

Talking Points for Her Majesty Queen Noor
UN Panel Discussion on Support for Afghan Women
March 8, 2002

We all know the deprivation *and oppression* under which Afghan women and girls have suffered; I shall not go into detail on this tragic state of affairs today. Instead, I believe we should look forward and focus on the positive steps that we can take to begin to address their needs and aspirations.

Our goal should be to support women and their families in Afghanistan and throughout the developing world, with resources that will enable them to participate fully in social, economic and political rebuilding of their nation. In Afghanistan and indeed throughout the developing world, this is the path to self-reliance, self-realization, and self-respect for the women themselves, but equally important, it is vital if their countries are ever to recover from the deprivation and chaos wrought by conflict and war.

Over the past 25 years I have worked with women struggling to recover from conflict in the ME, SE Asia, the former Yugoslavia and most recently during a Refugees International visit to Pakistan. These women represent an enormous and too often inadequately tapped resource for recovery and peace building – in the family, in the community, in the world of ideas, in the world of business, in the professions— women’s voices are critical for accelerating overall improvements in standards of living and security.

The priorities of the Afghan women I met with in the region were simple and basic--- education, health, security, first and foremost and then more of a voice in community and national affairs. On March 23, girls will begin returning to school in Afghanistan for the first time in six years.

But the challenge remains daunting — 8 of every school-age boys and 19 of every 20 girls were not attending to school in 1999. (1.5 million boys and 2.2 million girls are out of school.) In urban areas, only 10 percent of women can read or write; in rural areas, the numbers are even more shocking – women have a literacy rate of only three percent.

The benefits of girls' education are well known : most striking perhaps is that with each additional year of schooling for a mother, mortality decreases among her children. Education also increases women's economic power, resulting in improved nutrition, shelter and access to medical care, not only for themselves, but also for their families.

As one Afghan teacher explained to me, “If we educate women, they will know their rights. They will study the Koran and learn that Islam gives them rights, including the right to education equal to that of men.”

In countries like Afghanistan, promoting women's participation is not an easy task, especially outside urban areas. It will require working at the grassroots to empower women to play a full role in their communities . This cannot be achieved simply by changing legislation at the national level.

Governments, however well-intentioned, can only do so much in this area. Success will depend on putting local communities and beneficiaries in the driver's seat, and on expanding and where necessary improving the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that can deliver benefits, especially benefits to women and girls, in a culturally sensitive and appropriate fashion.

How can the international community best support NGOs and civil society institutions in Afghanistan to help women regain their rightful place in their communities and Afghanistan's economy and society?

There is substantial experience worldwide in this area. One example is the Basic Development Needs model developed 12 years ago by our foundation in Jordan, for the Middle East with support from the World Health Organization (WHO).

This model, embodied in a Quality of Life (QOL) project serves poor villages across the country, and is based on the premise that people need to be given the tools to help themselves. The project, an integrated development approach combining health, education, income generation and participatory decision making has had a significant impact on the role of women in their communities and achieving their economic self-reliance. Productive activities supported through microfinance and village cooperatives range from handicrafts to fish farming, from cultivation of medicinal herbs to dairy production. They are trained on how to run individual and community businesses; and educated on women's legal and civil rights, as well as sound nutritional practices and child care.

The program has had substantial successes over the years in Jordan and other countries in the region. Over 70 percent of the beneficiaries are women who make up over 40 percent of the membership of the Village Development Councils and the Village Loan Committees that determine community priorities and manage its microcredit program—which, have nearly 90 percent repayment rate (as of the end of 2001).

One of the most rewarding aspects is the success of our outreach training program in the implementation of the Quality of Life methodology for other Middle Eastern countries, including Afghanistan, Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Yemen, Pakistan, Iran, Somalia and Syria.

Much has been written about gender-oriented development and empowerment of women in poor societies. But too much of what has been written has been abstract and focused mainly on policymakers in central government. Empowering women and helping them to become self-reliant requires dedicated, skilled and trained personnel, able to understand women's needs and concerns, and to work with them and their communities at the grassroots level.

Achieving this goal will require a broad international support effort. Here, if ever there was one, is an opportunity for successful civil society organizations across the world to come together and share their experience with their Afghan counterparts.

Afghanistan's women are crying out for concrete, and practical help to help themselves. They have waited too long for such help. All of us in the international community, whether government or civil society organizations with experience in providing such help, have an obligation to work with these brave women, at the level of the village, at the level of the individual, to empower them to live a richer, more satisfying life, as full and equal citizens in practice as well as on paper and as full participants in community economic life—based on the self-confidence that self-reliance and self-realization bring.