

Wide Angled View of Afghanistan Airwaves

Q&A with Humaira Habib, Radio Sahar, an Independent Women's Community Radio Station in Herat, Afghanistan

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Afghanistan is in 'a situation of permanent chaos and a culture of violence and impunity taking root in which the press has become a favourite target' (Reporters without Borders 2010). Journalists routinely face intimidation from gangs, warlords and Taliban-controlled forces; and surveillance by the National Directorate of Security, Afghanistan's leading domestic intelligence agency.

As long as the Taliban had been in power from 1996 to 2001, television, music and cinema were banned. But, the Talibanisation of Afghanistan has, ironically, sparked interesting media initiatives where the community radio play, an educative and healing role for women and girls who are cut off from mainstream life. Initiatives like Radio Zohra, Radio Rabia Balkhi in Mazar-i-Sharif and Radio Sahar are significant media in Afghanistan's conflict-ridden environment today.

Humaira Habib, director of Radio Sahar explains:

For a woman whose world is encompassed in her backyard, the radio is all she has to understand and learn about health, education and 'see' a changing world, not immediately available outside her window. Our audiences listen not in leisure but while doing household chores and managing children.

Radio in Afghanistan essentially gives 'women a voice, educate and link them from around the country', Humaira says. It trains women from the most backward areas and regions like Kapisa to become journalists. Radio is also instrumental in educating women about the changing political and electoral process, which has increased the significance of women's participation as voters and decision-makers.

As the report from the Kroc Institute University of Notre Dam, *Afghan Women Speak—Enhancing Security and Human Rights in Afghanistan*, notes: 'Since the overthrow of the Taliban by US-led forces in 2001, the promotion of Afghan women's rights has been a highly politicized appendage of the military intervention.'

The role of community radios in the promotion of women's rights is not as well-known outside of Afghanistan though. 'We have a powerful oral tradition in this country,' explains Humaira. 'We love stories and listening.' That's why initiatives like *The Voice of Afghan Women* funded by UNESCO are important.

While women's rights and issues form a core part of the programming, Humaira says Radio Sahar also focuses on providing its listeners with education-based content, for example, health programmes where the staff talk to doctors and health care professionals about women health issues.

Before the advent of community radio stations, Afghanistan had the BBC Pashto and Persian services besides the religious broadcasts by the Taliban. Radio Afghanistan set up by the government in 2002 was strictly government-controlled.

For much of rural Afghanistan, lack of access to electricity and a low literacy rate makes radio the main medium of information, and in many cases, a channel for Afghan women demanding change, and

more importantly, educating them about coping with the change when it comes. And, not just politics and social education, as the radio programme, *Qahir-e-Qahraman* (Qahir the Champion), has proved. It represents a powerful voice for people with disabilities as well.

What is of note here is that while women are active listeners, their participation rate (in radio programming and journalism in general) remains significantly low. UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women) statistics (2008) show that most women continue to work as cleaners and cooks in the media sector and only 208 (23.6 per cent) out of the 881 staff members in the government press sector are women.

The history of radio in Afghanistan is a long and varied one. In 1925, Radio Kabul was Afghanistan's first official radio channel, and controlled by the government. Radio Kabul was shut down during the Taliban rule. It recommenced broadcasting after the Taliban were ousted. In fact, radio in Afghanistan for a very long time (even before the Soviet invasion in 1979) was under state control. But thanks to the Press Law signed by President Hamid Karzai in September 2002, independent community radio stations are now emerging as a force in the country.

There are two aspects to the growth of community radio stations in Afghanistan. While it has given the women a voice, it now has a new avatar that is encouraging the people to participate in the political process and tell their stories. Mobile technology too has been a catalyst, actively assisting these populations to take an active interest in the media of their country. The start of citizen's participation has already been felt with Radio Azadi SMS service. Radio Azadi first aired in Afghanistan from 1985–93 after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It airs programmes 12 hours a day in Daro and Pastho languages and has a sizeable listener base. In October 2010, in a bid to connect better with its listeners, it started an SMS service that lets listeners text message their views on current issues to Radio Azadi. Women form a large number of these texts, the station receives every day. The mobile penetration (estimates peg it at 17 million subscribers out of a population of 29 million) has enabled these women to participate from the privacy of their homes. The station has special programmes for youth and women but the SMS service has shown the station the reach of these programmes.

The issues that Afghani women journalists face here are akin to issues that journalists face in conflict zones in other parts of the world. Jobs are hard to come by even in radios that are financed by international NGOs. Besides the low pay, risks to life are common. Zakiya Zaki, murdered in 2007, is a glaring example.

As director and owner of the US-funded station Afghan Radio Peace, Zaki's audience were primarily listeners in Jabal Saraj, Parwan, a province, north of the capital of Kabul. A fearless journalist who knew that unless the local warlords (often members of the former Mujahideen) were arrested and stripped of their enormous power the local people would never live in peace. Zaki did a series of exposes she hoped would awaken the administration to their excesses. She was murdered in front of her eight-year-old son. As the BBC reported, her murder came just days after Shakiba Sanga Amaaj, a 22-year-old woman newsreader was killed for reasons described as 'family-related'. Amaaj was a reporter and presenter for the Pashtu-language private television channel, Shamshad TV.

Community Radio: An Overview

Working since 2002, Internews has built radio networks of 42 locally operated stations throughout Afghanistan and trained many women journalists. Among the many community radio stations in

Afghanistan, three independent stations were established primarily to encourage women to play an active role in the community.

Radio Zohra

Covering a radius of nearly 20 kilometres, Radio Zohra reaches a population of about 350,000. An independent women's community radio station in Kunduz, it is funded by the Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society (IMPACS), the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Internews, and USAID-OTI. Its programmes focus on women's affairs, education, health, children, and community issues. The station was inaugurated on Women's Day on March 8, 2004. It broadcasts 60 hours every week in Pashto, Dari and Ozbek languages. The station recently celebrated their seventh anniversary on air despite the constant security threats against its stance for women.

Radio Rabia Balkhi

This is based in Mazar-i-Sharif, close to Uzbekistan. Named after Rabia Balkhi, a famous Afghan female poet from the ninth century, the programmes aired include health with taboo topics like mental health discussed openly. The channel invites letters from its listeners, which are then read out on air without identifying the writer and solutions to their problems are given.

Radio Sahar

Radio Sahar (meaning 'dawn' in Dari), a community-based radio station in the western province of Herat. Set up by the Internews Network, an international NGO that supports independent media and access to information for people globally. Radio Sahar was the first independent women's radio station in Herat. Internews began work in Afghanistan in 2002. From the start, Internews's focus was on empowering women not just as listeners but as producers of programmes as well. These women are not just presenters or voices of the programme; they are the collectors and curators of news as well.

I spoke to Humaira Habib, manager director of Radio Sahar, on August 28, 2011, via telephone about her work and the challenges she faces daily as a woman journalist in Afghanistan. She explains that as a journalist and a woman her job is to empower the women of her country despite the odds in a patriarchal Afghan society. Humaira is proud to be one among the many women who travel the countryside to understand and report on the issues faced by some of the Afghan society's weakest sections.

Humaira's Story

Born in Kabul, Afghanistan, Humaira Habbib moved with her family to Pakistan to escape the chaos in her country. In 2000, at age 18, she returned to Herat where she experienced the Taliban oppression of the women population. Life changed for Humaira when in 2004, the authorities declared that she could

not work as a journalist any more. Humaira was in despair but she fought for her rights and continued to work till she became director of Radio Sahar.

A member of the first batch of graduates from Herat University's Department of Journalism, it was her experiences as a Sauvé Scholar at McGill University in Montreal in 2007/08 that changed her worldviews. Humaira and the other girls employed at the radio fight every day for the rights of Afghan women. A woman-run station, they make sure that their programming is a mix of items of appeal to women and young people. Broadcasting 13 hours a day, it is the fifth most popular radio channel in Herat where competition among media outlets is high. Broadcasting in Dari and Pashto, a majority of Radio Sahar's programmes is educational.

Paromita: How old were you when you entered the journalism field?

Humaira: I was 20 years old when I started in Radio Sahar. At that time, I was studying but work was such fun. Radio in Afghanistan is a great place to work for women. Many families don't want their girls to be seen so that makes television difficult. I believe many more women would have been working in radio if only the long war years, the Taliban *dikats* and breakdown of law systems didn't have such a severe impact. The best thing about the radio is its flexibility and anonymity. I wanted to do something that would help the women in my country. I was not too familiar with the radio and the way it worked before I joined. Choosing journalism was a conscious decision for me but radio chose me with its power, reach and the ability to change lives. Voices can be stifled but their reach through radio is enormous. We have many television channels especially after the Taliban but little at this time at least can beat the power of the radio. How many people do you think can afford a television set?

Why choose journalism that is so dangerous in this country especially for a woman?

I really want to become a fine and accomplished journalist. I don't know when I will get there but I am willing to work hard. During the Taliban, there was no school for girls, later when schools started boys and girls studied separately but at university we were allowed to be together. When I came back to Herat from Pakistan in 2000, I taught the Koran to girls at a secret school. My family is very liberal. I wasn't married off early unlike most Afghani women. This is the freedom that makes me want to do well. I was allowed to go to college with boys. My parents were proud at my graduation. Yes, we do wear our *chadars* at work. Our faces are often hidden behind veils. But, our clothes help us reach out to a public that is in veils too. It may seem very strange to women from the western world that we walk around in our flowing robes without headphones on our head and holding out microphones. I like to make a difference to my society. It's not like we don't talk to men. If real progress is to come then men too must be involved in the process. Here our clothes make them feel comfortable enough to share a few thoughts. We are different already. We are women out in the public and working. We don't want to alienate or draw too much attention to ourselves. Let's hope our work speaks for ourselves.

If we are to bring about a change in the situation of women then we women will have to go out and get the stories, find the problem as well as the solutions to them. We have many programmes on Radio Sahar that focus on the plight of women, especially issues of violence. You should hear some of the cases. One woman's husband beat her, his sons, daughter and other wives beat her. They often burnt her feet. He wouldn't give her a divorce. Finally, she found the courage to leave him. What happens to her after that? That's where Radio Sahar has to find answers. That's also what motivates us to work harder

and smarter to make sure that my listeners find their answers in the programmes we broadcast. This isn't a purely commercial issue of retaining listeners or increasing listener bases. It's about making sure my programmes are also playing a constructive role in creating a more informed audience.

What issues do you have to deal with daily? Tell us about some of the most dangerous stories you have done.

Though the situation is getting better, we still have all kinds of problems. Earlier it was very difficult to find women who would be willing to speak to us. Now more women are confidently coming forward. Earlier men would stare as we tried to talk and get interviews now they are used to seeing women journalists. There are now about 300 to 350 women working in Afghanistan. See how small our numbers are! Women in journalism are a very new phenomenon still. Our tribe has to grow and times aren't safe. This peace is fragile. Many journalists still get killed and we can easily number among the dead. There will always be obstacles to overcome, such is the situation in Afghanistan but we have to move forward.

Afghanistan isn't a democracy like the western world. We must think that just because the Taliban has left all the rights that were taken away from women will miraculously return. They were forcibly taken away and we have to fight to get them back. I fear that people have grown too used to being conservative. It's going to be a long way before we regain what we have lost. Many don't even know that once upon a time women in Afghanistan went to schools and colleges like women all over the world. It a process of education and re-education so that women become self reliant enough to demand back their rights.

How do you decide your programme content?

Our years of work with women here have taught us about the topics that are important to them. We know what solutions the Afghani women is looking for. We aim to address every niche of the audience. So we have music and poetry as well as programmes where we discuss very hard issues like divorce and mental health. We broadcast 13 hours a day. We need to be very resourceful in order to prepare the kind of programmes that will keep our listeners coming back. Just because our women don't have the kind of exposure or experience that women in developed countries take for granted doesn't mean that we don't have to work hard to hold their attention. In fact, because our women have so little opportunities our responsibilities double. Most of our content is educational. We also broadcast poetry and now that the Taliban are gone, we can also broadcast music. We must remember most women can't read nor do they have access to the internet or television. We make sure our programmes have a lot of information. I hope that other radio stations can follow our lead and hire more women journalists focussing on women centric programmes. The threat of violence does impact the quality of our reporting and the stories we can cover adversely.

What kind of training does Radio Sahar give its journalists?

We hire from the university so our work is a lot less but when they don't have an education then we have to give basic training in radio interviews and audio techniques. Also, universities here don't have the kind of equipment we take for granted in the United States and other developed countries of the world. My years in Canada showed me what world class equipment can be like and how easy they make our job. We learn on the job. My future plans include encouraging more women to work as journalists. A set of

societal and religious demands and norms expected from women won't make it easy but I do believe that if change has to be brought in then we the women have to work for it. Many of the women working in Radio Sahar now are part-timers. I am the director. It's my duty to see that payments are given on time. Besides difficulties imposed by culture, funding is an issue that needs work. Most community radio stations in Afghanistan remain dependent on foreign funding.

When I joined the university, there were only 20 people in class. Now, there are so many in a class with so many women students. Media is on a boom here in Afghanistan. There are now 12 radio channels in Herat alone. I see more women who want to take advantage of the new opportunities around. I have faith in the internet and hope that it develops as fast in Afghanistan as it has in the western world. But radio for the time being, will remain a media in demand because issues of illiteracy, access and poverty will take years to overcome.

Does Radio Sahar hire men at all?

Yes. We do have a few men on the staff but they are mostly recruited to address technical issues of broadcasting and programming rather than real reporting. It's not that we actively don't want to hire men but the societal structure here makes hiring men journalists impractical. If we are to get the voices of women on air then women themselves must go get those stories. Our stories come from the kitchens and places where women draw water, so to speak. Men simply aren't allowed into those inner sanctums. Also, women will not speak as frankly to men as she will to me or my team of women journalists.

Women often get killed in Afghanistan. Are you not afraid?

My best friend was killed on assignment but I won't stop my work. Actually, that's the reality for most journalists here, be they men or women. Women are my inspiration. Women in Afghanistan want to be journalists. I believe in looking forward to the future. We have recently launched our website (<http://www.sahar.radioconnect.af/>) that allows the Afghani Diaspora to stay in touch with what's happening in part of the world. I am very excited about this. I know I am a target. Sometimes, the threatening phone calls come promising to imprison me. I would be lying if I said I wasn't afraid. But, then it's only natural to be scared but I am not so afraid that I will leave my work. If this ends with my murder then so be it.

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