That's very important to me.

How long will you continue this profession?

Until I reach to the highest rank.

How do people look at you when you're out and about?

In our society the presence of policewomen is still new. Pioneers will always face difficulties and have to expect all kinds of incidents, if they want to open up the way for others. Nevertheless I feel people have a positive attitude.

Would you be prepared to go and work in provinces other than Kabul?

Yes, I would try to ignore the obstacles. I'm committed to performing my duty the best I can. I aim to serve my country wherever I am required and under any circumstances.

How do you evaluate the attitude of people at your office towards policewomen?

As I said already, people like me have to face many challenges until a status quo is established. Pioneers will always face difficulties if they try to open up the way for others. But the planning has been good and the administrators have tried to make conditions feasible for women.

How much do we need the presence of policewomen in our society?

There's no society without women. In other words, the presence of women in any society is necessary and something natural. Therefore, the representation of women in various fields will lead to the better growth of the nation. That applies to the military too. The participation of women is undeniably and undoubtedly an important way to improve military programmes and form a relationship with society.

And finally, are women's rights respected in military organizations?

Fortunately, the Ministry of Interior Affairs acts without any discrimination in this matter. Girls and women get the same salaries and allowances as their male counterparts. Both male and female officers cooperate fully to fulfil their tasks.

Habiba Sarabi was selected as Minister of Women's Affairs at the emergency loya jirga held in 2001. She was the first woman to become governor of an Afghan province. She is also running to become Afghanistan's first vice-president in the 2014 presidential elections. As governor of Bamiyan province, Habiba Sarabi has put great emphasis on educational development there.²⁷



“I have faith in the young generation of my country”

Please tell us something about yourself.

I am a normal Afghan woman and was born into a middle-class family. As you know, the birth of a girl is not welcomed in Afghan families. Nevertheless, I started primary education in Baghlan province. I continued my education in Kapisa province and attended the Aysha Durrani Lycée. In 1976, I started studying pharmacy at Kabul University. After graduation, I started working at the central laboratory of the Institute of Medical Laboratories. I was employed there until the Taliban took over the country. The Taliban regime made life difficult for the majority of people and I was no exception. I had to migrate to Pakistan. At that time, I had three children. I was very worried about my children's future and where life had taken us. I thought most about my daughter. I wanted my children to get an education and have a better future. Around that time, I got involved in teaching children and providing support to women. I wanted to draw international attention to the plight of the Afghan people especially to the women who had suffered most because of the war and under the Taliban. I wanted to be a voice for the Afghan women and promote their legal and civil rights. In 2000 I returned to Afghanistan and began to establish educational programmes in Samangan province. At the emergency *loya*

jirga, I was chosen as the Minister of Women's Affairs. I remained in that post until 2005 and in 2006 I was appointed governor of Bamiyan province. I served in that post until October 5th 2013.

What was your experience like as a refugee?

We were the third generation of refugees. The first generation of refugees was made up of people who had left the country under Soviet Union occupation. The second generation was the people who had fled during the *mujahideen*. What made the third generation different from the previous ones was that these people were more educated and open-minded. They went into exile because there was no longer a viable environment for intellectual and social development. They gained respect for leaving as a protest to a dark era in which social and human rights were neglected, but not because they were simply seeking a comfortable, modern life. We saw what we had to do and started getting involved in various activities to show we were fed up with sitting inside homes. It was actually a kind of protest against the environment that was prevailing in our country at that time. Exile changes one's thinking and actions. It awakens new ideas, new initiatives and the exchange of ideas. It makes people want to try and learn more. That's what we felt, and because we were busy with educational and cultural activities, my children too were able to grasp this opportunity to work hard and get an education.

When you were appointed Minister of Women's Affairs, what did you feel?

To begin with, it wasn't great. I felt as though my freedom had been snatched from me and I was imprisoned inside my office walls. But later with the encouragement and support of my husband and friends, I calmed down and started to fulfil my responsibilities in a better and more efficient way.

What were the first steps you took as minister?

First I looked at everything that had already been done, although it was a relatively young ministry and Dr. Sima Samar had only served for six months before me. But I had to find out where to begin. After that we started planning. We had to start a lot of things from scratch. Work on issues like gender equality had only started recently. With the support of foreign experts we started to try and convey the importance of these

issues to the people.

After 12 years how do you see the situation of women?

As a refugee, I saw girls and women going to school and going to work. I returned at a time when educational and employment opportunities for females were negligible. There's no doubt that things have changed greatly since 12 years ago. If we had laws to support women's rights, their situation would undoubtedly improve. Our constitutional law is the best law, although its implementation is more important. The Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law that was discussed in the parliament a few months ago would benefit women and society if it were implemented properly. We need to continue raising public awareness about the importance of laws. In many remote parts of the country people know nothing about these laws. And the judicial system has to be modernized and brought in line with international standards. The judicial authorities have to be independent, and we need security so that laws can be implemented in their true sense.

You were the first female governor in Afghanistan. Please tell us about your experience as governor of Bamiyan.

I have more sweet memories than bitter ones. Since people in Bamiyan are forward thinking, they mostly cooperated with me, despite this, there were some undesirable incidents of rights violations. I was pleased that girls were so eager to go to school and that women could come to my office to freely defend their rights.

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How much have your efforts helped to raise literacy rates among women in Bamiyan?

Of an overall 135,000 students, 46 percent are girls. That's the highest rate of education in the country. Even in remote districts such as Waras, girls are hugely keen to get an education. It's the same in official matters. At most official meetings, our women were able to speak out confidently. In many Afghan provinces, you find only the director of women's affairs is allowed to discuss legislative issues.

In your view what is the most important requirement of the people of Bamiyan?

The province is in urgent need of roads. Although there has been some

road construction, much more is needed. The people of Bamiyan face great difficulties due to the lack of roads especially during winter. There's still no connection between certain districts, such as Punjab and Waras. People in Bamiyan face a lot of hardships and always have done. The completion of Bamiyan's road infrastructure is essential if poverty and the province's other problems are ever to be eradicated.

How many kilometres of road were constructed in Bamiyan during your time as governor?

We paid a lot of attention to road construction because of their importance. When I was appointed governor, the province didn't have a single kilometre of asphalted road. So far a large number of the roads in the city have been completed.

The Yakawlang-Shibar road has been built and now the province has about 200 kilometres of paved and asphalted roads. And there are many roads that are ready to be asphalted.

Poverty remains a nationwide problem, not only in Bamiyan. There is a need for peace and stability if it is to be eradicated. How much peace and stability has been achieved so far?

Unfortunately, the situation is unsatisfactory. The problem is largely due to the lack of good governance. The security situation could be improve if we had good governance, if local authorities acted wholeheartedly, if people's interests were not compromised for political gains, if serious efforts were made to counter corruption, and if force was not used to impose ideologies that further fuelled people's frustrations. Until this has been resolved, there can be no justice and governance will continue to be negatively impacted.

What is your definition of good governance?

The definition of good governance is when the people regard themselves as having a role in government. In Bamiyan, we acted on that principle and made efforts to respond to the wants of the people and society. Our focus was always on the rule of law, justice and human rights.

Ms. Sarabi, you're part of the team with a presidential candidate running in the April election. What exact plans do you have for Afghan women?

My focus is on the economic empowerment of women. A woman who is

economically independent can be an effective participant in many areas. And that's how we can promote equality and the development of civil society.

What's your view on individual freedom?

I want to emphasize the point that we shouldn't be striving to change things overnight. We need to make steady progress, always bearing in mind both the negative and positive aspects of our society. Cultural issues should be evaluated professionally. Public awareness must be raised. It's important to take sound measures to bring about positive change. Men and women must respect each other as people. A general framework must be defined. Looking at positive models, defining individual and social responsibilities as well as taking steps to respect human rights and increase social awareness would all help to promote respect for the thoughts, human rights and needs of every individual.

What's the difference between the young people of your generation and the young people of today?

The young people of my time weren't equipped with the technologies of today. We were only connected to the world through books. Today it's no big deal getting connected to the world and keeping up to date.

And back then we didn't have the right to speak even within the family. Today's young people have much more awareness because they experience the world as a family, and the value of human relationships is much more important to them. I hope that this environment will help our younger generation save the country from extremism and move towards a better future, free of ethnic and religious prejudice.

Your office seems to be different from the offices of other political groups. Your employees are young, educated, bright and well dressed. Why is it so different here?

Not only here but also in Bamiyan, 85 percent of my office employees are young people. The young people work here because they are committed. I believe in the young generation of my country and I value their ideas. They are the ones who can bring political, social and economic change to Afghanistan.

Please tell us something about Sarab and its people.

Sarab is located in Jaghatu district of Ghazni province. ‘Sarab’ means ‘spring.’ The area has three big rivers, which flow into many other areas. My uncle was also a politician and took ‘Sarabi’ as his last name. He served in various positions ranging from chancellor of Kabul University to jobs at the ministry of planning, higher education and commerce, and the office of vice president of Afghanistan.

How do you spend your spare time?

Mostly I spend it with my family. Although my husband does more with the family, I try to take part in household activities. I’m a keen gardener. I love plants and flowers and love to have a green and clean environment for living.

What is the significance of a red flower to you? Is it the colour, or the flower?

Both! A lot has been written in literature about the meaning of red flowers, and so I like its meaning more than the colour itself. In other words, I love living and working with my family and country. Life is symbolized by a beautiful red flower.

How do you balance your professional and social work together with your family life?

It’s not that easy. Given the situation in our society, this is an important matter. I never accepted baseless pride neither from myself nor from others. Family life has its own way and manner which starts with mutual respect. As a mother I give a lot of time to my children. I never want my children to think their mother is politically active and does not care about them. I treat my husband the same way. Fortunately, I haven’t had problems balancing my personal and professional lives.

What are the names of your children and what do they do?

Naheed is my eldest daughter. She’s doing her PhD at the University of Michigan in the US. My son Ali Arsalan is studying medicine at university in Ankara and my second daughter Ateela is studying engineering at another Turkish university.

Can you sum up your husband in one sentence?

He is my greatest supporter.

Who do you love more: Naheed, Arsalan or Ateela?

I love them all. It's difficult to say which one I love the most. However, Ateela is my youngest daughter and during her childhood I had to travel a lot, which often kept us apart and so she is nearest to my heart. I have to mention that in our family we pay a lot of attention to the girls to make sure their rights are not violated.

Who is your eldest child?

My daughter Naheed.

When Naheed was born, how did your family treat her?

She was treated with much love and sympathy.

Does your job ever stress you out?

Yes! I get stressed most of the time. At home my husband notices it and always tried to calm me down.

You said Ateela is nearer to your heart. Can you describe her smile?

It's like the smile of all the children and young people of Afghanistan.

And finally, are there any other thoughts you'd like to pass on?

We women do not want sympathy but opportunities to prove our abilities.

Suraya is in her final year studying film directing at Kabul University. Her mother's name is Fatima and her father's name is Mohammad Hussain. She went to school in Bamiyan province and loves making and directing films. She's also an active sportswoman and has boxed for the past six years. She's a courageous and capable young woman, with a great determination to reach her goals.²⁸



“Art is closely related to peace”

What does Suraya mean?

‘Suraya’ means height and sky. One who is as beautiful as the sky is high.

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Have you reached such a height?

I still have a long way to go. I want to be really good at volleyball, boxing and the art of filmmaking. There are many levels in arts and sports and getting there is not easy.

Filmmaking is such a vast field. How do you aim to reach all of your goals?

There say there are no rules in the arts. You will never reach your end. There is a lot of work to do where the arts are concerned in Afghanistan, especially for women. The same applies to the field of sports. I want to be a film director and actor, and I also want to be a professional athlete.

How do you manage to balance your studies and sports?

That's a hard question. I have to do sport in order to be a successful artist. It takes a lot of careful planning.

What is your definition of art?

Many people define art in their own ways. Art means having an effect or

leaving an impact. There are various definitions of cinematic art and the film industry, although both require innovative work.

Have you made any films?

Yes, I made a film called '*Fatima Gul*.' It's about a policewoman. I also made a fiction film and I have directed several other films.

What's the impact of cinema and theatre in Afghanistan?

Afghanistan needs cinema and theatre. But they have been neglected. People make films on very low budgets. If Afghanistan had good cinema, its film industry would thrive and would get more attention.

What do you mean by good cinema? Isn't that changing?

It's all symbolic. One or two buildings do not make cinema. The long running conflict not only destroyed our buildings but also our ideas. We still have a long way to go. For example, I know a lot about the people of India, their culture, tradition and lives but they know nothing about things in Afghanistan. The only things people associate with Afghanistan are terrorism and war. They know nothing of our culture, tradition or other positive things. That's because we have no real cinema. Short films made here are project-based and rely on organizations to fund them. This is where the quality is compromised and no value is given to the ideas and wishes of the film director. Films like that can't do anything to present our country and its people to the world.

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How can the situation of cinema and theatre change for the better in Afghanistan?

It largely depends on economic issues. In other words, we need to invest in this area. The relevant authorities must invest in cinema and the film industry.

Well, let's return to our previous discussion. What was the connection between filmmaking and sports that made you continue both?

I'm a girl who wants to be a storyteller, film director and actor, and sports give me self-confidence. The healthier you are, the better you think. I think that's very important. If you want to work in this country as a director, you must be active in sports too. Another reason I take part in sports is that I want to be able to defend myself. Self-defence is important for women and girls living in Afghanistan.

How long have you practised boxing?

For about six years. I've even won some medals. I also play volleyball.

How do you react to sexual harassment?

You get it in every society. If I encounter such a situation I would definitely defend myself. However, I mostly try to avoid such people.

How has taking part in sports changed your life?

As I mentioned earlier, sports increase self-confidence. In Afghanistan, girls have always been repressed. It's most acute in Kabul because there has been such an influx of people from other provinces. Rural attitudes are dominating urban life here but the government is paying no attention to it. Women and girls have a lot of trouble when they go out in the streets. But I'm not afraid to go out alone. Although I couldn't fight off everyone, I'm confident that I could defend myself if necessary.

What benefits do you see in sport?

Sport is a means to reaching my goals. Sport gives you a different life. It gives you a feeling of satisfaction. It's a different world.

Have you only worked in Kabul as a filmmaker?

I've also worked in other places like Jalalabad, Parwan, Bamiyan and Balkh.

In view of your profession, what was the social situation and people's mindset like in other provinces?

In many provinces of Afghanistan it is difficult for a girl to walk around with a camera. But I'm not like most who start crying when they face difficulty. You have to have tenacity and have hope. I travelled with another girl to places where the people had no idea about the filming equipment we were carrying. We were asked some unusual questions. In some of those provinces, it feels like there government or the international community aren't present at all, and that women's rights are only words. There's been no social work in those areas.

You said you don't cry like other girls but didn't mention boys who cry. Is there any difference between girls and boys crying?

Our society considers tears to be a girls' weak point but it overlooks their emotional condition. That's what I was talking about. Although I have no objection to such a way of thinking, I wanted to say that even

if we consider crying to be a girl's weak point I am not the kind of girl who cries. It is ingrained in men's minds that crying is a female weakness but this is not so. What I mean is that if girls face a difficult situation it cannot be resolved by weeping. But being emotional is another thing altogether. In working relationships there's no place for emotions. In our society, emotions can create a lot of difficulty for girls. One cannot help being emotional, but in a working environment the standards are merit, ability and proper planning. We must work to eliminate undesirable ways of thinking and beliefs in society. I have seen families who don't allow girls to go out shopping in their neighbourhood. This is very dangerous for our society. Cinema and the film industry can help. Films can be used as instruments for offering solutions to the challenges in society. We can't do that by showing dramas from other countries that depict cultures that don't relate to our own.

How can the arts help in bringing about peace?

Art is closely related to peace. But this close relationship can only be used if we value artistic works and have an independent film industry.

Where did you study?

I went to school in Bamiyan. Currently I am in my final year of film directing at Kabul University.

And finally, is there anything else you would like to pass on?

Life is an art. In every second of our lives we are playing a role without realizing that in fact we are the best artists.

Sonia Iqbal Zeerak is the head of the civil and political movement 'Afghanistan 1400.' Her father is Dr. Ghulam Ahmad and her mother is Sakina. Sonia was born in Kabul and currently lives in the Karteh Parwan district. She has a Bachelor's degree in International Politics and Security, and a Master's degree in Post-war Recovery and Development. Sonia says that taking risk is an essential part of achieving success. She views the country's future with optimism and says there are many women who have faith in her.²⁹



“Instability will not return”

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How do you describe your personality?

I am hardworking. I'm the only girl in my family and also its youngest member. I try to find my own way in life and take every opportunity I get. I always have a goal and I never give up in my pursuit of it. If I feel a goal is beyond my reach I'll set a different one.

My friends might say that I'm very sociable but don't think I am. You're interviewing me as a successful women but I still have a long way to go to achieve the kind of success I expect. I still face many challenges and have much to accomplish, but I'm happy with what I have achieved so far. I hope by overcoming all my challenges I can become a model for other women.

You said if you felt you could not achieve a goal you would set a different one. Is that not a risk?

You're right! Success can't be achieved without taking risks. The world is huge and there is so much work to be done. Sometimes I wish I had more than 24 hours in the day so that I could work more. But you have to take

risks if you want success.

To what extent can women in our society take risks?

There are many limitations. From very early on, girls are taught that they have to take a path already chosen for them. There's no opportunity for experiencing new things. Fortunately I was born in a family that is different than others. Even as a child I was allowed to make decisions. My parents taught me that I have the same capacity for thought as any other human being. Sometimes they even made me make decisions on my own. They said they wouldn't be with me my whole life to help me. It seemed strange at the time. But now I know that self-reliance is the best lesson my parents taught me.

You said you are not very sociable. In your view, how much important is it to be sociable?

I really try to be sociable, but I'm not very talkative. I don't speak unless it's to say something really important. I have small number of friends but they are very sincere. People change with the age but when I look back I don't think I have changed much. Maybe this is because of my life. In my work with people I have always tried to create a friendly working environment and keep everyone satisfied. I think if are simply yourself and don't have problems with others, that's one way to becoming sociable.

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You said you still have a long way to go to be counted as a successful woman because you face many challenges. What challenges are there?

Experience is important for maturity and knowledge. I think I need more experience to be successful. I've only just started working and I have to work harder. In our society women usually face two kinds of challenges: personal challenges at family level and social challenges. In a country like Afghanistan, one does not expect a feasible working environment for women to happen overnight but there are so many challenges to be tackled. Such challenges cannot be allowed to hinder the process of development.

How well do you know yourself?

That's a very difficult question. Getting to know oneself is a lifetime process. So it's hard to say how well I know myself. Topics like 'knowing thyself is key to knowing God' and 'a human is an unknown being' are

major philosophical discussions. What I do know is that I am a member of humankind and am not bound by a specific geography. Therefore I intend to work for welfare for all people.

Did you grow up in Kabul?

Yes. I went to school up until the 9th grade in Kabul. Then we migrated to Pakistan where we lived for about eight years. We returned to Kabul when the Taliban rulers were toppled. Then I completed higher education.

Who governed Afghanistan when you were in the 9th grade?

First the government of Mohammad Najibullah and then the *mujahadeen*.

Where do you live in Kabul?

Karteh Parwan.

Are you actually from Kabul?

I was born in Kabul but my mother is from Parwan province and my father is from Qara Bagh district.

What do you think of when you hear the word ‘Parwan?’

I think of its gleaming lakes, beautiful mountains and pure morning air. My mother is also a symbol of its beauties.

Please tell us about your studies.

I went to America on a women’s scholarship and graduated in international politics and security studies at the Juniata College, Pennsylvania. Then I completed my Master’s degree in Post-war Reconstruction and Development at York University in England.

What is your most important work at present?

My work for ‘Afghanistan 1400.’

Why?

At ‘Afghanistan 1400’ our objective is to make a brighter future for Afghanistan and to build the Afghanistan we want, an Afghanistan that requires effort and demands that we assume more responsibilities. If we achieve a prosperous and developed Afghanistan we have met all our goals. I took over as head of the movement after Ms. Shahrzad Akbar and since then I have given it my undivided attention. It’s more important than

my other work. It's quite clear to me that all the members of 'Afghanistan 1400' are keen to reach its goals. The group is made up of young people with good positions in society, politics and the media, and they have notable leadership qualities. So my work with them is quite important for me.

We are just a few months away from presidential elections. What does 'Afghanistan 1400' hope it will achieve?

In 'Afghanistan 1400's view, the next president election is an important political process for the future of Afghanistan amid baseless fuss that is made about the year 2014. If political transition takes place in a peaceful and proper way it will be counted as the greatest achievement of the people of Afghanistan. This is not only a test for the members of 'Afghanistan 1400' but also for the people of Afghanistan. If we pass this test we can easily address other challenges. The election is the most important part of democracy and 'Afghanistan 1400' intends to announce its position in this regard soon.

How do you see the current situation?

Despite our efforts we are not yet at the stage we should be. With regards to the security of women, you know that active women have been targeted in the provinces and threats still persist. We have to admit there are still groups that oppose peace and security in the country. Their aim is to create obstacles to peace and development. A lot of work needs to be done to create opportunities for women. Women are not an obstacle to their own development. Afghanistan's gains over the past 12 years must not only be preserved but also be further developed. Currently we have the highest number of educated girls and women in the history of Afghanistan. There's no doubt that most opportunities have been created in cities but even people in rural areas have seen benefits over the past 12 years. Afghan handicraft is now a growing industry and it is women who have made this possible. Facts like this suggest that instability will not return. With the sustained efforts of the government and the support of the people and international peace keeping forces, we can be optimistic about a peaceful future.

How do you spend your leisure time?

I enjoy reading books. Although I don't have enough time I do read. I like

to be with my family. I cook. I love to make breakfast for my family. I enjoy trying out new dishes. But I have very little time.

Are you still the most loved one in the family?

I am the youngest member of my family. Therefore I am still the most loved one in the family.

And finally, is there anything else you'd like to add?

The most important achievement in my life is the confidence to make my own decisions. You must have self-confidence. No one knows you better than yourself. Only you can make the best decision.

Khatira Ishaqzada was born in Kandahar but has lived most of her life in Kabul. She speaks eloquently and clearly and emanates a sense of serenity. Khatira is active in many fields, and is dedicated to pursuing the goals she sets herself.³⁰



“I want to be the voice of the young generation”

Please introduce yourself.

Before anything else, let me thank *Rah-e Madanyat* for this interview because it is a widely-read magazine and I also read it quite often. I went to school and then to university in Afghanistan. After graduation I went to India where I completed my Masters’ degree in Political Science. For the past seven years, I have been working with various media in Afghanistan. I’m committed to my projects and together with my colleagues and other young people I’m striving to build a peaceful and developed society.

Can you tell us about your current projects?

I run a social organization that is mainly focused on capacity building activities in the remote provinces of Afghanistan. In Kabul, there are already enough social organizations for women.

What is the name of your organization?

It’s the Educational, Medical and Professional Institute for Afghanistan

When was it established?

It was founded about 14 years ago when the Taliban ruled. It is still running

today and has some notable achievements.

Who founded the organization?

I co-founded it together with some other women.

What kind of areas has it focused on over the past 14 years?

It has been focused on capacity building, educating women and increasing their awareness about family relationships, relationships between parents and their children, family growth, the roles of family members especially that of women in society, the importance of an educated woman in family and society, etc. It also works towards improving relations between the public and the government. In other words it creates awareness of what makes an ideal government in order to build people's trust. In the previous election, we implemented an awareness programme across 22 provinces and it was quite successful. We even travelled to districts where government workers could not go and were commended by the Independent Election Commission for our active role.

What did you do before getting involved in this organization?

I was a student.

You established this organization during the Taliban rule. Didn't you face any difficulties?

Yes, there were certain problems. But even today we face various kinds of problems.

What kinds of restrictions were imposed on you during the Taliban regime?

There were many restrictions. But our activities were confined to local level and fortunately we were able to cooperate with the tribal elders and mullahs and didn't face serious problems. But that's not to say our activities have been without any troubles.

Were you able to dress the same way during the Taliban regime as you do today?

Unfortunately, no. I didn't wear a *burqa* because I was too young but I had to wear *hijab* to cover everything except my eyes. But women still feared the Taliban even wearing the *hijab*. Now the situation has improved and women can work more comfortably.

You said you were very young. How did you perform work-related activities?

Motivation isn't age related. It all depends on how determined you are. Fortunately I was determined and could make decisions. That's why I succeeded.

What has been the most significant achievement of your organization?

Its most significant achievement is that it is respected by the majority of girls and women who think like me.

What difference do you see between now and the Taliban era?

There is a great difference! Most of the people who worked with us during the Taliban rule were illiterate. But now our employees are all educated. Back then our programmes were modest but now we have programmes for managing society. Back then people were not aware of the programmes we are implementing today.

In light of the present situation, how do you regard the prospects for Afghanistan?

There is no problem-free society in the world. If we give our wholehearted support to the current process, work to strengthen it and give importance to the role of the young generation, there is no doubt that we will have a better future. Our country's stability depends on us. We must be determined to move our society towards peace and stability.

Do you think such a determination has existed over the past 12 years and adequate work has been done?

Work has been done but it misses some fundamental points. For instance TV shows people how much water they waste if their taps are leaking but no attention is being paid to our rivers flowing into Iran and Pakistan. We import electricity from Tajikistan but don't construct our own dams that might be more effective in fulfilling our energy needs and reducing our reliability on other countries.

Do you mean there haven't been wholehearted efforts over the past 12 years?

There might be people working wholeheartedly at lower levels but people at higher levels haven't worked as wholeheartedly. If they had worked with true determination, things wouldn't be as fragile as they are today. People

are facing problems due to soaring prices. We rely on other countries for fulfilling our electricity needs. And the security situation is deteriorating.

Have there been adequate opportunities to improve the security situation?

Yes, but we haven't used them properly. Troops from around 48 countries were deployed in Afghanistan and much financial aid poured in here. But it wasn't effectively utilized. We haven't even been able to secure our borders with Pakistan. Today not a single Afghan can travel to Pakistan without a passport and proper documents, but hundreds of Pakistanis, Arabs and other nationalities enter Afghanistan without any passport. You know why they come here? Iranians come to our country to do business. Meanwhile Afghans face great difficulty travelling to Iran. Afghans get arrested and are shot at by security forces on the borders to our neighbouring countries. Iranian and Pakistani police treat Afghans inhumanely. But no measures have been taken to change that.

How do you evaluate the security situation specifically for women?

Security is better in Kabul compared to other provinces of the country. In remote provinces and frontier regions the security situation is not satisfactory for women or for anyone in fact. But compared to the past the situation has improved. I hope it develops further. We must work more for the security and prosperity of our country.

Please tell us about your other activities.

For the past seven years I've worked with various media as a newscaster, anchor etc. My degree was in the field of journalism and it's my profession.

At the same time I've also been involved in other projects. I was director of international relations at the Afghan Red Crescent for two years. I'm PR manager of a civil society organization and I'm also standing in the provincial council elections.

So how do you find time for everything?

Fortunately I have been able to continue all of them but at the same time I think I should work harder. I go to work at dawn and get home when it's dark. I want to use my energy and the current situation to work for the benefit of myself and others. I think motivation is the key to managing everything I do.

What do you like to do in your spare time?

I enjoy cooking. I myself organise and clean my room. I enjoy gardening and like to grow flowers. I have a garden full of flowers from Afghanistan and ones I've brought from abroad. If you had come to my home I could have shown you my flowers and how I look after them!

Apart from cooking and growing flowers, what other activities are you interested in?

I can sew and am particularly interested and skilled in embroidery and handicraft.

To what extent have you achieved your goals?

I think I have achieved 40 percent of them.

Will you achieve the remaining ones?

I live in hope and believe that I will achieve the remaining ones too.

Please tell us about your interest in arts and literature.

I have participated in a number of arts and literature programmes. Although I do not claim to be a poet, I have three collections of poetry and short stories that are ready to be published.

In which language did you write your poems?

I write *ghazals* in the Pashto language.

How do you find time for writing poetry and stories with such a busy work life?

If you want to do something you find time for it. Writing poetry and stories is not easy because you need the right kind of environment. I found myself inspired to write poetry in 2006 after looking at the stars at night. My first poem was about a girl and the moon. For a while I just wrote poems and then short stories. One of my poems was aired on Azadi Radio and it won first prize. And the famous Pashto poet Ustad Abulbari Jahani also read one of my poems and praised it in one of his interviews.

You seem so relaxed while talking. Why is that?

People should be calm and relaxed when they talk and spend time with others. I believe that having positive views can make us relaxed.

You speak Dari so fluently. How did you learn it?

I spoke Dari when I was a child. At home I spoke Dari with my brothers and sisters but Pashto with my parents. I love the Dari language. Just like Pashto, Dari is also our language.

Have you ever lived abroad?

Yes, I lived in America for eight years.

Are you married?

No.

If you were to marry what kind of person would you choose?

I would like a person who thinks the same way as I do. I have had some admirers but so far I have not found my match.

Are you interested in politics?

Yes, very much! It wouldn't be wrong to say I want to dedicate my whole life to politics.

How do you see yourself participating in politics?

I am already working with the media and I also am running as a candidate in the Kabul provincial council elections. That would be my formal start in politics.

What made you decide to run in the provincial council elections?

I was inspired by the support of my family and friends and because I'm enthusiastic about getting involved politics. I want to be the voice of the young generation.

Masuma Mohammadi is an active and dedicated woman who works tirelessly against discrimination. She heads the Equality Social and Cultural Organization (ESCO).³¹



“Equality is a need and a goal”

Ms. Masuma, can you please introduce yourself to our readers?

I am 35 years old. My mother’s name is Razia. She is very kind and supportive of her children. Although my father Mohammad Ishaq Mohammadi is part of a generation that largely considers women inferior, he has always encouraged his daughters to participate in society. Despite the challenges he never stopped his daughters from getting an education and going to work. I grew up in a culture-loving family. I am proud of every member of my family. I am grateful for what I have and thankfully I have suffered no tragedy in my life. I feel fortunate to have achieved all of my goals so far, but I believe there is always room for improvement. I believe that everyone, including Afghan women, has the right to live a decent life and I strive to achieve that goal. I have two children. My daughter Sara is 11. She’s in the 5th grade and always top of her class. My son Amir Hussain is one year old. He is mischievous with a smile that gives me great hope. My husband Abbas Arman is an opened-minded and sensible person. Ever since I can remember I have always aspired to be the best I can. I love women who are strong, capable and influential.

Where did you start your career?

I was born a refugee. Throughout school I always got top grades. I also took part in many cultural and social programmes at that time. Gradually I

started reading and writing articles and essays. After I finished school I took my university entrance exam, which I unexpectedly failed. I was hugely disappointed because it was very difficult to get admitted to university as an Afghan student at that time.

Then with encouragement from my parents I started pursuing cultural and social work. I established the Sayed Jamaluddin Private School for Afghan children. Then with the support of other young Afghans, I set up the Sayed Jamaluddin Cultural and Social Organization aimed at helping other Afghan refugees. We started putting out one of the very few publications by Afghan refugees, the 'Voice of Women.' Even at that time my work focused largely on issues faced by women. I finally came to Afghanistan in 2003 after 24 years as a refugee.

What did you do when you came to Afghanistan?

For a while I was involved in children's rights working with the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission in Bamiyan. I was looking for another job when I heard that Inter News was recruiting and training reporters. I was selected and after completing the training I started working as a news reporter inside Afghanistan. I worked with several organizations including Radio Salam Watandar, the UN, Azadi Radio, Nai and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance. I also stood in the second parliamentary election but a lack of transparency and funding problems meant I was not successful. I wasn't disappointed though because I learned so much and gained a lot of experience.

I remember your election buzzword was 'equality.' Since then, how much have you worked for developing equality in Afghanistan?

Yes, that was my election buzzword! Some of my friends and relatives even used to jokingly call me 'Ms. Equality.' My campaign for equality caused a lot of waves. Some people said sexual equality was possible while others said they did not want women in their families to be equal to men. In their view men are men and women and women, and that's the end of it. People came to my office to ask me about it... I explained that gender wasn't grounds for discrimination and inequality and that men and women are all humans with equal rights. But some people just could not accept that. While my rivals tried to use the issue to put off my supporters, I always felt that promoting equality was the crucial requirement of our society.

So what programmes have you headed for the promotion of equality?

I set up the Equality Social and Cultural Organization three years ago with the support of people I worked with during the election. My background in journalism had made me aware of the influence of media, so that's the focus of the organization. The organization focuses most of its activities on media training. In the first round of training in 2011 it trained ten young women in news reporting. In 2012, 25 women were trained with support from the National Endowment for Democracy fund. The training programmes were both theory and practice-based. A third round of training is now underway. At the behest of some young people, we also established short-term management and leadership courses. Some women were able to complete these courses for free. Our goal is to help Afghans realize their full potential, especially women in management and leadership roles.

What have you done most recently?

This year we established an association of women journalists. Our latest project is focused on advocacy, networking and supporting women journalists and increasing their number. For example, we help to promote female reporters through our contacts with various media and civil society organizations. Our women's support group is tasked with researching and evaluating the challenges women face in the working environment. Soon ESCO will institutionalize its media resource centre to provide technical assistance and facilities to students and trainees pursuing a career in journalism. This is our way of achieving one of our objectives – promoting the freedom of information.

What is your definition of equality?

Equality means all humans should be seen as equal regardless of gender, ethnic, linguistic and religious differences.

To what extent is that possible in Afghanistan?

It's possible but it's not easy, especially in a country like Afghanistan. We still have a long way to go. 'Equality' is not only my buzzword – it's an essential requirement and a goal too. In my view, equality is not only limited to the relationship between men and women, but to all human beings and their rights – and that is something that has not been institutionalized in Afghanistan. Every Afghan deserves to live without discrimination

and exercise his or her rights as a human being. Since women face more difficulties because of their gender my emphasis is more on sexual equality. The gender gap can be filled if men and women who believe in equality and human rights fight for them with determination and are prepared to make compromises. We need open-minded men and women who work wholeheartedly to promote equality, rather than people who want freedom for others but at the same put restrictions on their own family members.

In your view, how does equality relate to peace?

It is directly related to peace. If there was no discrimination, inequality and cruelty, there would be no reason for war. And if we had equality, our country would develop at a faster pace in all social, political and economic spheres and so get nearer to being a peaceful Afghanistan.

What was the main purpose of establishing the Equality Social and Cultural Organization?

It wasn't founded because of personal interests. As I said I wanted to play a role in bringing about positive change and so I decided to establish this organization with cooperation from some like-minded people. It was possible because my family supported me working and exercising my civil rights. To be honest I wasn't interested in any financial benefit when I set up the organization. The costs of setting it up came out of my own pocket.

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Do you earn an adequate income? Is your salary important?

I have no opinion on increasing of my income but yes! The level of income cannot be neglected. In my view, it's not a problem as long as you're earning money by doing something useful. I could work in any other organization and earn more but I prefer to do this. I feel satisfied when I see women learning skills and then find them employment. This work is far more satisfying than just working in an organization in order to get a higher salary.

What is your opinion on the word 'expectation?'

I have high expectations of life. That's why I strive for a better life. I also have respect for the legitimate expectations that my family and friends have of me.

Have you ever faced any serious obstacle?

Yes. Achieving something you want is not without challenges and obstacles. For me, obstacles are not the end of something and failure is the first step of success. Gandhi said, "Our greatest glory is not in never failing, but in rising up every time we fail."

How much has your work helped you become more professional and skilled?

I have always tried to learn from my work activities. Using one's skill at work and being active professionally are one way to empowerment.

What is the secret of your success?

When I intend to do something, I do it as best I can and have confidence in myself.

In your view, what would be an ideal life?

My ideal life would be seeing my children growing up in a peaceful environment, getting an education, having a good social status and never having to face discrimination and injustice.

What is the best thing that ever happened to you?

Becoming a mother.

How much do you value yourself?

I value myself, my life, my abilities and every breath I take.

How much do you favour individual freedom?

I like individual freedom. It is the right of every person to be free and have the individual freedom to be able to exercise his or her rights as a human being.

What things do you enjoy the most?

I enjoy being with my children, my husband, parents, sisters and brothers. I love shopping, taking walks, being in a green environment, listening to soft music and travelling. Unfortunately I am not very good at cooking and other household activities.

How did you and Arman meet?

I had read some of Arman's short stories written for a publication and I

liked his writing. We met at a literary gathering. We worked together to publish 'Voice of Woman' and now we've known each other for 15 years.

Which of Arman's works do you like the most?

All of his stories are interesting. My favourite is one of his earliest stories called 'Slippers of My Mother.' He wrote another story called 'The Best Girl on Earth,' which he dedicated to me.

Does Arman ever get angry?

Yes but very rarely. It's natural to get angry and upset, especially in a country like Afghanistan where there are many reasons for it. However Arman has always supported me. He is a good husband and a kind father. He has never prevented me from participating in social activities although women going to work isn't common in our society.

What do you do when he gets upset?

I listen to what he wants to say. If he wants to be alone, I will let him be. He is a writer and writers are different. His anger does not last long. I understand him well. However a shared life is not without difficulties. What is important is not to allow these difficulties to disturb the peace and happiness of our family.

What is the best thing you have been called by someone else?

'Mother' is my favourite word. It gives me a good feeling. When I hear it I feel great responsibility. Bringing up children and fulfilling their needs are the main responsibilities of their father and me.

Do you like joking around?

No. I don't like jokes a lot. I spend my time among pragmatic people. I do not speak much. I am very sensitive to what people say when they are around me.

Have you ever experienced love at first sight?

No. I have not fallen in love at first sight. I think real love begins when you get to know someone well. Emotional love is not love.

Which qualities do your friends appreciate in you?

They say I am serious, hardworking, strict, punctual and kind.

Who do you share your feelings with?

It depends! But mostly I share my feelings with my mother and sisters. I talk with my daughter like a friend.

When you look in the mirror, what do you feel?

I feel satisfied and at the same time proud. I feel life is going on; its signs are quite visible when I am in front of the mirror.

How much time do you give to looking beautiful?

I give a lot of importance to beauty. It is a part of life for women. Looking beautiful and well dressed is not for men but it is good for a woman's personality and the impression they leave on others.

Do you like poetry?

I love poems. Sometimes I write poetry although I don't have much time because of my professional and personal activities. But I am seriously thinking about writing poetry. I write a blog called 'Nigaristan.' Sometimes I post my poems on it. Reading and writing poetry keeps me calm.

Who is your favourite poet?

I like poems by Hafiz Sherazi, Sheikh Sa'adi, Forough Farkhzad and most of our country's contemporary poets. Here is part of my favourite poem:

*Cowardice and cowardice
Kept me in barrier for long
But I without any excuse
Remained a woman*

And finally, is there anything else you would like to say?

A woman can be a mother, a wife, a poet, a politician, a trader or whatever and can live a life equal to men. Many try to escape this fact but it is my duty and that of like-minded people to institutionalize equality in Afghanistan.

End notes

1. This interview was published on 5 May, 2012 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 2, Edition 20.
2. This interview was published on 7 July, 2012 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 3, Edition 29.
3. This interview was published on 5 August, 2012 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 3, Edition 33.
4. This interview was published on 9 September, 2012 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 3, Edition 36.
5. This interview was published on 13 October, 2012 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 1, Edition 41.
6. This interview was published on 11 November, 2012 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 44, Edition 44.
7. This interview was published on 18 November, 2012 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 4, Edition 45.
8. This interview was published on 25 November, 2012 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 4, Edition 46.
9. This interview was published on 4 November, 2012 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 2, Edition 43.
1. This interview was published on 3 December, 2012 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 4, Edition 47.
11. This interview was published on 15 December, 2012 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 4, Edition 48.
12. Publishing of interview on 21 December, 2012, Rahe-Madanyat, Page 2, Edition 43
13. This interview was published on 24 December, 2012 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 2, Edition 49.
14. Anarkali Hunaryar, Publishing of interview on 28 April, 2013, Rahe-Madanyat, Edition 63.
15. Nilofar Ibrahim, Publishing of interview on 19 May, 2013, Rahe-Madanyat, Page 4, Edition 66.
16. Sahraa Karimi's interview was published on 2nd June, 2013 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page2 Edition 68.
17. This interview was published on 16 June, 2013 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 4, Edition 70.
18. This interview was published on 6 July, 2013 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 2, Edition 72.
19. This interview was published on 28 July, 2013 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine,

page 2, Edition 75.

20. This interview was published on 18 August, 2013 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 2, Edition 77.

21. This interview was published on 1st September, 2013 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 2, Edition 78.

22. This interview was published on 6 September, 2013 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 2, Edition 79.

23. This interview was published on 19 September, 2013 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 2, Edition 81.

24. This interview was published on 6 October, 2013 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 3, Edition 82.

25. This interview was published on 13 October, 2013 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 3, Edition 83.

26. This interview was published on 27 October, 2013 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 2, Edition 84.

27. This interview was published on 2 November, 2013 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 2, Edition 85.

28. This interview was published on 25 November, 2013 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 3, Edition 87.

29. This interview was published on 9 December 2013 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 2, Edition 89.

30. This interview was published on 23 December, 2013 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 2, Edition 90.

31. This interview was published on 30 December, 2013 in Rah-e-Madanayat Weekly Magazine, page 3, Edition 91.