



Q&A with Tahira Afridi on the situation in Afghanistan

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Tahira Afridi is the Director of Artisan Links, one of MADE51's social enterprise partners working with Afghan refugee women.

Artisan Links was officially registered in 2017 in Peshawar, Pakistan but traces its roots back to a 1985 development project started by the Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees. Over the course of 30+ years, the initiative evolved from a sewing project for Afghan refugees, into an NGO working with both Afghan refugees in Pakistan and marginalised women in Afghanistan, and finally into the Fair Trade Pakistani business it is today.

Artisan Links continues to work with Afghan women both in Pakistan and border regions of Afghanistan and is now the first and only guaranteed member of the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO) in Pakistan.



Tahira Afridi at work with refugee artisans in Pakistan in 2020. Artisan Links has continued to work with their artisans throughout the pandemic while respecting health protocols.

Afridi has been at the helm of Artisan Links since the beginning. She is a dynamic leader with a deep commitment to creating economic empowerment for marginalised women. We wanted to hear her thoughts on the current situation in Afghanistan and how it is affecting the 600 Afghan refugees Artisan Links works with in Pakistan, as well as the 30 artisans who used to live in Pakistan but have since returned to Afghanistan. Our questions and her responses are below:

Can you tell us a little bit about the women you work with in Pakistan ?

Yes, their parents came to Pakistan as refugees during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The second generation is being raised and educated in Pakistan. So the artisans that are working with us are mostly second generation refugees. We previously worked with the elders, but now it's mainly the young lot.

The world just watched the Taliban re-gain control of Afghanistan. How have the women you worked with reacted to these developments? What are the refugees you work with in Pakistan hearing from their family members ?

The artisans still haven't forgotten the last Taliban regime. They remember the hardships that families faced. The trust factor is lacking. Uncertainty exists and these artisans are worried about their family members in Afghanistan and want them to come to Pakistan. Half the families are here, half are there, you know? So they are worried about them but they are in touch with them.

The trust factor is lacking and artisans are worried about their family members who are still there. They are worried but they are in touch with them via telephone.

You have 30 artisans that started with Artisan Links when they were refugees in Pakistan, but have recently returned to Jalalabad, Afghanistan. Are these artisans safe? Are they still working?

I called our trainer in Jalalabad to hear from her about this. The feeling amongst the artisans is similar - the issue is trust. This time the Taliban has promised that children will be able to go to school and women will be able to work but the artisans fear that the Taliban will return to their old ways.

The group that we are working with - these are poor women and they are not asking for much, just the freedom to go out, to send their children to school. So they think if the Taliban stick to their promises, they will be okay because their children will be able to go to school. Men will be able to work. It might be bearable.

But it is confusing times right now, it is too early for them to relax. They are worried about their children and families. Most men are at home from work as the Taliban has not presented any governmental systems as yet. So, what I gathered is that they do not trust the Taliban, even though they are promising things that they want to hear right now. Everybody has those previous Taliban regime images and experiences, and they still haven't departed from those.

So it's a sad situation and we just hope and pray things get better. Artisan Links is committed to keep working with the artisans there, even now that the border is closed. We have found ways to bring their products back to Pakistan - it's expensive but we are continuing so we can give work to these women.

They used to work with us in Pakistan and have returned to Afghanistan before the Taliban took over. They worked with us for such a long time we don't want to let them go. We are here to help in whatever capacity we can.

What is Artisan Links doing right now?

We are the only organisation that is still, at this time it is two weeks since the Taliban took over, working with our artisans who live cross-border in Afghanistan.

We are working on a really large order right now and the artisans in Jalalaba are still working on it, so they can earn income while the men in the families can't work.

We are grateful to our customers for giving work to us so we can give work to the artisans.

Are there any other observations you would like to share with us ?

It's because of MADE51 that Artisan Links survived a very tough time a few years back. MADE51 and WFTO have been a big part of our support system so we would really like to mention this.



Afghan refugee, living in Pakistan, creates embroidered throws and pillows in partnership with Artisan Links. © Raven and Lily

About Made51

MADE51 is brought to life by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency.

For more details on MADE51's strategic partners, wholesale orders, and how to get involved, please visit: www.made51.org

For questions about wholesale orders, please email: sales@made51.org.