



They say women cause wars. Then the examples offered range from Helen of Troy, Cleopatra to Draupadi—all mythical legends. Recorded history does not name a single woman at the forefront of terror and war. However, it does say that women and children are the worst hit in troubled times. *Femina's* new campaign, Women For Peace, throws the spotlight on soldiers who form the army of white flags.



Mina with children who are a part of her project The Voice of Afghan Youth

'AFGHANISTAN IS POOR, NOT BROKEN'

Mina Sharif's TV and radio programme from Kabul gives Afghanistan's children, particularly its orphans, a chance to be heard. They may have grown up with war, but they are not victims, she tells **Deepa Suryanarayan**

Mina Sharif, an Afghan-Canadian grew up in Toronto, but moved to Afghanistan in 2005 on a six-month volunteering assignment. Ten years later, the 29-year-old is still in the country working with a private NGO called the Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation Services for Afghanistan (PARSA). She talks to *Femina* what spurs her to live and work in Kabul...

How does your project, The Voice of Afghan Youth, make a difference?

The Voice of Afghan Youth is a radio and

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television series that provides a platform for kids, particularly those in orphanages across the country. They introduce themselves and their unique cultures and communities to each other, voicing their dreams and opinions. They do things like clean the streets and visit injured police officers, showing us by example how civic engagement is a responsibility at any age.

Tell us something we don't know about the country.

I think normalcy is the story we fail to tell about Afghanistan. I'll list some 'surprising' facts from my perspective, as a woman and as a resident of the capital, Kabul. Beauty and fashion is a big deal here. Rich or poor, women will go to the best salons they can afford. There are now about 18 million mobile phones in use. Many of them belong to women, as is evident by the number of apps designed just for them. 3G and Internet services are available. You can't turn on the TV or radio without seeing/hearing a female co-anchor on the news and variety shows. We have women governors of provinces and a higher ratio of women in parliament than most first world countries. Some young girls skateboard. They join cycling, Taekwando and boxing teams. We have boys and girls scouts, with almost half being girls.

Why do you think working with the youth is so important for the future of Afghanistan?

About 70 per cent of Afghanistan's population is under 25, and has lived in increased security since they were about 10 years old or younger. In that time, they have also been exposed to the world through the Internet and television. It is inevitable that their aspirations differ from the generation before them, who were forced to fixate on survival. Offering these young people a chance of a nurtured life and a good education is what will save the country's future. I am inspired by Afghan children for many reasons, but mostly because they never feel sorry for themselves. Every day, I hear them tell me about how they want to become police officers, doctors and teachers "to serve their country". If we could make use of their perseverance and patriotism by supporting them, there is a real chance for the believers in peace to finally prevail. The future is in their hands. **■**