

Profile

Sima Samar: safeguarding human rights in Afghanistan

Sima Samar had just graduated from the Kabul University School of Medicine, in 1982, when the Soviet invasion forced her to flee to central Afghanistan. “I began seeing patients immediately, but I often had to run to my book to identify symptoms and treatments, and then I had to find out whether the necessary medicine was even available. I saw women die every day because of incomplete abortion or shoulder presentation of the fetus at delivery: we did not have the proper equipment to deal with these sorts of problems”, she wrote in *The New England Journal of Medicine* in 2004. This experience started Samar on a journey to help women obtain equal rights, including health care, that would take her to Pakistan, around the world, and eventually back to Afghanistan.

Sitting in a cosy office at Boston University, where she is the 2006 Distinguished Visiting Scholar in Global Health, Samar is about as far from a war-torn country as one could imagine. The setting doesn’t matter. “I believe that there is no full justice anywhere”, she says. “One of the reasons the war became so violent, and lasted so long, was the lack of education, as well as poverty and joblessness. To overcome these things, I insist on education. I don’t believe in any kind of development without the involvement of women.”

Samar fled central Afghanistan in 1984 when her husband was arrested—he was never heard from again. She remained in exile for 17 years while the former Soviet Union, and then the Taliban, ravaged her country. Samar plunged into work in Quetta, Pakistan, and eventually established a hospital for Afghan refugee women. This facility was desperately needed: fundamentalists dominated the refugee camps and were opposed to the provision of health care for women by male physicians. In 1989, she founded the Shuhada Organization, a non-governmental organisation that is “committed to the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan with special emphasis on the empowerment of women and children”. Despite hostility from the Taliban, and with the support of the Norwegian Government and Novib (Oxfam Netherlands), the Shuhada Organization’s 20 physicians and 1000 other staff now run four hospitals, 12 clinics, and 60 schools in Afghanistan.

Samar returned to Afghanistan in 2001 and was named Deputy Prime Minister of Hamid Karzai’s new Government and Minister for Women’s Affairs. She now serves as Chair of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, which monitors and investigates many human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, forced marriage, rape, torture, and illegal imprisonment. In today’s Afghanistan, says Samar, human rights for women means promoting reproductive health and providing family planning, which isn’t happening

yet. “Public health officials say 77% of the population has access to health care. I don’t believe that it’s more than 30% among women”, she says. I ask her whether she has the support of the Afghan Government, since the Human Rights Commission was appointed by President Karzai, but isn’t part of Government. She waits before answering. “Yes and no”, she says carefully. “We don’t have full support, but we do have support. We make some noise. They have to listen to us.” The rest of the world is listening as well. “Dr Samar is the leading voice in her nation for the rights of women”, US Senator Edward Kennedy said, in 2004, when she received the John F Kennedy Profile in Courage Award, one of many honours she has won over the years. “Facing one of the world’s most severe challenges, Dr Samar has become an inspiring example of one woman’s dedication to begin the transformation of an entire society”, Kennedy said.

Samar’s influence extends beyond Afghanistan and in 2005 she became the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on the Situation of Human Rights in the Sudan. She has visited Darfur three times since her appointment. “I try to cut down on my travelling, but there are certain things I have to do myself, I can’t send someone else”, she says. After her most recent visit, in August, 2006, she reported that “After meetings in Khartoum I visited North and West Darfur and was extremely disturbed by the critical human rights situation in the region and the signs that there will be a further deterioration in the coming months if action is not taken to protect civilians from attacks and end the conflict through peaceful means.” Alongside her work for the UN, Samar travels around the world to speak at conferences and workshops—recent trips have taken her to India, Taiwan, and around the USA.

This extensive worldwide travel contrasts with Samar’s circumscribed existence inside Afghanistan, where she spends half her time. Like many critics of the Taliban, especially women, Samar faces danger whenever she moves around the country. The recent murder by two gunmen of Safia Amajan, the Director of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs in Kandahar, underlines the threat to Afghan women in public office. Samar has bodyguards. “I don’t go everywhere. I don’t travel much inside of Afghanistan. Even in Kabul I’m not someone who can walk freely.” Nonetheless, she believes progress has been made to protect human rights in her country: “The good part is the Human Rights Commission in Afghanistan is well established, with 11 offices around the country and 500 staff. In Afghanistan we have someone watching the door.”

Ivan Oransky
ivan-oransky@erols.com



Jamie Chromas

For the Shuhada Organization
see <http://www.shuhada.org>