

Statement by Ms. Sima Wali
President of Refugee Women in Development
at UN Panel Discussion on Support for Afghan Women
March 8, 2002

Your Majesty Queen Noor, Ms. King, distinguished Panelists, Honorable Ambassadors, Honored Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

As an Afghan woman who has strived to bring peace and democracy to my shattered homeland, I am honored today to have the opportunity to celebrate International Women's Day with you.

For the past 23 years I have anguished over how to explain the untold suffering, oppression, grief, and outrage that the women of Afghanistan have endured. Throughout this period, Afghan women not only have been subject to the generalized horrors of war, and the daunting and unending circle of violence which has confronted everyone in Afghan society, but, in addition, in a historically unprecedented way, became the targets of a new kind of war.

The ferocity of the attacks against Afghan women have been so severe and draconian, that a new term "gender-apartheid," was coined to describe the extent of the new kind of horror aimed directly at them.

The continuum of violence trapped Afghan women into what is often referred to in other contexts as the feminization of poverty," as well as another international instance of the "feminization" of forced migration. The political, social, and physical infrastructure of Afghan society has been ravaged and destroyed. Deplorable human conditions have forced twelve million women to live in abject poverty. Untold countless have been forced into the worse kind of abuses, into prostitution, and subject to trafficking. Average life expectancy for women is under 40 years, there is a mortality rate of 25.7 percent for children under 5 years old, and an illiteracy rate of 80 percent for women. Maternal mortality and TB rates among women is unprecedented in Afghan history. These daunting indicators places Afghanistan among the most destitute, war-damaged countries in the world.

For the past two decades the story in Afghanistan has been about empowerment - the empowerment of the communists by brutish force; the empowerment of the warlords by equally brutish force. But nowhere in this story has the empowerment of the people of Afghanistan, in particular its women, been given a place. For more than twenty years, I have waged my own jihad for social justice and peace, as the rights of my Afghan sisters have been systematically violated to the extent of rendering us as non-citizens in our own country. Afghan women have suffered heinous crimes against humanity, and need diplomatic and financial leverage from the international community to aid them in their fight to reclaim their rightful place in Afghan and international society. With help from the international community, this not only will aid in the increased likelihood of securing a more stable future for Afghanistan, but will increase the possibility for a more stable outcome for the troubled region, and the

world. Focused, comprehensive international backing is critical not only for Afghanistan, but for us all.

It is therefore critical that particular attention is paid to rebuilding civil society in Afghanistan. While building governance and political institutions is vitally important, creating conditions where extremism and terrorism cannot find support is equally important.

As a human rights activist, I have carried the shattered and muted voices of my Afghan sisters for almost two decades carrying with me their cries for justice. Our voices went largely unheeded until the grotesque arm of terrorism first, against us, in our homeland, extended its arm to my country of exile here in the United States. Now perhaps there is hope. While Afghanistan remains at the epicenter state of world attention, we are hopeful to finally embark on a process of peaceful transition to democracy.

At the UN Peace Talks on Afghanistan, where I was one of the three female delegates, we achieved a measure of success negotiating for the rights of Afghan women in the post-Taliban government. In Bonn, I pioneered the concept for the creation of the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Toward this end, I secured support from Mr. Kanouni, and the other male delegate leadership. At my request, the office of the former King of Afghanistan sent communication reminding us of His Majesty's past history respecting women's rights guaranteed in the 1964 Constitution, and the establishment of a co-educational university. I owe my success in these endeavors largely because of the instrumental role that the United Nations played in the peace talks. And for this, I wish to express my deepest appreciation to His Excellency, Mr. Lakdar Brahimi. It is time now to build on what was achieved in Bonn.

However since my return, I fear that once again our rights as more than half of the Afghan population are threatened when partial solutions, instead of long-term engagement toward nation-building, are offered. I am fearful when culture is used to keep Afghan women subservient and disenfranchised. I am here today to tell you that my culture does not propagate violence, torture, rape, prostitution, or the trafficking and sale of young women and their children. It does not drive women into poverty, starvation, deny them education, or medical care. My religion does not promote the bondage of women. It does not dehumanize women. During the late 1920's Afghan women were granted the right to vote by an Afghan patriarchy. The 1964 Constitution granted us equal rights under the law of Muslim Afghanistan. Yet, almost seventy years later, another male-led militia took away these very basic human rights of Afghan women. Anything less than a commitment from the world community to restore the rights granted to Afghan women is tantamount to succumbing to the discounting of the needs and aspirations of 67 percent of Afghan society.

It is time to ensure that the rights of Afghan women, enshrined in our pre-war Constitution are safeguarded. It is imperative to take occasion of this "golden" opportunity, accorded to us in the history of development assistance, to mainstream gender equality. It is time to build on what was already accorded to Afghan women, by conditioning international assistance on the basis of gender equality. Without the element of conditionality placed on international assistance, we cannot leave this moment in history with pride that we have done our share to restore the dignity, power and confidence of Afghan women. We, as Afghan women, and as citizens of the world, deserve consistent and sustained international pressure on our male political leaders to secure the rights of women. This is not the time to retract from commitments made in Bonn or Tokyo.

Our role and contribution as women is vital to ensuring a democratic Afghan society which respects the rights of women as well as men.

We cannot afford to allow the elements of brutish force in Afghanistan to grow stronger for one more day. The Afghan society is desperately in need of peace and stabilization. The women of Afghanistan, as non-combatants, who have not borne arms or perpetuated violence, have declared their mandate to bring peace and stability to their homeland. They have instead waged their own non-violent jihad for social justice and peace. And they have undeniably demonstrated this through community-building efforts. They are indeed nurturers and builders not destroyers. Their contributions as refugees and displaced persons to rebuilding and rehabilitation during the years of turmoil stand as a testament to their courage. For decades, I have worked in promoting the capacities of scores of women whose indomitable spirit and courage in the face of daunting challenges has inspired my work.

Afghan women have fought for human rights at grave risk to themselves and their families. Fiercely dedicated to a vision of dignity, safety and freedom, their dream to participate in the rebuilding of their own shattered lives, and that of their nation is dependent on your commitment to help make that dream a reality. How we respond to the gender crisis in Afghanistan will reveal how the free world measures up to its belief in its own ideals.

In the name of freedom, dignity, and humanity, I appeal to you on behalf of my Afghan sisters. Let us extend solidarity and sincerity to the women of Afghanistan. May no woman grieve for a lost child, sibling, parent, or homeland. Let us wipe the tears of a nation of women in pain.

Thank you.