



## **ifa Podcast “Die Kulturmittler”**

### **Episode #40: Afghanistan: Of Values, Human Rights and Freedom With Negina Yari – English Edition**

**Intro, Negina Yari speaking:** “I want to say that we, Afghan women and girls are not different from other women and girls around the world. We also have the same talent. We also have the same wishes. We also have the same idea. I wish that one day a group of talented and young women should lead Afghanistan. [...] We have the same rights. We are equal, believe us, support us, and stand with us. At this moment, we honestly need your support.”

#### ***Opener „Die Kulturmittler“***

**Dan Wesker:** “Hello and welcome to today's episode of ifa's podcast “Die Kulturmittler”, the title of which can roughly be translated as “The Cultural Conciliators”. My name is Dan Wesker.

A little bit over a year ago, the Taliban took over Afghanistan. But even before that, Afghanistan suffered decades of turmoil and instability. In 2021, it caused the US and other foreign forces to withdraw their military forces, diplomatic representatives as well as civilian personnel. The Afghan people, especially women and children, have since been suffering under the strict rule of the Taliban leadership. In this podcast, we are talking to Negina Yari, an Afghan civil society activist, education and peace expert and human rights defender. She is also the director of Afghans4Tomorrow and founder of the Afghanistan Peace House Organization. But let's give her a chance to introduce herself.”

**Negina Yari:** “Salaam alaikum, everyone. Thank you very much for giving this opportunity to me in order to introduce myself and to be part of today's podcast. I'm

Negina Yar, a peace expert and I have been working with Afghanistan's civil society organizations and institutions more than eleven years, and I hold up a bachelor's degree in economics. I was a student of a bachelor and a master's in business administration. But after the collapse, due to challenges and also due to restrictions for women and girls in universities, I was decided to leave the university. But I was engaged fully in a peace negotiation process of Afghanistan through civil society organizations, and I have background of working with national and international organization in Afghanistan during last two decades.”

**Dan Wesker:** “Negina Yari remained in her country after the Taliban takeover in August 2021. Only recently, in March this year, she was able to leave Afghanistan.

With the Taliban takeover, many human rights defenders, journalists, teachers and artists have fled the country or gone into hiding. Women and girls might be facing the worst consequences as they have been deprived of their basic human rights. I asked Negina Yari in what situation she found herself when the Taliban took over and what made her leave the country.”

**Negina Yari:** “After the collapse and also when the Taliban took the power for the beginning of a few months, there was a hope that the Taliban strategies might be changed and there might be some flexibility about the Afghan women's and girls' rights. But as we see that, unfortunately the door of school is still closed for the girls. And Afghan women and girls are still not able to have access to their basic rights. If we continue like this, we will not be able to survive our life and without any engagement, without any access in any economic, political, and also in social activists, without women engagement, the governments or any structure will not be able to continue their work. And it's also put them under pressure to leave the country or still or at least stay away from being engaged in any activities in Afghanistan for a while to make sure that what the decision will be taken by the Taliban and also by the other de-facto authorities, and what is a possibility and way to go forward.”

**Dan Wesker:** “Despite the problems in the past years, you've worked with numerous civil society stakeholders and NGOs, including the Human Rights Research and Advocacy Consortium and also the Afghanistan Development Association. Since 2016, you are the managing director of “Afghans4tomorrow”. Can you tell us more about this organization, its mission and how it operated until August 2021?”

**Negina Yari:** “Until August 2021, my engagement with different stakeholders, as I mentioned during last 11 years, that I was working with different institutions, our missions and our goal was working in human rights perspective, gender and especially women economic empowerment. Through our organizations plans for Afghans4tomorrow, we were provided technical trainings on women economic empowerment. We established a number of women economic development centres, small businesses opportunities, and provided small grants of businesses for rural women. And more than 600 women were working with us on women economic empowerment centres, they were busy with their small businesses of dry fruits and also dry vegetables. And the other mission was equal access of boys and girls in education. We worked together to find funds in order to establish and construct a school in rural areas of Afghanistan for the girls, we provided technical trainings for the teachers and also provide free classes for examination preparation for university for girls.”

**Dan Wesker:** “Obviously, there's been an enormous change since August 2021. Could you outline how these changes have changed your work and the organisation's projects?”

**Negina Yari:** “Before August, we had a number of projects, which were about gender, women, peace and security, and also women's economic empowerment. But when the Taliban took power, it was not clear for us in which way we should go and what we should do. So, we were in close contact with our donors, but the donors were also confused about what will happen to our project, because the design of this project was totally different. Like for women, peace and security, our project was to establish a peace campaign for women.

And the target audience for this project was more than 5,000 women. Some of this project was handed over back to the donors and the fund was refunded back to the donors. But a few of this project, their mandate and also their goals, has been changed to humanitarian activities in order to provide technical trainings for women. And instead of these trainings, we were the donor was decided that let's change the audience and also the design of this project to humanitarian project and provide some food assistance for rural women. So currently, all the project design has changed. A small number of the project is only focusing on the development perspective, but the rest of activities and the rest of the project is only focusing on humanitarian, providing the food packages, the nutrition packages, and also working on health perspective activities in Afghanistan.”

**Dan Wesker:** “What actually happened to the employees from “Afghans4Tomorrow” when the Taliban took over and what is their current reality?”

**Negina Yari:** “Honestly, the history of our employees is different from one family to another families. Before the collapse, we had more of the female staff and they were also very happy and our female staff was working in very high positions. But when the collapse happened, our female employees were decided to leave the work at the beginning and then they were decided to leave the country. And then they asked us that we have to give them SIV letters<sup>1</sup> or that we have to introduce them to some opportunities to evacuate them. But the problem was not only from their family members, the problem was also from those pressures that the Taliban rules also put on the females. So, for more than 20 of our female staff, due to the pressure of society and also pressure from their family members, they were decided to resign from their positions. But for the rest they are still continuing their operation inside the country. And currently we have more than 35 female staff and also more than 85 male staff. They are working on different positions and our humanitarian activities inside the country. So, it has a negative impact because their salary and also their

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<sup>1</sup> SIV letters = special immigrant visas for Afghans, who were employed by/on behalf of the U.S. government (<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/immigrate/special-immg-visa-afghans-employed-us-gov.html>, accessed on 25.08.2022)

allowances decreased due to lack of funds and also due to a big change which has happened in banking sector and also in the fund system for Afghanistan. But still, we are operating and still our employees are continuing their work in Afghanistan.”

**Dan Wesker:** “That’s inside the country. In what way is it still possible for you and for other exiled human rights defenders to support and engage with the Afghan people who are still living in Afghanistan?”

**Negina Yari:** “The working possibility virtually is possible. And currently we are also fully engaged with our human rights defenders and also with our civil society activists. But after August, conducting any advocacy conferences and also attending any in-person meetings in order to discuss on human rights perspective and on women, access was not possible inside the country because due to restrictions on women and human rights defenders inside the country. But still, there is a lot of possibility to work and to engage with the people and especially with the defenders, to talk with them and provide opportunity of small grants for our defenders that are under threat and to find ways and funds and grants for those small angles that they are not able to operate their self or they’re facing with lack of funds. We are advocating that we have to find some small grants and small opportunities for those women organisations, especially at the rural and four provinces, that they should keep their activities sustainability and we should operate them only on some administrative and operation costs.”

**Dan Wesker:** “Before August 2021, Afghan civil society activists were engaged in all national and international debates and attended conferences such as the Geneva Conference on Afghanistan in 2020. I was informed by Miss Yari that during the peace negotiation process, advice given by Afghan human and women’s rights defenders was ignored. Afghan activists were already under threat and a huge number of defenders were arrested by the Afghan government. Many were killed during suicide attacks. I asked

Negina Yari how she would define the Afghan civil society before 2021, especially the role of women.”

**Negina Yari:** “Women and also activists and defenders played a very wonderful role before 2021. And during that time, more than 5,000 organization was registered with the Ministry of Economy, with the Ministry of Justice, they were only working on human rights and women's rights perspective in Afghanistan. There was a lot of opportunity of defunding as well. So, the organization and also the civil society organization would not only engage in humanitarian perspective. We had areas of working on justice, on anti-corruption, on economic empowerment, on SDGs. A broad umbrella was available for activists to have a part and to be in inclusive processes like an election process. Most of the International Organisation of the Afghan Civil Society played a positive role, like the Transparent Election Foundation of Afghanistan. They were fully engaged during the election process of Afghanistan, provided a very transparent report and focused on political engagement of the women and different areas of the election. The defender situation and also the civil society situation before the collapse was very meaningful. Now we can see that lots of the defenders and also Afghan civil society left the country or they already evacuated. So now, a very few number of these activists are playing a role in Afghanistan, but they are not able to raise their voices publicly.”

**Dan Wesker:** “The Taliban takeover isn't the first crisis under which the country and its people are suffering. The past 40 years were marked by different political systems and ideologies, foreign occupation, various international interventions, or civil war. What is this doing to a society that has experienced more than four decades of war and crisis?”

**Negina Yari:** “Unfortunately still, our politicians and also leaders are not able to find the exact challenge and the exact problem. Afghanistan might be one of the countries in the world that are building everything, but after each ten years, after each five years and 20 years, we are going back to zero. Those foundations and also those investments which was

done in the last two decades. It's a huge amount. But within 24 hours everything just gone down. We lost everything honestly. One of the big achievements during last two decades was the banking system of Afghanistan. But today we are near to a big crisis of our bank. We have not found what's the exact problem. Our people, honestly, is so tired of war. And every regime which is coming to Afghanistan, people hope that, okay, it will bring a positive change in our life. But still, Afghanistan, after spending more than billions and billions of dollars on different areas, different sectors. But still, we are depending on the fund. There might be lack of management, lack of technical and also honest leaders for Afghanistan. And there is no long-term strategy of working for Afghanistan. And there might be a lack of good relationship and good governance of Afghanistan with the international community and exact strategy and policy of Afghanistan on how to build the diplomacy and how to stop this war and how to make sure about equal access of all groups of people of Afghanistan. It's mostly not the Afghan war. It's a strategic war."

**Dan Wesker:** "Right, so we've talked about the changes – albeit unwelcomed changes. Which values, structures or ideas have survived and still exist today?"

**Negina Yari:** "During the last two decades there were different values. The value is different from region to region of Afghanistan. Women's rights for education is a kind of value for Afghan people. Our Jirga was a value for Afghanistan as we see that a woman played a positive role in all the regimes in Afghanistan and political engagement. But those values that have been built by civil society activist, which was about freedom of speech and equal engagement of women and men in different perspectives of Afghanistan's society, and a good governance, a kind of accountability. This was also value for our society, our laws, rules and regulations which have been written and have been decided to be implemented during the last two decades. Our culture still exists in the rural areas and also in different regions of Afghanistan. On the other hand, we see that in most of the village violence against women, unfortunately, is getting normalized. It also might have different reasons. We try a lot to keep values that have been built during the last two decades

sustainable, but due to different reasons, as I mentioned, that the war affected, the strategic war affected and also the collapse affected, these values do not exist anymore in Afghanistan. Value for education rights, value for human rights, value for women rights activists, and also those foundations and values that have been built by civil society, especially freedom of speech and other perspectives of civil society activists still not exist.”

**Dan Wesker:** “Can you see or put quite simply, what strategies and possibilities exist to work with the Taliban in the long run?”

**Negina Yari:** “Any change might have a positive and negative impact in a country. But if a group or if governments want to stay for a long period of time, they should build a very strategic and also a very honest relation with the people to have a positive engagement and accept the international rules and regulations of international community; and to provide those opportunities for the people inside the country, that they should stay with the governments and they should support the government. It’s also not too late. It’s not too late to tell that everything is gone. But to work with the Taliban, it will be better that again, international community should help Afghan people and work on bringing a positive change on policies, positive collaboration and coordination and engagement of the people and the government structures. Every Afghan today is asking about the inclusivity of the government and also engagement of the women.”

**Dan Wesker:** “What further actions would you want to see taken from the international community when it comes to human rights and in particular to women’s rights in Afghanistan?”

**Negina Yari:** “I think there should be further engagement of international community with the Taliban and also with the de facto authorities, because it’s not about history of the 15 or ten human rights defenders. It’s about the history of all women and girls in Afghanistan, about the rights of all women and girls in Afghanistan. Today, those statements and also those debates that the international community is conducting within



these Western countries is not helping us. The thing which has helped us is that the international community should start and open the floor of a debate with the de facto authorities and with different leaders of the Taliban at international level. And they should ask from the women rights scholars, women rights defenders and also some other Islamic countries that they are respecting for the women's rights in their countries and bring those Islamic countries also in the debate. It's very important that we should have a practical engagement of international community, Islamic countries, and they should advocate for the rights of Afghan women and girls. But why it's going like this? I think that the good way is to have further engagement and bring them to the table and talk with them and ask them about the priority thing of the Doha Agreement that they have been done. Because in Doha Agreement they were highlighted that we have respect for the women's rights and so we should ask them about accountability of the Doha agreements, or we should and international community should ask them that: where is the women rights in Afghanistan?"

**Dan Wesker:** "Afghanistan is not alone in its struggle to find peace and implement basic human and women's rights. In its neighbouring country Pakistan, women are also suffering under domestic and economic abuse and its connection to the Taliban. I asked Negina Yari whether she notices if the Taliban governance in Afghanistan is having an impact on its neighbouring countries."

**Negina Yari:** "Pakistan has played a very big role in the case of Afghanistan. But unfortunately, both of the countries were not able to build a positive and a very effective diplomacy within two countries. When during the last two decades, the improvement and also the possibility of the work which has been done in Afghanistan, it also had a positive impact on Pakistan. Today also the same. Anything which is decided about the rights of Afghan women and girls and also any restriction that the Taliban government put on the women and girls will have a direct impact on our neighbouring countries as well. It will affect Pakistan also. It will affect Iran also. Because there is some similar ideology within Pakistan from the Taliban Pakistani. And that's why I was focusing on further engagement

of Islamic countries about the Afghan women's rights, because if they are not paying attention, they will survive the same things and they will see and they will experience the same days that today Afghanistan and especially our women are experiencing.”

**Dan Wesker:** “Talking about the experiences of women in Afghanistan: I watched a news report recently about the sharp increase in premature births due in part to hunger and stress. The report concentrated on the strain on a relatively non-existent service due to the funding being withheld because of the Taliban and considering the strong role that religion plays. What are your hopes of a realistic balance with the Taliban?”

**Negina Yari:** “It's all about the lack of funding and also lack of transparent funding for Afghanistan, we can say it like this. This, the hunger and also the poverty has increased a lot in different area of Afghanistan, especially in rural area. The big problem is about recognition. And because the recognition is not done yet, that's why we are not able to fund on development areas of Afghanistan. So that's why the hunger and also the other poverty in different area of Afghanistan is increasing day by day. The positive role which religion can play is about increasing awareness among the people of Afghanistan. Today we see that, especially in rural areas, people believe in mullahs and also in religious elders. And I think the realistic balance with the Taliban would be that they should advocate for the rights of hungry people and also the religious elders should conduct awareness through their mosque for the people. And I think those policies that the Taliban is announcing, which is against the rules and regulations of the international community, they should focus more and they should rethink about these policies, and they should not put lots of restriction on people of Afghanistan, especially on women and girls of Afghanistan. The only people that are paying the cost are the people of Afghanistan, not the international community and not the Taliban.”

**Dan Wesker:** “And your wishes – it's perhaps an obvious question – but what do you wish for the future of Afghan girls and women?”

**Negina Yari:** “I want to say that we, Afghan women and girls are not different from other women and girls around the world. We also have the same talent. We also have the same wishes. We also have the same idea. I wish that one day a group of talented and young women should lead Afghanistan. And I wish that the future leadership should be built by Afghan women and girls and the world should not do a kind of project business as for on the rights of Afghan girls. We have the same rights. We are equal, believe us, support us and stand with us. At this moment, we honestly need your support.”

**Dan Wesker:** “The female Afghan politician and journalist Shukria Barakzai once said: I want my country back. How do you feel about that? And what would this Afghan country look like if you had the choice?”

**Negina Yari:** “I want my country back – it means that we want that our Afghan women and girls should be able to go back to school. We should have our women at the leadership level. We should see our young journalists back in the TV. We should see that our people have the same freedom of speech. We should see that how the private and government universities is running and how these girls are attending these universities, and how women and girls are working with the civil society and also with the other perspective. We should see that how these flowers is just dancing on the street. I mean, that how we see that the people with the happy faces, that they are not thinking about their pocket money, they are not thinking about the foods that they need in the house. Everything that they are thinking about today, but they had it yesterday. They should only focus on future of Afghanistan, and we should have a very bright future for Afghanistan. We want our country back. We want our rights back. We want to see that how our girls are protected and how they are going to school back and how they are working back and how we should see our youngest and talented politicians back, especially women politicians back in their positions. Thank you.”

*–Music–*

**Dan Wesker:** “My thanks go to you, Negina Yari, who is leaving us with these powerful words and who has provided us with a vivid insight into her important work as an Afghan civil society and human rights activist during these difficult times. Women are put under a lot of restrictions and prohibitions. Girls are still not allowed to go to school or university. Negina Yari hopes that the international community will continue to support the Afghan people and make the Taliban leaders reconsider the rights of women.

And that’s it for this episode. One last thing before we go: The next issue of ifa’s magazine [KULTURAUUSTAUSCH](#), coming out in October, will focus on Afghanistan, particularly on women.

For any suggestions, critique, and wishes feel welcome to email us at [podcast@ifa.de](mailto:podcast@ifa.de). My name is Dan Wesker – thanks for listening and take care.”