

This is their time to shine

Abandoning her fast-paced City life to do something 'of value that would change people's lives' led Sophia Swire to set up Future Brilliance – a charity that's bringing the women of Afghanistan and their 'sparkling assets' to London during Fashion Week

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IT TOOK KHALA ZADA two months to persuade her sons to let her come to Jaipur in India. A 50-year-old widow from rural Afghanistan, Zada runs a small business making jewellery by hand out of tiny lapis lazuli beads. This six-month course would teach her about design and techniques and how to sell to customers around the world, but being in a country of gender inequality and repressive edicts, she was not, as a woman, allowed to make the decision herself. She had to get permission from the men in her life – her adult sons. Finally, in January this year, Zada left her home accompanied by one of her sons and his wife to enrol alongside 35 other Afghan men and women (the ratio was two men to one woman) at the Indian Institute of Gems & Jewellery in Sitapura, Jaipur's new jewellery quarter.

Zada is a pioneer in a new scheme, devised by the charity Future Brilliance, to create a network of skilled Afghan artisans who will set up businesses and spread their knowledge when Afghan security is handed back to its own administration next year.

This week, a Future Brilliance jewellery range has been launched during London Fashion Week under the brand Aayenda (which means 'future' in Dari, the lingua franca in Afghanistan). Enthusiasts have described the project as one of national transformation; sceptics see it as overambitious. But Sophia Swire, the 49-year-old British businesswoman who founded the charity, has no doubts. 'The aid tap is about to be turned off and we have to prepare the Afghans to be self-sufficient,' she says.

Self-sufficiency is one of Sophia's strengths. The woman who introduced pashminas to the western world back in the 1990s (she spotted the

shawls being worn by beautiful female film stars at a Lahore party hosted by Imran Khan and tracked down their source in Nepal) has spent more than two decades working in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Nepal.

She is used to travelling to war zones and perilously remote destinations, and isn't scared of confronting warlords and drug barons. Yet her background is one of English comforts and financial privilege. She grew up in Dorset.

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in a Jacobean mill house near Blandford Forum, with three brothers. Her mother is Dowager Marchioness Townshend ('I was never as elegant or as beautiful as she is – she used to call me the 15-year-old peasant!'). Her late father, whom she clearly adored, was a former director of Sotheby's, and one of her brothers, Hugo, is now a Tory minister.

Educated at a local boarding school, then at Queen's Gate School in London after her parents divorced, she went on to read art history and Italian at the University of Manchester – and then surprised everyone by getting a job as a stockbroker with Kleinwort Benson. She says she only did it to prove her brothers wrong. 'They ►



Clockwise from left: Sophia in Jaipur; student Khala Zada; Sophia watching a student at work, and with graduates from the Future Brilliance course in Jaipur. Opposite: a necklace from the Aayenda collection



From left: Sophia in the lapis mines of Badakhshan; the students' designs are intricate and unique; Sophia looks over some sketches with Indian jewellers Rajiv Arora and Rajesh Ajmera and US designer Anna Ruth Henriques. Opposite: Debi Nishimura of jewellery brand Derewala examines student drawings

◀ said, "You can't do it. You're a girl." But Sophia seems to thrive in male-dominated environments. She built up an impressive client list (including the Vatican) over two years, but after Black Monday in October 1987, when the stock markets went into free fall and the atmosphere became even more cut-throat, she decided to take her fight elsewhere.

'I was having a stand-up argument with my then boss, who was taking my top clients from me, and I was saying, "You can't do that, I will get fired." He said, "If I don't, I will get fired." And while I was fighting, I had a little bird on my shoulder saying, "You should take this fight and use it for something that actually matters." I realised it was time for me to leave the City and do something that I felt had value and could actually change people's lives.'

Journalist friends were already reporting on the Soviet-Afghan war, and in 1988 Sophia went for a three-week break to Peshawar in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province, drawn by a romantic notion of the front line. 'At that point, I either wanted to be a foreign correspondent or an aid worker, so I went to find out more.' During that trip she visited Chitral in the foothills of the Hindu Kush. 'It was magical, mysterious and outstandingly beautiful.' Chitral also provided her with her first start-up. She was watching a polo match when the deputy commissioner came up and explained that she was the kind of woman he was looking for to help him set up a school. 'I said, "Why me?" And he said, "Well, did you go to university?" I told him I had. "In that case, you have 15 years more education than most of the women here." He persuaded me to bring back 200

kilos of school books and a number of my friends to teach there.' Later in the year, Sayurj Public School opened with 40 children aged four to ten.

It was the start of a new life doing good things in a world that was a galaxy away from the one into which she had been born. She stayed at the school for a year, and then moved to Islamabad for six months to help set up Battle Against Narcotics, to address the problem of heroin addiction in Pakistan. 'That was a subject I knew about. Having grown up in the 1980s, I had lots of friends who had been involved in heroin abuse.' (It was during this time that she discovered pashminas, turning them into a £1 million business selling to 250 global outlets.)

In 1993 she co-founded the Learning for Life charity with Charlotte Bannister-Parker, daughter of the athlete Sir Roger Bannister. This has since established more than 250 schools for girls in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. The charity's HQ was a turret in a church in Notting Hill, London, and Sophia travelled between England, Pakistan, India and Nepal raising money and awareness (and running her pashmina business).

In 2008, after a friend introduced her to Rory Stewart, a former diplomat and current Tory MP for Penrith and the Border, she started working for his Kabul-based Turquoise Mountain Foundation, which was initiated by Prince Charles to support traditional arts in Afghanistan.

Jewellery-making has an ancient history in Afghanistan, a country rich in emeralds, rubies, tourmalines and lapis lazuli, and Sophia wants to close the gap between those who have benefited from its wealth (mainly foreign dealers) and those who haven't (the Afghan people). She

established a school for jewellers and gem cutters through Turquoise Mountain, and in 2010 became a senior adviser to the Afghan Ministry of Mines, inspecting gem mines in outlying provinces to check their safety for workers and looking for ways to channel profits from the gemstone business to Afghan artisans.

Sophia is good at getting things going - and then she likes to hand them over: 'If you build yourself into the business model, at the end of the day there is only so much you can achieve in life. It's much better to set something up, put excellent management in place, and then step back and let it go.' Her business background means she's unflustered by spreadsheets. 'I'm a Virgo and get great pleasure from matching the receipts and balancing the books.' She is brisk, hard-working, pragmatic, good with money - and wants Future Brilliance to be the same.

Her views on aid aren't always in line with humanitarian thinking. She believes the aid boom has created a welfare culture - something she is passionately against. 'When I had my pashmina business, if people didn't deliver, I didn't pay them. That is the philosophy behind Future Brilliance as well. There will be no safety net for poor performance, for poor or shoddy goods, just as there is no safety net in the real world.' But the advantage is that women jewellery-makers will be able to work from home - a key benefit should the Taliban return to power once UN peacekeeping forces pull out.

Her plan is to kick-start the jewellery industry in Afghanistan. Future Brilliance doesn't only teach students how to cut and polish gems, they learn about design and Western taste from



Inspired by the cultural heritage and native gems of Afghanistan, Aayenda Jewellery is a collaboration between local and international designers

visiting teachers, such as the British designer Paul Spurgeon (who has designed the Aayenda jewellery range on sale during London Fashion Week), how to sell online to customers around the world and about global standards of quality control, pricing and manufacturing. The jewellery course is in Jaipur and not Kabul, she explains, because Jaipur has been the centre of the gem and jewellery industry for hundreds of years – it has gem dealers, stone cutters, polishers, jewellery makers. When someone such as designer Jade Jagger wants jewellery made, she comes to Jaipur.

Sophia is, you realise, a mass of contradictions. She is decisive and draws people in, but admits she can be intensely shy and hates giving speeches. 'It's probably about wanting to be perfect,' she says. She is scared of earthquakes and lions, yet resolutely faced down the police commander who waved his

Kalashnikov at her when she was inspecting lapis lazuli mines in a remote area of Afghanistan in late 2009. 'I have never been with a person who was more angry in my life – and he had a gun. But I managed to calm him down. I think in many situations being a woman is an advantage.'

But she is not naive about the country's dangers, particularly after the murder of her friend Dr Karen Woo, the British doctor who was killed by gunmen while on a medical mission to a remote corner of Afghanistan in 2010. 'I was

profoundly shocked and saddened and since then I've been less prone to taking risks.' She is evangelical on the transformative effect of education. 'When the women first arrived in Jaipur I couldn't see their faces. They wouldn't even unpin their scarves. I didn't know what they looked like. But I knew it would just be a matter of time before the chadors [scarves] slipped and I could see who they were and their confidence and true brilliance start to shine through. I am so inspired by the women in the project because they've taken a much bigger risk than I will ever take in coming to Jaipur. For them

it is a huge step and I am so proud of them.'

She insists she's 'cool' with not having a home of her own (her UK base in Dorset belongs to her family). And she says one of her most magical times was working for Turquoise Mountain Foundation

in Kabul in 2008, with no electricity and scorpions dropping on to her bed. 'Part of the art of life is learning how not to be too attached to people, things and places. I went to Ascot recently and felt a bit like an alien dropping into a world I no longer belong to.'

She admits, though, that her 'crazy, accelerated life' has also cost her a family of her own. 'I've come to learn that men like to be the centre of attention, and when you're driven to achieve things, it's hard to put your focus on another

person.' She has fallen deeply in love, but it didn't work out. 'I've heard the words "too independent"', she says.

The great tragedy of her life is not having children. 'There was a period, in my mid-40s, when I had to come to terms with the fact that it probably wasn't going to happen, after assuming all my adult life that it would. That was hugely difficult, a grieving process, and I see a lot of that in my friends.'

'But Future Brilliance has refocused me, because I am able to pour all of that maternal love and care into the Afghan girls and women. We wanted the course to be half women but so many families refused to let their womenfolk leave the country. When we take our programme back to Afghanistan, it will be much easier because we'll be opening our training courses closer to their families.'

Sophia is extremely proud of Khala Zada, who is now a graduate of Jaipur's Indian Institute of Gems & Jewellery with a City and Guilds certificate to prove it – and her bracelets, made of lapis beads, are stunning. Zada, who is unable to read or write because of Afghanistan's limited schooling opportunities, can now expand her business and employ more women, says Sophia. 'So in terms of maximum return on capital employed, taking just this one woman and investing in her is potentially huge as far as the economy of her local village is concerned.' ■

■ The Aayenda Jewellery range, and Khala Zada's pieces, are available from futurebrilliance.net, with prices starting at £20

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