

AFGHANISTAN

STATEMENT

BY

Dr. Masooda Jalal
Minister of Women 's Affairs

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Statement of H.E. Dr. Masooda Jalal
Minister of Women's Affairs
Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

Introduction

I have the honor to convey to all of you the warm greetings, expression of support and solidarity of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and its people, on this significant gathering of advocates and supporters of the global movement for women's empowerment and gender equality.

This is a historical moment for the women of Afghanistan, as it is the first occasion in which we are officially represented in a global meeting on women. We missed the first four world conferences on women, as well as the Beijing plus Five. However, today, we are in your company. This is because we now have a government and political environment that permits Afghan women to be heard, represented, and to create a path where they could lead and be productive in the service of our country and people.

A glimpse at our women's situation...

The story of our women is one that is inextricably linked to the story of our nation. The world watched with awe and interest as a new wave of optimism unfolded following the collapse of the Taliban rule three years ago. It was like coming out from the dark after 23 years of quiet solitude. We also acknowledge that the shackles we carried during the past 23 years may have been broken, but continue to stand in the way of our vision.

War destroyed the foundations necessary for the growth and progress of Afghanistan as a nation. Due to a lack of statistical capacity, as a result of those twenty-three years, we cannot describe with accuracy, the extent in which women suffered in Afghanistan. Our story is a living example of the worst that could happen to women under the regime of despotism, lawlessness and armed conflict.

Nevertheless, we have been taking positive steps since three years ago. With the help of the international community, we put together some data that provides a clearer picture of where we stand in our efforts to advance the status of women. Data reveals that there are many issues that afflict the lives of our women. However, the worst indicators could be found in the areas of health, education, economy, legal protection of human rights and political participation.

HEALTH AND POPULATION

Women represent 48.6 percent of an estimated 22.2 million people in Afghanistan. While women in developed countries generally live longer than men, life expectancy of women in Afghanistan is forty-four, one year shorter than their male counter-parts.

Maternal mortality rate is 1,600 per 100,000 live births, believed to be second highest in the world. The infant mortality rate is 115 per 1,000, while fertility rate is placed at 6.8.

Last year, health expenditure (per capita) amounted to only US\$1, in contrast to the average US\$21.0 among countries of South Asia. Almost half of the deaths among Afghan women - within the reproductive group - result from complications of pregnancy and childbirth. Twenty-three years of exposure to violence, conflict and *public execution rituals* have left many Afghan women psychologically traumatized and in dire need of therapeutic assistance. Forced marriages – occurring mainly during puberty -, inadequate reproductive health services and facilities, poverty, lack of female health practitioners, unfavorable traditional beliefs and practices, and many other factors have prevented our women of proper health conditions.

EDUCATION

The Taliban imposed repressive edicts that severely stunted the learning and thinking capacities of our women. In the region of South Asia, the women of Afghanistan have the lowest literacy rate (10 percent). Over 1 million girls, between the ages of 7-13, remain out of school. The completion rate of primary education for females is 0.4, while men rate at 15.0. In addition, based on the total figure, the average years of schooling is 0.8 for females and 2.6 for males. Distance between schools and communities, lack of transportation, restriction on girls' mobility, poverty, lack of interest in education, shortage of female teachers and schooling for girls, male preference, coupled with a lack of security, and poor instructional materials are among the challenges faced by women in the field of education.

ECONOMIC

Despite recent progress in the field of economy, approximately 70 percent of the country's population continue to live in extreme poverty, with women experiencing the worst consequences. Women predominantly work in the informal sector (agriculture, commerce, manufacturing, handicraft, and transport), which accounts for 80 – 90 percent of the total economy. Economic projects are available, but few, palliative, un-sustainable and too micro to create meaningful impacts. Women's economic potentials are hampered by a lack of education, restricted mobility, inadequate capital and technical services, lack of access to market, low productive capacity, lack of infrastructures for product transport and storage, as well as poor technology. In addition, the contribution of women to the economy has been undervalued, while they continue to not have control over their income.

LEGAL PROTECTION

Legal protection for all should exist within the framework of national laws. However, due to a lack of knowledge of their rights and a culture that generally supports the subordination of women; the majority of women are deprived of equal protection before the law.

A wide range of acts of violence against women and girls are reportedly committed in the name of religion and tradition. Domestic violence, early marriage, forced marriage, and a practice of marrying off women to settle disputes continues to remain rampant. In the most desperate of situations, women either threaten to, or actually, commit self-immolation. The rights of women are ignored within the family, while the closest external source to mitigate the problem remains the village Shura's (a village justice mechanism). Whereas, some of the Shura's have started to include women as members, lack of gender sensitivity has rendered women helpless in the face of injustice. Moreover, family and community frown upon women who present their case outside the home.

POLITICS AND PUBLIC LIFE

Participation of women in public life remains extremely low. Their representation in the civil service and in international development agencies also remains insignificant. Their consciousness of public issues is poor, while the general belief that women's activities should be restricted from domestic spheres continues to exist. There are NGO's that are working actively to promote gender awareness and women's rights. However, they lack capacity and resources. They need support.

Steps that we have taken...

In spite of all the challenges, significant developments favoring the growth of women's empowerment and gender equality in my country have taken place. On December 14, 2003, the Constitutional Loya Jirga convened with the unprecedented participation of 102 women of the 502 delegates. As such, women comprised 20% of all delegates. Afghanistan's new constitution was promulgated in January 2004 with explicit provisions concerning non-discrimination, equality between men and women, and protection of women in various sectors such as education and health. Moreover, the Constitution also ensures the right of women to political participation. In this context, the Government has been mandated to take appropriate measures aimed at preventing and eradicating negative customs contrary to Islam.

In addition, the Government has ratified and acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and with the assistance of UNIFEM, is currently working with a technical assistance mission from the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) to enhance our capacity in fulfilling our State obligations at the highest levels.

We have a Ministry of Women's Affairs, of which, I have the privilege of serving as current Minister. Our mandate is to facilitate gender mainstreaming and provide policy advice to the Government. For the past three years, we have been able to secure allocations from the National Development Budget. We have also established supportive mechanisms such as an inter-ministerial working group to mainstream gender in statistics, as well an NGO coordinating Council consisting of the four largest NGO

coordinating bodies in the country. This body will help monitor the achievements of its members in regard to women, and will also function as a consultative and advocacy mechanism to support our work on gender mainstreaming.

We have signed a memorandum of understanding with 11 ministries to build capacity for gender mainstreaming at the ministry levels. Training has been conducted for key officials of five ministries, including provincial partners. Additional training programs will be completed this year. In this regard, a gender training institute, in partnership with Kabul University, is expected to be inaugurated to institutionalize formal gender courses for Government staff and their partners.

Ministries have also taken steps to advance the status of women. The Government of Afghanistan has created an inter-ministerial Committee on the Eradication of Violence against Women and signed a protocol with them on specific measures to prevent and eliminate violence against women. Curricula and learning materials are being reviewed for gender sensitivity. Policies have been adopted to facilitate the securing of business licenses, particularly for women entrepreneurs. Computer and English training courses have been provided to women in Government, including kinder-garden and day care facilities for their children.

The international community has played an important role towards the empowerment of women in Afghanistan, as contained in the Report of the Secretary General. I am taking this opportunity to express the heartfelt appreciation of my Government for the support rendered in helping us rebuild our nation.

And we will keep moving on....

Despite progress achieved, much remains to be accomplished. We are aware of our objectives and want to be strategic in accomplishing them. Nevertheless, we need your support. Upon conclusion of this meeting, we will report to our Government the highlights of this meeting and begin work on formalizing a national plan of action within the framework of the 12 areas of concern, as contained in the Beijing Platform for Action. This will serve as a reference point for the planning, budgeting, monitoring and reporting of the Government on implementing measures towards the advancement of women.

We also want to assess the manner in which development assistance is being utilized in Afghanistan. We are seeking to adopt a policy that will allocate a certain percentage of project funds for mainstreaming gender, ensuring that women benefit from development projects on an equal basis with men.

Given the forth-coming Parliamentary elections, we are currently engaged in dialogue with political parties, so as to ensure the inclusion of women in their party tickets as well as the inclusion of women's agenda in their party platforms. We are also working with the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission to guarantee equal competition between women and men, under an affirmative action policy, during

the recruitment of new staff under the Priority Reform and Restructuring Program of the Government. In the meantime, we are trying to build a network of women, already member of the Government, to create a constituency support-base within the ministries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to extend, on behalf of my delegation, gratitude and congratulations to the Commission on the Status of Women for having convened this very important meeting. We trust that this meeting will pay attention, not only to the needs and concerns that are common to many countries, but also to those that may be unique in a country like Afghanistan, that are equally pressing and important in redeeming women's dignity and freedom. Among others, we need a strong women's program health program, including reproductive and mental health.

The Government of Afghanistan reiterates its commitment to achieving the Development Millennium Goals, in particular the empowerment of women and achieving gender equality. We are also in need of strategies that will enable our women to run for elections and perform with a vision of gender equality. We need to build an alliance with all of you in order to learn from your past experiences and to share with you, our experience in rising from the ashes of war. We need more girl's schools and female teachers, as well as sustainable economic opportunities for our women.

I began by saying that our story was a living example of the worst that women could experience under a regime of despotism, lawlessness and armed conflict. Let me finish by saying that we want our country to be an example of how best women can rise from extreme oppression with the assistance of the international community. To all of you who refuse to tire in the process of helping the women of the world: Thank you very much, and we remain with you in this noble undertaking.

Thank you.