

Speech by Suraya Pakzad (Director, Voice of Women Organization, Herat, Afghanistan)

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Dignitaries, distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen!

Let me express my gratitude to the Vienna Institute for International Dialog and Cooperation (VIDC) for inviting me to participate in this important dialogue to represent the Afghan Women, the most marginalized and vulnerable population of Afghanistan. Actually, this dialogue is happening in a time when Afghanistan seems to be once again ignored by the international community.

I, as an Afghan women who lived all of her life in Afghanistan, have witnessed some of the most brutal and horrible incidents in Afghanistan's recent history. From closure of girls' schools, the execution of a woman in a sports stadium, whipping of women in front of huge crowd for the crime of walking without a male family member in the streets to the bombing of the capital. It's obvious that in any crisis women and children are the ones who are paying the high price and continue to suffer with no hope for a better future.

Having witnessed the hardships of women and girls, leaving Afghanistan was no option for me as a human rights defender.

Before elaborating any further, I will take a moment to share my story, which was tragic but eventually turned to victories at the end. The reason I want to share this is to highlight the importance of changes that we as a whole can bring in the lives of our fellow humans beings.

During the dark days of Taliban's rule when Afghanistan was almost entirely forgotten by the international community, I found myself obliged to fulfill my responsibility. In 1998, I was living in Kabul with my four children in a rental apartment with three rooms. I turned one of the rooms into a makeshift covert school for girls to keep the candle of education alight. It was not easy! The move accompanied severe punishment as girls' education was a crime by the regime at that time.

Making any decisions against the so called laws of the establishment at the time had life threatening risks. However, seeing the young girls deprived of their most basic human rights such as education had given me the strength and courage to go against the winds. I did not only continue to educate girls in my house but also established ten other covert makeshift schools in Kabul City where a group of committed friends and colleagues helped women to educate girls to learn. By the time the dark clouds of Taliban's rule were gone, we had educated 300 girls! An achievement that was unimaginable at the start of the initiative.

When young girls were attending the first session of the covert school, I was under the impression that the major challenge for women and girls was only lack of access to education. However, as time passed I learned that lack of access to justice was an even bigger problem, which overshadowed educational needs of women.

In 2005, when I was working to establish the first Women Protection Center in Herat, the clergy and religious figures had issued decrees against me and my family. I never imagined I would survive long enough to witness the dream come true. My struggle with the help and generous donations of international donors proved fruitful, not only Herat Women Protection Center was established but four other Women Protection Centers in Badghis, Ghor, Farah and Nimruz provinces of western Afghanistan were created by the Voice of Women Organization, the national NGO that I have the honor to run since the establishment of the covert schools in 1998.

I am pleased to share with you that what started as a makeshift covert school is now the Voice of Women Organization in Afghanistan that runs and administers five women protection centers, five family guidance centers and has presence in 29 provinces of Afghanistan and operates with a team of 224 staff members in ten projects whose prime beneficiaries are women.

The Voice of Women Organization continues to provide immediate safe refuge to at-risk women and girls who are still prosecuted by extra judicial and traditional rulings, stoned to death, executed and whipped in public only because they are women. Voice of Women has saved hundreds of lives and provides vital legal, educational and economical services to victims of domestic violence.

As of recent, all over Afghanistan, especially in the western region, a huge influx of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) has been recorded due to drought and insecurity. According to the statistics from the Department of Refugees and Repatriation in Herat, in the last 7 months alone, 40 thousand families have escaped their places of origin and moved to Herat. Unfortunately, the local government bodies in Herat lack the capacity and necessary resources to deal with this huge number of IDPs. These displaced families need food, shelter, access to medical services and awareness campaigns for urban settlement as they are coming from totally different geographical areas to Herat and seriously need help.

Right now 11,954 families, which consist of 83,678 individuals live in camps in Herat in substandard living conditions. The approaching winter will be deadly for majority of these displaced people as most of them are elderly and children.

Extreme poverty and psychological problems can be widely witnessed in these camps, which are some of the root causes of violence against women and children. We receive news of forced and underage marriages and various types of domestic violence from within the camps. Recently, shocking news surfaced in Herat that at least 71 kids between age three to ten were sold by their families because of poverty. The local authorities in Herat have confirmed at least

ten such cases, apparently denying the exact number of sold children. Selling of children in the 21st century with numerous policies on prevention of harm to children is not only unacceptable but a heinous crime punishable by law.

It is undeniable that UN agencies and international organizations are working to address the needs of these vulnerable populations. However, to my understanding, the long term solution for the IDPs will be to address their needs in their places of origin and provide them the humanitarian assistance before they undertake the burden of moving to another location. The majority of the internally displaced persons come from provinces where agriculture is by far the main source of income. Incentives and financial aid packages in the agriculture sector with access to local markets would resolve this problem by a huge margin. Afghanistan's landscape is ideal for agriculture but still most of the agricultural products are imported from neighboring countries.

Women in the rural areas play a key role in agriculture and livestock sector, which mostly remain unnoticed to the outside world. Strategies to empower women and provide business opportunities for women in this sector by the international community in collaboration with the local government would undoubtedly have huge impacts in the lives of women in the rural areas.

I am taking the opportunity through this podium to request the international community to extend their help and pay attention to the dire needs of Afghans.

In order to prevent internal displacement of families and to put a halt to illegal immigration, to stop forced and underage marriages and to be able to provide education to girls and children and reduce psychosocial problems in the society, no better strategy exists than empowering women! Women account for half of Afghanistan's population and turning a blind eye to half of the population and marginalizing them will only contribute to more problems at the family, village, country and international levels.

Women are mothers! Empowered mothers will present empowered children to the society and their role can be crucial for the future of Afghanistan. As a famous saying goes, no country can reach the peaks of development unless women have their deserved and active role in the construction of that society.

Today, 17 years after the fall of Taliban, violence against women is dramatically continued, women activists are targeted and eliminated, forced marriages are common and in most parts of the country girls cannot go to school, because either the schools are burned down or the area is under the control of armed opposition groups. A large portion of the population in rural areas lack access to the formal justice system due to insecurity and extra judicial traditions that are practiced in many parts of those remote areas.

Economical problems, insignificant presence of women in the labour job market, lack of proper and perpetual empowerment programs and inability of the government to provide job

opportunities for women, internal displacement due to insecurity and drought has added to the already existing problems of women.

Women's access to employment is more difficult due to a perception held by potential employers of women having many family responsibilities. There are evident signs of women being treated unequally in the work place. The average women's employment rate in Afghanistan between 1990/2017 was 15.66 percent with a minimum of 14.51 percent in 2000 and a maximum of 19.47 percent in 2017.

Unfortunately so far there is no broad support to women business owners and women employees in the formal economy. There are no strong linkage between skills and markets to enable women to become better entrepreneurs, business owners and managers. It's important to build women capacities and strengthen women's business networks, with particular focus on mentoring and matching women business owners and entrepreneurs with other women in their organizations or sectors, and also a high level of public support for working women should be promoted.

It is important to understand, which programs are more effective at improving the skills of the populations of low- and middle-income countries to cope with the demands of the "knowledge economy". However, women around the world are at a disadvantage when it comes to acquiring skills and applying them in the labour market due to a number of social, cultural, institutional, and structural barriers.

In short, Afghanistan is still one of the most dangerous places for women on earth.

Afghanistan needs your attention and help. Thank you.