# We Are All Afghanistan: Afghan Women Leaders Reflect on the Past and the Way Forward

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## Abstract

*On October 15, 2021, Women's Learning Partnership (WLP) convened an online, public conversation with former Minister for Women's Affairs in Afghanistan, Sima Samar, and former Governor of Bamyan Province, Habiba Sarabi, moderated by former UNFPA Executive Director Thoraya Obaid and WLP Founder and President Mahnaz Afkhami. Audience members were from around the world, including directors of WLP's partner organizations in Asia, Central Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. A Question & Answer session, moderated by WLP Executive Director, Allison Horowski, followed the conversation.*

*The conversation and Q & A session have been edited for length and clarity.*

**Peer review**: This article has been subject to a double blind peer review process



**Mahnaz Afkhami:**

Greetings to all of you wherever you are, and welcome to today's dialogue. We call this event "We are all Afghanistan," based on our understanding that whoever we are and wherever we live, we are inescapably interconnected in every possible way. Our health, our jobs, our politics, our social fabric, our survival on planet Earth are all interconnected, so Afghanistan is *all* of us. We have with us today two women who have experienced Afghanistan firsthand—as children, as young girls attending school, during the first Taliban takeover, and life in exile—and who returned to Afghanistan to rebuild a demolished country, only to be thrown into exile again. Sima Samar and Habiba Sarabi have experienced this history personally, from their grassroots beginnings to the highest

offices in the land and in international fora. It will be an honor and a learning experience to hear from them and engage in dialogue with them.

The four of us, with Thoraya Obaid, have a lot in common, including the culture, the region we come from, our passion for human rights and women's rights, as well as our work in multiple non-governmental and governmental arenas. Thoraya Obaid and I each began by studying English literature and moved into civic activism. In my case, the government, and in hers the United Nations. Her service to the human rights community and especially to women has been amazing. Her primary focus, one that has helped us all in the international community, has been on the significance of local culture and values in the fight for women's rights.

Studying English literature has helped Thoraya and me to connect West and East through art and literature. She has been invaluable in understanding the global situation, the connections between East and West, and how we can mobilize both parts of the globe for women's rights. I will turn to Thoraya Obaid, former Executive Director of the UN Population Fund and Under Secretary General of the UN, and ask her to introduce our guests today.

**Thoraya Obaid:**

Thank you very much, Mahnaz. I think what brings us all together is that we are soul sisters in one way or another. All four of us speaking today come from similar backgrounds. We hope that together we can make a difference for the younger generation who are looking forward to a better life.

My role today is to introduce our distinguished guests. It's an honor for me to be able to do that. I'll start with Sima Samar. Sima, you are our sister in so many ways. As a medical doctor, you had a certain vision of what it meant to be a doctor and why you became one. You also became Minister of Women's Affairs in Afghanistan and you were formerly Chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. You advocated for human rights, and the UN was able to receive some of the wisdom of your experience by having you as a member in the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement.

Sima is also a member of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Advisory Board on Mediation. In addition to her official positions in Afghanistan, she has held the position of Vice Chair of the Emergency Loya Jirga, a very important, consultative body in Afghanistan. From 2005 until 2009, Sima was the UN Special Rapporteur of Human Rights in Sudan, bringing some of her experience in Afghanistan to another country. Sima, it's really an honor for me to see you here.

The other sister we have is Habiba Sarabi, the former Governor of Bamyan Province and former Minister of Women's Affairs in Afghanistan. Of course, it is not easy to be the first woman governor of any province in Afghanistan, and Bamyan in particular in 2005. She held the position of Minister of Women's Affairs from 2002 to 2004. In addition, she was appointed Deputy Head of the Afghanistan Government High Peace Council, a very important body that was established to negotiate with the Taliban. She was also a member of the Peace Negotiation Team for the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Habiba received the UN's N-Peace Award in 2016, and this great honor shows the centrality of peace development in her life.

So, my first question is to both of you about your childhood. Give us insight into your background. How did you grow up in Afghanistan before the Taliban? I'll start with Sima.

**Sima Samar:**

Good morning, good afternoon, good evening to everybody who is part of the program and thanks to you Thoraya and Mahnaz for organizing this program.

I grew up in Helmand before it was an insecure and more violent province. Afghanistan was not a very developed country and not rich, but it was a peaceful country. Fifty-seven years ago, I went to a co-educational school in Helmand until I graduated from 12th grade. Then I participated in the entrance exams for university and I was able to join the medical faculty at Kabul University. At that time, the medical school was also co-educational.

I remember that in Helmand, where people are more conservative, nobody opposed what the young women were wearing and studying. We

didn't have to wear a specific uniform or a burqa or the hijab, but there was a uniform for the school, which was a black dress and black socks.

We were able to travel. When I was at Kabul University, we traveled from Kabul to Helmand by bus at night and nobody would bother us. Whether in our jeans or in skirts, people did not bother us. Kandahar was on our route, and we were able to walk there and go to the local kebab restaurant and have lunch or breakfast and nobody bothered us.

This is no longer the case, unfortunately. The change started after the war began in 1978. After the coup d'état, the new communist regime started to restrict people's freedom and violate their human rights, which was the reason people started fighting.[1] But fighting, even if it is called a "just war" and people fight for their freedom, is still very destructive. What has happened to Afghanistan is not only the destruction of physical infrastructure such as roads, buildings, and hospitals, but the destruction of the people's behavior, which is very disturbing.

In the last 44 years, different groups of people have come to power. The people of Afghanistan were caught between the extreme left, which was the Khalq and Parcham,[2] and the extreme right that we have today. In the middle, the rights of the people were violated without any accountability and without any justice. So that is something that is very sad for the country. I think if accountability and justice are forgotten, then we are not going to have peace.

**Thoraya Obaid:**

Thank you, Sima. I'll move to Habiba. Habiba, can you give us the highlights of your childhood, your background, and so on?

[1] What is frequently referred to as the Saur Revolution occurred in April 1978 when People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) violently took over the government. Hundreds were killed in the fighting. The PDPA created a leftist government, which was aligned with the USSR and paved the way for the Soviet invasion in 1979.

[2] These were two factions of the PDPA.

**Habiba Sarabi:**

*Salam* to you and all the other friends and good morning, good evening, and good afternoon to everyone. Thank you very much, for having me at this event and for this opportunity.

I grew up in different provinces, because of my father's job. I lived all over Afghanistan from provinces in the north to the center of Kabul. So, I experienced what school was like in several provinces. I also studied pharmacy at Kabul University.

But I did have to start fighting for my own rights beginning in my childhood, and also for the rights of my mother. In Afghanistan we had many freedoms, as Sima-jan[3] has mentioned. However, in some areas and in some families, people were still not very open-minded. My mother was under pressure from her family and especially my father, so that was why I started my struggle and fight during my childhood and in my family. I wanted to get my own freedom and also to fight for my mother's rights.

But generally, as Sima-jan said, no one really bothered us in public. We had the freedom to continue our education and there were no boundaries for that, or for higher education. Even with regards to our *poushesh*, i.e., the clothes that we wore. There were no restrictions on which sort of hijab or clothes we had to wear. Of course, there were some differences between the rural areas and the urban areas. Gradually we were moving towards greater rights. According to the law we had the right to choose our clothes, to get an education, or to seek higher education.

I am someone who has seen what life was like for the Afghan people, and especially Afghan women, before the collapse of the regime, starting from the Khalq—Parcham parties' feud and up to today. As these different regimes came to power, the Islamist mujahideen fought all of them, from the leftist Khalq and Parcham parties, to the regime of Dr. Najib, and the other regimes.[4] The mujahideen were fighting them, claiming they were

[3] Jan is a term of endearment in Persian/Dari.

[4] The mujahideen in Afghanistan were fighters allied with different tribal groups, from diverse ethnicities and with different ideologies, who fought against the communists and Soviets. The US provided extensive funding

not good Muslims. They were fighting in the name of "Allahu Akbar" and killing the people. They were also fighting each other. Then when the Taliban came to power, *they* fought the mujahideen. Whenever they killed someone, the Taliban also said, "Allahu Akbar." During the 20-year period between the governments of Hamid Karzai-Ashraf Ghani and that of the Taliban, they are all still saying "Allahu Akbar." We are confused by all of these statements and claims of "Allahu Akbar" when they are killing people! They are destroying the city. They are destroying the infrastructure in the name of "Allahu Akbar." This is really something that we are very tired of.

After the first Taliban occupation of Kabul, I left with my three children and went to Pakistan. In Pakistan I started working in the refugee camps, as a teacher and training others to teach in the refugee camps.

**Thoraya Obaid:**

Thank you, Habiba.

**Mahnaz Afkhami:**

I would like to ask both Habiba-jan and Sima-jan about their first experiences of exile. Having lived in exile myself, and having written a book about others in exile, I know what a tremendously trying, tense, and horrible experience it can be, as well as the uncertainty it brings. I would like for each of you to tell us how that felt the first time.

Habiba, you just mentioned the work that you did in refugee camps in Pakistan. I had the pleasure of working with you when you were in Pakistan. You used our manual *Claiming Our Rights,* which we had prepared in Persian, and you were very happy with it.[5] It was such a good

and weaponry to the mujahideen, who eventually prevailed against the Soviet military in 1989, and then the communist Afghan government in 1992.

[5] *Claiming Our Rights* (1996), by Mahnaz Afkhami and Haleh Vaziri, was written as an adaptable training tool for women in Muslim societies to discuss their rights, using local idiom and culturally relevant stories and traditions to spark conversation. Its material was tested in a number of countries, including Afghanistan. *Claiming Our Rights* has been translated into a dozen languages.

thing to hear from you after you went back, what the experience had been. So, let's start with Habiba and then we'll go to Sima.

**Habiba Sarabi:**

The first time that the Taliban occupied Kabul in 1996, I left Afghanistan and went to Peshawar and there we started to work in refugee camps. Not only did we train the teachers so that they could educate the refugee children, but we had so many good programs with the Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL), and with Sakena Yacoobi regarding women's human rights.[6] The manual really opened the way for our teachers to talk with the women living in refugee camps about how they could get their education and know about their rights. This started from basic rights, the right to education, the right to health services, to so many economic rights, up to the political rights. This was something that we worked on inside the refugee camps.

At the same time, we focused on girls' education in Pakistan and in Peshawar City. But we also wanted to focus on children in the refugee camps. We wanted to enable the children and also enable the women to know about their rights and ways of securing their rights.

**Mahnaz Afkhami:**

Thank you, Habiba. And Sima-jan?

**Sima Samar:**

Thank you Mahnaz-jan. When I graduated from university, I worked for a few months in Wazir Akbar Khan hospital in Kabul. Then I left and went to the village in Jaghori, a district of Ghazni[7] where I was born. I was internally displaced, as I mentioned before. It was interesting because there was a big difference between the rural and urban areas, as Habiba-jan said before. I was there for almost three years trying to help people and I vividly saw the discrimination. I am a warrior and I started to fight in the same way Habiba-jan shared earlier. Starting when I was in the sixth

[6] Sakeena Yacoobi is the founder and CEO of the Afghan Institute of Learning. AIL, an early partner of Women's Learning Partnership, focused on education and healthcare for Afghan girls and women.
[7] Ghazni is located Between Kabul and Kandahar.

grade, I fought for my mother's rights. But that is an aside. When I was in this province helping people, the area was not under government control from 1982 to 1984. I saw the poverty and the very difficult role of women in society. Then in 1984 I had to move to Pakistan because I had a son and there were no schools for him in that region.

I was a refugee in Pakistan in November 1984 and it was a difficult experience. I started to work in a hospital where they had a female wing for the Afghan refugees. It was a very old hospital, which was built by the British in 1885, when Pakistan and India were still together. I started work there and then went to a refugee camp twice a week and saw the suffering of women and felt it personally. It was kind of a revolutionary act—I would go into the hospital early and stay very late with the last patients, because these patients were my own people. One early morning, when I went to the hospital a young woman came in with eclampsia [a life-threatening condition causing seizures during pregnancy.] I ran to the pharmacy, but it was closed. The delivery room was also closed. That was when I decided to start a hospital for women and children.

I started the first hospital for women and children in 1987 in the city of Quetta [ in Baluchistan Province] in Pakistan. Then, after almost two years of working at that hospital and another that I founded, I moved back to Afghanistan. Along with the hospital, I also started a training program for female nurses and midwives. I also started a girls' school, because there were too few girls' schools.

In 1988, the Norwegian foreign minister visited the hospital I was running in Quetta for refugees. He said, "Sima, what can I do for you?" I said, "Can you pay for a hospital in my village?" He said, "Can you bring me a proposal tomorrow morning?" That was the first time in my life that I heard the word proposal. So, I called an Afghan engineer and said, "Can you draw something for me by tomorrow morning and calculate the cost?" Before the foreign minister left for the airport, I gave him this so-called proposal, which was two pages long. He accepted it and gave me the money, and I started the hospital in the Jaghori District in Ghazni, and then also slowly opened a school.

I do believe that education is the key to changing peoples' mentalities. So, I also started schools in Pakistan for the refugees. Some of my students have gone on to graduate and receive PhDs in institutions such as Harvard,

and some of them are now teaching there themselves. And then I started a school in Afghanistan for boys and girls. My efforts have been very focused on helping women. I advocated for women's rights, and got very involved in the regional networks working for women's rights and women's development. It was very important to me.

**Mahnaz Afkhami:**

You were telling us what you did on your first return, which is going to be very helpful as we think about how we're going to help this generation of second exiles from Afghanistan.

**Sima Samar:**

Thank you so much Mahnaz-jan. I think the experience of being in exile, particularly in Pakistan or in Iran, is very difficult because you don't have an identity. It's tough. Being in Pakistan for 17 years was not easy.

**Mahnaz Afkhami:**

Do you think it was harder than if you were, for instance, in a Western country?

**Sima Samar:**

Yes. Pakistan had not ratified or joined the UN refugee convention, so they did not provide the refugees with any legal status.[8] You can also see how the policies of Western countries and Arab countries in Pakistan helped promote these very extreme right-wing, conservative people. In Pakistan for women to be active in work was not easy at all. It was quite difficult.

**Mahnaz Afkhami:**

Thank you.

**Thoraya Obaid:**

[8] Pakistan is not a party to the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, or the 1967 Protocol.

Both of you have been very active inside Afghanistan. Can each of you just highlight the main challenges that you personally lived through? Can you describe the challenges you felt in your work, in your advocacy, in relationships, in building institutions? I am sure women leaders will continue to face similar challenges. Let's start with Habiba.

**Habiba Sarabi:**

Working as a leader inside Afghanistan, a country that is male dominated especially within the past 40 years, government leaders focused on men and wanted to sideline women. Working for women's rights and empowerment was not easy work. When I returned to Afghanistan in 2001, I was appointed Minister of Women's Affairs, a position that Sima-jan had held before me, and worked on gender issues and women's issues. The ministry position was very new in Afghanistan after the Taliban regime. It was not easy working with all of the cabinet members, all of whom were men and had their own ideas.

After that, I became governor of Bamyan province and I was the first female governor in the country. I was working with men in the society and community. Even though the Hazara people[9] and their community that I was working with in Bamyan were much more open-minded than others, it still was not easy.

Every step, I faced so many problems, but the one that I want to share here is an interesting one. During the Eids (religious festivals), the governor usually gave a sort of political speech. The imam also preached to the people, but the governor would deliver a political speech. As governor, I gave a political speech in front of the Islamic Council. They then accused me of doing something against the *Sharia.* A delegation came from Kabul, from the Supreme Court, to accuse me of wrongdoing after I delivered this speech. Fortunately, one of my colleagues had a video of my speech, and when they started the investigation, he shared it with them. Also, there were other Shi'a imams who stood up for me. They said that women have their own rights and that they believed that is not against Islam. If Shi'a imams or scholars say something is not against Islam, then it is not. As a result, I was free from that accusation.

[9] Persecuted native population of Afghanistan. They speak Dari/Persian and a majority are Shi'a.

However, I received this kind of accusation a lot from male colleagues. I spent time working with them, talking with them, and convincing them, so that we could have better governance. It was not easy. I always faced a lot of challenges, especially as a negotiator with the whole peace negotiation team, which had only four women. It was challenging work for me to convince them that the female members had something to say and that we must be present for *each* conversation and for *each* meeting. Sometimes, a chief negotiator planned a meeting with certain Taliban leaders, but avoided having women as part of the meeting. This was another challenging aspect of the work—always convincing them that we had to be present for every meeting. Working with men, while I think it is a challenge all over the world, was particularly difficult in Afghanistan.

**Sima Samar:**

When in 2002 I went to Afghanistan as Minister of Women's Affairs and also as Vice Chair for President Karzai, they thought that I would be a shy woman, but I tried not to be. It was very difficult because there were no offices or infrastructure for the Ministry of Women's Affairs. I had to find a building. After two months, a great deal of diplomacy, and much pressure, I was able to locate a building. But the building was falling down and filled with *naswar* (tobacco). I had to find money to repair it. So, after four months, in July 2002 when I handed over the ministry to Habiba-jan, it was fully furnished.

Cabinet members, particularly the first Cabinet, were mainly commanders of different political parties. It was not easy working with them, but I was able to make a space for myself and for the women in the country. It was tough and I had a lot of sleepless nights while establishing the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Then, upon their return to power, [the Taliban] just abolished the Ministry [of Women's Affairs] in one day and gave the building to Vice and Virtue [the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice]. It was the same for our Human Rights Commission. In the Emergency Loya Jirga, they had organized a big group, which stood against me and called me the "Salman Rushdie of Afghanistan." They wanted to kill me and they didn't want me to be part of the Cabinet. So, it was very difficult.

But still, I ran for election and I won. There were twenty-seven or twenty-eight people who ran for that position, mainly the commanders of different political parties. But I won. Members of fundamentalist Jihadi

groups were against me. It was a very difficult time, but I did not give up. I was on the stage and they were shouting, “We do not want Sima Samar!” However, I smiled at them and when it was my turn at the microphone I told them, “You did not vote for me, so you don't have the right to shout. Go and see what you did to Kabul. This destruction was done by you people.” It was tough.

Then I was appointed to lead the Human Rights Commission, which I had already been responsible for. Many believed that the Human Rights Commission was not a very important position, so they were happy to give that position to me. Once again, I started from scratch. The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission was one of the best human rights commissions in the world. Again, it was abolished by the Taliban in 2021. Working with the Human Rights Commission was even more difficult because we were dealing with all these conservative men, and they were trying to use religion and tradition to control us.

However, we stood firm and we changed a lot of things. I will give you an example. We were able to ban the forced virginity test in Afghanistan. Women who were running away from an abusive family, or forced marriage, or child marriage, had been made to undergo virginity tests at least two to three times, and without permission of the courts. We changed that law and we changed many other laws. We also passed a law calling for the elimination of violence against women. Although it was not a perfect law, it was still good. But now it is all gone.

What is left, and what I think is a sign of hope, is that people’s *knowledge* about their human rights is something the Taliban cannot take away. The Taliban cannot take away that knowledge or take away what people learned at universities. That knowledge is a tool to struggle for a better society in Afghanistan.

**Thoraya Obaid:**

Thank you, Sima. I think of those last words that you just said—that once one is aware of their rights, that awareness can never be taken away. I think this is a very important lesson for all of us to remember.

**Mahnaz Afkhami:**

Yes, that is a great lesson. Actually, I see so much of this replicated in Iran and how much the consciousness raising that was achieved by the women activists before the Islamic Revolution is still there after all the years of pressure.

The next thing we wanted to know, and it is really important for our audience, is what is the priority right now? What are the most urgent needs of women in Afghanistan? How can we support education, security, survival, health care, etc.? Please do give us that, and let's begin with Habiba.

**Habiba Sarabi:**

Thank you. Of course, the first priority at the moment for women inside Afghanistan is education. Humanitarian assistance is another critical issue because of the economic crisis and the poverty that exists inside of Afghanistan. But the people, and the women inside Afghanistan, are so brave because, as Sima-jan said, they are aware of their rights. That is why the Taliban cannot stop them. Every week, protestors are holding demonstrations and saying they want their rights. So, something that we can do is to listen to their voices and share them with a network outside of Afghanistan. This network should take their concerns and ideas to decision-makers everywhere and to any institutions that can make decisions regarding Afghanistan. Their voices should be taken to networks and policy-makers.

Education is key, so we have to think about how we can support the educational system inside the country and how we can put pressure on the Taliban from other countries. There are some countries that have influence over the Taliban. For example, Pakistan, Qatar, Iran, China, and Russia. Maybe through the Islamic countries, the best way to put pressure on the Taliban is to tell the Taliban that education is not something against Islam. Why have they not opened the secondary girls' schools? At the moment there are separate boys' schools and girls' schools. There is no co-education, so why are the secondary schools for girls not allowed to open? There should be pressure on the Taliban to open them. Schools should be open to girls so they can go on to university. It will be very difficult to push back a generation that has fought for two decades. They will not stay back and just watch.

Also, through international NGOs[10] or international organizations, there should be support for women's organizations inside the country. When there is support for the women's organizations, the Taliban will be forced to recognize the power of women. That is why it is important to support women's organizations *inside* the country. The people or organizations outside of the country can also support women's organizations inside Afghanistan that empower women and also support women's businesses so that they can earn money and support other women.

**Mahnaz Afkhami:**

Thank you, Habiba-jan. Sima-jan, what are your thoughts on that?

**Sima Samar:**

I would say that currently the people of Afghanistan face three crises. One is the political crisis, which stems from the lack of trust and confidence in the leadership of the political system, and lack of trust in the future. This is really a problem.

The second crisis is the humanitarian crisis. Poverty was already an issue in Afghanistan. A lot of people were displaced and poverty has increased. Nobody can, even if they have money in the bank, get access to their money. Including myself, for example—I don't have access to my bank account.

The third crisis is COVID-19 and the health situation in the country.

I think these three crises need to be tackled in a proper way. I fully agree with the idea of education. Education must continue in *any* possible way. If it is in the mosque, if it is at a home, if it is under a tree, education should continue. The second point is humanitarian support. I believe that we should not make people dependent more on relief. The whole program should be designed in such a way that people feel that they have dignity and can live in a dignified way. Local NGOs should be used, and the United Nations and international NGOs should establish a clear mechanism to monitor the distribution of aid and not allow discrimination and corruption within the support organizations. I would urge the creation of job

[10] Non-governmental organizations.

opportunities—buy products introduced and made by women, and give them the self-confidence so that they can [stand up against this regime].

The third point is the health of people in Afghanistan. We really need to help people have access to healthcare and reproductive healthcare, including contraception. We need to give them the possibility to choose the number of their children, because we have more children than the resources in the country can support. That increases poverty and also leads to a radicalization of the young, particularly boys.

Fourth, I think [the international community] should put a lot of pressure on the countries that are supporting the Taliban. There should be engagement with the Taliban but not recognition, and they should not be bribed. We must not recognize the Taliban, but engage with them and put conditions on any support—conditions on the Taliban, not the people. The people should not be punished because of the bad leadership that we have in Afghanistan, whether it is Ghani or the Taliban.

The final point I would like to make is that war crimes and crimes against humanity should be condemned loudly. For example, look at what happened today in Kandahar.[11] There should be no negotiation on the principle of human rights. Human rights are not *Western* values. They are *human* values. Who does not deserve to have access to clean water? Everyone deserves to be free from fear and want, and that is the right of the people of Afghanistan, and particularly the women in Afghanistan. The current situation has increased violence against women and promotes child marriage, the selling of girls, and forced marriage, as well as forced prostitution. We need to stop this violence against women and girls if they are to live in a better and more dignified way.

**Thoraya Obaid:**

I think you are both, Sima-jan and Habiba-jan, very clear in terms of the needs in Afghanistan and both of you are talking about human rights. The right of people to a life of health, dignity, education, respect, and so on, is central.

[11] On October 15, 2021, suicide bombers attacked a Shi'ite mosque in Kandahar, killing at least 50 people. It was the second such attack in a single week.

We move now to people who had to leave the country or who were stuck, like you Sima, outside Afghanistan. How can people outside be assisted wherever they are? Habiba is in one place, you [Sima] are in another place. There are many who are not of your stature who are trying to live anywhere they can. How can they be helped, wherever they are? In other words, what can the host countries and the NGOs in the host countries do? Other than welcoming them, what kind of help should they provide?

**Habiba Sarabi:**

Life is not easy for those who left the country. The first time the Taliban occupied Kabul in the 1990s, it was a little bit easier than this time. The first time we left Afghanistan we settled in regions that were closer to Afghanistan. But this time, many people who left Afghanistan are not located close to the country—thousands more than the first time. So, it is very tough for them, and for the people such as myself and Sima-jan. This is traumatic for the people who are outside the country.

First of all, I want to request or to suggest that we motivate Afghan refugees to be active in social engagement, social activity, and creating a social network. This is very, very important. When the refugees share their problems and their pains, it will make it easier for them to live. Encourage them to be part of their new community, because if they are not part of the new community, and they do not accept this new community, it will be difficult for them to know how to live there and how to help pass the time. They have to be engaged and enter their new communities wherever they have settled. Creating webinars, seminars, or gatherings will help them find their own way. If the host city can set up different workshops for them, it will help meet the refugees' needs. If the host city conducts a survey or needs assessment, it will be much easier to know what to do for them.

**Mahnaz Afkhami:**

Thank you, Habiba.

**Sima Samar:**

Yes. I think that I fully agree with Habiba-jan. But again, I would say that the refugees should be treated with respect and dignity. It's good that the

host communities receive them, but the Afghan refugees are traumatized. They have left everything. Personally, I prefer the muddy house we own in Afghanistan, and would rather live there. I think everybody prefers the life they had in Afghanistan instead of even a luxurious one outside their country. So, it is really important that they are treated with respect and with dignity.

The second point that we should focus on is that life [outside Afghanistan] will be harder for older people. For the young it will be easier. But some people, let's say those who are above 40, come with their family. They will be lost between two cultures—the one they left and the one they encounter in the West. The men have a lot of problems and sometimes commit acts of aggression, or violence, against female members of the family. They need a proper orientation to the new culture. There is this expectation that they come to America and everything will be solved. They have to be told the truth and the reality, not to be disappointed but to be encouraged in order to become an active part of the new society.

For women particularly, job opportunities will give them greater confidence. If they are able to work, they would not have to use food stamps every day, or wait for social security in European countries. Having a job would be something positive that would help them build their [life] within that society for themselves. Of course, it's not easy, but it's not impossible either. It is possible with some patience, with some understanding, and with listening to the Afghans themselves. The Western observers might think, “human rights is a Western value. Afghans do not understand it, and they do not care. They're conservative people. They've been violent. They never had a government to control or rule.” I think these kinds of judgements should be put aside, and host countries should listen to the people and help them fulfill their basic needs so refugees can live with pride.

**Mahnaz Afkhami:**

Thank you. The last question. We do not have too much time, but it is the most important.

You’ve told us what the issues and the priorities are, so the question is—how do we mobilize the NGOs and the international community? And actually, I think that in some ways it's horrific, right—this moment for all

Afghans. I keep comparing the Afghan situation with the Iranian situation. Sima-jan, you and I talked about this. The one thing you have that is positive, at least, is that you are not being demonized—everybody has a heartfelt sympathy for what you are going through. When women from Iran were sent into exile, so many of them were demonized. Even those who ostensibly were well informed about international affairs misjudged the new government in Iran. They viewed the Islamic Revolution's leaders as liberators and paragons of human rights, even as laws were being enacted forcing women back into the domestic sphere as subjects of men, dependent on men for their legal and financial status. Many of us in exile—our lives threatened in our homeland and friends and relatives under scrutiny by the security forces because of their association with us—were accused of being enemies of Iran's "real" culture.

At least in the case of Afghan refugees, everybody is embracing them with open arms, listening and wanting to hear what they have to say and what needs to be done. We now have the digital component, which we didn't have forty years ago, so there are more possibilities for inside-outside communications and learning. Please tell us what the solution might be, and ways in which we can provide support to Afghans inside and outside the country.

**Sima Samar:**

I think we are at the beginning of a crisis. I would imagine that we will have more serious crises in the coming months, particularly, with the winter starting in Afghanistan. It's not possible to sustain the country this way, the way they want to run it. And I think, again, we need to focus on human rights. We need to focus on the promotion of democratic values. I think the good part with the Iranian exile—although yes, it was difficult—was that Iranians were more educated than the Afghans. Iran, economically, was in a better shape, with the oil and so on. We don't have that. Although there might have been misuse of those resources in Iran, the situation was much better than the condition that we have in Afghanistan. All of our social services, including the education and health system, depend on outside support.

So, one of the excuses that the Taliban is trying to use is that they cannot pay the teachers or the health workers. That makes the situation so much more difficult. But for ordinary people, it is the government that is responsible for basic social services, education, and health. And in every

country, not only in Afghanistan, but in countries such as Afghanistan, those two basic social services are what give people hope that, yes, there is a government that is taking care of them.

We need to advocate for an inclusive regime and promotion of democracy in Afghanistan. And, of course, we also need to warn [people] that the problem in Afghanistan will not stay in Afghanistan. History shows this, and we have to learn from history. I think what is really needed is that all the countries that were engaged in Afghanistan need to assess what went wrong. They should not repeat their mistake in another country. That is something that we all should do.

**Mahnaz Afkhami**

Thank you so much Sima-jan, and now Habiba-jan.

**Habiba Sarabi:**

I would like to discuss the priorities that Sima-jan mentioned, humanitarian initiatives and also education and health. We have to focus—all our friends, our networks, and our partners that are outside the country or in the Western countries—on these three areas. But there are also some possibilities or some opportunities for our sisterhood, our network that is supporting Afghan women, to have a strong voice. For instance, on October 27, 2021, there will be a European Parliament that will hold a meeting for those who want to listen to the advice of Afghan women who are in European countries.

We request that the demands of Afghan people be the central platform that is presented at international meetings. If there is no advice from Afghan people, and support for Afghan women is not mentioned, of course the Taliban will not take women's issues seriously. It is better to push these countries, whenever there is a platform, whenever there is an opportunity. They *have* to listen to Afghan women's voices. And also, as Sima-jan mentioned, the countries that are supporting the Taliban, they have to be pushed by the international community, especially by women.

**Thoraya Obaid:**

Habiba pointed very clearly to what I think needs to be done as a whole to mobilize support.

We will now open up the conversation to questions from the participants who have joined us today. Allison will take over the Q & A.

***Following the conversation, WLP's Executive Director Allison Horowski moderated a Question and Answer Session***

**Allison Horowski:**

Here is a question from the audience. Given the tough experiences and the amazing perseverance of women in Afghanistan, is everything lost with the Taliban takeover? What can be done by Afghan women inside and outside, and what can Muslim women and men from elsewhere do?

**Sima Samar:**

I think everything is not lost. As I said, the knowledge that the people have gained cannot be taken away from them. But of course, the situation is quite desperate and quite difficult. The other point that I would like to mention is that as we call for more political support, we also need more financial support for the people of Afghanistan. Again, I insist that we must create some job opportunities, particularly for women.

**Allison Horowski:**

Participants from Malaysia and Jordan have similar questions: How can women's funds best and safely support Afghan women and girls in Kabul, Afghanistan, as well as the refugees in surrounding countries? And, how do you think international aid can reach, at least partially, the women in Afghanistan rather than the Taliban?

**Habiba Sarabi:**

Aid should be conditional. The Taliban should receive support only if the aid can reach the women's groups. Also, there should be aid from women to women. If there are women's organizations outside the country and in Western countries supporting the women's organizations inside the country, then we can be hopeful.

**Sima Samar:**

I just want to add one thing. Muslim women and Muslim men can help a lot, because what they [the Taliban] do has nothing to do with Islam. So, in order to protect our own religion, Muslim women and men have to interfere in these issues. The last time Taliban were in power, unfortunately, we did not receive a great deal of solidarity from our Muslim sisters. This time, it should be different.

**Allison Horowski:**

Our next questioner asks, what do our panelists think about the diplomatic talks with the Taliban? I think this question is specifically referencing to the Turkish and Indonesian foreign ministers who are planning to go to Kabul. They say that they will talk with the Taliban to advocate for inclusion of different ethnic groups and women's rights. What are your thoughts?

**Sima Samar:**

As I said before, the Taliban should be engaged but not recognized. One thing that I have to say, honestly, is that I'm afraid that there are people who are trying to reduce the negative image of the Taliban, trying to show how good they are and covering up their violations of human rights. We have to loudly object to this.

The Afghan state cannot run in this way, where one exclusive group, such as the Taliban, are in charge. For example, the Dean of the Kabul University and administrators who have PhDs must now work under a *mawlawi* [a cleric] who has never been to school. Such things ought to be loudly criticized.

**Habiba Sarabi:**

The Taliban, of course, seek legitimacy; they are always talking about it. They suggest that they might even appoint a woman minister, etc., in order to gain global legitimacy. The international community should know that the Taliban is looking for legitimacy. The internationalcommunity does need to *engage* them, as Sima-jan said, but should pay special attention when the Taliban say they are helping women. Also, there should be joint pressure from the international community on other Islamic countries that

support the Taliban. They should demand that the Taliban become more inclusive and support girl's education and human rights.

**Allison Horowski:**

Thank you. The next question comes from our partner in Nigeria and an ally in Turkey. They ask, what advice would you give women's organizations in other countries that are facing similar extremist actions or takeover? And, if you could go back before the takeover of the Taliban in 2021 what would you recommend that women and men do? She is asking, as she says, to find out what should, for instance, Turkish women do [about their situation now].

I think these questions get at the theme of this meeting, that we are all Afghanistan. This is not something that is happening in Afghanistan in isolation. I'd also like to open up that question to Mahnaz and Thoraya. Given your experiences, if you would like to comment.

**Sima Samar:**

We need to continue our solidarity and support one another. One thing that other countries should learn from Afghanistan is that they have to resist violations and promote human rights and democracy; also, they should not be quiet against nepotism and discrimination, and especially corruption. When there's inclusivity in government, either in relation to women or to a different religion, that itself gives a lot of legitimacy to the government and gives a lot of ownership to the people. So that is something we also need to emphasize. Women in other countries should stand up for those values. Our values should not be based on discrimination and superiority. Our values should be based on equality, human rights, and human dignity.

**Habiba Sarabi:**

If I may share my thoughts on extremism. I think women's organizations in other countries, if they are facing similar practices, have to educate their people not to attend the very extremist *madrasas*. These extremist *madrasas* are what brought us such problems. If education is undertaken in a proper way and in the right way, it would be much better than these *madrasas*. We have to fight extremism and to educate people to be more open minded. I think Turkish women can do a lot if they lobby for us, stand

besides us, and advise their government to engage constructively with the TalibanFor example, I have worked with a woman who is working with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Qatar. I talked with her about the recent meeting they had with the Taliban, and also with the US, regarding women's education. As a result, in so far as girls' education is concerned, Qatar's support for women's education in Afghanistan is much stronger now than it was two months ago. Two months or three months ago Qatar supported the Taliban more uncritically. Qatar is now talking about inclusivity and also about education. So, this is a good example with regard to Qatari leadership. The Turkish leadership also can do more, but women in Turkey must push their leadership to stand for inclusivity and for girls' education.

**Allison Horowski:**

I'd like to have Mahnaz's and Thoraya's input. If you have anything to add with regard to what other countries can do in their own societies to push back against some of the extremist elements that we have been seeing around the world.

**Thoraya Obaid:**

Well, to push back, I think there has to be a change of dialogue in the society itself. There have to be campaigns explaining what extremism is about and how it hurts societies. Such discussions have to be included in the school curriculum. And, here in Saudi Arabia, we're having new curricula being put in place in contrast to the previous curricula that promoted extremism. So, we really need to have an official change of the dialogue, of the way teachers speak, the way doctors speak, anyone with some position of authority in society. It's not an easy process. We are still going through it. It is something that has to be done through a strategy with consciousness and awareness. The dialogue needs to change; the dignity of human beings can be protected within the culture as well as with the overall universality of human rights. I think this is a very important national change that has to take place, and a global change as well.

**Sima Samar:**

I think it requires strong political will and that political will should come from pressure that is exerted by women within society. Of course, access to health and reproductive health is also something that we should work on, because we have all these young, jobless, uneducated, frustrated men

in Afghanistan who seem to be taking out their frustration through violence.

**Mahnaz Afkhami:**

I would like to suggest something that you, our partners in this dialogue and our leaders in this discussion, may not be ready to engage in. I would like to invite the two of you to take the lead for us. All of what you said is amazing. It really tells us things that many of us did not know. This whole trajectory of change in Afghanistan, and what you've gone through during the last two decades, leading to the current situation is largely the outcome of international decisions and not solely the result of actions inside of the country. But I think now that we are facing this horrific situation, we need an entity, a collaborative effort, that can organize those with knowledge and experience in Afghanistan to give advice and assist in bringing together the people who are really dedicated to helping.

We need to do something, not simply because it is Afghanistan, but because the Afghan women's situation is a prelude to a global backlash against women's rights throughout the world. The global women's movement from the developing world especially, and some in the Western world, would like to help. But leadership is needed inside *and* outside. Iranian women have done this time and time again, creating an "outside/inside" connection and exchange between the diaspora and those in the country that has pushed back on the authorities in the country. We need help from an entity to provide advice and training. We need an entity to guide the diaspora in their advocacy efforts and to provide employment opportunities and to direct funding for various areas. People are interested in helping. Your knowledge of the situation and your knowledge of the international community, as well as how the government works and your cultural knowledge, is priceless. So please guide us.

**Sima Samar:**

Habiba-jan, as you remember, we cried before the fall of the government. It was tough for us. And so, yes, Mahnaz-jan, we will do it with your support and all of the other sisters' support. But I think we have to be careful not to do harm, rather than rushing into something quickly and causing harm to the people.

**Thoraya Obaid:**

A few reactions to conclude on. One issue that was raised was that we should ask what went wrong. I think this is a very important question. Since the Afghanistan crisis started, I've been delving into Afghan history, US relations, all types of things. What I learned was that nobody understood Afghanistan as a country or as a structure, including its social values. It just was not understood. Many of the decisions that were made about Afghanistan were linked to what was going on in Iraq. In other words, the country's history, culture, and well-being were not understood. I think in the Middle East the word *democracy* has come with a gun, with bombs, and that has made it a pejorative word. People are skeptical. They think that democracy is for others, not themselves. To allow democracy to flourish, we need to have demonstrations of democracy that come with peace, not democracy that comes with bombs and guns over the heads of people. I think this is one lesson we are learning as we go along.

The second lesson that I learned was the definition of extremism. There are so many definitions of extremism. Who is extreme, according to what standards, and who should be killed? Is it Al-Qaeda? Is it the Taliban? I think we should not kill people, abstractly, under the guise of fighting extremism. People's lives have value, and my feeling is that in this past decade or so, people's lives really had no value. That, I believe, was what Sima and Habiba were also emphasizing. We have to consider the value of human beings, how they can have a better life in their countries, and live with dignity.

The third lesson that came up in some of the chat was about the role of Afghan men. We've talked about Afghan women, we've talked about men and women, but maybe this is an area that needs special attention. How can we bring more men on board to support the struggle of women in Afghanistan?

The fourth lesson is that conflicts *always* have a greater impact on women and little girls. Even COVID impacted little girls more in our region. Because of COVID, girls are not going to school. They are being married early, or they're being sold. So, it is another war on human beings that COVID has brought. But again, little girls are the victims, and this is where we need to protect them with education and health, as Sima and Habiba have said.

The last lesson involves the whole issue of human rights. One of the UN documents during Boutros-Ghali's[12] days talked about freedom from want and freedom from fear. Basically, with respect for the self-agency people, people should determine their own lives. Islamists use religion to stop girls from going to school. But Islam can also be invoked to support women's education. I've declared many times that my father empowered me because of the first verse of the Quran, "Iqra' bismi rabbika, alladhi khalaqa," [which translates to] "Read in the name of [your] God [who has created everything]." He felt it was his responsibility as a father to make sure that the boys and the girls in his family read. So, if some people are looking for empowering words, they will find them in the Quran. It's just that some Islamists twist the words. What we want to emphasize is basically that the dream of human rights is for *all* countries. Today we have a crisis in Afghanistan, but we also have crises in Libya, in Iraq, in Syria, in Yemen, etc. We need for all the big people—we are small people—the big people to really respect human lives, respect human dignity, and ensure that human rights and democracy come through sustainable programs and not through guns and bombs. Thank you.

**Mahnaz Afkhami:**

Thank you, Thoraya, you are a big person, not a small person, by any measure and in any decision-making arena. I want to thank both of you, Sima-jan and Habiba-jan, for what you have done in your lives and what you will continue to accomplish, and wish you peace and easier times as well as success in helping your people and us. And whatever you do for your own people, you're doing it for all the rest, as Thoraya mentioned so well. Thank you so much. And thank you Thoraya for your wise words and for your support. *Khodahafez* [good bye].

[12] Boutros Boutros-Ghali was an Egyptian politician and diplomat who served as the sixth Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) from 1992 to 1996.

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