

**Somazzi Preis 2023****Laudatio on behalf of Benafsha Efaf, lawyer, and human rights activist from Afghanistan**

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Benafsha was ten years young when she decided to stand up for women rights in her country Afghanistan. Her neighbours in Kabul divorced. The former husband married again and lived his new life, accepted by friends and the Afghan society. But the woman, a well-educated and respected doctor, lost the support of her family, her friends and neighbours, lost her entire social status: She was only “the divorced woman” and the nicest of all behaviours towards her was pity, but most of the people despised and excluded her.

Benafsha could not understand nor accept that a woman was treated like that by society. At this point she knew that she wanted to fight for equal rights and protection of women. Aged 16 she started to help survivors of domestic violence. Most of those women who needed support, had little or no education and did not know what to do. Benafsha helped to find a safe place to stay for them and their children, helped with paperwork, gave advice and moral support, and she worked as a teacher. She started a project to accompany these women into independence.

Benafsha is now 38 years old, an advocate and human rights defender. She had to flee her country because of death threats of the Taliban. She lives now with her husband and daughter in central Switzerland. Her life has changed completely since last September. As she told me, she not only lost her country, her family, and friends, but also her identity. She is a refugee now, a “Ausländerin”, somebody who is endured not accepted. She had to start from zero, learn a new language, adapt to a different culture. She is separated from her parents and her six siblings, who are all placed in different countries. She is not able to travel to meet them or other Afghan activists, she is not allowed to work as a lawyer. And worst of all – she had to leave those women and children behind, who need her support.

When Benafsha studied law at the university in Kabul the world seemed different in Afghanistan. Women and girls could go to school and obtain higher education, were able to work as doctors, professors, lawyers. The society was still restrictive and paternalistic, and women were far from enjoying equal rights, but there was a visible progress for women's rights, also fixed in new laws. Female judges, journalists, activists, female politicians, and ministers defended those achievements. A ministry of women's rights was installed, violence against women was prosecuted and punished.

Benafsha started to work for an international NGO, Medica Mondiale, during her studies, and changed later to the NGO “Women for Afghan Women” (WAW). This organisation is centred on the needs of survivors of violence and offers help in all areas of live, starting from housing and education to legal support. The women, who are victims of violence in Afghanistan, often have no place to go, Benafsha told me. They have no support by their families, no money, no future. They need immediate protection, a safe place to stay.

To work for an NGO like WAW focussing on women rights was not easy in the country, even before the takeover of the Taliban in August 2021. Benafsha and her colleagues experienced a lot of hostilities and threats by various Islamic groups like the so-called Islamic State. But they kept on doing the dangerous work, accepted, and supported by the Afghan community.

WAW created 33 safe houses for women. They legally represented women in court and helped with paperwork and daily life. The leaders of “Women for Afghan Women” also created 6 children support centres. A decade ago, when a mother in Afghanistan was sentenced for committing a crime, her children were also forced to stay in prison with her. The government did not have any support mechanism and there was no school nor kindergarten for these children inside the prisons. WAW was the only organiza-

tion that established children support centres and took out all the children from prisons all over the country. Beside the safe houses for women Benafsha and her team also built so called Transition Houses to accommodate women after they were released from prison, because in the eyes of Afghan society they were outlaws. The WAW team helped them to build up relations with their families and getting back into an independent life.

Now under the Taliban rule, this work is almost impossible, but Benafsha and her team held on for more than one year. But then, last summer, the Taliban raided the offices of the NGO in Kabul, they took pictures, confiscated data and material, and accused the activists and lawyers of establishing western culture. Benafsha and her family had to hide, scared for their lives. Her name is on the death list of the Taliban, she had no protection at all, neither had her family members. The first attempt to leave the country via Kunduz to Tadjikistan failed, the convoy was stopped by Taliban. After days of terror and fear, she could leave with an evacuation flight out of Mazar-e-Sharif in September last year and arrived in Switzerland on 9<sup>th</sup> of October.

I am honoured to speak here at the occasion of the award ceremony of the Somazzi Price 2023 on behalf of Benafsha and all the other brave women rights activists in the world who devote their lives to promote and protect the rights of others – despite the costs for their own lives, despite the danger and the consequences.

Benafsha told me, that it is always hard to flee from your home country. To leave your country for your own safety, even though the women and children there need your protection, is almost unbearable. “I don't see any serious efforts by the international community to improve the situation for women and girls in Afghanistan. They are just left behind; nobody asks about them anymore.”

Women around the world, let us amplify the voices of Afghan women. Let us advocate for woman in Afghanistan, so that they can enjoy their fundamental rights, political rights, social rights like education and health care. Let us keep up the pressure on the international community to take a strong stand for women's rights in Afghanistan and to offer protection for those in need.

Just a reminder:

Women are not allowed to travel over 72 km without a male companion, they are banned from walking in a parc, doing sports, going to a gym.  
Girls are not allowed to go to school or attend a university.  
Women not allowed to work for an NGO.

We should urge the Swiss government to raise its voice for the protection of girls and women in Afghanistan. To keep up humanitarian help for the suffering people. And we should advocate within our country to develop structures for people who must flee their countries, so they feel welcomed and supported and can use their resources and competencies to continue their work and to help us improve our society.

We can be proud and happy to have YOU, Benafsha, with us, such a strong and brave woman, determined activist, expert on women rights and lawyer. You are an inspiration and role model for all of us. We embrace the possibility to meet you, to listen and to learn and we are more than happy to support your important work.

Congratulations, dear Benafsha. I share your hope, that Afghanistan, a country I visited so many times in the last 20 years, will become a free and peaceful country again.