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Presentation by
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The State of Afghan Women

As a ninth grader refugee teen in 1994, when I wanted to open the first literacy class in my village in Wardak province, I learned that I could not do so, not necessarily because of financial constraints, but because of the civil war in Afghanistan.

In 1998, when I graduated from a refugee high school in Pakistan and had accumulated enough financial resources, my request to leave for my country to establish the first female literacy center was once again turned down. My father said that even if he accompanied me to Wardak, I would not be able to bring education to girls and women, as the Taliban banned women’s education.

In 2001, when the oppression of Afghan women and suppression of their rights were declared to be replaced with protection and liberation in a democratic Afghanistan, of course I was not the only woman who joyfully celebrated the promises made by the international community and the Afghan government. Over 5 million refugees in Pakistan alone chanted the slogan of freedom. They voluntarily repatriated in the hope of pursuing a better life in their homeland.

In September 2002, when I established the first girls’ school in my village in Wardak province, which is 35 km west of Kabul, I wholeheartedly thanked God and appreciated the support of the international community, especially those countries that had quickly acted on their promises. They invested in organizations that did everything possible not only to protect but also to promote the rights of Afghan women.

I must say that after more than a decade-long and complicated intervention, Canada has been successful in preserving its humanistic approach in its attempt towards solving the Afghan problem. I am not saying this just because I am addressing Canadian audience here. I am saying this due to Canada’s commitment to girls and women’s empowerment. As a result of countries like Canada that have invested in building human capital by supporting schools and women’s empowerment projects, women in Afghanistan have been able to witness tangible progress particularly at the policy level that favor women.

Some of these policies include, but are not limited to, protection of women’s equal rights enshrined in the Afghan Constitution. Afghanistan’s Millennium Development Goals, which include specific targets for the advancement of Afghan women to be met by 2020, is of critical importance. The Convention on the Elimination of Domestic Violence against Women has been ratified by the Afghan Government. The Afghanistan’s National Development Strategy considers gender as a cross-cutting

issue. The National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan has been created and approved by the Afghan cabinet.

The Elimination of Violence against Women Law has been ratified by the government. And women's shelters, once referred to them as brothels in an attempt to deprive victims from their only safe havens, have been protected through a recent regulation passed by the Afghan government. The overall impact of these plans and policies has been tangible mainly in the lives of women and children in urban settings, and in the promotion of Afghan civil society as a whole.

In terms of political participation, for the first time women have vied for presidential election, starting with Masuda Jalal in 2004 and followed by Dr. Firozan Fana and Shahla Ata in 2009. Although we have several months ahead of us, one of the prominent female MPs, Fouzia Kofi, has already declared her candidacy for the 2014 presidential election.

For the first time, 68 of 249 seats in the parliament have been reserved for women. For the first time, women have participated in strategic conferences that have determined Afghans' destiny, starting from the Bonn Conference in 2001 and including the Chicago Conference last May and the Tokyo Conference last July.

For the first time, women have had the capacity to pressure the President to revoke the Shia Family Law, which he claims to have mistakenly endorsed. In fact, it was women who ensured defeat of the law that prevented Afghan Shia women from working and traveling independently. For the first time in Afghan history, women have been able to convince—or rather, pressure—an Afghan Minister to realize his mistake and apologize publically for referring to women's shelters as centers of misconduct, and for claiming that the victims in there were prostitutes.

Among other developments, women's progress in the world of philanthropy and entrepreneurship is stunning. Over 123 NGOs are led by women who work in sectors such as education, health, capacity building, security and agriculture. Women who were in solitary confinement under the Taliban now run businesses. Their goods such as handicrafts, carpets, and honey have made it to various international markets.

Under the Taliban, sports were forbidden not only for girls but for boys. Today we have hundreds of female athletes participating in tennis, squash, cricket, soccer, football, taekwondo, mountain climbing, among many others. They are gaining international fame and bringing national pride to our country and the region.

In the public sector, never in the history of Afghanistan have we had 8.3 million students attending public schools (38% of them girls). It is the first time ever that the Afghan government has run 14,465 schools across the country, led by over 183,000 teachers (30% of them female). More than 60% of Afghans have access to basic healthcare—in contrast to 2001, when less than 10% could access health services.

That being said, I admit that not all Afghan women have benefitted from these achievements as they have benefitted me and other Kabul-based female politicians, human rights and other civil society activists. Women are still being harassed notoriously. Aisha's butchered face on the cover of Time magazine will not be forgotten for decades. Acid has been thrown in teachers' and students' faces on their way to school. Hundreds of female teachers and students have been poisoned at their school premises over the last few months. Last month, a 22-year-old woman accused of adultery was shot in

the head in the presence of over 150 men in Parwan province which is only 45 km Northeast of Kabul. Women rights activists and politicians literally risk their lives. The provincial head of women's affairs in Laghman province, Hanifa Safi was targeted and assassinated by a bomb attached to her car in eastern Afghanistan a few weeks ago.

Women in rural and remote areas of the country are often neglected. They may not have received even five dollars' worth aid, out of the over 60 billion dollars that has flooded into Afghanistan since 2001. How could they possibly get any of the aid, when over 90 percent has gone to military sector and just 9.4 percent to humanitarian activities—of which only 1% has been allotted to women's projects?

The Voice of America indicates that Afghanistan is the first in-conflict country to receive the largest financial allotment of assistance from the international community. Yet Afghanistan is the second poorest country in the world. It has the second largest illiteracy rate among women. It is the second largest in maternal mortality – 1,600 deaths per 100,000 live births. Afghanistan is frequently cited as the most dangerous country for women in the world. Corruption is one of the biggest problems for the people of Afghanistan across the country.

In addition to these conditions, Afghan women are further concerned by two national issues: first, President Karzai's Reconciliation and Reintegration Program (which is mainly backed by the US). Second, the withdrawal of the coalition forces from Afghanistan in 2014.

The international community supports peace talks with the Taliban—and so will the women of Afghanistan if the Taliban abandon their insistence on removing article 22 of the Afghan constitution, which guarantees equal rights for men and women.

We want to make sure that the peace is made with the Taliban that appreciate civil society and understand the role of women in promoting it. In other words, we women will support the peace talks only if the progress made so far is not subverted. We will have no problems with the Taliban if they respect our constitutional rights and human rights values in general.

We Afghan women are desperate for peace. We certainly do not want an endless U.S. or any other military presence in our soil.

- What we want is the assurance of a smooth transition to a well-trained and well-equipped Afghan national security force that represents both genders. So that our men and women are protected and are proactive members of Afghan society.
- Women's rights and their achievements cannot be compromised. The peace talks with the Taliban should not be part of a quick-fix or pack-and-go strategy. We propose that the peace talks with the Taliban be pursued responsibly not only at the national and regional level but also international.
- At the Tokyo conference on July 8, the international community pledged 16 billion dollars in aid over 4-year timeframe. We propose that the donor countries earmark funds for women's projects—since women's organizations have previously been poorly treated by funding allocations.

- We want more talented and dedicated women to be in key leadership positions, so that they are part of national policies, plans, projects and implementation. Women's leadership particularly in our judicial system is key to resolving the prevailing gender-based and domestic violence. Although almost all the cases at the family court are filed by women victims or their families, we have no female leaders in the Supreme Court, which has often led to the interpretation of law in favor of male perpetrators.

The above proposals for solving some problems that systematically hurt Afghan women are not new. We Afghan women have been expressing our concerns, and potential solutions, almost everywhere we have had a chance to express ourselves. Yet our concerns have remained unresolved, particularly in the past few years. We are often told that there is a lack of women leaders; or even that when women are given the chance to be part of strategic institutions, they do not qualify.

Having travelled to 24 of the 34 provinces to work with women's projects and educational institutions, I know that such a generalization is baseless, particularly in urban areas. If there are not many, we have a few strong women leaders everywhere in the country. To say that we do not have qualified women is nothing more than an excuse to exclude women from their full participation in public life.

However, I am concerned about our future women leaders. If we ignore investing in young women's quality education, we will have gender sensitive policies and workplaces, but will be challenged by the dearth of qualified women leaders to take over. Because of the dire need for women's access to relevant quality education, the Oruj Learning Center has been providing women with all levels of education.

Oruj is the only women-led non-profit organization to establish a women's community college and a women's four-year degree-granting college. After having heard that more than half of our first-term new graduates of the community college are now full-time teachers and officers at the Ministry of Education, I deeply regretted having lost the chance to provide girls with the gift of education back in 1994, when I first wanted to be involved in the education sector.

I believe that the condition of women in Afghanistan would be much more advanced if girls and women were given the opportunities to invest in themselves.

In sum, the hard life in refugee settings and in our war-ravaged country has made Afghan women resilient and strong enough to fight various kinds of challenges. Given Afghan women's passion and dedication to change, I believe that investing in their education is the right kind of investment. Women's access to quality education has guaranteed change already in Kabul, and it will do so all across Afghanistan. To accomplish this, we need a transparent leadership of Afghan government backed by proactive international partnership.

Thank you!