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Women's courageous resistance to gender apartheid in Afghanistan: A conversation with Shaharзад Akbar

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ejw**Ayşe Gül Altınay**

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Feminist activist, scholar, and thinker Shaharзад Akbar is one of the leading voices of human and women's rights in Afghanistan – and beyond. In August 2021, she found herself in exile for the second time in her life, the first being after the 1996 establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan by the Taliban, when her family fled to Pakistan and lived there as refugees until 2001. Shaharзад Akbar studied at Smith College in the United States and became the first woman from Afghanistan to do postgraduate study at Oxford University in the United Kingdom, after which she took a number of civil society and political positions in Afghanistan. In August 2021, she was the Chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, which had 14 offices across Afghanistan, and was being regularly targeted by the Taliban. In 2020 alone, Shaharзад Akbar lost two colleagues in bombings and other acts of mass violence.

In 2021, Akbar was named as a laureate of the *Franco-German Prize for Human Rights and the Rule of Law* in recognition of her work defending human rights in Afghanistan, also becoming a finalist for the *Sakharov Prize*. In September 2022, she received the *International Hrant Dink Award* from the Hrant Dink Foundation in Istanbul.

A year after the Taliban's take-over of her beloved country, Shaharзад Akbar is at Oxford University as a Visiting Scholar at Wolfson College. We had the privilege of having this conversation with her in the last days of August 2022.¹ From her conceptualization of the human rights crisis in Afghanistan as 'gender apartheid' to her disappointment

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with the international community that has come to 'normalize' this situation, from her call for feminist antimilitarism that works towards breaking the cycles of violence to her reflections on the potentials of art in human rights activism, our conversation was rich with insight and inspiration about what transformative feminist activism might look like in the face of war and violence.

Ayşe Gül Altınay: Thank you so much Shaharзад jan for making the time to be with us, we feel excited and honored to start the EJWS Special Issue on Transformative Activism with this conversation. We would like to ask for your reflections on gender politics and women's rights in Afghanistan, Europe, and beyond, but can we first talk about your journey from a young girl who loved to read books, and yet whose right to education was taken away from her at an early age, to a feminist activist, scholar, and thinker? What or who have been your sources of inspiration in your own journey?

Shaharзад Akbar: Thank you Ayşe Gül and Andrea. I am so honored to be speaking to both of you and speaking for the EJWS. Since I was very young, I was very aware that being a woman, being a girl was not considered to be a good thing. I come from a family of five sisters and two brothers. I remember how my mom was just hated by the community for not having sons, until she gave birth to my brothers. My father used to take me to events with him, including poetry readings. He was very interested in poetry, literature, and politics. And I remember people complimenting me, saying, 'You are so smart. What a shame, you're a girl'. So, it was very obvious from a very young age that being a woman or a girl is considered shameful or a crime in a way. But the message that I received from my parents was consistently and constantly that women have done great things and women can do great things, 'look at the women in the history of Islam, look at the women in the history of our region and the history of the world' they would say. My father would always buy me biographies about women, literature by women. So, his message always was 'you can do it, too'. And I think since that very early age, I realized I was drawn to feminists. Because I was drawn to a world where I wouldn't be shamed for my gender. I was drawn to a world where I could be treated as an equal person, I could be valued for who I was as a person, as a girl. And when Taliban took over, they closed schools for girls and imposed a series of restrictions on women. So, these extreme experiences really shaped my passion for feminism and really shaped my understanding of its importance. So, when I went to Smith and as I continued to grow personally and

professionally, I started to think about how to learn more, how to know more, but also how to do more to make it a little less hard for other women in my country and everywhere. And of course, I have also experienced sexism everywhere, not just in Afghanistan.

Ayşe Gül Altınay: It is fascinating that your parents taught you early on about women who made history. And your name comes from an ancient tale about a powerful woman storyteller, right? The Shaharзад of *1001 Nights* who, through her enchanting stories, saved many lives, including her own. She is a reminder of the power of storytelling. In a way, you are doing the same, saving lives through storytelling – and much more, of course – although the kinds of stories you are telling are quite different.

Shaharзад Akbar: Yes. My father made sure that I learned the story of my name very early on. My sisters are called Zubaida, Noorjahan, and Fatima. So, all the names that our parents picked for us were the names of women in our history, Muslim women of incredible legacy and heritage or, women from the region. My father was a strong believer of Sufism, he had the Sufi understanding of Islam. And I remember him telling me that I shouldn't believe the Taliban version of Islam, that I should look at the role of Aisha, Fatma, and others in Islam's history, but also that I should look at the Quran itself. He used to say that the one time God showed anger with the prophet Mohammed was when he had a suspicion, a wrong suspicion about Aisha. 'What does that tell you about the way God views women?' he would ask. And God has called the story of Yusuf and Zulaiha, 'Ahsan ul Qasas', the best of stories. And it's the story of a woman falling in love with a man and taking initiative for that love. What does that tell you about what women can do in Islam? So, he always wanted to make sure that we felt very strongly connected to a tradition of women in our region, in our religion, in our culture who have defied cultural norms, stood up and tried to do things for their communities. From our names to the way we were raised, this value was repeated on a regular basis because he knew that the message we got every day from everyone around us was about shaming us, putting us down and making us feel insufficient because of our gender. Countering that message really required this daily emphasis, this daily practice.

Ayşe Gül Altınay: When you say 'our', what exactly do you mean? There is also a related debate about terminology: Some people say, 'Afghan women' and take all Afghan women to be a homogeneous category. And others prefer to say 'women of Afghanistan' in

an effort to be more inclusive of the diversity of women, especially with regard to the different ethnic, cultural backgrounds of women in Afghanistan. And I know you come from a mixed background of Arab and Uzbek. What is your preference in terms of terminology?

Shaharзад Akbar: The way I was raised, Ayşe Gül, by my parents, the real emphasis was on Afghanistan. Because it has been a cross-roads. In a way that we have elements of South Asian culture, Central Asian culture, and Middle Eastern culture. My father always said that it would be ideal for me to learn Turkish (or a Turkic language), Arabic, and have some understanding of Hindi. Because all these different cultures intersect in Afghanistan. Our music is heavily influenced by South Asia. So, this is beyond the ethnic composition of Afghanistan. When I say 'our', I mean, the bigger cultural heritage of the region. I think Afghans are very blessed to have flavors of all the languages and cultures in the region. No one speaks Arabic in Afghanistan, but because we have some religious training, we are exposed to Arabic. We have Uzbek-speaking, Turkmen-speaking, Farsi-speaking and Pashto-speaking. So there is a lot that we share, I think, that makes us rich. So, I feel most comfortable placing us in that bigger geography, which the current-day borders really don't hold. But I do understand where people come from when they say you shouldn't say Afghan women, you should say women of Afghanistan. I think the more we can be inclusive the better. My preference is for a way of looking at Afghanistan that captures its full diversity. And it's a very diverse country and its lived experience of women is also very diverse, of course.

Andrea Pető: Thanks a lot for sharing your personal story. I want to ask you about a term you have coined to refer to the situation in Afghanistan: 'gender apartheid'. These two terms, gender and apartheid, are coming from very different intellectual, political, and ideological trajectories. So, you convincingly describe that in Islam, in different aspects of Islam, there is space for women's empowerment. And then you come up with the term 'gender apartheid'. So, how do you reconcile this contradiction?

Shaharзад Akbar: I mean at any moment in time, we have multiple audiences as Afghan women, and different values, powers, and factors influencing our lives. Particularly, in the last few decades, when I speak about gender apartheid, I'm adapting a language that I hope makes sense to international players, to the UN human rights mechanisms. It's not a language that necessarily makes sense to people in my own country, but they are

not my audience when I'm utilizing this framework. Utilizing this framework, my hope is that we can get more out of the international human rights system that seems quite broken right now, but I'm not ready to fully give up on it. I use gender apartheid also to communicate the severity of the situation, because I do think that if people were treated on other bases, the way women are being treated based on their gender in Afghanistan, there would be a much stronger reaction. It is really extremely severe. I mean, being a woman right now in Afghanistan is not only culturally a crime or a liability. It is, by law, a liability, a crime. You are being prevented from access to the most basic rights because of your gender. That's enough to deprive your view of exercising your most basic human rights. So, in that sense, it makes sense to me because it captures the severity of that situation. But also, in talking to a global audience, it creates a sense of this not being a unique cultural situation, this is not how Afghans are . . . It is a mass violation of rights that's happening. It has happened before, this time it's happening in the context of gender. So trying to make it more understandable for them . . .

Ayşe Gül Altınay: So, how do you define the gender apartheid in Afghanistan right now? And how do you assess the period between the two Taliban rules from a gender perspective? What role did feminist activism play then, and what role does it have now? In the 2004 Constitution, women were recognized as equal citizens. How do you view the period between the two Taliban rules and the current moment from the perspective of feminist activism?

Shaharzad Akbar: I will say that even then, in late 1990s, there was resistance to Taliban's gender apartheid. I was a teenager then, but I remember all the different ways in which people resisted, particularly women. People who could leave, left, and leaving is an act of resistance. When you have no other tools to fight, then you go somewhere else to get educated, to continue exercising your full range of human rights. That's an act of resistance, I think. Those who could leave left the first time around as well. But those who stayed also resisted. There were secret schools that were being run. Women would get together to read books, to read poetry, to stay connected to each other, to encourage each other and, and to show solidarity. And there were the small, daily things. For instance, there was this family friend, a woman we visited in Kabul when we went back, who was telling us that every time she went out during that time, she would try to do something with her outfit that would get on Taliban's nerves. And there were also

women who would get together in weddings and other gatherings, play musical instruments and sing, they would just sing songs that they had come up with (because these are illiterate women) themselves. And they made a lot of little songs about Taliban, about Taliban's brutality, but also making fun of Taliban. These were all forms of resistance against Taliban's gender apartheid. These were forms of activism. It wasn't by educated women only. It was women sitting in villages, making fun of Taliban in their music, and continuing to defy the form of patriarchy that was being imposed. What's different now is that, of course, in the past 20 years, more Afghan women had access to education, more Afghan women had access to new and different ideas. In many villages and towns across Afghanistan, people started watching TV shows about women and men living in Turkey and South Asia. And people traveled, used Internet, connected with their families in Europe. So, there was a whole range of exposure to new ideas. And now there's a whole group of young activists who have stayed and who are battling Taliban's misogyny. They're going out and protesting, but it's not just the protesting. You know, some pro-Taliban observers say 'Oh, but look, it's not so bad. Women are going out. You know, they are not fully covering their face'. The credit for that doesn't go to Taliban, the credit goes to women. Taliban know that now it's impossible to stop every single woman and try to force them to wear what they want them to wear. If they could, they would, but they know they can't. Because the cities, especially, have changed so much. I see the difference that gives me hope. Although a lot of mistakes were made, there was a lot of failure and a lot of loss, there is this tangible mass – I don't know if I should call it human or feminist – aspiration for different lives among Afghan women. And that aspiration is being performed, is being illustrated in many different ways. And is trying to push back against the Taliban's brutality in their operation of limiting women's lives.

Ayşe Gül Altınay: It's indeed incredible courage that women in Afghanistan are showing in this context. Do you think that part of it is due to the institutionalization of women's rights in the past decade, through the constitution and equality mechanisms such as the Human Rights Commission you were leading?

Shaharзад Akbar: It's several things at the same time, right? The exposure, the social and cultural change, are, of course, also related to institutionalization. It also has to do with experiencing a period where things seemed possible. I mean, we had an incredible generational jump in the past 20 years. We had young women

from families with illiterate parents seeking PhDs. We had young women from families who couldn't read and write, joining the army, joining the police, positions that are considered too masculine, fields that women shouldn't even think about. So, people saw that it's possible. Women saw that it's possible. It's possible to be a member of parliament, it's possible to be an army officer, it's possible to be a pilot, it's possible to be a singer. And it was hard. It was really, really hard. All these women faced a lot of harassment and abuse, but they persisted. And now, overnight, you can't take away all that. You can't take away that aspiration, that belief. Because once it's possible, maybe it would be possible again. And, yes, the constitution granting that equality was important. For instance, if someone stopped me on the street, say a policeman, and said 'why is your scarf not on your head?', him stopping me and asking me this question would be considered illegal. He would do it, but still I had the law to back me. I could say that nowhere in law I am asked to cover my head. But now, we are in a very different situation where the laws, the policies require women to dress in a certain way and move in a certain way. So, it's much harder and we don't have that institutional backing that we had before. But the courage is there. And speaking of courage . . . I mean, these young women protestors who come out know that every time they come out, they could be arrested, not just themselves, with family members. And they have. They have been tortured and forced to sign letters saying they won't protest again or talk to media. The level of brutality that they face is unimaginable. So is their courage. I couldn't do it. I do not know many people – men and women anywhere in the world – who could do what they're doing.

Andrea Petó:

Thank you. I think you very nicely, and importantly, describe the process of how in the period between the two Taliban rules, there was a kind of institutionalization of women's rights. There was a kind of global human rights framework that was brought into Afghanistan. And you also pointed out that you are talking to a different audience when you are speaking about this gender apartheid. But I was wondering if you can reflect on this concept of the global human rights crisis, which you mention in your talks and interviews. Because, you know, there is this criticism that the adaptation of this global human rights system was a form of colonialism. And also, there are lots of criticisms saying that it did not really promote empowerment. So, I was wondering if you can reflect on the global human rights crisis and what happened in

Afghanistan. Is this a part of it or a sign of it or is it totally a separate phenomenon? And how is it connected to these everyday practices of resistance that you have described?

Shaharзад Akbar: Absolutely. I mean, I share some of the criticism that's leveled at international community's engagement in Afghanistan and the way it instrumentalized, particularly women's rights, to justify the war on terror. The coupling of the war on terror and the women's rights agenda was a huge mistake. It did a huge disservice to the agenda. It did a huge disservice to the work of activists who were truly working for a human rights agenda. They were not interested in the war on terror aspect of it or the political aspect of it. So, reflecting on the past 20 years, what we see time and again is that women's rights are being instrumentalized by political powers, by the Taliban or by the United States. Women's rights have been used to justify political objectives or security objectives or to give them a nice cover. And that's destructive, very destructive. But I think what we should remember is the agency of women in this process. Yes, women's rights were instrumentalized in Afghanistan—and we see that very clearly now because there's a mass violation of women's rights and the same countries who came to Afghanistan saying 'we are saving Afghan women' are doing almost nothing about it. But, regardless of the pretense under which the international community came to Afghanistan, in that period of openness, women themselves saw that openness, with some legal structures and some recognition of their rights, and jumped on it. They tried to make the most of it in terms of educating themselves, educating their families, improving their lives, improving the lives of their communities, improving the legal framework. They pushed hard. And we made mistakes in the way we prioritized, the way we utilized the language, but there was an incredible momentum in the sense that women decided we'll make the most of this. If there's an opportunity to vote, we'll all go out and vote, despite the security threats. If there's an opportunity to educate myself, I'm gonna go and learn. If there's an opportunity to work in the army, I'll try that. If there's an opportunity to become a doctor . . . So, I think, the credit for the change that we see in Afghanistan does not go to the international community's intervention by itself, but the fact that Afghan women, and Afghan people in general, despite the conflict, despite the corruption, were able to utilize the very small opportunities that existed to change their own lives, to transform their own lives. To change society in the way that it changed in the past 20 years was very difficult.

There was a lot of corruption and conflict. You would see attacks on girls going back to school, you would see attacks on female activists. You would see female journalists being targeted and killed, and then the next day, their colleagues would show up at the radio station. And this was not because America had some women's empowerment agenda. This was because *women* had an agenda for themselves, and they were pushing for it.

And when I talk about the global human rights crisis, what I mean is that we see setbacks and regressions, not only in traditional, conservative, patriarchal countries like Afghanistan. In the past few months, we have seen major setbacks, legal setbacks in terms of human rights in the UK, where I'm living right now.

So, I think, in the human rights movement, we really need to wake up. What are we missing? We are missing something. We are missing something very crucial. Setbacks always happen, but the degree of setback that we are seeing right now, the sort of discourse that we are seeing about human rights. . . . What do we need to change? Do we need to change the way we communicate? Do we need to go to other audiences? Do we need to broaden our alliances? What's not working? Why are we failing to have an impact in improving women's lives in Afghanistan, in one of the worst women's rights crises? Why, what is the root cause? And how can we, how can we tackle it? I don't have the answers . . .

Ayşe Gül Altınay: I was just going to ask you about your answer to these questions, Shaharзад. Perhaps we can approach this question from the amazing analysis you have laid out. There are women in Afghanistan, even in this very scary context, coming out and showing remarkable courage. I just read a piece of news about a new library being opened by women, a women's library. Despite the conditions of what you call 'gender apartheid', women are initiating change, educating themselves, creating spaces for education, going out in the streets, and asking for their rights. How can the international community make use of this or relate to these women on the ground in Afghanistan, who are trying to change the current conditions? And of course, the international community is not a homogeneous entity. There is the UN, with different entities within, there are the different states negotiating with the Taliban, there are the international women's rights and human rights organizations . . . How can these different actors in the international community engage in a meaningful way with Afghanistan based on what you have just laid out for us?

Shaharзад Akbar: I think the international community still has options to engage constructively and they should be taking their cues from people on the ground, from the women on the ground who have articulated their demands time and again. There is a clear demand for non-recognition of Taliban unless they recognize half of the population. This is something that women have articulated again and again. And when I talk to activists on the ground, their biggest fear is normalization of what's happening in Afghanistan. What they don't want to see happen is that somehow diplomats make peace with Taliban based on, say, 'this is Afghan culture, this is Islam, this is okay. We don't want to impose our own lifestyle on Afghans. Afghan people are okay with women not going to school. So, let's just go with it'. This is their biggest fear. Don't normalize what's happening. It's not normal. We are telling you, Afghan women and Afghan men are telling you that it's not normal for girls not to go to school. It's not normal for women to be policed on the street if they don't have a male escort with them. It's not realistic. Many, many households are female-headed households. Because there has been a long conflict, there are so many widows. What do you expect, that they never leave their house to go grocery shopping or work or support their family? How is that gonna happen? How will women farm, covering their face and wearing a long black dress? That's not practical and that's not Afghan culture. This is what people fear the most. And let me tell you the main anxiety in the international community, particularly in the Western countries that contributed troops. They want Afghanistan to be forgotten. They don't want their public to remember what a failure it has been. So, normalizing the situation and distancing themselves is the outcome that they're most pleased with. They feel like they can't change the Taliban and they don't have any energy or any time to think about Afghanistan anymore. All they want is the next time there are elections, in the US for instance, that there's no talk of Afghanistan. No images of starving children and no images of women complaining and protesting. That's what they want. What we want, what women in Afghanistan want is solidarity. It is the world standing with us saying 'this is not okay, this is not acceptable. A small group of men cannot detain and police women, half of the population of a country, like this, and no cultural excuse, no religious excuse should allow this'. This is what we want. This is the kind of solidarity that we demand. And this kind of solidarity is only coming out in statements really, nothing more tangible. And I do

think that we should all try to find ways to support women on the ground. I know that, for instance, supporting them politically, supporting them financially, and continuing to invest in education opportunities for Afghan women inside and outside Afghanistan, are some of the things that seem small, but can make a difference in a few years.

Ayşe Gül Altınay: Since you've talked about solidarity, we have a question about that as well. Earlier this year, we were together on an online panel organized by SU Gender in Istanbul on the concept of feminist+ solidarity. So, could you talk about what feminist solidarity or feminist+ solidarity mean for you – especially in connection to the main theme of this Special Issue, Transformative Activism? What form can feminist+ solidarity take in the case of Afghanistan?

Shaharzad Akbar: Let me first say that we have seen solidarity from activists in different parts of the world. And I'm grateful for that and I'm touched by it. But it hasn't been to the extent that we expected . . . maybe it was naïve to expect more, but I thought that if there is a country in the world where girls can't go to school, women would be protesting in every city in the world about that. Feminists would be protesting in every city in the world, asking every day: How can this happen? How can this be possible? This is stuff of nightmares. This is like reading, you know, dystopic fiction. This is not real. This is not acceptable. And, we haven't seen that. And I don't know why. I don't know if it's because people feel like it's not gonna work or because it feels so distant or because we live in capitalist societies where people are consumed fully by the act of daily survival, you know, paying the bills, making ends meet, taking care of their families. I don't know. I don't have the explanation, but it has been really difficult to watch. It has been really heartbreaking to watch because what worse could happen to women that we could allow to happen, and just watch. And so, for me, feminist+ solidarity really is about . . . maybe you can't change the Taliban's mind, maybe you don't have the political power to undo what's happening there, but you can go out there every day and say, 'I don't accept this. This is not okay. I know this is not okay. If this happened to me, it wouldn't be okay. It's not okay if it's happening to a woman in Afghanistan. I don't speak her language, I don't understand her culture, I don't know her religion, but she's a woman and this shouldn't be happening to her. This shouldn't be happening to any human being'. And, you don't see action on that scale. Of course, not only for Afghanistan, I know that there are other human rights crises around the world. So, trying to

keep Afghanistan on the agenda and trying to grasp solidarity where we find it, that's what we're trying to do. I don't know if I answered your question . . .

Andrea Pető:

I was fascinated by the response, thank you. So, you mentioned in your previous comment, the concept of normalization. And I think that's really a key term in terms of the strategies and tactics of how to deal with these extraordinary times we are living in. And you said that feminists in this extraordinary time were measured and weak, normalizing what is happening for different reasons. And there is the other crisis: Russia's attack on Ukraine. And you have been posting on your Twitter account, lots of messages of solidarity with Ukraine. So, I was wondering if you can comment on your experience. How do you experience the war against Ukraine as a feminist human rights activist? And how do you think that this will inform or change feminist activism?

Shaharзад Akbar:

Thank you, Andrea. Actually, last night, my husband and I were watching the coverage of Ukraine's Independence Day. It is 6 months since the war started in Ukraine. And, I was watching this soldier, talking to his family, now in England, and saying, 'I'm doing this for all the children, I'm not doing it for my own family. My own family is in a safe place'. It just breaks my heart. I just . . . I just find wars meaningless. And I just find them anti-feminist, I'm sorry. War can take away so much. War is so destructive. And, every day, when I think about the situation in Ukraine, I just think . . . You know, the war will end – and I hope it ends very, very soon . . . today, yesterday, you know, a few months ago – but there will be some things lost that you can never gain back. So, when I think about conflict anywhere, from my experience, as a girl, as a woman and as a mother, there is no good in war. There's no winner in war for me. Because someone is losing a piece of their heart, their child, you know. I don't want to suggest that women are by nature against wars; of course, women are involved in war, women promote war, women take part in war. I'm not saying that . . . But I do think that feminism should be about protecting life and war is against life. So, for me, the feminist movement should be focused on preventing wars and stopping wars and ending wars, and creating a world where people see how meaningless wars are. But that's not the world that we live in of course.

My solidarity is really with everyone who suffers in war, all the civilians. I mean, just watching how the Ukrainian people had to start their lives from scratch is painful, because we have done that, too. Because I have lived in a condition for so

many years, for most of my adult life, where my mom would refuse to buy something as simple as a wooden cupboard because she wasn't sure she would be living in the same house in 3 months, and she didn't want to carry it around. Because, guess what, my mom has lost everything that she had several times in her life, several times, everything . . . So for her, it has no meaning to buy something for her house. She doesn't want to do it. What's the point? Because she might lose it again. So, I have a lot of emotions around this because I have grown up in war and I have lived in war. But it breaks my heart. And I think our strength, the strength of the feminist movement should be in mobilizing as many voices, in Russia and across the world, against the war, as we can. And that's how we should measure our impact.

Ayşe Gül Altınay: Do you know if there has been any kind of communication between Ukrainian feminists in exile in the UK, for instance, and Afghan feminists, like you?

Shaharзад Akbar: I have been part of a conversation with Ukrainian activists and feminists inside Ukraine, not in exile. There may have been, but I'm not aware. Certainly, there are a lot of things that we share.

Andrea Pető: Thank you for sharing this story. I was wondering if you can say more about your position in relation to feminism. There are, of course, lots of feminists who are basically rejecting this kind of appeal for a kind of antimilitarist appeal. Some are taking up arms and joining the fight. And I was wondering if you see that also in Afghanistan. Besides, for instance, going out to protest, or mocking the Taliban, or having a library, are there also women taking some kind of active military action and using real violence against the Taliban for feminist causes? Because in the case of the Ukrainian feminists, that's the major change. Many consider the kind of discourse that defines feminist politics as peace politics as a form of colonization of their fight. I was wondering if you have got any comments on this based on the long experience you have.

Shaharзад Akbar: I can only speak from my own experience. What I have seen in my own context and Ukraine is different. Every context is different. From my own experience, my own context, I think the best use of our limited energy – because our energy is limited, it's not infinite – is to find ways to prevent war, to prevent fighting. This is based on what I have seen, what I have experienced, what I have seen happen to women, and what I have seen happen to men who engage in war and then come back to live with their families. You know, in the

Human Rights Commission, many of the cases of domestic abuse we registered were by men who had gone out and fought the Taliban, and in the process lost a part of their soul. When they came back to live with their families, there was increased violence, and increased anger. And maybe that's just Afghanistan. I don't want to universalize my own experience. But every violent interaction ended up having a compounded impact on the women, even if the women were not directly involved in that fighting themselves. The male members of their families were involved and the impact on their lives wasn't a positive one, it was a negative one, from what I have seen in my context.

And now, of course, there's a whole discussion in the Afghan diaspora about how to resist the Taliban. And there are people – men and women – who are for armed resistance against the Taliban. I am not. Because I don't see how we can break the cycles of violence. The biggest thing that I see in my own country is this ongoing cycle of violence for 40 years – under one or the other cause. And I think the biggest thing that we, as a nation, need to learn is to learn to live together and solve our issues peacefully. That would be the biggest milestone for me. And that's what I strive for. Of course, I understand the people who think otherwise . . . I mean, the day that I heard the Taliban kept the girls away from schools, March 23rd, when girls went to school and the schools were closed – they didn't even tell them in advance – as I was watching these sobbing teenagers being turned away from school, was that a moment that I was thinking about nonviolent resistance to Taliban? No, I was so full of anger! I was telling my husband 'I am gonna go to Afghanistan, and I am gonna fight them'. They are breaking the hearts of millions of teenage girls! How can they do this? So, I have my moments, but then, when I take a deep breath, I think that it's a harder journey, but we have to break the cycle. For us, we have to break the cycle.

Ayşe Gül Altınay: Thank you so much, Shaharзад. There's so much wisdom in what you have just shared. And it really touches my heart very deeply. Maybe as the last question we can ask, what message would you like to give the readers of the *European Journal Women's Studies* – about gender politics, about Afghanistan, about transformative politics, anything that you would like this particular group of readers to get from this conversation?

Shaharзад Akbar: I think there is this idea in Europe that . . . European political leaders like to think of themselves as champions of human

rights. And there this conception that somehow Europe is leaning on human rights. And in some ways it is, in many ways it is, perhaps. But what I have witnessed that has made me deeply uncomfortable is how selective human rights discourse can be. Having been trained as an anthropologist, I understand these discussions around cultural relativism. I understand the idea that women in Afghanistan do not want the same things that women in Sweden want, but I want to caution people living in Europe to revisit this notion that Europe is a champion of human rights as often as they can, watching the actions of their political leaders. I want them to be conscious of the double standards, as the cases of Afghan, Syrian, and Ukrainian refugees very clearly illustrated to all of us. Also, the different responses regarding accountability when it comes to allegations of war crimes in Ukraine and allegations of war crimes in Afghanistan. And also, I want to remind them that women everywhere for hundreds of years have been wanting more, more from their lives. And this is true about women in Afghanistan as well. It's not just the past 20 years, it has been for at least a hundred years that we know that women have been pushing for the right to education and to political participation. But even before that, we have a long history of women defying barriers, becoming Queens, becoming philosophers and poets. And it's something that people seem to forget when it comes to our part of the world. And it's very important to remember: humans love freedom. No matter what culture they're born in. And you can support that quest for freedom, do. Do something about it, I would say.

Ayşe Gül Altınay: I said the last question, but I do have one last question based on what you just said. I know that you love poetry, you love art, and music, your sister is an artist. Andrea and I have had a lot of conversations – also as part of this special issue – about the transformative potentials of art. So, how do you see the transformative aspect of art in the journey of Afghanistan? As I was listening to you just now, I was reminded of Zohra, the first women's orchestra of Afghanistan, born out of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music and now dispersed around the world. So where is art and music in transformative feminist activism for you?

Shaharзад Akbar: It's so central, I think, particularly in Afghanistan. As I said before, one of the first ways to understand feminism in the local context is by going to women's songs. There are so many songs, for instance, about love, a woman describing love to a man. There are also many songs about forced marriages, early marriages, about the brutality of fathers, brutality of brothers,

brutality of husbands, as well as songs against the Taliban. So, music has been a real form of resistance. As you know, Ayşe Gül, I have been reflecting in the past few months with my colleagues about how to continue our human rights work, and one of the ways that we want to change our work or improve our work is by engaging in more artistic collaborations. Even in the way we are naming our organization, we are not using the words human rights. Because it has been so misunderstood, we are using a more local concept. What makes sense to Afghans might not make sense to foreigners, but we don't care about that anymore. We cared about that for a very long time and it didn't help us. But also, really integrated, as part of our work, will be working with and through artists, for a better society. Afghans love music, they really, really do. They love songs and music, as well as poetry. So, I think, just taking that song from a, you know, 70-year-old woman in a village who has never been to a town, probably has never seen a car in her life, and recognizing the same yearning that you have living in London, for that better freedom. That's, that's magical. And that says something about how these aspirations are universal. I think we have to amplify that more.

Andrea Pető: I cannot agree more. That is why I'm often tweeting with the hashtag #ArtWillSaveUs. Thanks a lot.

Ayşe Gül Altınay: Shaharзад jan, could you name some Afghan women poets, musicians, scholars and activists who inspire you – so that we, and our readers, can too be inspired?

Shaharзад Akbar: Of course! There are so many, I do not know where to start. There is a young singer **Ghawgha Taban**, who also did a song about women's protests. The last time we were able to celebrate the International Human Rights Day in Afghanistan, we invited her to the Commission to sing. We wanted to celebrate in a different way. There's another young woman called **Elaha Soroor**, who sings a lot of Afghan folk songs; she is very young and very, very talented. There are a lot of poets. For instance, **Mahbooba Ibrahimi** is a great poet. Her poetry is also very feminist. We also have an incredible generation of woman singers who have been exiled for much longer, since the Mujahideen period. One of the most prominent among them is **Ustad Mahwash** who has been given this special title Ustad (master). Poets **Nadia Anjuman** and **Mahtab Sahel**, artists and filmmakers **Shamsia Hasani**, **Naheed Shahalimi**, and **Roya Sadat**, activists **Sahar Fetrat** and **Farahnaz Forotan**, and scholars **Huma Saeed**, **Weeda Mehran**, and **Nilofar Sakhi** . . . Just some of the incredible women of my country.

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