

## **Afghanistan Beyond the Headlines: Women, Youth, and the War**

Keynote Speech by: Ayscha Hamdani

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Ladies & Gentlemen,

Margaret Mead once said that: *“If we are to achieve a richer culture, rich in contrasting values, we must recognize the whole gamut of human potentialities, and so weave a less arbitrary social fabric, one in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place”*.

Today, we are here to look in more detail at the questions of women and youth in Afghanistan. Whereas both of these topics are highly debated and met with little consensus, with opinions ranging all the way from great achievements having been made over the past decade to opinions that claim that Afghan society has regressed as a whole, I would like to dispel some of the myths that misinform both foreign and domestic audiences, and instead attempt to present you with a realistic and balanced picture, as well as recommendations on a way forward that will serve better the people of Afghanistan.

Before I continue, please note that I will largely refrain from making reference to statistical data or any trends that may be interpreted to exist therefrom. Just because some aspect of Afghan life may be correlated to some other aspect thereof does not imply causality, or anything else at that. Afghanistan does not

yet possess a culture of data collection and, whilst efforts are being made to change this, largely we rely on anecdote for it still rings truer right now. As the future may give rise to accurate census and all its associated stratifications, so does the present still lend itself to more concrete, close-to-reality analysis.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Since 2001, the international community and Afghan Government have been actively engaged in the promotion of gender equality, women, human rights, education and the promotion of youth. Men and women were accorded equal rights in Afghanistan's constitution, and women now feature prominently in the Government, with a 25% quota for women in the Lower House and a 17% quota in the Upper House of Parliament. Women participate in the private and nongovernmental sectors and have assumed roles in Afghanistan's National Security Forces. Women have been integrated in the Government's policy and institutional framework, participating in political, governance and economical processes. In many parts of the country boys, girls and aspiring youngsters have access to education and work. Women speak publically at national and international events and many women and youth organisations cater to the needs of their fellow citizens.

Post-2001, the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs was established to oversee the formulation and execution of government wide gender policies and gender mainstreaming in all ministries and governmental institutions, whilst another

important body, namely the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission continues to monitor and report on the current human rights situation in Afghanistan. In 2008, the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan that sets out an operational framework for furthering gender equality and women's empowerment under the Afghan National Development Strategy framework was put in place. Last but not least, Afghanistan is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Elimination of Violence against Women and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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In 2002, the first youth civil society conference was held in Kabul, followed by the establishment of the Afghan Youth Coordination Agency in 2003. Subsequent regional youth conferences were held and in 2005, the Afghan Government created the Afghan Ministry of Youth Affairs within the Ministry of Information and Culture. In 2006, the Afghan Government established the Youth Affairs Administration, which in turn established a countrywide Youth High Council. In 2007, the Joint UN – Afghan National Youth Program commenced and in 2008, a Youth Parliament was established in cooperation with a number of governmental bodies. Throughout this period, a whole range of youth organisations, such as 1400, the Afghan Youth Network, Afghan Youth Voices and Youth In Action Association were set up and just this year, a joint international and Afghan effort led to the development of Afghanistan's first

National Youth Policy.

However today, with international assistance and thereby mechanisms for accountability gradually reducing, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the implementation of processes to improve the situation of women and youth in Afghanistan is lagging behind the ambitious conceptual framework that the international community and Afghan Government have created over the past decade. The representation and active participation of women and the youth in the political, economical and social spheres remain limited, reflecting the highly volatile and uncertain future of over 70% of Afghanistan's population.

Furthermore, Afghanistan has one of the highest maternal mortality and infant mortality rates in the world.

Unfortunately, since the very beginning of efforts in Afghanistan, "gender" has been used synonymously with women and women's rights and therefore not only hampered male involvement in gender processes but far worse, only left little room to address violence, abuse and discrimination against the male population of Afghanistan. Whereas the women rights agenda has been put out into the open, the men rights agenda largely remains a taboo.

Lastly, and very pertinent to the context of Afghanistan, the traditional view of women and the youth and the absence of a grassroots support network or social movement can be regarded as the main reasons why women and the youth at

large have so far been unable to participate in various processes and to exert more influence overall. Whereas in urban centres effective women and youth networks have established themselves, rural Afghanistan remains remote and removed from most of these processes. The security situation prevents stronger linkages between the urban and rural contexts.

Given the aforementioned, the question arises whether the gains made for Afghan women and the Afghan youth are tangible and sustainable or rather symbolic and superficial and further, whether the implementation of the current development agenda in Afghanistan can actually progress, or whether substantive rethinking will be required to establish a new concept that would lend itself to a more realistic and tangible approach.

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#### **CONTEXT**

An important milestone to define the relationship between Afghanistan and the international community in particular post-2014 was the 2012 Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan. However, and despite ample mechanisms, policies and processes in place, and the fact that many partnership agreements have been signed since, commitments on gender equality, human rights, women rights, education and youth remain worryingly short on detail.

We will now look at the situation of women and youth in Afghanistan in order to

establish what gains have been made, what challenges they continue to face and what the future will likely hold.

It may come as a surprise to some of you but efforts to accord women with equal rights in Afghanistan were already undertaken way before international attention was geared towards Afghanistan in 2001. In the early nineteenth hundreds, King Amanullah Khan and his father in law, Mahmud Tarzi encouraged social reforms with particular focus on the rights of women. Queen Soraya, whom King Amanullah Khan presented to the people on the day of his inauguration, played a crucial role in this process. At a later stage, President Najibullah ensured women's access to education and the professional sphere, and subsequently both Nur Mohammad Taraqī and Hafizullah Amin introduced reforms to ensure equal rights for women and to bring an end to forced marriage. In the 1960s, when the National Police was formed under King Zahir Shah, women were recruited in small numbers and trained alongside men.

## **CHALLENGES**

Today, and despite the fact that a legislative framework to protect women and children has been put in place, to which the Afghan Government has made a constitutional commitment, the challenges encountered by these groups seem to be on the increase. It should be noted that whereas international community involvement has certainly created opportunities for women, children and the youth alike, women in particular have been removed from their traditional role;

alas, they have not been assigned a new role or better said position within society until today.

The Ministry of Women's Affairs has limited reach and whereas oftentimes other governmental bodies acknowledge policies on gender mainstreaming and / or women's rights, implementation lacks or is frankly spoken non-existent. Gender mainstreaming across Afghan ministries has not been a successful undertaking so far. The work of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission is oftentimes politicized and as a result marginalized.

Whilst gender related progress can largely be attributed to international community involvement, women in the Government and Afghanistan's National Security Forces are subject to entrenched discrimination because they defy the traditional role accorded to women. There is limited female representation at the higher, institutional level and therefore little to no influence in policy-making processes. The role of women therefore remains strongly marginalized. Further, there is great reluctance by women to make use of female police for domestic

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violence due to a common belief that matters of such nature should not be dealt with outside of the family sphere.

The 2014 date has prompted an on-going debate about the future of

Afghanistan. Central pieces to this debate are the Transition Process and the Afghan-led Peace Process and thereto the questions whether gains made for women and the youth can be secured and what potential prospects for reconciliation could be. With the Transition Process well underway, experts argue that women will not be able to consolidate their gains in a militarized environment and go as far as suggesting that the increasing military intervention Afghanistan experienced actually enhanced the insurgency and thereby increased the insecurity of women and girls – a development that could already be seen in 2005/6.

The women of Afghanistan, whether in public or in private, express great concern over the withdrawal of troops in 2014, fearing that this abandonment will erode the gains made over the past decade. Despite public reassurances, women fear that unless they are more visible and involved in the process, they will face a return to Taliban times. Notably, I have met quite a few women, who did not know that the international forces were going to leave the country. Fatima Gailani, President of the Afghan Red Crescent Society was quoted in a report stating:

*“What will we have to sacrifice with reconciliation? Is it women’s affairs, is it democracy, is it human rights, is it a free press? For me that is not peace. For me that is a huge prison.”*

It is becoming increasingly apparent that in the current Peace Process of Afghanistan, women and youth, or really 70% of the



Afghan society have not been included.

As I stated before, it should be remembered that harmful practices affect all members of Afghan society; however, women are particularly vulnerable given that they are more likely prevented from participating in public life. The Law on Elimination of Violence Against Women that was initially passed as a law is currently being contested by the Afghan Parliament. More importantly though, due to inadequate facilities and reporting mechanisms, especially at sub-national level, it can either not be implemented or often, traditional and informal practices would prevail. Most women in Afghanistan are not in jail because they committed a crime but because a crime was committed against them.

Afghan Government officials can also obtrude women's access to rights and justice. In March 2012, President Karzai endorsed a decree by the Ulema Council restricting women's access to the public sphere. Despite not being an official decree or binding law, it certainly had its impact. Nowadays, students report of increasing segregation in university environments.

Recently, Parliament removed the 25% female quota from the Electoral Law, leaving women to compete with warlords and influential power brokers in the upcoming elections. The law has yet to be approved by the President but conservative parliamentarians stated that the concept of granting rights based on their gender was unconstitutional.

In Afghanistan, the very country that is experiencing a significant youth bulge with an estimated 70% of the population being under the age of 25 according to UN figures, the youth today is growing up in an environment dominated by  
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violence, lack of education and unemployment, nepotism and a culture of impunity without any tangible prospects for the future. With 2014 around the corner, first studies are indicating an increase in emigration from Afghanistan towards anywhere in the world.

The Ministry of Culture & Information has limited reach and scope and many of the aforementioned initiatives, such as the Youth Parliament and the Afghan Youth Coordination Agency were short lived due to reasons of infighting and allegations of corruption. In the traditional view of Afghan society, the youth is not considered as an essential part to decision making processes and whilst youth organizations are plentiful, they lack capacity, vision and representation, especially that of women.

The lack of education, employment and an increasing inequality that fosters a stronger adherence to status quo are probably the main factors that lead to the radicalization of the youth and subsequent employment by insurgency groups as well as the induction into crime and the narcotics industry. The report of the

Secretary General to the UN General Security Council on Children and Armed Conflict that was delivered on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May this year provided a comprehensive overview of the kind of atrocities children and youth in Afghanistan are exposed to. Notably, a total of 1,304 conflict-related child casualties were reported in 2012 alone, most of which were caused by IEDs.

Access to decent quality medical services remains illusive for the majority of the Afghan population with curative hospitals only present in urban centres; often out of reach for the rural population; and rural areas seeing at best well intended, but through a lack of security and access, often severely limited efforts at the provision of very basic health services. Given the lack of general direction and the virtual absence of proper oversight, coordinated efforts at improving the general level of health services in the country have stagnated, whilst as a result of the low rates of enforcement of the proper standards of medical education, coupled with the ease with which any existing governmental requirements can be bypassed, the country has also seen the proliferation of a vast number of private health care providers that are neither under control of the Government, nor necessarily in control of the quality of their services. The reliance on the provision of health care services through NGOs creates a situation in which the reduction of aid can result in a country unable to provide for its citizens' basic medical needs. Gherardo Pontrandolfi, Head of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Kabul, recently said that

*"a general lack of security prevents medics and humanitarian aid from reaching the sick and wounded just when*

*they need it most and that the risk and concern is that despite dwindling international attention, the needs of Afghan people will not disappear".*

Particularly affected by the lack of adequate health services are the Afghan women. As I stated before, the country has one of the most alarming health realities with life expectancy estimated to be from 45 to 47 and both maternal mortality and infant mortality rates being amongst the highest in the world. Next to poverty, a lack of awareness, the absence of sufficient female personnel, a common practice of child marriage and strong conservative views are considered to be amongst the main reasons why women do not have adequate access to health services. In Afghanistan, it is not consented for a woman to see a male doctor, which means that in many parts of the country, women are left without any medical support. Furthermore, sexual education and the use of Woodrow Wilson Center

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contraceptives are taboo and abortions are illegal. This in turn leads to many unsafe abortions, which are considered as one of the main contributors to maternal mortality in the country. Lastly, topics such as women's reproductive rights, access to healthcare and family planning only feature on the outskirts of broader discussions on women's rights.

Already in 2001, UNICEF advocated for education to be one of the first priorities to be delivered to the country. As a direct result of a lack of oversight and

enforcement on behalf of the state, the educational system lacks the capacity to provide for an ever increasing number of high school graduates, wishing to pursue higher education, and is at the same time rife with nepotism and segregation, which results in the preferential treatment of those socially and economically in a position but meritocratically speaking undeserving of pursuing such studies. The aforementioned factors, in addition to an unrelenting increase in the number of private higher education institutes, either out of reach economically or short on quality, bare directly on the continued absence of a pool of qualified, local graduates and an ever more increasing percentage of youth unemployment.

Further, omnipresent political, religious and ethnical pressure and the resulting need for anyone wishing to pursue studies to align themselves from the very beginning in what can certainly be seen as a highly politicized educational environment further deters from integrative processes designed to yield a more cohesive, literate society. An active pursuit of segregative policies and a demonization of education as religiously justified by diverse groups with vested interests in the maintenance of this status quo accounts for a debilitating, uneven access to education across the country. Ironically, in a place where the majority of the population adheres to the religion Islam, it is conveniently being forgotten that the first duty of a Muslim is to attain knowledge through literacy (the revelation of the holy Qur'an to the Prophet began with the word "iqra", meaning "read" in the imperative).

With religion being the predominant denominator in Afghan society and in combination with a largely illiterate and uneducated populace presents a rather worrisome scenario. After over ten years of an agenda that pushed democracy and its values, the rule of law, human rights and gender equality to the forefront of political statements and developmental dialogues, today we find ourselves in a place where a parliament refuses to pass a bill that ensures the safety and well being of women, where individuals proclaim that any such law stands in direct contradiction to the religion of Islam and where most concerning of all, young people, influenced by the political agendas of others, take to the streets to protest against the imposition of what they label as Western values. Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, commonly known as Al-Afghan, one of the most renowned historic Afghan scholars famously expressed upon his return from travels aboard:

*“I went to the land of unbelievers and beheld the behaviour of Muslims. Upon my return to the land of the Muslims, alas I beheld the behaviour of unbelievers”.*

From the aforementioned it can be seen that in spite of sound legislation in place that would improve the situation of Afghanistan’s citizens, the Government fails to respond effectively. It further shows that the top down level approach is not very efficient in a place where the local level remains central. Nonetheless, as can be seen, the Government does have mechanisms in place by which it effectively reaches out to the larger public.

Amnesty International, in an open letter to President Karzai and President Obama recently stated that they: “...are deeply concerned that the significant gains made by women and girls in Afghanistan may be threatened as U.S. and allied troops leave the country”.

Amnesty further urged that: “a comprehensive action plan to guarantee that the clock is not turned back on a decade of strides in education, health, security and employment for women and girls should be put in place”.

Amnesty concluded that: “...if women’s progress cannot be sustained, then Afghan society will fail”.

## **OPPORTUNITIES**

Having said this, I do believe that there are several avenues that could be explored to define a path towards gender equality and the empowerment of women. Next to educating women in general and specifically on their rights by reaching out to communities, one way to accelerate the process could be to educate men on the rights of women. Further, the status of Afghan women can be lifted through economic empowerment. Women who work and take place in the public usually gain a higher standing within their family and respective communities and are therefore more likely to be involved in decision-making processes. Most importantly, whatever the approach may be, the relevant actors within Afghan civil society should be in charge of the process from beginning to end, in order to foster a culture of follow up and accountability and thereby

achieve sustainability in the long term.

Government policies should be in line with UNSCR 1325, knowing full well that women play a crucial role in the prevention of violence, the resolution of ongoing conflict, and the rebuilding of post-conflict societies. This could increase the participation of women at both the decision making level as well as at the provincial level in order to foster open dialogue that would be required for linkages between women from all parts of society and simultaneously cater to the establishment of networks that could allow for full recognition for the role of women and ensure their empowerment in post-conflict rehabilitation.

Furthermore, the actual implementation of legislation, such as the Civil Code and the EVAW could increase women's access to justice.

It is a known fact that investing in better maternal health care and family planning does not only improve women's health and that of the family in general but also empowers women to join the workforce and thereby promotes the economic wellbeing of the entire community. Men, women and children alike need to be educated on the topic of health in order to mitigate cultural impediments, such as the common belief that the more children one has, the better the future will be secured. Men need to understand the risks associated with a pregnancy per year for their wives and existing legislation ought to be enforced to abolish child marriage. Whilst there is still an absence of comprehensive standard health direction and policy, there is an opportunity to



introduce and disseminate a more comprehensive family planning education program in Afghanistan. Let's not forget that by the end of the day it is the community as a whole that feels the devastating effects of maternal and infant mortality.

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With considerable amounts of funding coming into the country to increase civil society's role with a particular focus on women and youth in Transition over the coming years, there is a need for a platform or umbrella organization that identifies constructive and innovative ways of integrating women and youth priorities into the national agenda and that puts in place a functioning knowledge management system that allows for follow up and accountability. As implementation partners are identifying partners in civil society, youth organizations should receive particular attention in order to build capacity, attain inclusivity, move away from prejudice and status quo and become focused, issue based and thereby effective.

Furthermore, there is an opportunity for the youth to become more involved in policy and decision-making processes by contributing to the ongoing consultative process on the National Policy for Youth. The SAARC countries are looking to establish a youth chapter and the first consultation meetings have already taken place in Afghanistan, to be followed by similar processes involving youth in all SAARC countries. Lastly, the UN ITU Youth Forum provides a great resource for youth wanting to take an active part in leadership and policy-making

processes.

All of this now begs the question of what the best sources of support for women and the youth could be in Afghanistan. Whilst it is pertinent that throughout the Transformation Period from 2014 until 2024, the international community keeps a watchful eye on the actual implementation of policies and legislations pertaining to women and youth, and whilst in my opinion the provision of aid should be made conditional on the delivery of said issues by the Government, the former Mujahedin and Jihadi leaders probably present the greatest opportunity to disenfranchised groups, simply for the reason that once they are in agreement, no one would question it. Their children, who study abroad and are therefore exposed to new thinking and ideas, will likely be involved in the countries future, something that should be leveraged. In order to obtain rights and basic privileges, it is that very culture of impunity that needs to be held accountable.

I believe with a reduction of forces and an on-going peace & reconciliation process, social mechanisms and a civil society based framework of accountability ought to be put into place to allow for a realistic, sustainable and long term approach that will enable Afghan society to grow as a whole.

## **CONCLUSION**

The main conclusion I would like to draw today is that there is an incompatibility

or a disconnect between the Western approach to gender equality, women's rights and the promotion of youth and the Afghan understanding of these issues that needs to be remedied if tangible and realistic advances for Afghan society as a whole ought to be made.

What I mean to say is that whilst recognizing that there have been advances for women and the youth, primarily in the public sphere, it becomes apparent that the treatment of men and women alike needs to be put into the right context.

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Western style human practices based on the right of the individual are a privilege that a poor and collectivist society, such as the Afghan one, cannot afford.

In my opinion, Afghanistan has yet to arrive at that juncture where the role and rights of women and the youth can actually reach traction within society, rather than becoming superficial processes that are perceived by some as foreign impositions. The approach chosen for Afghanistan was certainly well intended but is simply too advanced for the social context within which Afghan society currently exists.

Let me remind all of us here today that the youth is our future and therefore our common responsibility. It is of the utmost importance to put in place a responsible and resolute approach that will allow the youth to play a key role in the structuring and development of Afghanistan. I recognize that this will probably take decades; however, and in the words of Mahatma Ghandi:

*“No culture can live if it attempts to be exclusive”.*

Thank you.