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Meet the New Boss

Questions for Dr. Sima Samar

Q: Why do you think you were picked as minister for women's affairs?

A: Because I'm very much outspoken and I belong to a minority group, the Hazaras. So this was a double benefit, actually.

Q: Does that make you a token?

A: I don't know exactly, but maybe yes. I don't say that I'm perfect, but I can do something.

Q: Do you want the job?

A: I don't want to say no because they'll say the women are not capable. I personally wasn't interested in power. I was really hoping to do my own work, to not forget that I am a woman. We have lots of examples of women leaders, like Khaleda Zia in Bangladesh and Benazir Bhutto and Margaret Thatcher, who get power and try to keep power instead of fighting for women's rights.

Q: How will you begin to make life easier for Afghan women?

A: Being a woman in this new government is the first step for them to trust that things have changed. Once there's security and a judiciary system, then women will trust that they can complain somewhere and that we will listen to them.

Q: So being a woman in power sends a signal: Come out and take off your burka if you want to?

A: Well, the burka is not the big problem. The problem is when it's imposed on you.

Q: How would you react if your daughter wanted to wear the burka?

A: She will not wear the burka. She doesn't like it. She's 10 years old. If she decided to wear it, I'd let her wear it. It's not a big problem.

Q: Speaking of burkas, what will you wear as a deputy prime minister?

A: A simple dress like I always do in Pakistan, with a small scarf on my head just to be a little conservative. If we just wear a scarf to avoid the objection of the men, it's not a big issue. We learn how to play with these people, these factions, during these long 23 years of war.

Q: How else can you play with them, put them at ease?

A: I don't know. I cannot say in advance what I will do and what kind of problem I'll face from the men. I'll wear the chador. That's no problem for me.

Q: Now that you're returning to Afghanistan after spending the better part of two decades in Pakistan, are you worried that you'll be among people who only recently wanted you dead?

A: Yes, but things are changing. In 1995 I was invited to Davos, Switzerland, and we had a dinner, and there was a Russian banker sitting beside

me, and I stood up and said I cannot sit beside a Russian. But now we see that the Russians are our friends. Everything is changing. It's not 1992.

Q: For men too? How will you deal with having men under you?

A: I already do. I have 700 men on staff at my organization.

Q: How do they handle working for a woman at your clinics and schools?

A: They are surgeons, military officers and engineers, and all of them do accept my orders. They do really accept me.

Q: Will it be different back in Afghanistan, maybe, where men are not as accustomed to working for a woman?

A: I think the men just need a little space to breathe, and they will go back to normal. Of course it takes a little time to prepare mentally. But they will adjust, inshallah.

Q: Really? These men have been warriors for years. Will it be so easy for them to work with women now?

A: Not all of them are warriors.

Q: What if you ask an underling to do something at work, and he says: "No, I won't listen to you. You're a woman"?

A: They cannot say that.

Q: But what if they do?

A: I will have to figure it out, but I don't think it will happen. It hasn't been my experience.

Q: Is your model of a liberated Afghanistan a Western one?

A: Why should everything be Westernized? Liberation is not just a Western idea. Everyone wants it.

Q: Who is the liberated Afghan woman?

A: She has access to education, the right to vote, the right to go to work, to choose her spouse. All these things are the basic rights of all human beings, and Afghan women need those too.