

While a fair price for gold miners can change their lives, Sophia Swire believes that jewellery can also help to transform the economy of Afghanistan. If this sounds far-fetched, her conviction is based on a realistic assessment of Afghanistan's artisan skills supported by vast deposits of gemstones including world-class emeralds, lapis lazuli, rubies, spinels, tourmalines and aquamarines among other stones. Swire, a former investment banker in the City of London, became the senior gemstones adviser to the Afghan Ministry of Mines, funded by the World Bank.

The country is home to the world's oldest lapis lazuli mines, dating back 7,000 years. According to a US report in 2010, Afghanistan's untapped mineral deposits, including gold, copper and lithium, could be worth a trillion dollars or more. 'Afghanistan is sitting on treasure,' Swire told *The Sunday Times* of London.⁴⁹ 'I want the world to know that it's not just a land of mortar shells, suicide bombers and Taliban.' She believes that the gemstone industry 'could become a viable alternative to poppy farming, transforming the economy.' Given sufficient development assistance—she suggests \$10 million over five years—the industry could be worth \$300 million a year.

The need for such investment couldn't be more pressing. The United States has spent \$7.6 billion on counter-narcotics programmes in Afghanistan since 2001, says the office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. Britain has invested in similar eradication programmes. Yet by October 2014, opium poppy cultivation had hit an all-time high of 209,000 hectares, worth an estimated \$3 billion.⁵⁰

Swire, who took part in a forum on human security issues in Caux in 2012, is the founder and CEO of the not-for-profit Future Brilliance and its social enterprise, Aayenda Jewellery, *aayenda* meaning 'future' in Dari. Its designs are co-created by Afghan women and leading Western jewellery designers and use Afghan-sourced gemstones. A royalty from sales of Aayenda and a profit share through dividends held in trust for the Afghans through Future Brilliance continues to provide skills training and equipment to the artisans.

Swire believes that it is essential to train Afghan artisans in technical and entrepreneurial skills that give them a sustainable way to

earn incomes, as Western governments pull their troops out of the country and aid budgets plummet. Women jewellery-makers are able to work from home, a great advantage should the Taliban ever return to power following the pull-out of UN forces.

Yet ‘mining techniques in Afghanistan haven’t changed in thousands of years and the men work in appalling conditions,’ Swire told *The Sunday Times*. ‘They burrow into the rock and support shafts with branches and twigs.’ They mine with rudimentary crowbars, as she has seen for herself. Substantial investment in the gemstone mining industry is vital as well as in the development of artisan design skills.

In 2013, on winning a grant from the US Department of Defense, Swire took three dozen men and women from Kabul and other places in Afghanistan for skills enhancement and business training at the Indian Institute of Gems and Jewellery in Jaipur, India. Jaipur has been a world centre of the gem and jewellery industry for hundreds of years, including gemstone dealers, stone cutters, polishers and jewellery makers. There they learned about design from award-winning Western jewellers such as the US designers Annie Fensterstock and Anna Ruth Henriques and the British designer Paul Spurgeon. Together they designed products that appeal to the taste of young Western customers in London, New York and California, and the first collection was snapped up by top boutiques and style leaders such as Fred Segal LA, among 25 fashion retail outlets. All 36 students were trained to be teachers and, back in Afghanistan, are passing on their learning with the ongoing support of an international trainer supplied by Future Brilliance. Some of the workshops in India will be offered for ongoing apprenticeships.

Swire chose Jaipur for the training as it is a safe place to operate for international trainers and designers. She is all too well aware of the dangers of life in Afghanistan. She was ‘profoundly shocked and saddened’ by the murder of her friend Dr Karen Woo, a British doctor whom she had encouraged to serve in Afghanistan, and her American colleagues who were killed by Taliban gunmen while on a medical mission to a remote region in 2010.

People often tell Swire that they are struck by her courage, working as she does in remote parts of Afghanistan, often in the heart of the gemstone-mining areas, many days’ drive from safety.

'I am so inspired by the [Afghani] women in the project because they've taken a much bigger risk than I will ever take in coming to Jaipur,' Swire told *The Mail on Sunday*, UK⁵¹. For them it is a huge step and I am so proud of them.' Swire 'wants to close the gap between those who have benefitted from [Afghanistan's] wealth (mainly foreign dealers) and those who haven't (the Afghan people).'

She hopes that such investment in people—in 'human capital' in the jargon of business—will have an impact on the Afghan economy, though the challenge is to scale it up sufficiently to have a national impact. Some of the Jaipur graduates go on to earn up to \$300 (£199) a month as gemstone cutters and goldsmiths—more than six times the average Afghanistan wage.

Khala Zada, a 50-year-old widow from rural Afghanistan, learnt to make and, most importantly, teach others in the design of stunning bracelets and necklaces, using super-fine, hand-carved lapis and turquoise beads, on the Future Brilliance training programme in Jaipur. Commissions for Aayenda Jewellery doubled her sales turnover in the first six months following her return to her village. She can now expand her business and employ more women. 'So in terms of maximum return on capital employed, taking just this one woman and investing in her is potentially huge as far as the economy of her local village is concerned,' Swire told *You* magazine.

I first met Sophia Swire at an event at the Royal Geographical Society in London in 1998. It was an appropriate place to meet a natural-born traveller and adventurer. The event was the launch of her documentary film about the life of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, commissioned by Channel 4 TV. It was in aid of the UK educational charity Learning for Life which Swire and her friend Charlotte Bannister-Parker had founded to support village schools for girls in rural Pakistan, a traditionally patriarchal society that actively disapproved of girls' education.

Swire had been a high-flying merchant banker with Kleinwort Benson in the City of London. But the cutthroat atmosphere on the trading floor after Black Monday, the financial crash of 1987, so appalled her that she resigned. She took herself on a three-week holiday to Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (now renamed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or KPK). Arriving in Chitral, a magical

snow-bound valley in the foothills of the Hindu Kush Mountains bordering on Afghanistan, she felt she had found her spiritual home.

A local Pakistani district commissioner approached her, apparently out of the blue, on her 25th birthday and asked her to return with British friends to help found an English medium school. This, she told me, was her *kismet*, her destiny.

Swire responded by recruiting friends and family, and returned a few months later with 250 kilos of school books and equipment, funded by her last City bonus. The experience of seeing first-hand how a single school could uplift the outlook for an entire community led her to understand the transforming power of education. And so Learning for Life was born. The charity helped to establish over 250 schools in Pakistan, India and Afghanistan and, in 2010, Swire was honoured with the Pakistan Achievement Award for empowering the women and girls of Pakistan through education.

Returning to London, she became known internationally in the fashion world as the ‘Pashmina Queen’, as she initiated a global craze for pashmina shawls, made from the finest goats’ fur. Her ‘Sophia Swire London’ fashion cashmere line sold successfully in stores such as Harrods and 250 outlets worldwide for 15 years. The British Council wrote of her: ‘With corporate social responsibility and sustainability at the heart of all her work, (Sophia) launched and managed an innovative and profitable, ethical luxury fashion brand, working with artisans in Nepal and India and spearheading the launch of the global fashion for pashmina shawls in the 1990s.’ This led to a significant increase in Nepal’s GDP.

In 2008, at the London film premiere of *The Kite Runner*, whose producers she had introduced to Kabul orphanages, she met Rory Stewart, the former diplomat and now the Tory MP for Penrith and the Borders. He insisted she put her fashion business on hold to go to Kabul and establish Afghanistan’s first jewellery school at his charity, Turquoise Mountain, which was developing artisan skills and renovating the ancient heart of Kabul. There she established the school in six months, and used her experience in fashion to launch Afghanistan’s first jewellery brand during London Fashion Week.

Swire lived in Kabul full time from January 2008 to June

2011—her first year in the Fort of the Scorpions, a building where alarmingly scorpions would fall onto her bed in the night; the second year in a USAID compound; and the third year in her own place with an Afghan family. She continues to travel to Afghanistan about three times a year, and has signed a contract with the World Bank to continue advising the Afghan Ministry of Mines for six months through 2015 and 2016.

Her journey in life has not been without personal cost. She feels she has missed out on motherhood, but she puts her maternal instinct into serving her younger protégés. One of them is Roya Hayat, a half-Afghan, half-Chitral woman born in Kabul and educated in the first school sponsored by Sophia and her mother through Learning for Life. Roya went on to earn her Masters in Gender and Development at the London School of Economics and is now Gender Manager for Future Brilliance.

Sophia has often told me that she has a profound sense of calling to tackle extreme poverty and instability in South Asia. She has the satisfaction of knowing that her original decision, all those years ago, to turn her back on the pursuit of wealth in the City of London, and to follow her heart, her *kismet*, has transformed the lives of countless numbers of people in the region through education and skills training. She continues to do so through her charity, Future Brilliance, and its ground-breaking jewellery brand, Aayenda.⁵²

Footnotes

49 *The Sunday Times*, 11 July 2010

50 *The Guardian*, 21 October 2014

51 *You* magazine, supplement of *The Mail on Sunday*, 15 September 2013

52 www.futurebrilliance.net; www.aayendajewelry.com