



Policy Statement: Afghan Women and Canada's Role in Afghanistan

October 2010

Introduction

The question, "What do Afghan women want?" is easy to answer. Afghan women want what Canadian women want: food and shelter for themselves and their families, safety, security and dignity on the streets and in their homes, access for themselves and their families to quality health care, education, freedom of mobility, to be free from poverty, opportunities to celebrate culture and family traditions... and, high on the list, a bright future for their children.

The mission of *Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan* is unequivocal:

Canadians taking action, in partnership with Afghan women, towards improving conditions of human rights, ending women's oppression, and providing opportunities for Afghan women to live their lives with dignity, certainty and purpose.

It is through the lens of this mission that our organization forms its policies towards any issue confronting Afghanistan and its international partners. We are staunch supporters of a strong international effort in Afghanistan that seeks to secure basic human rights and peace, with coordination and increased strategic intervention on diplomatic, development, and military fronts. We oppose any positions that would ultimately lead to more bloodshed and civil or regional war in Afghanistan, such as a premature withdrawal of international forces; or to an Afghan state that fails to uphold the basic rights of women and girls.

Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan supports Canada's role in Afghanistan's reconstruction effort, including its military, development and diplomatic contributions. Our organization is proud of Canada's role in bringing Afghanistan to this current stage where much progress has been made on the ground, and where Afghans have once again been able to embrace basic freedoms that were denied to them when the Taliban were in power. In particular, we value and encourage further Canadian support for improving the rights of women and girls, particularly in the area of education which we see as profoundly linked to Afghanistan's prospects for peace and stability. Yet we are also mindful and much grieved by the enormous sacrifice made by Canadian troops and aid workers, as well as those from other nations, and especially the Afghan people who have suffered staggering losses and decades of war.

Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan is able to draw on many Afghan voices and speak from its 15 years' experience working in partnership with Afghan civil society and women's organizations. We have worked with many of our partner organizations since the Taliban were in power, when these organizations were managing clandestine projects, or projects from exile in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan. We listen keenly to our partners on the ground, to those on the front lines of the Afghan women's movement, and to the will of the masses as documented in the numerous Afghan opinion polls that have been undertaken in Afghanistan since 2002. The collective message we hear consistently is that the international community, including NATO and US forces, should not withdraw from Afghanistan prematurely, nor should negotiations take place with the Taliban insurgents that would turn women's hard-gained rights into bargaining chips.

Context: Progress Amidst Challenges

Since the deployment of the International Security Assistance Force and NATO, initiated by the invitation of the Afghan Government at Bonn in 2001 and mandated by successive United Nations resolutions, and the start of development assistance, the progress in Afghanistan has been palpable. Some examples of notable achievements since 2001 include:

- Nearly seven million children in school, compared to less than one million in 2001 (mainly boy students of madrassahs);
- More than 90% of Afghans have access to basic healthcare; unlike in 2001, when less than 10% had access;
- Girls and women are free to work, attend school, and seek medical care- rights that were denied to them under Taliban rule;
- A Constitution is in place, and it grants men and women equality in the eyes of the law;
- There is a democratically elected government and a parliament that is gradually becoming a more forceful check on the executive, and has a higher percentage of women members than our own parliament in Canada;
- Afghanistan once had the highest maternal mortality rate in the world, however this has steadily been decreasing since 2002 as midwife training programs have been established and access to healthcare is increased;
- Several new highways have been built, connecting all major regions, and facilitating trade and economic development;
- Early reforms to the judiciary are underway, and Afghan women have played an active role in introducing legislation that will better protect their rights such as the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) Law;
- Increased recruitment and growing capacity of Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police¹;
- Successful introduction of country-wide inoculations for children;
- The growing impact of a strong Afghan feminist movement on reform and rights efforts;
- 22.5% real GDP growth rate in 2009 (adjusted for inflation), and a fast rising GDP per capita. Growth for 2010 is estimated at 7.6%.

¹ SIGAR, Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, Quarterly Report to Congress, July 30, 2009, p. 55.

Despite the improvements mentioned above, Afghan women still face many challenges and much work remains to be done. Yet, the decade mark has also become a rallying cry for exit strategies by some NATO countries, as well as ushering in frightening rhetoric about negotiating with the Taliban. *Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan* is strongly opposed to any negotiation with the Taliban that would be at the expense of Afghan women's rights. In any negotiation process that goes ahead, it is critical that women are meaningfully involved at the highest levels; and that the Afghan Constitution's clause of gender equality (Article 22) is not compromised. We have listened carefully to the recommendations of Afghanistan's Women's Political Participation Committee and their '50% Campaign', who stated in a declaration signed by 200 women's and civil society organizations on January 25th, 2010 in Kabul:

We, women's rights and Afghan civil society organizations participating in the abovementioned historic meeting, herewith declare the following:

- 1. Based on the persistent violation of the rights of women and men by the Taliban, whether when in power or after, object to any negotiation with the Taliban.*
- 2. We desire peace and stability in Afghanistan, but we reaffirm that the Afghan Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are non-negotiable.*

Indeed, it is hard to imagine any alliance made with the Taliban that would not come at the expense of women. In March 2009, Patricia Lalonde of the New York Times wrote, "the Afghan women I know cannot conceive of a "moderate" Taliban, not to mention negotiations with them. The Taliban are the Taliban, Islamists who advocate a fundamentalist and extremist ideology in which the role of the woman is to be muzzled and illiterate." And while many outside observers call for the withdrawal of troops, concerned with the expense and loss of life this means for their own country, there are many well-informed voices who convincingly point out the serious, indeed deadly, consequences of the international community once again abandoning Afghanistan.

Steve Coll, the Pulitzer-prize winning author of the seminal *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, wrote in The New Republic in August 2010:

"American and European commentators who advocate for troop withdrawal often seem to find it necessary to dehumanize Afghans to justify their own loss of will, or to blame Afghans for the international community's own policy failures—i.e., saying the country is hopelessly corrupt, drug-addled, primitive, perpetually at war. Among its other flaws, this line of thinking misjudges Afghanistan, a pluralistic and very poor country that has repeatedly rejected Taliban-style ideology and retains a strong sense of national identity, one that produced a unified and mainly peaceful nation for much of the twentieth century, until a succession of outside invaders shattered its cohesion and independence."

The Response from Afghan Women

While there remain a legion of development, military and other experts who have warned against a premature withdrawal in Afghanistan, within the purview of *Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan*, our concern is focused foremost on the welfare and rights of women. We are also preoccupied with what Afghan women themselves are counseling the international community to do and with their opinions and ideas.

What are the women saying?

In a country as diverse as the multilingual, multi-sect, and multi-ethnic Afghanistan, there are a multitude of responses, informed by diverse personal experiences, differing levels of education and literacy, and rural versus urban, among other factors. Yet despite these differences, women are remarkably united in their insistence that as women, they have natural rights, rights that have too often been denied to them.

The following passage from Cheryl Benard's book, *Veiled Courage*, describes how there is little acceptance of the poor treatment of women on the part of Afghan women themselves:

"Afghan women, even those from very simple backgrounds, were embarrassed by their ignorance. Since this ignorance was statistically "normal", a fate shared by almost all women and proclaimed to be a proper part of their place in the world, we might expect them to have been accepting of it, but such was not the case. Most women regarded their inability to read, and their general lack of knowledge and education, as a painful deficit. That's interesting and noteworthy. It shows that even lifelong acculturation did not succeed in entirely stifling women's sense of themselves or their personal aspirations. Individually and collectively, women felt ashamed that they had not been schooled. They viewed it as an injustice that education had been withheld from them. As little girls, they had been told that their brothers were more valuable and more intelligent, that men were their intellectual and mental superiors. By the time they were grown, most women had studied the men around them carefully enough to know that this was not entirely the truth, that the story of men's universal brilliance and women's mental incapacity would not hold water in real life."

This point is important, as many voices in the West are quick to take culturally relativist positions, assuming that the notion of human rights is something foreign to Afghanistan or that it is a western imposition.

A young Afghan-Canadian woman, writing under the pseudonym of Freshta, points this tendency out eloquently in the *Globe & Mail* in April 2010:

When I came to Canada, I found freedom, and perhaps more importantly, hope. I was free to pursue an education, free to plan and dream. I adjusted to my new home. But I still have not adjusted to the support I have found among

Canadians for the Taliban state of mind. It made me sad to see that in a free and modern society, there remain those who excuse an ideology based on the hatred of women, by citing multiculturalism. And they are not Afghans, or even immigrants, but those born in Canada who somehow think that the abuse of women and a fundamentalist view of the world, are acceptable among Afghans, and so no intervention is required. But remember that among Afghans, women can also be found. Have you remembered to ask whether the Taliban represent their culture?

In addition to rights, Afghan women also want peace in their country. There are many views as to how to achieve peace, yet the vast majority of Afghan human rights activists and civil society leaders have expressed their fear of a premature exit strategy by international forces, despite their frustration with the deteriorating security situation and weak governance of the Karzai administration. Similarly, ordinary citizens generally do not support a withdrawal of NATO and US troops at present. In a 2010 poll conducted by ABC News, only 4% of Afghans said they would prefer a Taliban government. In a separate Gallup poll last year, 80% of Afghans said the Taliban were a negative influence on their country, and a 2009 BBC poll similarly found that Afghans saw the Taliban as the greatest danger to their country. Further, when asked to rate the work of NATO in Afghanistan, 69% responded “excellent”, “good”, or “fair” in 2009. The same number also said that it was “very good” or “mostly good” that the US forces came into their country.

Many leaders of the women’s movement and women members of parliament echo the findings of the various opinion polls.

Recently, Afghan Suraya Pakzad, called one of the 100 most influential people in the world in 2010 by *Time* magazine, was honored in Washington at the Carnegie Institution by the Peace X Peace group. “It would be devastating,” she said of the US military pullout that many Afghans fear is coming. “Even if President Obama increases the number of troops, that alone will not bring a solution: I don’t believe war - fighting - produces a winner.” She also worries that “a US withdrawal from her homeland would mean more girls enduring more horrors”. Evidently, she wants troops to stay but with less of a focus on fighting and more on protecting.

Fatima Gailani, president of the Afghan Red Crescent Society said in an interview that she too was worried about Americans growing weary of the war in her homeland. “Tomorrow, I don’t want to wake up and open my eyes and you are not there. It’s really scary.”

Masooda Jalal, who made history when she ran against Hamid Karzai for the presidency of Afghanistan, as the only woman among 17 presidential candidates, said in October 2009, “It is good for Afghanistan to have more troops – more troops committed with the aim of building peace and against war, terrorism, and security – along with other resources”... “Coming together they will help with better reconstruction.”

Dr. Sima Simar, the Chair of Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission is succinct in her expectations of the international community: "Finish the job you started. It's about the protection of humanity. This is a human responsibility. It isn't possible to escape this kind of responsibility."

Horia Mosadiq, an Afghan researcher for Amnesty International articulates what that "job" referred to by Dr. Samar should resemble: "Instead of a meaningless focus on how many Taliban are killed or how many villages are cleared, international forces should measure their success by clear benchmarks in terms of how they've improved human rights. Are more women in Helmand able to get healthcare? Are more children able to attend school?"

Shinkai Kaokhail, an outspoken women's rights activist and a member of parliament for Kabul in Afghanistan has said, "In the current situation of terrorism, we cannot say troops should be withdrawn," adding, "international troop presence here is a guarantee for my safety" (October 7, 2009).

Jamila Afghani, executive director of the Noor Education Centre, and a veteran women's rights campaigner, said in February 2010, "If the military left, it would be very dangerous. If they have a proper strategy to replace themselves, okay, but without a strategy, they might as well walk out right now. There is a Taliban revival and terrorist revival going on. The future will be even worse than the past, so I don't suggest they should leave. Or, if they leave, we should be satisfied before they go."

Manizha Naderi, who runs shelters for Afghan women fleeing domestic abuse and leads legal advocacy work to protect women's rights to divorce in court through Women for Afghan Women, has said, "If the coalition forces leave, the Taliban or other conservative factions will be much stronger. Women's mobility and participation in everyday life will be limited again."

During the Kabul Conference in July 2010, Afghan MP Shukria Barakzai saw increasing signs of the deteriorating commitment of the international community to Afghanistan, saying to journalist Chris Sands, it's "like the last drop of the water just fell down"... "Until a few months ago I was optimistic, maybe, maybe, maybe. But right now there is no hope." She added, "In a year's time it will be like a civil war".

Another MP, Fawzia Koofi, said during the Kabul Conference, "We thought we were working in a longer-term partnership with the international community. We really wanted to have a joint partnership with them and now they are leaving. There are talks about leaving [but] I think the train has left the station" also saying, "even in two years time I think Afghanistan will be Talibanised, not in terms of individuals but in terms of ideology. And then all these outspoken women, and media and the young generation of Afghanistan will have a much more tough, difficult life."

Najia Haneefi, a founder of the *Women's Political Participation Committee*, and former executive director of the largest women's organization in Afghanistan, the *Afghan Women's Education Centre*, explains that "the Taliban and other extremists will be the only ones who will celebrate Canada's departure. Civil society, Afghan women and our young democracy will

mourn Canada's departure”, adding that the Taliban will be in a position of strength should international forces withdraw. She further points out that,

“A premature pullout by Canada will not only be negatively perceived by many, including Afghan people, NATO and Canadians who sacrificed a lot for Afghanistan, but also will undermine the great efforts made by Canadians. Afghans appreciated and respected Canada’s value-based, impartial diplomatic mission. Afghanistan is a joint Afghan and international mission. As such, we started together, we will have to leave together.”

What Next? Changing the Status Quo

Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan remains committed to its mission. We believe that “to improve conditions of human rights, to end women’s oppression, and to provide opportunities for Afghan women to live their lives with dignity, certainty and purpose”, the international community, including military, developmental and diplomatic entities, must stay the course in Afghanistan. However, they must stay the course with a paradigm shift that dramatically improves security, escalates development, changes tactics, champions human rights, and vigorously addresses corruption at all levels of government and in the aid community. How to get there is beyond the scope of this statement, but we seek a coalition of the best thinking and best coordinated, collective efforts of all players, at all levels, from all nations. We are at a critical juncture, with every opportunity to change the present course.

There is also consensus from most parties about the end game: an independent, peaceful, prosperous Afghanistan that defends gender equity and human rights, with all troops safely home. Until we are much closer to this vision, we cannot, and must not abandon Afghanistan.