Interview with Sima Samar

(September 2012)

You started your career as a doctor, and today you head the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). In between, you have established schools and served in government. What has motivated you to take on these different and very challenging roles?

Afghanistan has always been a male dominated country, and discrimination against women and ethnic groups was very common. Believing in equality, I started very early on in my life to fight against discrimination. In order to achieve my goal and fight against the inequality in the country, I decided to take on the most difficult task in Afghanistan: to prove that a woman can also do the same work as a man.

What would you say is Afghanistan's greatest challenge today and how and where do you see the international community being able to support Afghanistan in a constructive manner?

The biggest challenge in Afghanistan is a lack of security and the absence of rule of law. The international community can do a few things to support Afghanistan:

A- Implement a long-term multi-dimensional strategy for Afghanistan. Unfortunately the focus now is only on military means to build security, whereas we all know that building security requires a broader approach including economic development, poverty reduction and much more.

B- Understanding that security is not the end of active war, but more about human security and ensuring people's access to basic social services and living with dignity.

C- Providing more attention to changing the mentality of people through education. One of the reasons why the war was so long and so aggressive in Afghanistan was due to the lack of education. The people have been used easily under the pretense of respecting religion and culture.

D- Promoting women's participation in every social and political activity related to the country which has not been the case till date. This must be combined with a general respect for human rights and democratic principles.

E- Promotion of accountability and justice in Afghanistan. This has not been the case in the past 11 years. That can be achieved through good laws and the rule of law.

F- Promotion of democratic values in all the conflict countries including Afghanistan.

Heading the AIHRC comes with an exceptionally difficult mandate. What would you say has been your greatest success as chairperson?

As Chairperson of AIHRC, my biggest achievement is that I am still alive and the word 'human rights' has been used without being counted as a crime. When I started as Chairperson of AIHRC, using the word 'human rights' was perceived as a crime. Now, people regularly use this word without a lot of fear.
Religious conservatives were upset when you questioned certain Islamic laws, including Sharia law, in 2003. How difficult has it been promoting women’s rights in Afghanistan, and what impact have your training programmes and advocacy had on ground realities?

Some of the religious conservatives still use the same argument that human rights principles are a Western concept. My argument is the existence and oneness of human beings anywhere is the proof of their rights. We Afghans are also human beings and we have rights. In a conservative society like Afghanistan, the fact that we have equal rights in the constitution for men and women is indicative of the impact of AIHRC’s activities.

You are no stranger to frequent death threats. What gives you the courage to continue working as a human rights activist?

My belief in human rights and equality is the reason why I continue my activities.

You have always focused on education, both through the Shuhada Organisation, which built schools, and now with the Gawharshad Institute of Higher Education. How do you see improving access to education changing the dynamics of the situation in Afghanistan?

My personal achievement and the difference between myself and uneducated members of my community is a clear sign of the impact of education. That is why I think education is the key to change the community and mentality of the people.

What does the Right Livelihood Award mean to you at this stage of your career?

The Award is the recognition of the suffering of the women of Afghanistan and the need to continue supporting the Afghan people, particularly women in this country. It gives me more courage and supports my personal security. And I am very grateful for the solidarity.

Further interviews with Sima Samar

Interview on Woman’s Hour (starting at 1:02). BBC Radio 4, October 2012.


Further Information

Acceptance Speech by Sima Samar
Pictures of Sima Samar
Videos feat Sima Samar
Interviews with Sima Samar
Biography in German
Biography in Swedish
Better World Links
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