

Zarifa Ghafari, Woman of Courage

Zarifa Ghafari was born in Gardez in the Paktika province of southeastern Afghanistan. She belongs to the majority «ethnic» group of Pashtuns. Her mother is a teacher, her father, a colonel in the Afghan special forces, was assassinated in November 2020 in Kabul in an attack that was never claimed. At the age of 16, she received a scholarship that allowed her to continue her education and enter Punjab University in Delhi in 2009. There she obtained a Master's degree in Economics in 2015. In parallel to her university studies, she worked for the NGO Assistance and Promotion for Afghan Women and created the radio station Pehla¹, which focused on the training and promotion of women in Afghan society, two activities that marked the beginning of her political life.

Thus, in July 2018, she took part in a civil service entrance exam, instituted by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani who wanted to diversify the composition of the civil service. She obtained the best results, which earned her the appointment by President Ghani, at the age of 26, mayor of Maiden Shahr, a city of 35,000 inhabitants located in the province of Wardak, about 20 kilometers south of Kabul. But from the very first day she took office, she faced violent opposition from men who were hostile to the idea that a woman could hold the office of mayor of their city. The young woman had to be evacuated under the protection of officers of the National Directorate of Security and it was only 8 months later that she could take possession of her office and begin to fulfill her mandate, a victory won following an intense campaign conducted on social networks under the hashtag *IwillFightforRight* **#iwillfightforright**

Despite repeated death threats and two assassination attempts, Zarifa Ghafari asserted herself in office, engaging with determination and efficiency in sanitation and public works campaigns, taking concrete steps to educate girls and promote women, encouraging their appointment to the civil service and encouraging them to take initiatives in the economic field. The «International Woman of Courage Award», created by the U.S. State Department for women around the world who have distinguished themselves through leadership and entrepreneurship, is awarded to her in March 2020.

Zarifa Ghafari's journey is part of the long struggle of Afghan women for recognition of their political rights, a turbulent history of victories and defeats, and one that has been shaped by the international issues that have plagued Afghanistan for so many years and in which the Pashtuns, Uzbeks, Tajiks and Hazaras, the four main "ethnic" groups that make up Afghan society, have been caught up. Afghanistan has had several forms of government. First it was a monarchy, including that of King Anamullah Khan, who granted women the right to vote in 1919 and established a school for girls in Kabul. Then came a succession of republics until the Soviet occupation, fought by the mujahideen, followed by the American occupation and the resistance of the Taliban, who seized Kabul in 1996 and imposed their law in a large part of the country. Despite this situation, many women are involved in public life, as doctors, lawyers, teachers, businesswomen or activists. In 2014, the Afghan National Assembly had 28% women, the provincial councils 25%.

What will happen to the negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government that have been going on in Doha, Qatar, since September 2020? What will happen to Afghan women? Four of them are involved in these negotiations, including Fatima Gailani, president of the Afghan Red Crescent, while others have joined together in the feminist *Women's National Movement for Peace*, using cyber-activism in the hope of influencing the current negotiations.

Presentation of Zarifa Ghafari proposed a member of the Zonta Club of Sion-Valais

¹ Young girl in «Pashtun»