

“Unlike attitudes, laws can be enforced immediately”

Mina Sharif, Afghan-Canadian journalist and activist

BY SYED ZAFAR MEHDI



Q. You were born in Afghanistan, grew up in Canada, and returned to Afghanistan in 2005 for nearly ten years. How difficult was it to adjust in a new country?

A. My adjustment to a completely new environment differs from others. It was by choice and it was back to Afghanistan rather than out of it. There was an adjustment to daily life like harsh winters without heat, stomach bugs and other conditions that differ so much from life in Canada, but it took no time for that to feel normal. I was either the Afghan amongst the expats or an expat amongst the local Afghans. It took a long time for me to realize this was always going to be the case and I had to accept that I am a product of two very different worlds.

Q. Somebody quite famously said, you can take me out of my country but you cannot take country out of me. Do you relate to this sentiment?

A. Yes. I think I first felt the power of that sentiment on arrival at Kabul Airport. Nobody could have prepared me for the instant connection I felt to Afghanistan as soon as my feet hit the tarmac. I had left when I was a year old, so I had actually agonized on the way over whether or not this was a mistake and whether or not I would even be welcome. Any doubt was gone as soon as I landed.

Q. In the minds of westerners, Afghanistan mostly conjures up the images of war, violence. What do you tell your friends when they ask you about it?

A. It is annoying that in this day and age people can forget that media is obsessed with sensationalism and negative reporting. We allow ourselves to dehumanize entire groups of people because they fall under the simplistic labels and stereotypes. That being said, I would have had same perception had I not been to Afghanistan myself. I tell people that my friends in Afghanistan are great. I go to work, weddings, grocery shopping, and restaurants. I meet some kind people and some mean spirited people like anywhere else in the world.

Q. What does it mean to be an independent, educated, successful Afghan woman in 21st century?

A. It means different things for different women. For some it is exercising their right not to be abused. For some it is learning to read and write. For those who have been lucky enough to reap benefits of past 12 years, it has meant accomplishments. There are women holding positions in government, teaching, running companies and raising educated children. If the progress continues at same pace, the women in Afghanistan will continue to redefine what it means to be a successful Afghan woman.

Q. Despite tremendous progress made in last 12 years, women continue to face violence in Afghanistan. What needs to be done to address the issue?

A. Women face violence everywhere. The improvement in situation comes with addressing it and punishing the culprits. I would like to believe that the insecurities that lead people to use the veil of religion, culture or any set of rules to support violence against others will go away. Attitudes take generations to change. The enemies of a peaceful Afghanistan keep their power by trying to convince us that hurting each other is part of who we are. Unlike attitudes, law can be enforced immediately.

Q. This is an important year with elections, followed by withdrawal of international troops. How do you predict the future of Afghanistan, post 2014?

A. It is difficult to predict but I sincerely hope and pray we will continue to move forward. I think it is very basic – security and education are the two key areas we have to focus on.

Q. What are your dreams for your country? Do you plan to come back?

A. I have many dreams for Afghanistan. More than anything, I want our children to refer to these days as “before”. Healthy, happy and safe is what I wish we could offer the next generation. I hope I will be witness to that.