

Afghanistan:

The Unfinished Agenda for Women, Peace and Security

By Sweeta Noori

Excellencies distinguished guests,

Thank you for allowing me to take part in today's open debate. I appreciate the opportunity to share my thoughts and observations about the role of women in peace-building in Afghanistan.

In my point of view, there are two Afghanistans. The United Nations sees one Afghanistan that is progressing and developing. Yet there is another Afghanistan that the international community does not see. It is violent, unstable and in many ways very scary for women. And that is why it is absolutely critical to continue to be fully engaged in Afghanistan.

We have heard some very good news from my country. A record number of women will be part of the Parliament. But we must also recognize the many challenges women face. We, Afghans and the international community must close the gap between the two Afghanistans to bring true democracy, security and peace all over the country.

In my country, we have seen much progress after the fall of the Taliban.

In Afghanistan, we have a Constitution that finally recognizes women's equal rights and gives women full rights to political participation. This is ground-breaking and gives all Afghan women hope.

We now have a Ministry of Women's Affairs.

At the provincial level there are local women's councils.

Afghanistan has elected its first woman governor in Bamyian Province in central region.

Three ministerial level positions are held by women.

The Constitution also sets a quota for Afghan women's representation in the Parliament. It says that women should be 25 percent in the Lower House, and guarantees 50 percent for the presidential appointments to the Upper House.

The numbers are impressive; they are significant; we are hopeful. But, numbers alone do not tell the full picture of reality for women on the ground in the country.

The women candidates needed their husbands and family approval to run for office. Independent female candidates often lacked money and support for campaigning, unlike

those supported by warlords and political parties. The independent women candidates risked their lives to put their names on the ballots. The warlords and their followers targeted independent women candidates with threats, violence and even assassination

The warlords also threatened women voters to keep them from participating in the political process – to stop them from choosing their future leaders. I heard many times the warlords and their supporters threatened women if they voted. The women voters received threatening phone calls, emails and even flyers delivered in the middle of night that said, “Do not vote or else your husband, your children or you may lose your life.”

It took much courage to run for office and to go to vote. In the hidden Afghanistan—one that is not in front of cameras or UN monitors—exercising one’s right is a life or death choice.

As I weave my life through the two Afghanistans, I see islands of peace. There is growing stability and political participation in the areas where there is a strong presence of the International Security Assistance Forces. But just a few steps away the local and national government officials are ignoring the status of women and women’s rights when they feel no pressure from the international community.

In these areas the Constitution and international norms do not rule. Traditional tribal rule shapes how a woman is treated and what her rights are—if she has any at all.

I hear the stories from the local communities about forced and child marriages of girls. Women are not given the choice in these arrangements. They are considered as property exchanged between families. Sometimes, daughters and sisters are used to settle disputes between families.

I also hear stories about domestic violence that is so severe and women feel they have nowhere to go. They can’t go to authorities because they will be jailed for their complaints against family members. There are no safe women’s shelters outside of Kabul City.

Last year in a Red Crescent Hospital in Kabul, I met a young woman, she was only 17 years old and was three months pregnant. She suffered such great violence at the hands of her husband and in-laws, that she poured petrol on herself. She died from her petrol burns.

In this year, there were 75 reported cases of self-immolation in Herat City in western Afghanistan alone.

The Poppy eradication program and stopping illegal narcotics trafficking in the country has had a negative impact on women

Many farmers are awaiting a sustainable alternative to poppy crops. In the meantime, women are suffering.

Let me explain. Again and again, I hear the story of poppy farmers who are selling their daughters to repay their debts to drug traffickers. They forced loss of poppy crops has left farmers unable to repay drug traffickers who lent money to buy seeds. To settle their debts, the farmers are turning to traditional Afghan practice of handing over sisters and daughters.

I can not tell you how difficult it is to know this is happening today in my country. It undermines their rights guaranteed by the country Constitution and international law.

I urge the international community to support the rule of law, not the rule of individuals, warlords or fundamentalists in my country.

There cannot be one Afghanistan for men, another one for women. Right now 10 percent of the reconstruction money through the National solidarity program is set aside for local women's councils, to use for projects identified as women's priorities. Yet, as I travel to rural areas, I discover that many women councils are unaware that they should have access to this money. Or when they are aware, I find that often the men's councils' priorities overtake that of the women's. Often, women politicians or council members are used as window dressing, while, the agenda setting is still dominated by men.

There are also specific needs of women that must be addressed .

Eighty percent of the female population is illiterate. We need schools that educate girls as well as women.

One in six Afghan woman dies in childbirth due to the complication of pregnancy. We need female health professionals and health clinics to address the basic physical, emotional and gynecological needs of women.

We need to identify a new generation of Afghan women leaders and give them tools and resources to develop their potential. So when women candidates run for office, they do not need to rely on money from warlords and fundamentalists but can be successful independent candidates.

However, I have heard from the Ministry of Women's Affairs that we can not train Women for Women International's participants about the CEDAW, which Afghanistan ratified in 2004. We were told to wait until the Ministry of Justice and a council of Islamic judges approves CEDAW.

There is an unfinished agenda for Afghan women. Presidential and parliamentary elections are good markers for progress, but Peace and security in Afghanistan will take a long term commitment by the United Nations and the International Security Assistance Forces.

We urge that the Security Council to consider extending the mandate of ISAF and expanding its work throughout Afghanistan. The continued insecurity also undermines the safety and progress of women.

We urge that the Security Council and the international organizations such as UNIFEM to support Afghan authorities and women's groups in the peace-building in Afghanistan. We should have a full partnership that develops the capacity of women and protects their human rights.

We urge the Security Council and international community to fully implement alternative livelihood initiatives for farmers in the Poppy Eradication Program.

We recommend that the United Nations and international community work with the Afghan judicial system so judges, police, and local leaders rely on the rule of law, not traditional laws that undermine women's rights.

Lastly, I recommend that the Security Council and international community promote civil society especially women's groups to help keep the government accountable.

We do not want the international community to abandon Afghanistan before we have secured a stable future for all women, men and children. Peace-building in Afghanistan must continue.

We need women. We cannot ignore women when rebuilding a nation. As long as you leave women behind, there will be no peace. Afghanistan will continue to be weak.

Let me end by saying without strong women, we cannot build a strong nation.