

Social Justice Leaders on What Matters: Hilary Pennington & Hakima Abbas

This video transcript captures a Zoom conversation between Hakima Abbas, co-executive director of [AWID](#) (Association for Women's Rights in Development), and Hilary Pennington, executive vice president of programs at the Ford Foundation.

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Transcript begins.

[Hilary Pennington, a white woman with short blonde hair, wearing a blue top, sits for a video conversation with Hakima Abbas, a Black woman with curly black hair, wearing a white blouse and glasses.]

HILARY PENNINGTON: What is it in your own life that has led you to be as passionate and innovative as you are?

[on-screen graphic: Hakima Abbas, Co-Executive Director, AWID]

HAKIMA ABBAS: I learned very early that it's important to create safe space for us to be, um—as Black women, to thrive and for us to be able to challenge the world and to say, “This is not right, and this is not how it should be.” And it can be different as well, right?

HILARY: Yeah.

HAKIMA: I saw the ways in which it could be different.

[on-screen graphic: Social Justice Leaders on What Matters, Hilary Pennington with Hakima Abbas]

HILARY: I am speaking today with Hakima Abbas, who is the co-executive director, together with Cindy Clark, of AWID, the world's leading international feminist sustainable development and human rights organization. An African feminist, trained in international affairs, Hakima has a long history in social movements.

I'm really excited to be speaking today.

HAKIMA: Thank you, Hilary.

[on-screen text: Hilary Pennington, Executive Vice President of Programs, Ford Foundation]

HILARY: It has been a year of so much suffering and disruption but also really, really exciting and renewed social justice movements. And I am curious what sense you make of it, and in particular what you feel we're learning about fighting inequality.

HAKIMA: So, AWID is a global feminist movement support and membership organization. We have members in 180 countries—6,600-and-so members, the majority of whom are from the Global South. So, at this time, during the global pandemic, we've seen a spike in our members, which really shows that feminists are in a moment where they want to be part of something. And we have a responsibility as an organization to make sure that they're connected, that they're able to exchange and learn from each other and be in solidarity.

HILARY: That's fantastic to hear that, Hakima. Talk to me a little bit about what the feminist vision is that you are trying to call people into.

HAKIMA: We're calling people to be bold and relevant and strategic in this moment. We're calling to a feminist leadership that's collective, that's in service. I'm really inspired by the women in Poland and by the people in Chile who are demonstrating. And, you know, many of us can't name who's the leader of that, because it's collective, because it's in service, because it's about us coming together. And I think that's so important in this moment.

HILARY: I love those ideas. I think these are leader-*full* movements. They're not leader-*less* movements.

HAKIMA: They're also moments of possibilities, where a whole generation of people experience the possibility and the agency of creating change.

HILARY: You know, the nature of change is very complex, as we see during COVID in who disproportionately is bearing the brunt of what's happening in most societies around the world. I mean, I think that's part of the kind of conversation and network you at AWID are trying to curate and to anchor. And so I'd love to hear you talk a little bit more about what are the kinds of conversations you have across those members.

HAKIMA: A conversation that's been so important at this moment is around the economy and the need for a feminist bailout and economic recovery. Because the pandemic, as you said, has impacted people at the very basis of their livelihood. About 81% of the world's workers are negatively impacted at this time, and that's basically everybody. And so we know that in supposedly normal times, women are the most underpaid, work in the most precarious work, have the least rights in the workplace, and experience violence in the workplace. So now, in this moment where things are so difficult, the burden again is on women.

And so we started a conversation around the feminist bailout, using some online actions and webinars and conversations, and saw huge uptake around that idea. And so, again,

it was really wonderful to see how different feminists in different contexts use this idea of a feminist bailout very differently. In Kenya, it meant informal workers went to the streets and demanded a feminist bailout. In Haiti, they came together and appealed to the government through letters and petitions around the feminist bailout.

And so it's that kind of conversation—understanding the impact now but also what that's going to mean in the long term, and trying to interrupt it as we can now.

HILARY: I think that's such a powerful, um—a powerful picture that you're painting of the power of a network, right? Of connected people.

If you, as a, you know, a body of feminists represented by AWID, were making priorities for what governments or international organizations can do, what would be at the top of your list?

HAKIMA: I'd like to start by saying, going back to that idea of feminist leadership. I don't think it needs to only sit within movements.

HILARY: Yeah.

HAKIMA: I think feminist leadership can happen and should happen in governments, in multilateral institutions. In places like in Kerala, in the state in India, where they've had this long-term sustained empowerment of women and women's networks and collectives, that they were able to activate those for the pandemic response, and that made a significant difference in terms of them being able to provide health education, being able to provide food and all kinds of other resources to respond to the pandemic. It's that different mindset from government, the enabling environment for networks and collectives to exist, so that then we can activate them when society is in need.

HILARY: That allows a much faster adaptive response, right, than anything that comes from the top down, both to send information up about what the needs actually are and then to organize effective response.

HAKIMA: And I think that's, in many ways, what social movements do every day, in the sense that we put demands forward and we put propositions forward to say, "This is what could be."

HILARY: That's so hugely important. And I know you think a lot about a generational change and that AWID has done an amazing job, I think, of really activating young feminists and making sure that their voice and their knowledge and their expertise has an equal place at the table.

I'd love to hear you talk a little bit more about how you see that within the feminist movement right now, and how they're challenging the movement.

HAKIMA: We are really excited that about 48% of our institutional members are young feminists. And it's fantastic because, again, it means that young feminists are looking for and finding places to connect across geographies, across movements, across themes

that they work on. I've been really excited in this moment of the pandemic, seeing some of the creative ways in which young feminists have organized. So, things that I wouldn't have thought of, um, the ways that they—

HILARY: Like what?

HAKIMA: Like TikTok—and the things that they do to disrupt, you know?

HILARY: [laughs] Yeah!

HAKIMA: And I love the irreverence. I love the just being out there, being impolite, just saying it as it is. It cuts through so much of the obtuse ways in which institutions may organize or, or—you know, it says, like, “We’re here and this is what we’re demanding.” And I’m thinking, for instance, the environmental activists, some of whom, you know, are active at the UN but are going to the UN and saying, “How dare you?” And that’s—that’s not the language that’s usual in those spaces—

HILARY: Yes.

HAKIMA: You know, where you’re being very polite and “We recommend” and “We urge this.” But just to say, “No. How dare you? You’ve had this long and you’re spoiling things.”

HILARY: “Who do you think you are?” Yes, absolutely. You are, yourself, still a young leader and I’m interested in your own journey. What is it in your own life that has led you to be as passionate and innovative as you are?

HAKIMA: I was raised very much in a political family, because my family is a family that in many ways was displaced. We’re African. I grew up in the diaspora. It was also a very matriarchal family, and so the feminist ideas weren’t so much a theory or something that was spoken about, but it was very much in action. It was the practice. And that, of course, is so different as soon as you step out of your home.

HILARY: Yeah, yeah.

HAKIMA: And so I think I learned very early that it’s important to create safe space for us to be, um—as Black women, to thrive and for us to be able to challenge the world and to say, “This is not right, and this is not how it should be.” And it can be different as well, right?

HILARY: Yeah.

HAKIMA: I saw the ways in which it could be different.

HILARY: You and your work at AWID are so important to us at the Ford Foundation, so I’m really, really grateful for the opportunity to talk like this.

HAKIMA: Thank you.

HILARY: Thank you.

[on-screen text: What's your take? Join the conversation]

[on-screen graphic: Ford Foundation logo]

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