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## COURAGE, FROM KABUL

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WRITER: ALANA CHLOE ESPOSITO  
EDITOR: ALLISON GELLER  
PHOTOGRAPHY: RADA AKBAR

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## NOORJAHAN AKBAR'S STUBBORN OPTIMISM ABOUT THE FUTURE OF HER NATIVE AFGHANISTAN OFFERS A COMPELLING COUNTERNARRATIVE TO THE BLEAK PICTURE PAINTED BY WESTERN MEDIA.

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Is the world getting better? With 836 million people across the globe living on less than \$1.25 per day, it's easy to see a bleak future ahead. But according to a recent analysis of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, a set of eight targets aimed at eradicating extreme poverty and hunger and improving health and education around the world, the proportion of people living at this income level fell from 47 percent in 1990 to 22 percent in 2010. Despite economic crises, protracted violent conflicts that spawned unprecedented numbers of refugees and large-scale natural disasters, the Millennium Development Goals constitute the most successful anti-poverty campaign in history.

Now the U.N. is developing Sustainable Development Goals, a new set of 17 targets designed to accelerate progress in areas where the original goals fell short, while also pursuing additional advancements. By 2030 they promise to end extreme poverty and hunger once and for all, achieve full gender equality and combat climate change.

Meanwhile, individuals who see themselves as global citizens are increasingly taking matters into their own hands through grassroots activism. Empowered by unprecedented interconnectivity and access to information, they are growing more effective at mobilizing public support for their causes, which in turn influences policy and budget choices among countries and aid organizations.

One such individual is writer and Afghan women's rights activist Noorjahan Akbar, a charismatic 23-year-old Kabuli who embodies a winning combination of unbridled optimism, intelligence and drive that pushes the world forward.

### **Visions of Apple Orchards**

I encountered Akbar, founder of the blog Daughters of Rabia: Free Women Writers, for the first time at a high-profile Women for Women International event last May. I felt a surge of inspiration rise within me as she stole the show from the other distinguished speakers on the panel with an amalgamation of topical knowledge, eloquence, optimism and fortitude, all packaged together in a charmingly diminutive figure. By the time it was over, I wanted her to run for the Afghan presidency not in 20 years, but right now.

Akbar envisions a land once again dotted by pear and apple orchards like the ones her parents remember from their youth; a land connected by bridges that stand strong and roads that are free of mines. She imagines a more progressive and equal society buttressed by good schools and an adequate health care infrastructure, one in which tolerance and literacy prevail over hatred and ignorance. She foresees freedom for the arts to flourish and for both genders to play sports as they please. She anticipates a generation of women less vulnerable to maternal mortality, domestic abuse and sexual harassment and more likely to participate in their government or become doctors or lawyers. She can picture families of the future spending time

together outside like they used to when she was a child, picnicking or attending public concerts without fearing a suicide attack.

Still reeling from successive wars and struggling to quell the violent Taliban insurgency, the current circumstances in Akbar's native Afghanistan are dire. The country's infant mortality rate is the highest in the world and its maternal mortality rate ranks not far behind, in part because "families do not know to bring children or expectant mothers to the hospital when a problem arises," according to Akbar. Moreover, with only one doctor per 3,000 citizens, even if more people sought medical care, many would struggle to get it. Meanwhile, over 60 percent of the population is illiterate due to very low school enrollment rates prior to a major education push after the fall of the Taliban.

Yet Akbar believes that peace and stability cannot elude Afghanistan forever, for the practical reason that "the status quo is simply unsustainable." And when they come, they will set the stage for social and economic progress. It is possible, she insists, to revive the prosperity, tolerance, commitment to learning and cultural vibrancy that characterized Afghan society throughout much of the country's illustrious history.

Optimistic that this idealistic vision will come to fruition within her lifetime or a generation or two thereafter, Akbar's confidence in Afghanistan's future stands in contrast to the sea of despondency that flows through Western media.

It would be a mistake to confuse her optimism with naiveté. Akbar hardly underestimates the adversarial power of those who seek to obstruct her dreams. As a child, she and her family spent six years in Pakistan seeking refuge from Taliban rule, while she now receives accusations and death threats because of her activism. But she trusts in the power of education to combat fundamentalists' misguided ideas and overcome the social and economic disempowerment that let them rule.

Not unlike the U.N.'s Sustainable Development Goals, Akbar's goals are more of a road map for survival than a pipe dream.

### **Profile of a Young Activist**

One of four daughters born to two teachers from Kabul, Akbar was raised in an environment of constant learning in a family committed to social activism. She credits them for teaching her the meaning and intrinsic value of freedom, knowing full well that it was a rare gift in a country that generally teaches its daughters self-hatred and doubt.

The family fled to Pakistan in 1996, when the Taliban came to power and prohibited girls from attending school. In the relative safety of Peshawar, she learned English and acquired computer skills. Returning to Kabul in 2001, her family opened an English-language center for women. Four years later, at the age of 14, she applied her impeccable English skills to translating for a work-study scholarship program at the International School of Kabul,

enabling her to attend the only American school in Afghanistan. When financial hardship hit her family, she took her first job writing children's programs for Radio Azadi (Radio Free Europe) and later with the Huma Media Group, which runs a monthly publication broadcasting the voices of local children and teenagers.

Her work soon turned political. At 20, she co-founded a gender equality advocacy group called Young Women for Change, which comprises about 30 mostly female volunteers between the ages of 18 and 25. For their inaugural activity they organized a march against street harassment, a major problem for urban Afghan women. Not expecting much of a turnout, she was thrilled when over 75 people joined, including men who proudly showed their support as they shielded the women from potential harassers. They also conducted the country's first large-scale study of sexual harassment and founded Kabul's first women-only internet cafe. Today the organization is still going strong, although Akbar left it in 2012 to focus on her studies and other activities.

Akbar pursued her education in the United States, attending a private Quaker school in Pennsylvania her junior and senior years of high school before studying at Dickinson College. She recently earned a master's degree in journalism and public affairs from American University in Washington, D.C. Throughout her time here, she has remained active with several women's rights groups in Afghanistan. She also writes articles for publications including the U.N. Dispatch, Safe World for Women International and several Afghan newspapers and websites, focusing on women bravely overcoming and speaking out against the systemic practices that subjugate them, such as impairments to education access and harassment.

Schools and other institutions routinely invite Akbar to speak about gender equality, Afghan women and human rights issues such as racial and income inequality. The history books and literature she grew up reading at her parents' urging enrich her speeches. When she talks about empowering women she references formidable figures of the past like Rabia Balkhi, a medieval Persian princess (from an area now part of Afghanistan) who wrote amorous poems to exchange with her forbidden slave lover. It serves as a reminder that cultivating erudite, independent and even seductive women is not an unknown tradition in Afghanistan, merely a forgotten one.

For young Americans who do not remember a time before the U.S. invasion, her passionate allusions to things that bear no relation to terrorism or oppression open their eyes to the country's richness. Western portrayals of Afghanistan conveniently overlook the great poets, architects, religious scholars, scientists and mathematicians who thrived there from the Bronze age through the dawn of Islam and into the Middle Ages, but they are as much a part of the country's legacy as the warlords, mujahideen and corrupt officials who overshadow their memory today.

Historical perspective also serves her well when she engages with her detractors at home. Framing her vision of the future in the familiar terms of the past makes her ideas seem less radical and threatening. It may not be enough to impart the wisdom of her ideas on others, but hopefully it will at least keep her a little safer from their harmful reactions.

Safety for herself and her family is a big concern—Akbar routinely receives death threats from various factions of Afghanistan's polarized political landscape. "I've received more threats than I can count," she says. "They have come from someone whose family was really high up in the government, from warlords." She was especially shaken when the radical media denounced her as an infidel and showed her picture on TV so others could unleash their hatred on her.

Still, not one to be deterred by fear, she takes these threats in stride, turning to her family, friends and supporters for solace. And she draws courage from the realization that though they sometimes make the most noise, the "scary fundamentalists" are but a small minority of the population. Her message, she trusts, resonates with many of her compatriots even if trepidation keeps them from vocalizing their support.

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"I KNOW THAT THE PEOPLE WHO DISAGREE WITH ME ARE LOUD, BUT THEY ARE NOT THE MAJORITY. MANY PEOPLE SUPPORT ME EVEN IF THEY KEEP SILENT FOR FEAR OF THEIR OWN SAFETY," SHE SAYS. "THAT GIVES ME COURAGE."

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Mostly she blocks out the negativity and just keeps working toward her vision so Afghanistan's daughters of tomorrow may never know how it feels to live in fear. To that end, she promotes opportunities for women's voices to be heard. According to Akbar, "Everyone wants to talk about Afghan women. Rarely is there a platform that allows them to talk about themselves."

Last summer she set out to change that. She compiled and self-published *Daughters of Rabia: Free Women Writers*, a book of poetry and nonfiction by dozens of female writers from

Kabul and other urban centers (where women are more likely to be literate). Akbar distributed 1,000 printed copies of the book for free throughout Afghanistan and also made it available online.

Now the project lives on through her blog, of the same name, which began two years ago as a Facebook page. To date, over 120 writers, including about 20 men, have contributed fiction, poetry and articles on issues that matter to them such as street harassment, access to health care and economic inequality. At the moment, both her writers and their 25,000 active readers speak the Persian dialect Dari, Akbar's own native language. But she is trying to expand the blog's reach by also publishing in Pashto, Afghanistan's other official language.

Crucially, she recently began translating the blog into English as well, in hopes that curious readers outside Afghanistan will learn more about the country through the voices of its own people.

Like most recent graduates, Akbar is still mulling over what to do next, which makes her seem refreshingly normal. She would like to move home to Kabul and continue her activism there, but at the moment security risks are too high. Whatever particular form her work takes, it will continue to be in pursuit of global gender equality with a focus on Afghanistan.

No one, including Akbar, expects that mission to be anything less than daunting. Across the globe, traditional interstate wars that the U.N. set out to eradicate may well be on their way to extinction, but the insurgencies, civil wars and small-scale proxy wars that have eclipsed them are no less ghastly. Nor on the civil rights front are we much closer to overcoming systemic prejudices that stand in the way of racial harmony.

But imagining a better tomorrow is the first step toward achieving it. As Akbar says, "The moment we say there is no hope, we stop trying so hard."

#### **Reasons for Hope**

Whether driven by inherent human optimism or culturally embedded beliefs in the inevitability of progress over time, the notion of "the future" tends to conjure visions of a more perfect world. It's what motivates the U.N. negotiator to get up and try again the morning after one of the other parties to the conflict he has been trying for months or years to resolve blows it all up. It's what convinced 137,000 men, women and children from war-torn countries in the Middle East and Africa to traverse the Mediterranean in the first half of 2015 alone, despite knowing that at least 3,500 people drowned making the same perilous journey last year. And it's why students routinely ask Akbar how they can help, rather than laughing her offstage for dedicating her life to a chimera.

The difference between a cynic and an optimist is largely one of perspective. Taking a long view of history, Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker claimed in 2011 that the world is vastly more peaceful today than ever before, violent extremism and drug wars and other instances of carnage notwithstanding. Moreover, he posits that violence will further abate as civilization continues to evolve.

His thesis raised quite a few eyebrows, but the statistics Pinker cites support it: any given person is over 1,000 times less likely to be killed in battle today than they would have been at the dawn of civilization, and modern Europeans are 100 times less likely to be murdered than their 15th-century ancestors. Within the past 100 years the global rate of genocide has declined dramatically, while the number of annual deaths resulting from conflict is 10 percent of what it was in 1950, and the rate of wars that kill over 1,000 people a year dropped by 78 percent since 1988. Everyday life has also become safer, as instances of domestic abuse, spouse killings, rape, child abuse and violent discrimination have all fallen.

The primary explanation is that as people get smarter—the IQ of an average teenager rises with each successive generation—they think of better means than violence to satisfy their needs and wants. If Pitcher's theory is correct, we can accelerate the trend towards peace by improving access to and quality of education, which raises our innate intelligence levels.

We already know that a girl who stays in school until just fifth grade is far likelier than her uneducated sister to find employment down the road, to vote and to gain access to credit. She is also likely to be healthier because she will marry later, have fewer children, seek medical care when necessary and have less chance of contracting HIV. For all these reasons, universal access to education is one of the Sustainable Development Goals.

In Afghanistan, only 191,000 girls attended school at the time Akbar returned there from Pakistan. By 2012, that number had risen to 2.7 million. There is still a long way to go, but we are getting there little by little.

No one really knows what the future will bring for Afghanistan, but chances are that eventually it will more closely resemble the place of Akbar's dreams than it does today.

How quickly that happens depends on the extent to which the international community puts its money and brainpower where its mouth is. The Millennium Development Goals fell short of hitting many targets. Without more robust funding and the political will to implement them under trying circumstances, the Sustainable Development Goals will not fare any better. But maybe humankind has grown smart enough by now not just to do less evil, but to do more good. Perhaps, Akbar will have the chance to walk freely through apple and pear orchards in Kabul.



Rada Akbar's series *The Unseen Pain* challenges the notion that exists in Afghanistan and elsewhere that a woman's essential role is that of cook, housewife and mother. Even women with educations and professions start to doubt themselves and the identities they have formed, Rada observes, when society tells them that they belong in the kitchen before they belong anywhere else.