

## **“Distance does not erase commitment”: the voice of an Afghan judge Bilbao**

*The speech by Safia Jan Mohammad, Afghan judge in exile, at the MEDEL international conference “Double Border: Gender and Childhood in Modern Migrations. European Regulations and Human Rights”, Bilbao, June 12.2026.*

My name is Safia Jan Mohammad. I am an Afghan judge. For years, I worked in Afghanistan as a judge in the court in charge of cases of violence against women in the city of Kabul, and today I live as a migrant in Pamplona, Spain.

Before beginning, I am delighted to be here in the city of Bilbao, surrounded by judges, jurists, and legal professionals. It is a great honor for me to be able to share a part of my life story with you.

When I speak of Afghanistan, I am not talking only about a country; I am talking about millions of women whose dreams, rights, and voices have been threatened and tested time and time again.

I worked for more than sixteen years as a judge. Every morning, as I entered the courthouse, I knew that behind every file there was a real person: a woman who had endured violence in silence, a young girl forced into marriage, a mother who feared for her daughters' future, and people who expected justice.

I remember many women who came to the court after years of suffering. Some had been beaten, others had been forced to marry, and many had lost hope before finding the courage to speak out.

As a judge, I could not change society as a whole, but I could change the life of the person standing before me, and that was precisely what I did.

I worked on cases related to violence against women, forced marriages, child marriage, deprivation of rights, physical and psychological violence, and other forms of abuse that gravely damage human dignity.

Every judicial decision carried an enormous responsibility. I knew that behind every sentence there was a life that could change forever.

However, defending women's rights in Afghanistan was never an easy task. On many occasions, those of us who worked for justice faced threats, pressure, and personal risks. I was myself threatened on repeated occasions.

Despite all these difficulties, we continued to fulfill our duty because we believed that justice is not just a profession, but an ethical commitment: the conviction that all human beings deserve to live with dignity and without fear.

Then came a moment that changed my life: with the fall of the Republic of Afghanistan to the Taliban, I was forced to flee my country.

It was not just me; a large number of Afghan judges feared the arrival of the Taliban. With the arrival of this terrorist group, prisons were opened, and many criminals we had sent to prison were released. Furthermore, more than 2,000 male judges and 270 female judges lost their jobs. Many had to go into hiding or leave the country for fear of reprisals and acts of revenge.

I was among those judges. Along with several female Afghan judges, I arrived in Spain at the invitation of the International Association of Women Judges and the Spanish Association of Women Judges.

I had to leave behind my work, my court, my colleagues, my memories, and a significant part of my identity.

The future I had worked for over years suddenly became uncertain. Sometimes I feel as though my experience, my knowledge, and my years of service have been suspended.

Becoming a migrant means starting over.

Migration is not just crossing a border; migration means migration means taking leave of an entire life. It means leaving behind places, people, projects, and dreams. It means living between two worlds: the world we left behind and the world we are trying to build.

Today I live in Spain, and as I move forward along the path of an uncertain future, far from the judicial profession, I experience a life that is still full of questions and challenges.

But I must make a confession: the distance from the judiciary and the uncertainty about the future have placed a heavy burden on my life.

The hardest part for me was not losing my position as a judge.

The hardest part was feeling that I could no longer help women the way I used to.

For years, I listened to their voices every day, I listened to their stories, I tried to protect their rights and bring them closer to justice.

And suddenly, I found myself far away from them.

Sometimes I feel helpless.

Sometimes I wonder what has become of those women whose cases I knew.

Sometimes I think of the Afghan girls who cannot study freely today, of the women who have lost the right to work and to participate in society, and of those who are still fighting to make their voices heard.

But I have also learned something very important:

*Distance does not erase commitment.*

Although I can no longer sit in a courtroom in Afghanistan, I still have a voice.

And as long as I have a voice, I will continue to speak for those who cannot speak freely.

Because the defense of human rights does not end when you leave a country.

Justice has no borders. Solidarity has no borders. Human dignity has no borders.

That is why gatherings like this one are so important. They allow us to listen to the voices of women and the stories that sometimes remain hidden. They remind us that behind migration statistics exist real people, with names, families, dreams, and wounds.

And I want to finish with something that I carry with me every day:

I am not just a woman who lost her court. I am not just a migrant. I am not just a story of displacement.

I am the voice of many women who could not make it here. I am the memory of those who defended justice in silence. And I am, above all, the proof that human dignity cannot be abolished by any border or any system.

Because if I am standing here speaking to you today, it is not just my voice you are hearing.

It is the voice of thousands of Afghan women. It is the voice of those who are still waiting for justice. It is the voice of those who, even in silence, never ceased to exist.

Thank you very much.