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AFGHAN WOMEN'S NETWORK



WOMEN VISIONING 2024

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Women's visioning 2014-2024

As the years of 2014 - 2024 are benchmark years for every Afghan, especially for Afghan women. It was very important to measure the gender equality indicator and set milestones for these upcoming years. The presidential and provincial council elections of this year, the peace and reconciliation processes, the possible return of the Taliban, the status of economic stability and extractive industries and the national assembly elections in 2015 are the big questions for everyone of us in relation to all of these fundamental processes that: "Where and how will women be included in these development initiatives? How will they be affected by them?"

In consideration of these major challenges of transition and transformation, a group of women activists (Palwasha Hassain, Mary Akrami, Nargis Nahan, Lida Nadery, Wazhma Forgh) started to brainstorm, to think out loud and to share their vision, aspirations, and fears for the future in a planning retreat in Delhi in 2013. They reflected on the gains of the past decade and deliberated on how to secure them after the withdrawal of the international forces from Afghanistan. In order to pave the way ahead they developed a vision with which most women leaders could identify, which should be as inclusive as possible of the views of all women in Afghanistan. After seven days of heated debates, it was agreed to bring more women on board, continue the discussions, and share the vision for the future.

Then, the draft working paper of above discussion was used to stimulate the discussion among women in Kabul as well as in the provinces, in order to find common grounds for developing a clear vision of our future. Therefore Afghan Women's Network (AWN) conducted a series of consultations in all the 34 provinces of Afghanistan through its members, to compile the expectations of all Afghan women and arrive at a more representative vision for the future and reflects on the key developments of the ongoing transition, including the opening up of media, and increased political participation of women.

As a result of those combined consultations and discussions, it was agreed on the following vision for Afghanistan in 2024: "Afghanistan is a self-reliant country in which every citizen (woman, man and child) enjoys equal rights and freedoms as upheld in the Constitution and other laws of the country". The vision anticipates higher levels of inclusion of women, men and children in Afghanistan. The actual question boils down to the following: How can we, as women, with little political backing and so many internal and external challenges, play a key role for realizing this vision for ourselves and for others?

To sum up this paper outlines the most **significant challenges** that Afghan women can expect to face in the aftermath of the international troop withdrawal. It also **attempts to assess** the current state of the Afghan women's movement and provide clear following **recommendations**.

- ❖ Strengthening the Afghan Women's Movement
- ❖ Trust building
- ❖ Bridging generational divides
- ❖ Devising innovative protection strategies
- ❖ Sharing high profile opportunities with a broader group of activists:
- ❖ Increasing communication between women in Kabul and women in the provinces

Vision 2024: Paving the Way Ahead

“Afghanistan is a self-reliant country in which every citizen (woman and man and child) enjoys equal rights and freedoms upheld in the Constitution and other laws.”

Afghan Women Activists, 2013

Introduction

The past ten years in Afghanistan have proven to be a decade of remarkable progress in the lives of Afghan women. Emerging from an era characterized by the absence of women in public life, called “gender apartheid” by some, we have witnessed significant changes over the last decade. Today, 28% of Afghan parliament seats are filled by women; women have important roles in the development of their communities (at least in the cities); millions of girls are back in schools¹, and women are running their own businesses - both collectively and independently.

Although these developments are proof of important positive achievements, the gains made in the past decade may be contested. Statistics indicate a rise in violence against women, but also an increase in women’s **reporting** of violence against women.² Afghanistan is still a long way behind other countries on international development indicators and yet there are improvements in maternal mortality rates³. Literacy rates among women, still have a long way to go in comparison to other countries in the region, and there is need to increase women’s civic and political rights in order to achieve true equality. We still face an uphill road towards progress, but we are optimistic that women can be an instrument of positive change for other women, and for society as a whole in the long run.

While most of the progress made in the area of women’s rights would not have been possible without the efforts and activism of Afghan women themselves, it is only fair to acknowledge the considerable international support, both politically and economically. The decades of transition and transformation have been and will continue to be a test of the ability of Afghans to stand on their own as a nation, to take ownership and custody of their own achievements. For us and other Afghan women, these achievements are of immense importance. The question now is: how can we safeguard our gains and ensure that we do not lose the momentum going ahead?

While there have been many tangible changes in the last decade, other gains have been superficial and unsustainable. Which changes are the most important to us when push comes to shove? Where do we draw our own red line if we have to make compromises in the coming years? How will we lead the march toward change ahead of us? These are the pressing and difficult questions Afghan women are asking themselves.

¹ Out of 10 million, 4 million girls have been to school since 2001. Source: “What brings tomorrow”, [Beth Murphy](#), in The Global Post, October 31, 2013.

² “Afghanistan Human Rights Independent Commission, Annual Report on Violence against Women” (November 2013) indicates a 25% increase in reported cases of violence as a result of a rising awareness among women to report incidences of violence.

³ UNICEF statistics on Afghanistan report (2013) indicates a decline in 460 maternal mortality rate among 100,000 women. This marks a decline from the report of previous years with maternal mortality of 1,600 per 100,000 births. For detail consult: http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/afghanistan_statistics.html

The years 2014 and 2024 are benchmark years for every Afghan, but especially for Afghan women. How will Afghanistan measure up with regard to gender equality? We have many milestones against which to measure our status between now and 2024: the presidential and provincial council elections in 2014, the contested status of constitutional amendments in the face of the peace process with the Taliban, the peace and reconciliation processes and the possible return of the Taliban, the status of economic stability and extractive industries, the national assembly elections in 2015 etc. The big question for us in relation to all of these fundamental processes is: "Where and how will women be included in these development initiatives? How will they be affected by them?"

Facing the major challenges of transition and transformation, a group of women activists⁴ allowed themselves the space to think out loud and to share their vision, aspirations, and fears for the future in a planning retreat in 2013. They reflected on the gains of the past decade and deliberated on how to secure them after the withdrawal of the international forces from Afghanistan. In order to pave the way ahead they developed a vision with which most women leaders could identify, and which was as inclusive as possible of the views of all women in Afghanistan. After seven days of heated debates, it was agreed to bring more women on board, continue the discussions, and share the vision for the future.

This paper will be used as the working paper to stimulate the discussion among women in Kabul as well as in the provinces, in order to find common grounds for developing a clear vision of our future.

The Afghan Women's Network (AWN) conducted a series of consultations in all the 34 provinces of Afghanistan through its members, to compile the expectations of all Afghan women and arrive at a more representative vision for the future and reflect on the key developments of the ongoing transition, including the opening up of media, and increased political participation of women.

As a result of our combined consultations and discussions, we agreed on the following vision for Afghanistan in 2024: "Afghanistan is a self-reliant country in which every citizen (woman, man and child) enjoys equal rights and freedoms as upheld in the Constitution and other laws of the country". The vision anticipates higher levels of inclusion of women, men and children in Afghanistan. The actual question boils down to the following: How can we, as women, with little political backing and so many internal and external challenges, play a key role for realizing this vision for ourselves and for others?

This paper outlines the most significant challenges that Afghan women can expect to face in the aftermath of the international troop withdrawal. It also attempts to assess the current state of the Afghan women's movement.

Obstacles to Women's Advancement Post-2014

As Afghanistan is approaching 2014, many concerns arise. The real obstacles to women's rights are not restricted to what will happen as a result of the potential return of the Taliban alone. We are also concerned about the broader growing

⁴ The group of activists that met in Delhi was small but diverse, including the leadership of Equality for Peace and Democracy, and key members of the Afghan Women's Network, who discussed issues of concern in formal and mostly informal meetings and discussions.

conservatism in the country. In the past few years, there have been many setbacks as a result of this growing conservatism. The following developments indicate the challenges and setbacks that women have faced in Afghanistan's transition:

- The acceptance of the government and the parliament of the Shiite personal law and the discriminatory articles against women,
- the control of safe homes and the limiting of the role of independent women's groups in running the crisis shelters for women in dire circumstances,
- the putting in question of the Eradication of Violence Against Women Law (EVAW) and
- the reduction of the women's quota in the provincial councils serve as examples.

As the decade of transformation approaches, along with the impending withdrawal of international forces, these setbacks cause many concerns about what might follow.

The key obstacles identified by women both at the planning retreat and via the provincial consultations are:

Trust deficit between women's rights activists and religious leadership.

Despite genuine efforts by Afghan women to work with higher religious entities such as the *Shura-e-Ulema*, more time and work is needed to build trust and respect for women's rights in order to protect the achievement of the past decade. Women in Afghanistan currently bear the brunt of an inherited trust deficit that has resulted from past attempts at modernization and secularism.

Religion plays an important role in traditional societies such as Afghanistan, and religion is one of the most powerful pillars of our society. We need to emphasize that there is a need to distinguish between religion and tradition. In many cases, traditions that legitimize violence against women are perceived to be based on religion. Due to the entanglement of these ideas and their impact on women's

rights, women groups have understood the importance of connecting with religious leaders in the last few years. Religious leaders, such as the *Ulema*, can play an important role in improving women's rights if only they emphasize the essential principles of Islam, which involve "justice" and "rights" for everyone. However as for now, challenges remain in terms of mutual understanding and trust building, and women's demands for their rights are often perceived as Western phenomena.

The inherited trust deficit in Afghanistan stems from the century-old state-run, politically-driven women's emancipation movement. This movement traditionally lacked grassroots ownership, and instead was solely driven by the country's high-level elite. It has always been associated with the state-run modernization policies, which generally aggravated tensions between modernists and traditionalists (examples include King Amanullah's (1919-1929) reformist policies or the war between the Mujahedeen and the leftists affiliated with Soviet invasions (1979-1992)). The setback of later years was defined by a more conservative religious norms, including traditional ideas about the roles of women and men in the private and public spheres, and ideas about family honor, which under the Taliban (1996-2001) became even more rigid and dogmatic.

During the past decade, the international community has been more cautious in pressing for Afghan women's rights, sometimes to the frustration of women's rights

activists and feminist groups. The use of cultural pretexts by policy makers has been a major obstacle that women activists faced in the past ten years. Civil society groups have also been cautious in their desire to avoid a backlash and to mitigate the trust deficit between religious, modernist and progressive groups. However, due to the politicization of religion and traditionalist narratives about women's legitimate roles being only in the private sphere, women have found that their freedom to take part in and shape public spaces has narrowed progressively in the past few years.

The existence of armed groups such as the Afghan Local Police (ALP) and antigovernment groups who, one way or another, affiliated themselves with religious parties, have posed great threats to women and children. There have been rising numbers of cases of violence by such elements throughout the country against which women activists have protested. These include cases of abduction, rape, and forced marriages. Because women protested against these negative developments in their lobbying and advocacy in Afghanistan and abroad, warlords and powerbrokers turned them into their "ultimate rivals".

In the past decade, there have been conscious efforts and significant progress made in trust-building and building bridges with religious parties. Women's groups have been working with *mullahs*, religious leaders, and community elders, by engaging them in workshops and other discussion forums. However, we know that there have been, and will be, challenges from time to time that need to be addressed in a sensitive manner. Women had to prepare a careful and precise response when working on and responding to the *Ulema Shura* statement⁵ arguing that women should have fewer rights. The statement was a clear warning to women activists fighting for their rights in the public sphere, women's mobility, and leadership. At the time women rights activists decided against protesting this statement or responding to it, and decided instead, to treat it as having no legal legitimacy, because the continuation of any dialogue about the statement could have instigated further antagonism.

The efforts undertaken by women, such as initiating a positive dialogue with the *Shura Ulema* on the harms of child marriage and other forms of violence were an important move. Despite the subsequent regressive statement by the *Shura*, there have been genuine expressions of support from within the religious camp. Many of the religious clergy, for example, shed tears when they saw pictures of violence against women and listened to women's stories. In a successful attempt to increase awareness and sensitivity for the hardship and suffering brought upon some Afghan women in the name of religion, a group of women shared the pictures of the 12 year old girl whose throat was slit by the family she was married into, and of women whose bodies were dismembered due to domestic violence. Following this awareness, the head of *Shura* council made a statement supporting the protection of women and condemning violence against women.

However, not everyone in the council was supportive of women. As a result, some individuals managed to influence the issuance of the subsequent *Ulema Shura* statement that literally put women back in their traditional roles.

⁵ The Dari statement in official AF government presidential site <http://president.gov.af/fa/news/7489> for English translation consult in Afghanistan Analysis <http://afghanistananalysis.wordpress.com/2012/03/04/english-translation-of-ulema-councils-declaration-about-women/>

Legal protections designed to prevent violence against women threatened.

The *Ulema Shura* statement, its endorsement by the Afghan cabinet and the very regressive treatment of the Eradication of Violence Against Women Law (EVAW) are evidence of regressive thinking that still characterize those individuals and institutions currently ruling the country.

The *Ulema Shura* statement, if implemented as is, would call into question many rights that women currently enjoy in the public sphere, including their mobility and independence. Similarly, the EVAW law if passed by the parliament with all the changes proposed by the conservative elements would fail in its essential purpose of ensuring the protection of women's rights. Instead, it would reinforce many of the conservative ideas regarding child marriage, polygamy and women's submission to men's will in marriage, in addition to weakening the definition of violence.

The context in which women's rights activists work is complex and makes it difficult to develop a clear strategy on how to address the trust deficit between women and hardline thinkers, and policy level recommendations developed to address women's rights issues need constant re-adjustment. Any advancement at a given time needs to be informed by the environment in which changes are happening. The EVAW law, for example, had been in practice for three years without interruption and any objection by any legal or religious entity until a group of conservative MPs branded it as un-Islamic.⁶

Internal Challenges:

There are also internal challenges within the women's movement that can pose a threat to progress in women's rights and the protection of their gains. In the surveys and consultations that were conducted, this was attributed to a number of factors:

- ❖ *Lack of accountability by women representatives to constituencies*

Women have fought hard to secure their role in political spaces created through political processes and fostered by international efforts. Women activists have successfully utilized these opportunities to increase women's representation and participation in political institutions. However, activists have observed that women who hold positions in political institution do not necessarily respond to the needs and interests of women constituencies except when they are committed to women's rights. Women have often felt betrayed when they encountered less support from elected women representatives than expected. The failure to act on the part of the members of the Women's Commission of Parliament on the EVAW law (resulting in the fact that the EVAW law approval is still pending) has been a source of disappointment to many activists. These activists worked on drafting the law, lobbied for its enforcement, and pushed for its implementation for protection of victims of violence for three years. EVAW thus serves as an example for the divisions within the women's movement. In the provincial consultation, women emphasized the need to place qualified and committed women in the positions allocated for women representation in Parliament to make sure that women's rights are upheld and strengthened by them.

⁶ http://www.afghanwomennetwork.af/EVAW%20Statement%20_Final%20English_.pdf

It is important that women increase their political ground not only through representation. They also need to strengthen their presence as constituencies so that representatives feel more accountable to them. Women’s participation as voters is of paramount importance. Women who fill the quota seats through conventional politics, and occupy the seats within the realm of male-driven politics, end up being more accountable to political stakeholders than to their women constituents. Support to independent and genuine women leaders in mainstream politics is important in order to ensure women leaders’ accountability to their constituencies.

One other area emphasized in the provincial consultations was the need for women in civil society to strengthen their communication and relationship with the communities they work with. Consultation alone cannot ensure the necessary accountability of those who entrust us with their opinions, and provide us with information for our projects, lobbying and networking. In order to build a vibrant civil society, it is important to strengthen two-way communication strategies and prioritize feedback to communities and constituencies.

❖ Lack of accountability between women’s groups and networks

The past few years have been characterized by immense time pressure for women’s groups and networks causing overlapping and parallel endeavors. Often, this time pressure has adversely affected our accountability to our fellow women. The lack of coordination has contributed to isolated interventions and programming that have failed to achieve synergies. The time constraints, limited capacity and donor requirements have often constrained women’s groups’ accountability to their peer groups. Most of the time, accountability to donors takes precedence over women’s accountability to their constituencies. This is because women often receive more recognition for their work outside of their communities and their peer groups than for their accountability to their constituencies.

Solidarity with other women is going to be more important than ever in the coming years. Meaningful solidarity can only be achieved through strengthening our accountability towards each other. To encourage internal accountability and solidarity, we recommend that recognition of women for their work should be increased internally and that external assistance should support internal coordination.

A Path Forward: Strengthening the Afghan Women’s Movement

The Afghan women’s movement is comprised of professionals and experts who have been striving to secure and protect women’s rights for decades. Despite many threats today, the number of women leaders is growing. More women’s organizations are being founded, more professionalism is being demonstrated, and we have more women in different fields, from business to politics, who can be counted on as leaders both inside and outside the government. This was not the case ten years ago, with the exception of a handful of champions of women’s rights.

Women’s organizations have expanded their work from solely focusing on service delivery to also addressing the systemic issues that are the root cause of the problems they are working to address. Generally speaking, the operational capacity of women’s organizations has grown tremendously in last 12 years.

Activism on the part of women's NGOs and individuals has paid off. Many milestones have been achieved by the women's movement. They include: the experience of getting the equality clause into the constitution in 2004, successful lobbying to increase women's representation and quotas in parliament, winning the insertion of gender budgeting in parliament, drafting and securing the ratification of the bill on the eradication of violence against women and women's strategic positioning to influence the peace process. All these have been the result of joint efforts in which women learned to put aside their differences to join forces in their fight for women's rights.

Women were the first to rally against the decision of the Afghan parliament to pass the Amnesty bill, which precluded prosecution for war crimes committed in conflicts in previous decades.⁷ Peace building has been another area in which women raised their voices for a peaceful settlement. Other civil society organizations followed suit much later.

Also the media landscape has evolved in terms of portraying women's rights issues and images of women's rights activists, despite occasional attacks by some conservative outlets. However, there remains a significant absence of women managing media outlets and in serious journalism.

To leverage this progress, the women's movement needs to refocus on the strength and unity of the movement itself. Through the planning retreat and subsequent provincial consultation, women identified a number of strategies to address this need.

- ❖ **Trust building:** There is a need to prioritize trust building between and among groups, and expand networks both internally and externally. Women have learned that no network can be built in which women pursue selfish interests that compromise their fellow women's rights. Trust and professionalism open the door to self-criticism and accountability, although it may not be apparent to outsiders. The factors which can strengthen trust among groups have been identified as follows: recognizing each other's work, crediting the achievements of individuals, documenting facts, and publically recognizing each others' efforts. These practices will promote a positive culture among women.
- ❖ **Bridging generational divides:** On the one hand, it is important for more experienced women to work with younger women who can bring dynamic leadership to the movement. On the other hand, it is up to younger women to connect with past leaders. These women made it through the difficult periods of the past and the younger generation can learn from their experiences. We believe that many of the lessons from the past will be relevant and important to future women leaders in the challenging times ahead. In the past decade, there have been many diverse and committed groups of Afghan women from the diaspora, as well as younger women who studied abroad and established their own groups and projects. Regular interaction and dialogue across generations should be increased and promoted, so that the older generation does not become excluded from the

⁷ AFGHANISTAN: AMNESTY LAW DRAWS CRITICISM, PRAISE by Ron Synovitz, *EurasiaNet*, March 17, 2007 <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/pp0317.7.shtml>

process and so that the new generation can benefit from being mentored and included in key dialogues.

- ❖ ***Devising innovative protection strategies:*** Women activists and groups who have operated during the Taliban years and before in Afghanistan and Pakistan will continue their hard work in the coming years. At the same time, diaspora and younger women with high levels of education can bring particular strengths, especially as security threats will increase for women inside the country. There is an important role to be played by these diaspora and young women who have foreign passports and residence cards and can therefore take bolder positions since they enjoy a certain level of protection and access to safe places in times of need.
- ❖ ***Sharing high profile opportunities with a broader group of activists:*** Working and networking with younger women should not be limited to working with women coming from abroad, but should include those young women who have never traveled abroad. These women have tremendous potential and deserve to be supported in their efforts and mentored to assume the leadership roles that lie ahead of them.
- ❖ ***Increasing communication between women in Kabul and women in the provinces:*** Regular interaction and dialogue among activists in Kabul and in the provinces should be increased and promoted. Indeed, this is essential if provincial women are going to identify with the women's movement. If they are excluded they will become alienated from the women's movement.

The Post-2014 Agenda

There are many opportunities that may turn into threats to women's rights if women do not use them strategically to consolidate the basis of their rights in the coming years. These include the peace and reconciliation process, the 2014 elections, and the transfer of full authority for security to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). These will have major implications for women's security but also present opportunities to shape national security institutions. The coming decade of ongoing transition and transformation will provide both risks and opportunities that women can build their strategy around in order to emerge stronger at the end.

To minimize the risk of compromises being made that result in serious setbacks for women during the peace process, it is important that women are continuously engaged in the peace process on all levels, and continuously monitor its progress. Experiences of war and peace in the last few decades have shown that whenever nationalist politics are on the rise, women are left in isolation. Considering the strong anti-women policies of the Taliban, women must be continuous watchdogs of the process. More than that, they must participate in and even lead the process to make sure women establish a red line for what it means to have a just society.⁸ Only when women have some level of control over the process and have detailed knowledge of the negotiations will they be able to ensure that women's rights, women's protection and achievements are safeguarded in the future. Many developments are unfolding at

⁸ On the women preconditions and red line for peace and reintegration refer to the AWN pre Bonn Conference Statement <http://www.gnwp.org/afghan-womens-declaration-international-conference-on-afghanistan-in-bonn>

national, regional and international levels in which women are sidelined. Once again, it seems that beliefs about women as the mere victims of conflict are driving the agenda of peace and reintegration.

As previously mentioned, the 2014 presidential and provincial council elections are an important part of the agenda for Afghan women. If women do not consolidate their political presence in presidential, provincial and parliamentary elections during the next year, the gains we have made in the political life of the country will be very difficult to protect. The Afghan parliament already lowered the special quota for women in provincial councils by 5%. This figure can be lowered even further if women fail to fill the seats allocated for them, especially in the provinces where security is still an issue. The upcoming parliamentary elections in 2015 are of similar crucial importance for women. If committed women who are working to protect and promote women's rights fail to succeed in the parliamentary elections, there is a risk that laws and policies approved through presidential decrees will be reviewed, weakened or even rejected.

Therefore, women should maintain their pressure on the government and the international community to ensure their equal participation in the electoral process by improving security around polling stations and by increasing security measures for women candidates in the upcoming elections.

It is also important to seriously consider the security of women in current decision-making bodies in government, and of women leaders outside the government. The incidents involving two women directors in Laghman province last year were alarming for other women and made them question whether or not to take the risk of participating in local and provincial politics themselves. There are many measures that government can and must take to increase security for women leaders. The Afghan Women's Network presented many strategic recommendations to this end, such as security training for women leaders and the improvement of basic safety installations.

Women activists may face a less amicable situation with the withdrawal of the international troops from Afghanistan. Women must therefore engage in lobbying to make sure that the capacity of the ANSF is built, including setting clear benchmarks on women's safety and security, respecting women's human rights throughout their chain of command, and creating an enabling environment for women to join the security forces.

Protection of women's rights defenders is an important issue that needs attention. Flagging 'warlordism', fighting for an amnesty bill, working towards transitional justice, and exposing violations of the ALP and the Taliban bear the risk of resulting in violent backlash. Fear and security concerns can increase internal displacement and emigration to the West by many skilled women if alternative safety nets are not put in place.

Many western missions, including the United States, still have strict and prolonged visa processes in place for everyone, including women leaders. It is a signal to many women activists that in the coming years of increasing insecurity, women may not have many alternative places of refuge. It is important to create and ensure safety nets within the region and within the international women's movement, which can provide a safe shelter in the event that women activists are confronted with security

crises. A similar safety net mechanism should be put in place for women in the provinces.

Women need to be aware of the growing cultural conservatism, and key women leaders need to be equipped with Islamic scholarly knowledge to be able to defend women's status on the issues of *Muharam* (mobility), child marriage and *hijab*, which are repeatedly being used as weapons for restricting women. There is much progress in the Islamic World that can and should be brought to Afghanistan. Women make up half ⁹of the population in Afghanistan. Campaigns such as 50% and 5 million are the kinds of movements that can display women's political clout and can serve as important allies in dominant politics of the country.

⁹ <http://www.ifes.org/Content/Publications/Opinions/2009/Aug/Five-Million-Women-Campaign-Launched.aspx>