



The Mary Ann McCracken Foundation Inaugural Lecture Women's Role in Society: The Experience in Afghanistan

Thursday 18th November, 7pm – 8.30pm, via Zoom

On Thursday 18th November, the Mary Ann McCracken Foundation will host its inaugural annual lecture, focusing on the challenges facing Afghan women.

Many of us have watched in horror as events in Afghanistan have unfolded, from the war against the Taliban which began just over 20 years ago on the 7th October 2001, to their most recent uprising in August this year. During this time, hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to flee, fearing for their lives and escaping conflict. The lucky escape of Dr Sima Nazari and her family in the summer was the focus of a recent BBC Spotlight programme.

Sima was born in Kabul, Afghanistan. Despite having to travel to Iran for her schooling, she returned to Afghanistan to complete her studies in medicine and to support the struggle for Afghan women's rights. For 13 years Sima worked as a successful doctor in hospitals across Afghanistan, while also continuing to fight for a more progressive Afghan society. As a highly educated Afghan feminist from the Hazara ethnic minority, Sima faced extreme danger following the Taliban's takeover in August 2021. Following her dramatic escape, she was offered asylum in Ireland, where she has recently settled.

Norma Sinte, Chair of the Mary Ann McCracken Foundation, explains *"we are delighted and humbled to welcome Dr Sima Nazari to tell her personal experience of living in, and escaping from, Afghanistan as part of our first Mary Ann McCracken Foundation lecture. Mary Ann would have championed women like Sima if she were alive today. Over 200 years ago she herself fought to support education, the advancement of human rights and the promotion of equality, particularly for women."*

Attendees will also hear from Sara. Sara and her family faced constant threat from the Taliban because they came from the Panjshir Valley. They frequently moved from city to city and home to home to keep safe. Sara remembers clearly the tearing apart of her family, when her father left for the UK for safety, and the long long road he faced to bring her and her mother over to London to join him. A journey which took six years. On the 18th November Sara will talk more about the ongoing challenges her family, and other migrant families, face when moving to a new country.

Contributions to this event also come from Bilal, an Afghan national who served as Cultural Advisor and Interpreter for British Forces in Afghanistan from 2009 until 2014. Bilal's intricate knowledge of Afghanistan, and extensive network throughout the country, enabled him to secure safe passage for many vulnerable Afghans this August, including Dr Sima

Nazari. He is passionate about raising awareness of those who not only have managed to escape the country but also about the huge hardships that face those left behind, particularly as winter approaches. Bilal has seen and experienced first hand the consequences of the Taliban's treatment of women, their lack of access to education and medical treatment. He fears death rates will rise of expectant mothers and newborns due to restricted access to hospitals. A rate already the highest in the world. He also fears the negative consequences on young people, both boys and girls, who don't have the same opportunities when only one parent is able to work and bring in an income. Opportunities he and his siblings had because his own mother was able to work.

Norma Sinte continues "We want to use this event to raise awareness of the issues of women in society, particularly those in and from Afghanistan. However, it is important to also bring these conversations closer to home. We therefore welcome the contribution from the Law Centre who provide services for asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland, and who continue to lobby for change in legislation to ensure they have equality and access to services."

The stark reality of asylum seekers living in Northern Ireland today is often brushed under the carpet. They are seen as the lucky ones who escaped. However for many, the struggles they face may be different, but no less traumatising. Inadequate accommodation, inability to contribute to society, to work, to feel of value. The constant threat of changing legislation which could see them deported, and not to mention the stigma and racism that many face within the very communities which they so desperately want to be a part of and integrate in to.

Tickets for this event are £10 and are available to buy online. All monies raised will be given to support services for asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland. To find out more, visit: <https://cliftonbelfast.com/event/womens-role-in-society-the-experience-in-afghanistan-inaugural-annual-mary-ann-mccracken-lecture/>

About the Mary Ann McCracken Foundation

The Mary Ann McCracken Foundation was set up by Belfast Charitable Society (BCS) to celebrate Mary Ann's life and to build on her legacy today. As a Belfast-born social reformer and activist, Mary Ann McCracken made a huge contribution to life in Belfast and beyond, including the Poor House, today known as Clifton House.

The Foundation has two main objectives:

- To advance education of the public about the life and works of Mary Ann McCracken, a leading social reformer and philanthropist.
- In the spirit of the legacy and work of Mary Ann McCracken; to advance education, to prevent or relieve poverty, to advance human rights and promote equality.

About the Belfast Charitable Society

Based at Clifton House, the Belfast Charitable Society has long played a role in the development of Belfast and the welfare of its people. Founded by a group of leading businessmen in 1752 to build a Poor House and Infirmary for the most vulnerable citizens of Belfast, the Society played a guiding role in shaping the city. Today, the society, led by a board of members, continues to play a part in tackling disadvantage within the city.

About the speaker and Host

Sir Ronnie Weatherup was appointed as Belfast Charitable Society President in 2018. Sir Ronnie was educated at Queen's University Belfast and was called to the Bar of Northern Ireland in 1971 and took Silk in 1993. He was appointed a High Court Judge in 2001 and to the Court of Appeal in September 2015. Sir Ronnie retired in June 2017.

Sir Ronnie is a former member of the Judicial Studies Board, a former Judge in residence at Queen's University Belfast and Visitor to the University of Ulster from 2004 to 2014. He also served as an inaugural member of the Judicial Appointments Commission from 2005 to 2013.

Dr Sima Nazari

Dr Sima Nazari was born in Kabul, Afghanistan. Having attended high school in Iran and completed her bachelor and master's degree in midwifery at the Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Dr Nazari returned to her homeland in 2007 to support the struggle for Afghan women's rights and to complete her medical studies in Kabul's Cheragh University.

Dr Nazari has since worked as a successful doctor in hospitals across Afghanistan, specialising in obstetrics and gynaecology.

In 2011, Sima's family were forced to leave Afghanistan due to security threats and were accepted as refugees in Germany. Determined to fight for a more progressive Afghan society and serve the women of Afghanistan as a doctor, Sima stayed in the country.

As a highly educated Afghan feminist from the Hazara ethnic minority, Sima faced extreme danger following the Taliban's takeover in August 2021. She managed to escape from Afghanistan and now has refugee status in Ireland.

Bilal Nasiri

Raised in Kabul, Bilal Nasiri is an Afghan national fluent in six languages who served as Cultural Advisor and Interpreter for British Forces in Afghanistan from 2009 until 2014, during which time he led a team of 40 interpreters.

Following death threats from the Taliban, Bilal was forced to move to Australia at the end of 2014 when British troops withdrew from Afghanistan.

Bilal's intricate knowledge of Afghanistan and extensive network throughout the country and wider region, enabled him to secure safe passage for many vulnerable Afghans, including his family, over the past couple of months.

He currently lives in Melbourne with his wife, where he studies Law and Criminology and is mastering his interpreting and translation skills, while raising their two young children.

Sara - London-based Afghan

Sara grew up in Kabul and her father was a driver for the Ministry of Defence. Her family were targeted by the Taliban due to his work, as well as the family's Tajik ethnic background and sadly some were killed by the Taliban forces. Sara fled Afghanistan at the age of six and is now the voice for many Afghans facing oppression.

Sara is recent Politics and International Relations graduate who is seeking to begin her professional career. She is currently working to assist family members, friends and their extended families still in Afghanistan as well as supporting Afghan nationals in her local community in the UK.

Liz Griffith- Law Centre NI

Liz is Head of Policy & Research at Law Centre NI. Much of her work has focussed on the rights of migrants and asylum seekers, including securing the right to access free healthcare for all asylum seekers. The Law Centre is part of a consortium of NGOs that is currently supporting Syrian refugee resettlement in NI and is preparing to start welcoming Afghan refugees.