



Interview with Dr Sima Samar*

Chairperson of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission.

Dr Sima Samar was born in Jaghoori, Ghazni, Afghanistan, on 3 February 1957. She obtained her degree in medicine in February 1982 from Kabul University, one of the few Hazara women to do so. She practised medicine at a government hospital in Kabul, but after a few months was forced to flee for her safety to her native Jaghoori, where she provided medical treatment to patients throughout the remote areas of central Afghanistan.

One year after the communist revolution in 1978, her husband was arrested and was never heard from again. Some years later, Dr Samar and her young son fled to the safety of nearby Pakistan. She then worked as a doctor at the refugee branch of the Mission Hospital in Quetta. In 1989, distressed by the total lack of healthcare facilities for Afghan refugee women, she established the Shuhada Organization and Shuhada Clinic in Quetta. The Shuhada Organization was dedicated to the provision of health care to Afghan women and girls, the training of medical staff, and education. In the following years, further branches of the clinic/hospital were opened in central Afghanistan.

After living in Quetta as a refugee for over a decade, Dr Samar returned to Afghanistan in December 2001 to assume a cabinet post in the Afghan Interim Administration led by Hamid Karzai. In the interim government she served as Deputy Chairperson and first ever Minister for Women's Affairs. She was forced to resign from her post after receiving death threats and being harassed for questioning conservative Islamic laws, especially sharia law, during an interview in Canada with a Persian-language newspaper. During the 2002 Loya Jirga, several religious conservatives

* The interview was conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, on 7 February 2011 by Markus Cott, Deputy Head of the International Committee of the Red Cross delegation in Kabul, and by Robert Whelan, communication delegate.

published an advertisement in a local newspaper calling Dr Samar the Salman Rushdie of Afghanistan.

She currently heads the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC).¹ She was a nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009.

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What do you think are the root causes of decades of conflicts in Afghanistan?

In my view, the root cause of the conflicts in the country – and then later the behaviour of the people in power – has from the start been the lack of education.

What are your earliest memories of the conflict in Afghanistan?

I think from the day of the coup d'état in Afghanistan in 1978. I was a student at university. For the first time in my life I heard the sound of a MiG fighter flying over the palace, and we had never seen a tank before. I remember that with the noise of the tank, the shooting, and the MiG, I couldn't sleep at all that night. I was already married and kept my husband awake too, because there was so much noise that it was impossible to sleep. I was 22 years old.

I remember that, the week after the coup, our classmates who belonged to the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) immediately changed their clothing and their behaviour. They all had pistols and brought them into the classroom. Then we saw who was who. We knew some of them; they belonged to Khalq and Parcham.²

When the coup took place in 1978, the Khalqis started to arrest anyone, especially anyone who had land. They did so without any record, without any accusation, without any kind of fair trial. Lack of education was the main reason for the conduct of the PDPA. They began to be very tough, acting like a dictatorship, without any accountability. That is what caused most of the people to stand against them. For instance, it led to a popular uprising in my district of Jaghoori in Ghazni province. Because the Khalqis started to arrest family members, the people began to fight back and killed them all with stones and some very old British guns.

How did this first conflict affect women and what role did they play in it?

It affected them very badly, because when it comes to conflict, women's movements are even more restricted.

In a country like Afghanistan, the whole conflict is conducted by men. Women are left behind, washing and cooking. But at the beginning some city-educated women were involved. For example, we took part in propaganda,

1 Material drawn from 'Sima Samar', Wikipedia, available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sima_Samar (last visited 28 March 2011).

2 Khalq and Parcham were factions of the PDPA, Khalq meaning 'masses' and Parcham meaning 'banner' or 'flag'. The leaders of Khalq were Presidents Nur Muhammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin. The party was formed in 1965, supported by the USSR. The leader of Parcham was Babrak Kamal, who became the third president of Afghanistan in 1979. He was replaced by Najibullah in 1986.

distributing our 'night letters' and writing 'Death to Russia,³ Death to Khalqis' on the walls of Kabul.

There was a curfew at night. Whenever we were distributing 'night letters' we did so under the curfew. Soviet jeeps were patrolling and it wasn't clear who was who. They were on the lookout and we were trying to hide. The curfew was lifted at 6 a.m. and we would pretend we were going to the *hamam* (public bathhouse). But in fact we had the sprays or the 'night letters' on us and we distributed them in the *hamam*.

We lived in a two-storey house and used to throw such letters down into the compound. Our neighbour was a teacher and she would come up and say, 'Hi, I saw this one!' Everybody was so happy, encouraging people to stand up, and saying why the PDPA and the Soviets were bad and how they were violating everything.

We did not wear scarves at that time, and they were only very rarely worn in the university. We started to wear them not to be identified. We took different coloured scarves with us when we went to the demonstration because the Intelligence Service was trying to find us. We used to have four scarves in our bags; when we set out [into the city] we wore one colour, and then changed to another colour, thinking they could not identify us. But the Soviets were really brutal. They beat up many of us. Even under the Khalqis they came with rubber batons, beating us with them and spraying us with water.

One day during *Se Hoot*⁴ we all went out, and the Soviets came with their soldiers. We were led by the elite, the educated ones. All the other universities and schools, the girls' schools, the boys' schools, all of them joined the demonstration. The narrow streets were full of students and academic staff. We were shouting; we had slogans; we had all those things.

At the time it was not possible to make enough photocopies, and very few people had a typewriter. So during *Se Hoot* we were writing pamphlets and tracts, what we called 'night letters', by hand. We used up to ten layers of carbon paper and wrote with a Chinese pen. It was quite hard to make them readable through to the tenth copy. We were encouraging people to come up and say 'Allah-u-Akbar'. I think Kabul was moving when people were saying 'Allah-u-Akbar' against the communists. It was quite good.

However, when things became insecure the women were progressively put aside. Then the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 obviously had a really negative impact on our situation. Of course, the Hezb-i Islami⁵ had no women members; I don't remember any women being with them when we were out on the streets at that time.

3 In December 1979, Soviet military forces entered Afghanistan, remaining for ten years.

4 The last month of the Afghan year.

5 Hezb-i-Islami Afghanistan, meaning Islamic Party, is an Islamist organization commonly known for fighting the Marxist government of Afghanistan and its close ally, the Soviet Union. Led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, it was established at Kabul University in 1975.

Later you had to flee Afghanistan for Pakistan, where you opened a hospital for women in Quetta. What prompted you to do that and how did you manage to keep it running?

I went to Peshawar in 1983 and joined the local union of medical doctors. But we did not have enough medical supplies, so I sought help from various organizations. I was in close contact with the ICRC because I often went to see some of their female patients in Quetta Hospital, and occasionally I asked them to give me some dressings, iodine or suchlike, Vaseline and gauze for burn cases, things like that. So we did have some kind of co-operation. Otherwise there was nothing. All those Jihadi groups, all seven of them, had a hospital for the male members of the party, but not for their families.

There was a non-governmental organization (NGO) called Inter-Church Aid that was running hospitals, clinics, relief programmes. It was a consortium of different churches – Church World Service from the US, Norwegian Church Aid, and churches all over the world. I started to work with it in Quetta in a Christian hospital a hundred years old, dating back to the British time. It had a refugee branch, which included a female branch. That was where I worked.

One morning, a young Afghan woman was brought in with pre-eclampsia. She was having convulsions, and I ran here and there trying to find someone who could give her a valium injection to reduce them. The pharmacy was closed, nobody was in the hospital yet, the delivery room was locked, and I couldn't find the key. I got really angry. So I went back and sent the patient to another hospital. She died. I was so depressed. I said: 'We have to do something, there is nothing here for women. This is a hospital, but it's not for emergencies.'

That is why I wanted to set up the hospital for women and children. But it was difficult to find money. Nobody was willing to provide funding and nobody was willing to listen to a woman. In 1987, after that incident, I got some money from Inter-Church Aid. It was headed by an old British man. I went to him, still crying; I was so young! He asked me: 'What's happened, my daughter?' – he was really old, 85 at that time. I said: 'Well, today an Afghan patient came and she died because there were no injections, no valium injections. So I want to start a hospital. Can you fund me?' 'Sorry, no,' he said, 'because the Hezb-i-Islami will bomb our office; we will be in trouble.' I mean, the Pakistani police was in the service of Hezb-i-Islami, and it was controlling all those people. I told him that I would not tell anyone he was giving me funding, and managed to convince him. I worked with him for two years, so he saw that I was really working hard. I was the first to arrive at the hospital each day and I was the last to leave it – a young revolutionary. I went twice a week to the Afghan refugee camps. We had a lot of Pakistani staff, of course. The male doctor and the Pakistani staff kept saying it was time to leave. And I was saying 'No, not until I've finished tending the last patient.' So all of them were against me. It was already a fight between us.

Anyway, the British man eventually provided me with funds and I started the hospital in 1987. At that time, there was nothing for a woman, no education, not even in the camps. Each camp had a clinic, but there were hardly any female staff.

This was when you realized that you needed to work to improve women's education too?

Yes. You must realize that in Peshawar at the time literate people, and women in particular, were oppressed.

I remember one Mawlawi⁶ who came late on in 1987 to the hospital I started in Pakistan. He brought a lot of patients and said: 'One day, if Kabul is free, then we know what to do with you literate ones.' I said: 'Why?' He replied: 'Because you people understand what happens if a bomb drops here, you know how big an area it can cover; but the illiterate don't understand and disregard the bomb; that is why they're able to fight.'

So again, it's a question of education and literacy. Of course we understood. I said: 'We did our job; we did our part.' He said: 'I don't mean you, because yes, you are saving our morals, our honour, you have a hospital for women and children; but the others, they all ran away, they all went to America.' In that sense he was right: first of all only a few women in Peshawar were active, some of them were killed by Hezb-i-Islami, and the rest ran away. Then I was the only woman in a position to do something.

There was already a girls' school run by Iranians, but of course everything, including the curriculum, was Iranian, and they even provided uniforms and buses for the students. But to see that our own children, Afghan children, were being educated by Iranians in an Iranian manner, praying for Khomeini, was not easy for a secular person like me.

In 1989, Oxfam agreed to support us and gave us 24,000 Pakistani rupees [then approximately US\$1,000]. With that money I started a girls' school. The money didn't pay for furniture or chairs for the students; there was only a plastic carpet for the classroom. I thought, 'It's difficult to compete with Iranians; they provide everything for free, they give extra money and food rations. If I only have a cement floor, who will come to my school?' So I also asked the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee and they gave me some money for the furniture. That's how we got that school going.

By then the Soviets had left Afghanistan, and all the donors came out from Geneva, started the UN Operation Salam in aid of Afghanistan, and opened their offices there. For the first time the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) came to Pakistan. They opened an office in Quetta, and UNESCO opened an office in Quetta City too.

When I started the girls' school, I developed a literacy course for women. I wrote it myself and included health education in it. I said that, while they're learning to read and write, they should also learn how to stop epistaxis, how to deal with insect bites, things like that, explained in very simple sentences. I had also included family planning in the book. But when I approached UNESCO to print the book, they said that this subject was too sensitive. They said: 'We really can't fund this – Hezb-i-Islami will bomb our office!'

6 'Mawlawi' is an honorific Islamic religious title given to Sunni Muslim religious scholars.

So that was another instance of completely ignoring women. Nobody talked with us; nobody was there to listen to a woman. Of course, when I started the hospital, Hezb-i-Islami was after me. But they couldn't really catch me out, otherwise they would have torn me to pieces.

Did the situation change after the departure of the Soviets?

It became extremely harsh when the Mujahideen took power. The first thing they did was to ban women's participation in various ways. They divided the ministries among themselves in Pakistan. We had a very big administration in Quetta, but women were not included in it. The posts were shared out between Tajik and Pashtun alone, and there was no representation for minorities. There were no women, and that was in 1992!

One of the ministers from Sayyaf's party came to his office in the ministry. I think he was the Minister of Mines – I don't remember his name. On the first day he said: 'Oh, the women should not be seen when the minister comes, and they cannot come and greet me.' The next day he came with a pile of scarves, big ones, and first of all asked the staff to distribute them to the women and tell them to wear them, and then they could come and greet their minister. Whatever they did, the first thing was headscarves for women, and then they slowly increased the pressure.

At one point the government announced that the women who presented the news on television, national television – we had only one channel – were not to be seen. There was a rose on the screen when a woman was reading the news. Then they decided that the woman's voice should not be heard by men who were unrelated to her.

Nowadays we are still feeling the impact of that; above all, the lost possibility for women to have an education. And I believe that without education we cannot have the necessary confidence in ourselves to stand up for such things. I compare myself with my own cousins who did not have the opportunity to go to school. What I'm doing and what my cousin, who is my own age, does are completely different. She has a normal rural Afghan life – though not what I consider normal – and I believe that I'm a different person because of education.

What role did the international community play in improving the conditions of women?

Overall the international community was really, in my view, part of the problem that isolated women. Nobody talked about women's issues.

I remember, when UNESCO started to give some tents, furniture, and cupboards with some books to the Afghan refugees, I went to them and kept saying 'If you give two tents and materials for the boys' school, give one for the girls'. You should make it compulsory.'

When UNDP opened an office, I called and got an appointment. I began by telling the man I went to see: 'I'm glad that UNDP has started its programme for Afghanistan; do you have any programmes for women?' He said: 'Women?' 'Yes,' I said, 'the UNDP is all about development, and how can you have development without women's participation?' He replied: 'Sorry, we don't have anything for

women.' I asked him: 'Why not?' He said: 'I was in Afghanistan. I was in Logar province for a week and I didn't see any women.' And I commented: 'Look, all these heroes who fought with the Soviets and pushed the Soviets out, do you think they dropped from the sky? They were all born of a woman.' And that man said: 'I haven't seen any Afghan women.' I was so naïve, I said: 'I'm one of them!' He asked: 'Are you not French?' I said: 'No. I have green eyes, but I'm not French. An Afghan can have green eyes. You should understand from my broken English that I'm not.' 'I thought you were French', he said.

So that was the overall attitude.

Did you try to change this perception within the international community?

I argued the subject with Francesco Vendrell in 1998, at one of the conferences on Afghanistan in Lausanne. He was the UN Special Representative for Afghanistan at that time.⁷ There was an Afghanistan Support Group conference in Switzerland. It was the time when the United States wanted to impose sanctions on the Taliban government.

Mr Vendrell spoke as the UN Special Representative, and I spoke too as the only woman in that group. He said he didn't want the Americans to impose sanctions on the Taliban because he had already spoken with them and also with the Northern Alliance, and that they were going to sit around the table and discuss the issues. I raised my hand and said: 'Mr Special Representative, at that table where you got a guarantee from the Northern Alliance and from the Taliban in Pakistan and Iran, where was the space for women? What is our role?'

After the US intervention I told him: 'I'm here to tell you that women should be included from the beginning, but not me. Not Sima Samar. I am not here to fight for myself.' Then I stressed: 'But please include women from the beginning; otherwise they will not give us a chance.' Thus he remembered that I was fighting for women's participation.

Also, when I was appointed Minister of Women's Affairs and Deputy Chairperson of the Afghanistan Interim Administration, I went to Washington. They received and treated me really well. So I raised a few issues during a meeting with Colin Powell, who was then the Secretary of State. I said: 'I'm not a diplomat; I already have a lot of troubles to my name. One, I'm a woman. Two, I'm Hazara. Three, I'm vocal, nobody likes me. So I would like to ask you a few things. One, please do not repeat the mistakes that you made before.' He said: 'What?' I replied: 'You created these monsters. Please don't support them again. Two, the amount of money you spend on bombing in Afghanistan, do spend it on development there instead.' I gave him the example of the eighty-five missiles fired during Clinton's administration against Bin Laden's camps in Afghanistan: 'How many people you have killed. I think that with \$85 million you could have done a lot in Afghanistan.'

7 Francesco Vendrell was head of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan (UN SMA) and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations from January 2000 to December 2001. From 1993 to 2000 he was Director of the Asia and Pacific Division in the UN Department of Political Affairs.

I went on: 'Three, don't forget that you have not done enough for women in that country. We cannot really build democracy and bring peace in Afghanistan without women's participation.'

'Four,' I pointed out, 'who is going to see to our security? The failure of this government, our government, is clearly the failure of your government and the CIA. And please do send enough women with your soldiers to Afghanistan.' 'Why should we send female soldiers?' he asked. And I said: 'To let the Afghan people see a female face and see that they are also able to carry guns and able to patrol the streets and the cities. Finally,' I urged him, 'you really should not undermine accountability and justice'.

When I asked that the same amount of money be spent on construction and development in Afghanistan (as had been spent on the bombing), he said: 'Do you know how much money we spend?' I said: 'No, I just guess it's a lot.'

Colin Powell reacted to my remark saying 'I come from a minority, I'm a woman.' 'I'm also from a minority, Sima,' he said. 'I come from the black community and I'm the first black Secretary of State here, so I do understand part of your worries and concerns.'

When he came to Afghanistan and President Karzai introduced me to him, saying 'Sima is my Deputy Chairperson and Minister of Women's Affairs', he replied, 'I know, she already gave me a hard time in Washington.' Karzai looked at me: 'Where did you meet him?' 'Well, I had a fight with him.' [Laughter]

Colin Powell said: 'Your Foreign Minister [it was Abdullah] has already said that you don't need foreign troops in Afghanistan.' I told him that it's the same mistake, the same group. Who is Abdullah and who am I? Because we were not selected by the people; we were selected by someone and put in that position. I was appointed because I was fighting and walking around and saying that women should be part of the process.

How do you see things going in the future, let's say in the medium term?

I think the future of Afghanistan depends on the strategy of the Afghan government, let's say Afghan leadership, and also on our partners in the international community, to attain what we want for this country. In my view, one of the mistakes we all made was the lack of a strategy and clear benchmarks for ourselves – where we are going and what we want to do in Afghanistan. Unless we really give a chance to the people who are genuinely committed to and honest about democracy and about the principles of human rights, we will not be able to build democracy with soldiers. We can double or triple the number of soldiers. That will not help. It should be the people of Afghanistan who assert their will. The international community as our partner can facilitate matters, can help us and perhaps smooth the road for us.

I don't believe in a democratic country or a democratic society without women's participation. In Afghanistan, women's names have been used to demonstrate the democratic process, rather than for their real participation. Take the elections as an example. A male member of the family voted on their behalf, using the female name, but in reality their participation was low. It was high in only a few

areas, such as Bamyan and Hazara, and in Jaghoori it was really high because we have a lot of educated women. But it was low in Helmand or Logar. In Logar, for instance, when they provided voting cards for the population in the presidential election, there were twice as many voting cards for women as for men. I raised this issue; I had a fight with the President. I said: 'It's not fair. If the men in the family don't allow their wives to be photographed, they should at least be allowed to have their fingerprint taken. And women should be allowed to come and get the card, to let them know they have ownership of it. This was not the case.' His reply was: 'You're so extreme! They don't allow it.' 'Okay,' I said, 'if they don't allow it, then don't provide voting cards.'

If you consider Western history over the twentieth century, it was mainly after wars and because of their contribution as civilians to the war effort that women finally gained political access and a political vote. Why didn't that happen here?

Again, it is because of the oppression of women, and how little freedom we have. Again, it comes down to education. In Paktia, they say a woman has the right to leave the house twice: once when she's married and the second time when she's dead and they are burying her. That is not the European culture, because in Europe – and in Iraq, for example – there are a lot of educated women. It is very difficult to convince an educated woman to let her husband go and get her card and vote on her behalf. But it's easy for the husband of the poor woman who has not heard anything to vote in her place, to use her name, and vote for Sayyaf or anybody else.

I repeat: education really is the key.

You stress the importance of education. How do children face the future after thirty years of war and ongoing conflict? How do young people see what awaits them in the future?

Well, I honestly do think our hope lies in the young generation, both boys and girls. I'm very focused on education. One of the problems of this government – Karzai's administration – is that he does not pay committed attention to education. The Ministry of Education should be given to a person who is really committed to change and to providing a better quality of education. Two weeks ago, he officially sent letters to say that the time assigned to science studies should be reduced and lessons on religious subjects increased. I don't mean we should not have religious studies, but let's have them as a family responsibility.

Let the family take responsibility for the children and what they want them to understand about their religion. I suffered because I was a Shia. At home I had to learn the Shia religion for my father's and my family's sake, and at school I had to learn the Sunni religion to get the grade, in order to pass. So when answering an exam question in third or fourth grade I was trying, as a child of seven or eight years old, to focus on the fact that I was not at home, and not to give a Shia reply. If I was at home, I had to concentrate on not saying the Sunni things, because my father and my family would get angry.

This does not help us. We have to know our principles of Islam and we have to practise them. But not by force. We have to teach our children the value of Islam rather than focusing on Islamic subjects. [We have to] introduce the quality of education. We are living in the twenty-first century.

But why would you say that these people focus so much on religion?

It's just for political interest, political interest only.

How do you explain that humanitarian organizations are today not able to access certain parts of the country where there are needs?

I think it's simply a question of control and power. The power holders see the humanitarian NGOs and human rights NGOs or the people who defend human rights as a threat to themselves, because they are afraid they will lose their power or that we will weaken their power, which is true. That is why they are exerting such pressure.

Do you believe a court will ever be established to try people who have violated human rights and committed atrocities in these decades of war, and to bring justice to the victims?

I don't, because I don't see any political will on the part of the Afghan government and authorities or the international partners of Afghanistan. We keep saying that there should at least be an acknowledgement of the suffering of the people.

My 14-year-old brother-in-law was in seventh grade when he was taken from the street, and he never returned. And who is responsible for that?

Being a victim of war myself, I cannot really forget. Imagine what percentage of women in this country face the same problem as I did. I became a widow when I was only 23, and I had a son. I was able to raise him and provide him with a good education and an easier life, but he still ... he simply doesn't try to discuss these issues with me because he doesn't want me to be depressed. For instance, when my father died, my brother held the funeral and my brothers cried, and it was quite natural. But my son did not cry. Then he told me that my brothers were angry with him because he had not cried, and he said, 'Mother, I don't understand what a father means.'

He's got a daughter now and I can see, by the way he loves her, that he himself did not know the feeling of that love. So he has tried to centre all his love and attention on his daughter. The way he holds and takes care of her, you feel it. And who is responsible for that?

What percentage of women who faced the same problem as I did were able to stand on their feet and feed themselves? Very few. They all became victims again and again. I don't know how many brothers-in-law they had to marry in order to survive with their orphaned children. Somebody must be responsible for that.

I do think, though, that many people did not suffer. They gained a lot of money, status, and power because of the suffering of the general population. There should be acknowledgement of the victims' suffering. And then the perpetrators should at least be isolated, and sidelined from positions of power. If you look at

most of the leaders we already have, which of them have lost their sons? Which ones have lost their fathers? Very few. So they have no feeling for and understanding of the suffering of the people.

To sum up, it is as though the Khalqis took the bride away from the wedding ceremony and she never returned. They took away the doctors, the intellectuals, the educated people, and nobody was there to respond. Nobody.

In the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission we are mapping the conflict, especially the mass graves. And nobody is found to be directly responsible. It is so depressing.

Are you optimistic or pessimistic when you look to the future?

I'm an optimistic person. If I lose my optimism, then I really must leave the country or lie down somewhere to die. We have no choice. I think this country and the people in it cannot continue forever in conflict. We have to find a better way for sustainable peace. And hopefully we will do so. It will take time because of Afghanistan's low literacy rate and the ethnic, linguistic, and regional tensions and suchlike. We have to realize one day that we are the same, we are all human beings.