

Statement Read on Behalf of Afghan Women to the London Conference on Afghanistan

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As the only Afghan woman scheduled to address the plenary, I must spend a moment to focus on women's needs and priorities and the role women should play in efforts to stabilize and rebuild my country.

Afghan women are acutely aware of the need to improve security on-the-ground. We are paying the largest price for the resurgence in violence and we benefit most from peace and stability. Evidence from around the world is clear: societies are more peaceful, stable and productive when women have equal status with men.

Over the past few weeks, there have been extensive consultations with Afghan women leaders to prepare our messages to this Conference today [1]. We have put these in writing and we hope you all have a copy. I will focus my comments on the key issues that must be addressed — not only in words, but in important practical ways:

1. Women must have a voice in all decision-making about the future of the country. This must include any peace jirgas, conferences on development, or negotiations to reconcile competing factions. Women have a broader view of security, different priorities in development, and specialized knowledge and expertise that should be leveraged in efforts to return peace to the country.

2. Women's rights and status must not be bargained away in efforts to reconcile competing factions. In any negotiations, women's rights must be protected. We have fought too long and too hard to improve the status of women — rights that were completely eroded in the past. Compromising our rights will not bring peace; it will only undermine efforts to develop my country and leave unfulfilled a fundamental promise the international community made to Afghans in 2001. We look to the Afghan government and the international community to guarantee that our existing constitutional rights will be protected and advanced.

3. The military surge must be complemented by an equally robust effort to boost civilian support for recovery and long-term reconstruction. Only with a commensurate, coordinated, and complementary effort to invest in social and economic development, enhance government efficiency, root out corruption, and enhance rule of law will long-term peace and prosperity be attainable. Do not focus on short-term, quick impact projects; address human development needs. Undertake those efforts in partnership with Afghans themselves — women and men — and gear programs to long-term sustainable development outcomes.

4. Finally, in seeking to enhance rule of law, make sure to protect women's rights. Informal and traditional justice systems have historically proved discriminatory to women. Without careful checks and guarantees, violations of women's rights will go unpunished and women's voices will not be heard. As you seek to increase access to justice, intensify efforts to improve the formal justice system, because women's access to equal justice is far greater when formal, legally binding systems of redress exist with greater capacity for independent monitoring.

Women in Afghanistan are critical partners for peace. Women's engagement is not an optional extra component of stabilization and recovery; it is a critical precursor to success. Women's empowerment will enable you to deliver long-term stability, democratization, and development. Thank you.

Notes

1. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and The Institute for Inclusive Security facilitated discussions.