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‘So many Afghans have not given up on a better future’

Human rights activist Shaharzad Akbar on the current living situation in Afghanistan, gender apartheid and important takeaways for the Global North

You have recently been awarded the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Human Rights Award 2023, which honours your unwavering commitment to human rights in Afghanistan. Can you tell us what the living situation is currently like in the country?

When looking at the situation in Afghanistan, the first thing that we have to do is to emphasise the fact that women are *systematically* deprived of their fundamental rights across the country. Girls are deprived of the right to attend secondary school, women can’t go to university, they are banned from most sectors with the exception of health and education. Women are banned from working in NGOs and the United Nations, making Afghanistan the only country in the world where girls cannot go to school. The UN has said that they have never faced a situation in which they were told to not employ women. Afghan activists have called the situation a ‘gender apartheid’ because of its widespread and systematic violation of women’s rights on the basis of their gender.

The human rights situation more broadly is also very concerning. The Taliban have abolished most existing laws but failed to introduce new ones, creating a state of lawlessness in which arbitrary decisions by any Taliban judge, in fact, becomes the law. This has made it very difficult for people to access justice, in particular for women, since they have been completely removed from the judiciary. The laws protecting women and children have also been abolished, as well as other laws aligned with international human rights, such as the anti-torture legislation. Moreover, there are no redress mechanisms, therefore victims of violations perpetrated by the Taliban have nowhere to go.

Your work has been heavily focused on democratic development, advocacy and women’s rights in Afghanistan. Where do you see the

biggest challenges facing your country today?

The Afghan civil society has been heavily suppressed and the media is being censored. There is absolutely no space for activism, the promotion of democracy or any other form of civic resistance against the Taliban. Protestors face brutal suppression, as well as harassment and detention, which also pose a threat to their family members. And if you want to document the human rights violations in Afghanistan, you will have a lot of difficulties because the Taliban have made access to information very difficult. For Afghan women, being a human rights defender is even less of a possibility, because women are not allowed to leave the house without being accompanied by a male guardian. Thus, I would say that being a human rights defender in Afghanistan right now means being treated like a criminal and even putting your life at risk.

From your experience, how has the situation changed in the past decades? What are the main differences to life in Afghanistan 35 years ago?

We had over four decades of war, so some elements of instability and violence have unfortunately been there for as long as I have lived – and even before that. And, at least in the two decades post international intervention in Afghanistan, conflicts, as well as corruption, were major issues. This has had a huge impact on the country. It has meant continuous waves of migration, continued brain drain and an inability to develop our institutions with continuity. Yet, prior to the Taliban takeover, there was at least *some* space for improving things, including laws and institutions, as well as for educating new generations of Afghan women and girls and trying to rebuild the country. This was interrupted by the Taliban's war against the government and the international forces. What we have right now is a backsliding that is so massive it will take a long time to undo, particularly when it comes to girls' education. Because every day lost is a day that you cannot recover. And girls have been deprived of education for over two years now. We are a poor country that has been at war for a very long time. My concern is that we'll have continuous and worsening poverty if women remain completely excluded from education and work. And if these discriminatory policies continue, they will, in turn, refuel the conflict. Thus, while in terms of actual violence, things seem a bit quieter now, the outlook for the future is very bleak.

What can the European Union and other international actors do to help improve the living situation of the people/women on the ground?

One of the things that the international community can do is to decide on a common position on how they want to engage with the Taliban and what their priorities are. Because the Taliban are very happy to deal with countries bilaterally rather than with a bloc of countries that can exert more pressure on them. For some countries, the current priorities are the human rights situation, as well as long-term peace and justice. But for others, their priority is very narrowly defined as 'counterterrorism' with no real long-term outlook.

International actors can also sustain and increase humanitarian aid. The situation in Afghanistan is very dire, and there is a massive amount of needs. It is also important to improve oversight of how aid is being distributed — there are concerns about how much of the aid is actually being rechannelled, misused or wasted. And then, of course, there is the issue of resettlement for Afghans at risk. Many of the resettlement plans announced haven't moved quickly or efficiently enough, and there are many vulnerable people who fall beyond the scope of these programs. That means we are complicit in putting human rights defenders at risk of being silenced by the Taliban since we are not offering other opportunities for them to continue their advocacy work.

Do you consider the question of whether governments should actually cooperate with the Taliban valid?

For humanitarian organisations to be able to continue delivering humanitarian aid, we need a degree of engagement. When thinking of isolating the Taliban, you want to make sure not to isolate the Afghan people in the process. So, I think that one of the solutions is to have *principled* engagement, a common set of values around which those countries engage. We have to ask ourselves: do we want the Taliban's policies discriminating against women and girls? Do China, Pakistan or Germany want this? The question then is how can we work together to get closer to tackling this? But if China is only interested in counterterrorism, Germany is only interested in containing refugees, and Pakistan is only interested in economy and trade – and for all of them, women and girls' rights have become second or third issues – then it will be hard to have any impact or leverage at all.

What are some takeaways for the Global North from what happened in Afghanistan?

I think one of the main takeaways should be to exhaust every single measure before trying a military intervention. And when a military intervention does indeed take place, the international community needs to uphold the principles or values that they say they are there

for. First and foremost, in fighting violations, you are not allowed to commit more violations yourself. This is exactly what happened in Afghanistan. There was a culture of impunity, and allegations of abuse by the Afghan army, as well as the international forces, which were not seriously investigated. There were serious allegations of corruption, again not just by Afghans but also by the American contractors. And if you let these things fester, they can collapse a regime. Just because you are dealing with so-called terrorists, this doesn't mean that you can do whatever you please — for it's going to come back and haunt you. The way things ended in Afghanistan is another lesson — the lack of consideration of the implications of the decisions that were taken for 30 million Afghans. It was also very disappointing to see that, when the US was leading the so-called peace process, Europe was mainly following. Europe had invested in Afghanistan for over 20 years, yet, it still couldn't even voice a strongly worded objection. So, yes, I think there are a lot of lessons learned.

With the current surge of violence globally, Afghanistan has largely gone unnoticed. What would you like the world to know about the current situation in Afghanistan?

It is really important to realise that there is no other way to describe what's going on in Afghanistan but as gender apartheid. It is a massive systematic exclusion and humiliation of women, presenting women as less-than-human, secondary citizens. This is a level of human rights violation that cannot be in the interest of any society anywhere in the world — or for international security. Thus, paying attention to what's going on in Afghanistan and trying to advocate with governments to do more, to work together and truly prioritise these issues, is very important. I know that there are many urgent issues right now that require our attention and resources. But I do believe that we have it in us to deal with more than one issue at a time.

It's also important to remember that there are many ways in which people *are* resisting these injustices, particularly women. We hear about women who go to sit-in protests or gather in their homes to protest, women who form book clubs or teach girls in secret. There are many ways in which women are trying to run businesses and feed their families, trying to defy the Taliban's policies in any way they can to have a public presence. I think this is important to acknowledge — the fact that so many Afghans have not given up on a better future for themselves. The message can only be then that we certainly cannot give up either.

This interview was conducted by Alena Bieling.



Shaharzad Akbar

Shaharzad Akbar is an Afghan human rights activist who served as the chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission until the beginning of 2022.