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Unfulfilled Promises: Afghan women 5 years after the Taliban

For over 20 years, war and violence reigned in Afghanistan destroying a beautiful country, and ravaged the population. Despite years of anguish, it took the tragedy of September 11th to bring much needed attention and concern to the plight of the Afghan people, and especially the women of Afghanistan. Even then, the international community co-opted the oppression of Afghanistan's women to engage in, justify and gain support for the so-called 'war on terror.' In 2001, many promises and commitments were made by the international community. These promises remain unfulfilled.

Despite promising opportunities and initial gains, the situation in Afghanistan is worsening: security is deteriorating, poverty is rising and the women especially bear the brunt of this reality. The so-called 'war on terror' has deepened militarism, and increased violence, devastation and suffering. Clearly military presence is necessary to promote security which is essential to peacebuilding and reconstruction, and I want to emphasise that those who argue for the withdrawal of Canadian troops from Afghanistan are doing a great disservice to the Afghan people and the peace process. Their analysis does not account for the complexities in Afghanistan and their position would result in further devastation of Afghanistan and suffering for its people. That being said though, I also do not believe our current engagement will serve the needs of the Afghan people or the peace process. In my opinion Canada needs to re-evaluate its mandate and balance its military efforts on development/military support rather than the current emphasis on military.

In this presentation I will offer some thoughts on the situation of Afghan women suggest ways to better support efforts on the ground to improve their lives and advance their access to equal rights, opportunities and participation in the peace process. The allotted 10 minutes is not sufficient to address these themes fully, but I hope in this short time to some information with you which will facilitate a deeper appreciation of the incredible courage, capacity and insight of Afghanistan's women, the critical role they play in the peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts and the ways in which we can assist them in engaging in this process.

The present condition of women in Afghanistan

Undoubtedly, the removal of the Taliban served to provide opportunities for the improvement of women's lives in Afghanistan. Since the fall of the Taliban, women have fought and won equality rights in the new Afghan constitution, participated in two Loya Jirgas, two national elections, and gained seats in the national parliament. Since the fall of the Taliban, some women have had better access to education, employment and other opportunities previously denied them. While these successes are worth nothing, they must not obscure the reality of the ongoing and increasing challenges faced by Afghan women, and the many ways in which ongoing militarism and the deteriorating security situation is negatively impacting their lives and putting them at increased risk of violence.

What does life look like for Afghan women today?

Despite billions of dollars in international donation and the presence of hundreds of aid agencies and thousands of international workers, the vast majority of the Afghan population continues to live without access to basic needs such as food, water, shelter, healthcare, education and other services. While the situation improved initially in Kabul (and has since deteriorated again), the vast majority of the country has not benefited from international presence nor the billions of dollars pouring in. Afghans on the whole, and especially women, remain stricken by poverty and insecurity.

As in all conflict-affected zones, the women bear the brunt of the suffering. Promise and achievements on paper do not mean anything unless they translate into real change in women's daily lives and until women's lives are truly transformed we can not claim victory. Of course change can not happen overnight and must be done in culturally and religiously appropriate fashion. But 5 years is a long time for very little progress to be noted. Afghanistan today is the fourth poorest country in the world community with 60-

80% of its population living on less than \$1 a day. Despite gains from Taliban times, 80% of women continue to be illiterate, 68% of girls between 7-13 continue to not be enrolled in school, and 54% of girls are married before they reach 18, most forced into marriage to much older men for financial gain and customary practices. Despite 5 years of presence on the ground, the maternal mortality rates remains the second highest in the world with an appalling 15,000 women dying each year from preventable pregnancy related complications.

The situation of women is exacerbated by ongoing militarism. It is well document that militarism has a gendered impact on women and is coupled with increasing violence against them. Women's progressively increased absence and exclusion from public life makes them particularly vulnerable to the effects of conflict and violence. In the recent past for example, we see evidence of increased forms of violence against women including attacks, kidnappings and murders of women engaged in community work, a rise in the numbers and severity of domestic violence, a rise in the number of forced and early marriages, an increase in honour killings and self-immolation, a rise in trafficking and prostitution of women, and ongoing physical and sexual assault. Women are re-victimised when perpetrators are not brought to justice due to a nonexistent and gender insensitive legal system and so crimes continue with impunity. Military presence does not seem to ameliorate this reality, but further contributes to it.

Over 25 years of militarism has also contributed to deepening conservatism, rigid interpretations of Islam and its accompanying restrictions on women's human civil rights when I worked in Afghanistan, people repeatedly explained how the wars extremicised religious practice in Afghanistan and in an effort to protect women and girls from violence outside the home, men exerted increasing control on the movement, and right of women and girls in their families. This can only be undone when Afghanistan I not plagued by ongoing insecurity and afghan women themselves can begin (as they are doing now) to find space and justification for increased rights and opportunities in a culturally and religiously sensitive manner. Supporting these grass roots initiatives would serve sustainable peace much more effectively than spending billions of dollars on military action.

So where are things at today which we don't hear about?

- A rising civilian casualty toll
- Lack of progress on international commitments, particularly in the lives of Afghan women
- Rising resistance to women's efforts at achieving equal rights and opportunities
- Girls schools being burnt at such a rate that international aid agencies have largely stopped efforts to rebuild them
- Female candidates and parliamentarians facing widespread and continued intimidation and threats by male politicians
- A motion to re-establish the infamous Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice

Canada in Afghanistan: Opportunities for Advancing Gender Equality and Peace

1. Not enough funding for women specific program

In a recent interview¹, Khorshied Samad, the wife of Afghanistan's Ambassador to Canada remarked that only "a negligible percentage of CIDA funding to Afghanistan is being directed to Afghan women's rights projects." In fact under 3% of Canada's \$250 million in funding is supporting women-specific projects². Focusing on big projects rarely effect the everyday lives of Afghans in general and women in particular. For this reason, strengthening Afghan civil society through supporting grass roots initiatives I critical to long term peace in Afghanistan and the advancement of women.

2. Broad generalised reference to 'Afghan women'

This has lead to the misconception that Afghan women somehow constitute a single, homegenous

¹ Tara M Campbell, "Afghan Women Still Unheard." <http://www.straight.com/content.cfm?id=18745>, June 29, 2006

² CIDA website; Cheshmak Farhoumand-Sims, "Incorporating Gender Analysis into Canada's Foreign Policy" presented at Canada in AFghanisan meeting at Wilfrid Laurier University.

group³ when in fact, the experience of an uneducated, Hazara woman in a rural village in Afghanistan is not comparable to an educated, elite woman in Kabul. These are the gender difference that policies often overlook – by clumping all women in the same category and making assumptions about their experiences as women in a conflict and post-conflict space so the question is which of these women is being used as the measuring stick for the success of development, implementation and evaluation of Canada's Afghanistan policy. We must do a better job of accounting for difference in life experience, access etc in the rural versus urban areas and develop policies accordingly. This can only be done when we engage local populations in the creation of development policies.

3. Lack of gender analysis

Gender is not about adding women and mixing! Gender “as a central category of analysis exposes unequal social structures, particularly gender hierarchies, and provides a frame of reference on how these structures negatively impact the security of individuals and groups, and ultimately society as a whole.” (Tickler, 48). Gender considers the unique impact that war and violence has on men and women, and exposes the many ways in which unequal gender relations sustain military activities and promote cultures of violence that adversely impact women in both public and private spheres. Formulating and implementing policies that recognise and appreciate each sex's different experience in conflict and post conflict zones, and ensuring their equal participation in the rebuilding of their societies therefore is critical to sustainable peace. Gender blind analysis privileges a male experience in conflict and post conflict zones, and thus fails to consider the impact of conflict and their aftermath on women. In order to change women's realities after the start of the peace process, we need to ensure that women are fully engaged in the decision-making processes, both in government and civil society.

4. War does not have a beginning or end for women

We must understand that war in essence does not have a beginning and end for women (start of violence, start of peace process), but in fact continues to plague women's lives long after formal peace has been declared. This is particularly relevant for women in Afghanistan who continue to experience limitations to their rights, freedoms, opportunities and safety in a highly militarised, volatile and culturally patriarchal context. In Afghanistan, therefore, in addition to a focus on women's effective and active participation, and perhaps as a precursor for it, there needs to be a discussion and consensus on the causes and processes of women's disempowerment, and the different ways in which diverse women are oppressed. In this manner, plans can be formulated to challenge the multiple sources of women's oppression, and actions can be taken that seek women's empowerment (McKay and Mazurana, 22).

Where do we go from here?

Militarisation of peace is not conducive to building trust and dignity. Without these men will not even consider women's rights and women won't want to move forward in their struggle.

True development: development through military action, development for the privileged few rather than the needy masses is not true development. True development is providing assistance and opportunities for economic independence and dignity for the sake of human wellbeing and not to lure local populations away from the Taliban. We have to have humility and pure intentions on the way we engage the fragile state in Afghanistan.

What will it take?

- increased and sustained funding for reconstruction, development and poverty reduction: the ability of insurgents to draw new recruits is highly dependent on the economic vulnerability facing Afghans. Efforts to improve education, health care, access to water, food, sanitation, and improvement of rural livelihood, and the rule of law is critical.
- Long term diplomatic and development commitment
- The presence of international security forces committed to civilian protection and security maintenance

³ Barakat, S & Wardell, G (2002) “Exploited by whom? An alternative perspective on humanitarian assistance to Afghan women.” In *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 23, No. 5, p. 910.

- Continued efforts to promote human rights, justice and accountability

The status of women is a litmus test for success in Afghanistan. The ability of women to enjoy equal rights and access equal opportunities in any given society is an important characteristic of sustainable peace. I hope we will work harder to meet commitments to Afghanistan's women and their families.