Speaking up for the Middle East's women and children

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Literary Editor

When Deborah Ellis talks about the situation in Syria after last week's suspected chemical weapons attack and the possibility of Western military intervention, you can hear the despair in her voice. "You've got to think there's got to be a better way after all this time in human history. There's got to be a better way than the old way."

She knows a lot about the impact of military action of all kinds on people, particularly children, across the Middle East. The Canadian writer is best known for her novels for young adults about the struggles of an Afghan girl, and her non-fiction books telling the stories of Iraqi, Afghan, Israeli and Palestinian children as they try to survive in circumstances that can rob them of home and often country.

Ellis writes about the dispossessed and the deprived, gleaning stories from trips to refugee camps and countries around the region. She has been in Melbourne this week for the writers festival.

She had been active in women's projects in Canada but when news about the impact of the Taliban regime on women started trickling out she started visiting Afghan refugee camps. "It was initially to meet with women, hear their stories so we could be more useful back in Canada. And I started to hear stories of children as well."

What intrigued her were accounts of girls pretending to be boys to earn money to support their families. Since the first in the series Parwana appeared in 2001, Ellis has donated more than $1 million of her royalties to Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan.

She says the West is too often in the position of reacting on an emergency basis to events in the Middle East. "Saddam Hussein should probably never have been as powerful as he was and we had a big hand in funding him and arming him and making all that happen. Afghanistan is different but equally complicated because we had a hand in setting up the situation where the Taliban could take and hold power."

War, she says, destroys the fabric of trust that allows a civil society to operate properly. But she is optimistic about the future for women there.

"Women and girls of Afghanistan are pretty extraordinary people. Every single opportunity they've gotten since the fall of the Taliban they've taken with both hands and run as fast as they could with it. It's going to be hard to put that genie back in the bottle."

"I hope the strength they've gotten is enough to carry them through what comes next."

Deborah Ellis. Women and girls of Afghanistan are extraordinary people. Photo: Simon O'Dwyer