

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Program
Fulbright Stories Project

SHAZ AKRAM

Interviewed by: Tom Selinger

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INTERVIEW

Q: Okay, this is Tom Selinger with ADST. It's May 8th, 2025. We're here on behalf of the Fulbright Association to introduce Shaz Akram. Can you start, Shaz, by just saying your name and spelling it for me?

AKRAM: So my name is Shaz Akram, S-H-A-Z A-K-R-A-M. I was born and raised in Nigeria, Lagos, West Africa. I guess I should say Lagos, Nigeria, West Africa. By origin, I'm from Pakistan, and for more than a third of my life, I've been in the United States.

Q: Can you tell us your current employer and occupation?

AKRAM: I run my own company. It's called Her Pivot. I launched it in December of 2022. It is a storytelling platform for women in the mid to senior level career pathways. They talk about how they've made pivots in their careers as lessons for other women who are struggling in the sort of senior level, shifting from one career to the other. Prior to that, I was in the Civil Services of Pakistan, which is the equivalent of Foreign Service of the United States. I was with the Auditor General of Pakistan. I have worked at Mississippi State University. I was the Fulbright faculty and student advisor. I worked at the International Office. And then I moved to Washington, D.C. and joined the Fulbright Association. I worked with the association for 10 years, then I launched my own work and now I'm back in some short-term consultancy capacity.

Q: Can you tell us how you originally found your way to Fulbright and what you did?

AKRAM: So I was never in the right country at the right time to apply right. In Pakistan, I didn't even know about what Fulbright was. I know my mother got a Commonwealth scholarship to go from Nigeria to Canada. She turned it down because she had four children- her sacrifice. She had a master's in mathematics, she was a principal, a math professor, a principal in a school, a British system, hence a principal. And so seeing that, that example of how education was so important, it always, you know, pulled me, all these scholarships. And I, by the time I found out about Fulbright, I was just not in the right place at the right time. I was already in the United States. I was a resident, couldn't really apply, and I was not qualified to apply from Pakistan. It took me 10 years of working at Fulbright and being inspired by the community that I served: the chapters, the alumni, through conferences, our TEDx Fulbright brand, learning about so many

stories, hearing people's pathways and journeys in their educational field that I was so inspired by. And I said, you know what? I'm going to apply for a Fulbright. And then law and behold, I have a child. I had a child really later in my early 40s. And I said, well, here's my Fulbright miracle child. This child is going to grow up to be a Fulbright. So Fulbright Fulbright Fulbright was always at the back of my mind.

I was fascinated that the senator from Arkansas from a very red state came up with such a brilliant program and how his vision was to send Americans abroad and let them learn about what the world looks like. To bring the international community here, create these partnerships. It was just fascinating. Then I said okay I kept it at the back of my mind somewhere along the way in my journey that I'm going to do it. I don't know how I'm going to do it, but I'm going to do it. Law and behold, 2023. In 2023, I applied. I got on this Fulbright specialist roster. I created my own program project. It was underlining women empowerment, gender, feminist foreign policy, feminist financing concept and created a faculty development program for a college in Pakistan: Kanaed College for Women, it's a Christian school. I went on a six week program in 2024, and I gave six seminars, talked about CHATGPT, AI, how to use the sciences to amplify women's voices, how to empower women to think about their own financial situation in a very conservative country like Pakistan, where women are told that they're going to get married, they're going to have kids, they can have a job, but they don't make major decisions like buying houses, cars, or even they have no concept about the stock market or how to invest or how to have their own CD saved.

And so I started talking to them about that and that has the possibility of having a second Fulbright specialist grant to Pakistan as a follow-up and it'll focus on mental health and how to deal with all the challenges that women are facing as they try to teach and live their lives.

Q: Are there lessons you draw from all of your Fulbright experience that you carry forward in your sort of daily life?

AKRAM: My life is a walking, thinking, talking Fulbright. I think that America has given me one amazing experience and that's exposure to the Fulbright program. I love this country for that. I love this man who created this program. I love Congress for supporting it. I hope they continue. I think every American has a right to experience this. And what I love about Fulbright, it has no barriers of race, color, age, education. You don't have to be in the Ivy League. You can be from a small community in Mississippi or from the Midwest and it is your merit that gets you the program.

And of course along the way you should have a spectacular Fulbright advisor like me who will influence you and tell you how important it is to go abroad to study. I remember managing a study abroad program mentoring session for students at Mississippi State University and they used to look at me and say "look are you crazy? Why would we go abroad? Everything we need is here in Mississippi." And I looked at these young kids, I said, "listen, Mississippi is always going to be part of the United States. It's always going to be here. Your home is always going to be here. You are never going to get this chance again. You will outgrow this. You will regret it at some point. You are getting an opportunity to see the world, explore the world, you're ambassadors for the program, you gotta go, you gotta go. And come back. Grandmother will be

there, house will be there, fence will be there. You will get your car, you will get your job, you'll get the American life, but you will never ever have the opportunity. And you have to be an ambassador. You have to show your background, your color, your race, your thinking, your education, your upbringing because America is a beautiful fabric of internationalism. There's no American that's truly American. We're all a mixture here from all over the world. You have to showcase that mixture globally. That's diplomacy. That's your role.”

And I love America for giving me the opportunity. And my hope for the future is that every American gets that opportunity. And I salute our Foreign Service officers, our diplomats, our educationists, anyone who has worked in this international collaborating world. They make America safer because people understand Americans. You can have a dialogue. You can understand where we are from. We're no more- they're just Americans. They know what Americans are. Americans are from everywhere around the world. Everywhere, every part of the state. We have Hawaii, we have Alaska. They're not even connected by land, but they are Americans. We have so much diversity in culture, in language. We don't talk about that. So that is our strength and we hope that the administration sees the value. That the government sees value and continues this amazing program because it is life-changing and It is. It has built various bridges around the world

Q: Anything else you would like to add?

AKRAM: I think that is all. Cut! I made my political speech!

End of interview