

What brought you to Afghanistan?

I am drawn to Asia, because for me in many ways, I feel more at home here than I do in England. I feel a deep connection with people.

I've been in the Himalayas and the Hindu Kush region, working to tackle instability and poverty through education and jobs, since 1989. For me, it has been a life-long mission. And I have chosen to train people in skills and entrepreneurship, because I believe that nothing stops a bullet faster than a job.

I started off my working life in an investment bank in the UK, and then, one summer, took myself off to the Afghan-Pakistan border to see what it would be like to work as a Foreign Correspondent or an Aid Worker. On my 25th birthday, in the remote Chitral valley, the local Deputy Commissioner, asked me to help him set up a school. He had a very bright daughter and was concerned there were no decent schools to send her to. There were very few educated local women and decent teachers from 'down country', could not be persuaded to live in hardship conditions, land-locked by snow for 8 months of the year. I accepted and spent my bonus on school books and equipment before heading out to the Hindu Kush to teach.

That year not only changed the course of my life, but it also taught me that investing in girls' education and economic empowerment is the best way to tackle most of the world's problems. I'm a huge believer in eliminating barriers to employment for women and helping them unlock their potential. In a country like Afghanistan, where economic opportunity is linked directly to stability, more women in the workforce would not only increase productivity by at least a quarter, it would also help to bring peace to this war ravaged nation. When women make an income, they spend 90% of their earnings on their family's food, health and education, whereas men spend 30% to 40% on the family. A country's GDP increases by an average of 3% when only 10% more girls complete their education.

The 1990's and early noughties were devoted to establishing schools in the region, with a girl-child focus through a nonprofit I co-founded, Learning for Life. I ran a pashmina business and this freed me to do the work that I loved, before it grew and grew and then took over my life completely. In 2007, I was asked to return to Afghanistan to set up the country's first Jewellery School at the Turquoise

Mountain Foundation, Prince Charles' nonprofit. Afghanistan is rich in gems, yet one of the poorest countries in the world. I saw the potential for jobs and leapt at the chance.

How did Future Brilliance and the Aayenda Jewelry Co-operative come into being?

For several years, I served as Senior Advisor on Gemstones to the Afghan Ministry of Mines, a job that entailed inspecting gem mines to ensure their safety for workers, finding ways to bring more women into the value chain and generally to modernize the industry. Some of the world's oldest gem mines are in the northern regions of Afghanistan. Fine jewelry had been manufactured in Afghanistan for thousands of years, so, working initially with Turquoise Mountain, we started to revive the jewelry industry in Kabul. It made sense to roll that out to other gemstone-rich areas of the country. Many gems are found in Afghanistan, including lapis, tourmaline, ruby, spinel, emerald and kunzite. So in 2012 I set up the nongovernmental organization (NGO), Future Brilliance, to train Afghan artisans from all over the country to develop export quality jewelry, help them launch a co-operative and develop a fair-trade jewellery brand. The result is the Aayenda Jewelry (American spelling). Aayenda means 'future' in Dari. The nonprofit's mission is enterprise and workforce development for stability, particularly to get Afghan women into the workforce. Gemstone faceting, bead-making and jewellery manufacturing are good skills for Afghan women, as they can work from home if they wish to. Aayenda is not just marketing exquisite Afghan jewelry. There is an extraordinary story of courage and bravery behind this brand.

Could you share some of the stories of the artisans, (and how did the collaboration with Amrapali come about?)

Finding Afghan women whose families will let them be trained and enter the workforce is always a challenge. Khala Zada, a founder of the Aayenda Jewelry Co-Operative, is my inspiration. A shining beacon of hope for Afghanistan, she inspires women to aim high. She developed confidence and flair as a designer during her Future Brilliance training in Jaipur and her internship with Amrapali, and now her designs are on the front cover of Cosmopolitan all over the world. She is the most courageous woman I know. I'm hugely proud of her.

When she joined us in Jaipur in 2013, Khala had had to negotiate with her sons for several months to leave the country. She arrived wearing a Burka from her village

in northern Afghanistan, where she was already a formidable force (Chairman of the local Gemstone Association). Illiterate, a widow (her husband had been gunned down by the Taliban), she was passionate and determined. She quickly took command of the other students, some of whom were slightly unruly boys, and after her studies would walk through the bazaars selling her fine hand carved lapis beads to local traders.

During her training with Future Brilliance and Amrapali in Jaipur, Khala learned design and business skills. We equipped her with a solar powered Akaash tablet computer, (donated by the Indian company, Datawind) and she quickly learned how to communicate through Skype and other social media with business prospects and to collaborate with fellow artisans.

Thanks to her training in Jaipur, sales turnover of her business doubled within 6 months of her return to Afghanistan. There are now over 360 rural women in the northeastern region of Afghanistan hand carving fine beads that are sold all in Pakistan, India and Nepal – and now, through Aayenda – all over the world. Sales are now likely to increase again, as Amrapali has committed to sourcing fine lapis and turquoise beads from her. This will mean more jobs for Afghan women.

Through a royalty payment from sales of Aayenda Jewelry, Khala was recently able to complete the construction of a workshop for women in her village, in which she has already trained 60 more women. (The training was funded by a World Bank funded project through the Afghan Ministry of Mines and Petroleum). She has plans to train many more.

What was the situation on the ground?

Starting an industry in a country plagued by conflict is a Herculean task, but the bigger challenge is being able to bring women into the picture. Roya Hayat, gender manager for Future Brilliance, explains some of the reasons why Afghanistan is such a tough place for women. “Religion has always played a very important role in the daily life and social customs of Afghanistan. Historically, Afghan women have always been given a subordinate status. Their position in the family is shaped by many factors and there are strong cultural and historical roots of gender discrimination. Also, the long years of war and violence, an unstable political and economic situation and the Taliban takeover in 1996 had a particularly severe impact on women.”

Hayat, who was born in Kabul but fled to Pakistan as a refugee when she was 9 years old, sees the situation beginning to turn around for the better. “The political and cultural position of Afghan women has shown some improvement,” she says. “Since 2001, the wearing of a veil has become voluntary, and women have found employment in offices, shops and international NGOs. Some women are also receiving a university education. Widowed women are also benefiting from projects designed by local and international NGO’s like Future Brilliance. We are developing a globally recognized jewelry brand – Aayenda - so that the graduates of our program have a developed market to design for and sell into. For the training program in Jaipur, we interviewed over 130 people from all over Afghanistan and selected 36 students. 11 were female.

The six-month course in Jaipur, continues Hayat, “was designed and tailored to the needs of the students to increase their knowledge in design development, branding, sales and marketing, invoicing and financial management as these were the weak points of the majority of the students, especially the females. Besides the jewelry classes, we also arranged English language and personal development courses to boost our students’ self-confidence and help them communicate better with the outside world. These courses not only polished their skills but also provided them with tools and knowledge to compete with other companies in the international markets.”

Five months after the students returned to Afghanistan from Jaipur, a study was conducted to assess the progress and the employment status of the students. 39% percent of the graduates were currently working in their own gem-cutting/jewelry workshops and 38% were employed as gem cutters and jewelry designers, half of them in their family businesses and half of them outside of the family business. “Only two of the women weren’t working, due to family reasons”, says Hayat. “However, Khala Zada, has doubled the sales of her fine beads after returning to Afghanistan. When I visited her in Mazar-e-Sharif, she showed us a workshop space where she is planning to take on 30 more artisans, both men and women. Almost all of our students are earning better incomes than before, making them more confident with their work and helping their families to have a better life. Some of the students are also designing for the Aayenda collection and they are so proud so see their drawings and work being recognized and appreciated in the international market. Aayenda means ‘future’ in Dari, the local language. The students liked this name because it represents the hope of a better future for them and for Afghanistan.”

What is your vision for Aayenda?

My vision for Aayenda is a functioning and efficient co-operative, run by Afghans, that sells world-class jewellery all the world, creating jobs for hundreds, if not thousands of jobs for artisans, especially women.

The Aayenda Jewelry Co-operative now comprises 10 Afghan registered jewellery and gem-cutting companies, of which over half are women-owned. In addition to Khala Zada, Aayenda has 2 female designers from Ishkashim on the border with Tajikistan and another 7 women manufacturing jewelry in the capital city of Kabul. 11 women (out of a total of 36 students) completed 6 months training course in Jaipur, India, delivered by Future Brilliance at the Institute of Gems and Jewelry in Jaipur, with internships at Amrapali and other leading local workshops. They studied the craft, design and business of jewelry making.

Today Khala Zada is back in Jaipur, negotiating with Amrapali to source their hand-carved lapis and turquoise beads from the Aayenda Jewelry Co-Operative. She also wants Amrapali to stock the Aayenda Jewelry line in their stores all over India and in London. After a successful show at their flagship store in Delhi, she is optimistic. Amrapali have already agreed to support the Co-operative with ongoing work placements and technical training and tomorrow Khala returns to close the deal with Amrapali's owners. I am ecstatic: this is a wonderful achievement for the Co-operative and concrete proof that Afghan women deliver!

The perfect combination for sustainable economic development is tapping locally available resources and enhancing local skills, especially women's skills. When you invest in a woman like Khala, you have the jewel in the crown of international development.