

NAJIA ZEWRI - From Refugee to Peacemaker

A peace-builder from Afghanistan, whose life time achievements are briefly described in her story below: *From Refugee to Peacemaker*

I grew up in Afghanistan in the '70s and '80s, which was a time of great political transition and state repression. The Leftists wanted to abolish the monarchy and modernise the state and the Rightists wanted to maintain their power. During that time, I lead a very modern, middle-class life just like any child in Europe but much more privileged than the majority of Afghans. By the time I fled my country, I was a university student, and like millions of refugees, I walked over the mountains to Pakistan to an unknown destination and uncertain future.

The situation heightened my political inclinations, which had manifest themselves early on. As a child I was always looking for solutions to the constant rows between my siblings because I couldn't tolerate conflict. It made me think deeply about issues, especially women's issues. I am not a rebel by nature, but the situation for women demanded that I speak out about our rights even when I returned to Afghanistan under Taliban rule, which was unbelievably miserable. I was determined that women would share in the political process.

Since then I have represented women in jirgas from Tokyo to Bonn to Brussels. I have served on the Transitional Jirga, the Constitutional? Loya Jirga, the Af-Pak Peace Jirga and the National Consultative Peace Jirga. I was appointed to the leadership of the National Consultative Peace Jirga by sixteen-hundred delegates, which meant tribal leaders had to take into account the recommendations of women delegates and include them in peace processes including the establishment of the High Peace Council.

I co-founded the Afghan Women Network and with other advocates, and I helped produce the first draft of the UNSCR 1325 Action plan.

Peace Building

As a refugee, I learned a lot by talking with people in the battlefield, I worked in the camps and saw the impact pain and war had on the lives of individuals and how vulnerable it made people who were forced to flee their country. That feeling made dedicate my life to helping the defenceless.

At 25, I was managing an organisation with 85 staff. We worked in the most conservative refugee camps implementing literacy and vocational training programmes, health awareness and employment programmes. My job included fundraising and liaising with international community representatives. I also set up a resource centre for refugee women to come together for support.

I saw those people every day. The injured and traumatised, women and children, who shared their stories of living as stateless refugees and every day was a life-and-death struggle. I realised personally what it meant not to have legal status when I was part of a group of Afghan women refugees invited to attend the World Women Forum in 1991. The only document we had was a piece of paper which we discovered was invalid when we were in transit. We were held for many hours before finally being allowed to fly to Washington.

Challenges

In each political situation, the challenges are different. In the refugee camps in Pakistan, I came across a great deal of prejudice when I had to deal with men. Most thought, incorrectly, that education for women was against traditional values. One time I talked to a community elder about organising literacy classes for women and after our discussion, he turned to his colleagues and said, "hey guys, women are knowledgeable and can know about community issues."

Most men, however, resist change and women cannot break into those patriarchal networks where deals are brokered. Men see no reason to relinquish power nor do they see any role for or value women. As women have

no political, financial, military or tribal power, they consequently have little to bargain with. When women do put their heads above the parapet, they often received death threats and many have been killed. My role has been to challenge, change and build trust. That is part of my responsibility as deputy chair of the National Peace Consultative Jirga and as the secretary and executive committee member of the High Peace Council.

Successes

In the post-Taliban state building peace processes, Afghan women have demonstrated remarkable unity despite political, ideological and ethnic differences.

In the Af-Pak Peace Jirga, the Afghan organisers were reluctant to be the first to announce female participation due to honour issues. I initiated the advocacy and brought women on board, and with other civil society activists, we ensured a female presence at the peace talks. In this Jirga, I was the second deputy and the only woman and had to convince Jihadis and tribal leaders of the importance of respecting women as equal citizens and peace builders.

Women Are the Answer

Women have proved they play a vital role as peace-makers at the international and national level but also at a fundamental level by instilling core values in their families and in the wider community by promoting peace, unity and coexistence.