

Vicious Circle: Sisters in Afghanistan Fear Return of Subjugation, Dark Future

Having Learnt to Be Economically Self Reliant, Sisters Cry for Help, for Safer Options, for Survival

'Kabul is taken by Taliban'. 'Afghanistan has fallen to the Taliban'. As Afghanistan and the world woke up to these headlines on August 16, a fresh wave of apprehension gripped the people of the country who have been watching in shock the insurgents claiming provinces, one after the another, over the past weeks.

The fear is especially palpable among Afghani women who are anxious over their impending 'dark future' comprising loss of rights and subjugation. SEWA's sister organization Sabah Bagh e Khazana Women's Association (SBKSA) has a 10,000 member strong presence in Afghanistan. Most of them are involved in garments and processed food trades.

Till August 15, they were working in SEWA trade centers but reel under uncertainty, hoping and praying for a safe passage to a life where they would have liberty to work hard and live a free life.

Kabul-based Hafizjan, executive committee member of Sabah Bagh e Khazana Women's Association (SBKSA) and master trainer of garment making team in the Afghan capital, says the recent developments brought back spine-spilling memories of her being knocked down by gun-wielding Taliban. "That was 13 years ago. I survived and with the support of SEWA learnt to stand on my own two feet, mastering the trade of garment making and earning for my family. After I heard that the Taliban has entered Dasht-e-Barchi in Kabul, I am worried sick for the safety of me and my mother. I earnestly pray to Allah to help me go away to a place where I am safe and enjoy the liberty to work and sustain the life I rebuilt with SEWA's support," says Hafizjan.

"Taliban taking over reins of power in Afghanistan means I may no longer be allowed to work in the center, earn and buy food and medicines for my mother. It's not just me, millions of Afghan women will be subjected to extreme control and oppression," fears Hafizjan.

Azizgul from Herat said their province has already fallen in hands of Taliban again forcing women to the oppressed life they worked hard to change over the past decade. "Ever since the Taliban took over, women are not allowed to step outside their homes anymore. The situation is very bad as fear over rampant killings and gunshots becomes common-place. For us, the only way out is to get out of the country to a safe place where we can live without the sword of fear constantly hanging on our heads," said Azizgul.

Azizgul said their conservative families too want them to move out as they do not want us to be pushed into a life of oppression and suffering. "SEWA has helped us to believe in ourselves and live a dignified life. We are confident to move out and restart lives anywhere in the world," said Azizgul.

Sosan, another master trainer in SBSKA, Kabul says women like her had finally learnt to

become self-reliant by becoming masters of a trade, earning an income and sustaining their families.

"My husband lives out of the country. I live with my children and parents who are dependent on my income. Distressed by recent developments, I rushed to the bank to withdraw my savings but the bank said they had run out of money. I stare at a bleak, unsafe future," said Sosan.

"I wish for a safe passage out of Afghanistan. SEWA has taught me well to become financially independent. I am confident that in a new place, I will start work and stand on my own two feet and sustain my family. I fear for my safety, I fear for my family's well-being and need help," said Sosan.

Shikiba from Kabul said the situation in Kabul is bad where families fleeing provinces captured by Taliban have started camping on the roads with no money, no food and no roof over their heads. "A few rich families donate food to them. Ordinary people like us want to help but resources are limited as business was badly affected by Covid-19," says Shikiba who laments people are no longer buying Turchi pickles, jams and chutneys.

"Over a decade ago post-Taliban, SEWA had helped us become strong and build our lives. Today, when the Taliban is back, I believe we are strong enough to rebuild our lives with some support in newer, safer areas," said Shikiba.

Yashir Ghousi said that they are tormented over being ruled by Taliban once again. "How will we work to earn and buy our food. How will we pay the rent for our homes? How will we survive. We need help," said Ghousi.

It needs mention that SEWA's association with Afghan began in 2008-2009 with the aim to make widows and other most vulnerable Afghani women self-reliant. SEWA through its sister organization Sabah Bagh e Khazana Women's Association (SBKSA) has trained women in management, garment making, food processing, gems and jewelry, embroidery, community based organization management and soft-skills. SBKSA centers are operational in Kabul city and provinces of Mazar-i-Sharif, Baghlan, Parwan, Herat and Kandahar.