

Profile: Suraya Parlika - Champion of Women's Rights

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Forty years on, a veteran campaigner is still fighting for education and rights for Afghan women.

Imprisonment, threats and public scorn have never seen Suraya Parlika waver from her commitment to championing women's rights in Afghan society.

A 60 year-old single woman in a country where marriage is de rigeur, Parlika reflects on her difficult past calmly as she sits in her Kabul office, wearing a green, western-style trouser suit. A bottle-green scarf drapes around her shoulders, leaving her short dark hair uncovered. There is just a trace of make-up on her face.

From communist times onwards, Parlika has been an outspoken advocate for Afghan women. And now, as head of the Women's Union in post-Taliban Afghanistan, she is deeply involved in improving the lot of women through education and skills training.

Why does she continue to struggle for female rights? "I'm interested in women and in their life development, but not just women. I'm interested in all people," she says.

Parlika was born in 1944 into a family of Tajik intellectuals who were high up in the communist party. Her father Mohammed Harif was head of construction in the ministry of public works between 1937 and 1973, and his brother Abdul Wakil was foreign minister in the Soviet-backed government of Najibullah.

Parlika graduated in economics from Kabul University in 1966, and took a job in the city housing department. Five years later, she took up an administrative post in the university's international relations department.

Her communist background eased the way for her to leave Afghanistan in 1973, and spend four years in Kiev, Ukraine, studying for a master's degree in international economics. On her return in 1977, she again worked in the international relations office of Kabul University.

Parlika was a long-time member of the communist party, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, PDPA, and her feminist activism is based on socialist teachings on female equality. At the age of 21, she was already leading meetings of female party members.

In 1978, after Nur Mohammed Taraki became Afghanistan's first communist leader following a coup d'etat, Parlika was appointed head of the ruling PDPA's women's branch.

But she says she was only in position a few months before her outspoken advocacy of human rights began to turn the authorities against her. In August 1978, she was imprisoned in Afghanistan's central jail, Pol-e-Charkhi prison, for 18 months until December 1979.

Conditions were grim. "They took every opportunity [to torture me] by burning me with cigarette butts, pulling out my nails and burning parts of body. I still bear the scars from the burns," she recalled.

Parlika's release followed a bloody coup in which Taraki's Khalq faction of the PDPA was ousted by the Parcham wing led by Babrak Karmal, and backed by Moscow and its military.

In 1980, she became head of the women's section of the PDPA, where she continued until 1986, when she became head of the Afghan Red Crescent, a post she held until she was fired in 1992, when the mujahedin entered Kabul and ousted the Najibullah regime.

In September of that year, she decided to establish the Afghan Women's Union, working with women who gathered in natural meeting places, such as shrines and the "reciting houses" where bereaved women come to pay homage to relatives who have died.

She persuaded women to hold a range of training courses in their homes, including Koranic, basic literacy, English, computer studies, handicrafts, weaving and embroidery. The idea was that the skill would help women earn money as well as giving them some kind of education.

Although Parlika had opportunities to leave the country during the Taleban years, but after the fundamentalist militia captured Kabul in 1996 she remained in the city, moving between safe houses.

Parlika accepts that the situation of women has improved in political, social and cultural terms since September 2001. Two big steps are the right to take jobs and participate in elections.

She is now focused on informing women about democracy through workshops and seminars.

But she notes how much ground there is to recapture. She recalls that Afghan women first won the right to go to school under the modernising King Amanullah, who reigned in the Twenties. She says that during the reign of the last king, Zahir Shah, women could attend school and university and even take off their burqas.

Women retained these rights through the communist Eighties. "During the communist period of Taraki, Hafizullah Amin and Dr Najibullah, women were viewed as having the right to be involved in politics," said Parlika.

But when the mujahedin took over in 1992, women were removed from top jobs and given menial positions. And in the Taliban period, from 1996, they became prisoners in their own homes, and did not have the right to go out unless accompanied by relatives.

Parlika says there is still a long way to go for women in Afghanistan, noting that far fewer women than men have registered to vote in forthcoming elections and that there is only one female presidential candidate, Massouda Jalal.

More widely, she says that President Hamed Karzai's failure to tackle the power of military commanders, raises questions about the nature of the October 9 presidential poll.

The situation is simply not suited to holding an an election, she says, adding, "I won't participate and I won't say anything about the candidates. The situation is not good. The election should be delayed."

She vows to continue working to bring change to women's lives.

"I will continue my activities until Afghanistan has democracy, peace, equality between women and men, social development and the involvement of women in political, economic and social affairs," she said.

Suhaila Muhsini is a staff reporter for IWPR in Kabul.

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