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Help Empower the Women of Afghanistan ^[1]

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The largest defeat of British-Indian forces in the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-1880) came through the leadership of a heroic Afghan woman: Malalai of Maiwand. Malalai courageously inspired dejected Afghan troops and carried the Afghan banner into the battle that would end her life.

A woman who rose to meet a patriotic duty during troubled times, Malalai reminds us all of the critical role women must play in securing peace and prosperity for Afghanistan. While Afghan women have gained formal political suffrage under Afghanistan's 2004 Constitution, they have yet to secure equality. According to the 2007 Afghanistan Human Development Report, the female population in Afghanistan is beset with low literacy rates, limited economic opportunities, and instances of discrimination and violence. In light of the report, Afghan women are not afforded the respect that the revered Malalai still enjoys more than 100 years after her death.

In the two decades before the fall of the Taliban in 2001, continuous civil strife in Afghanistan deprived Afghan women of the opportunity to participate in the political life of the country. Together with children and the elderly, they became victims of unspeakable atrocities. During the Taliban period, any glimmer of hope for the emancipation and empowerment of Afghan women was snuffed out, as they were denied basic human rights, including access to education and freedom of movement. The lack of social and economic freedoms left them marginalized and vulnerable, and a financial burden on an impoverished society.

The new government has sought to remedy these abuses through the creation of a Ministry of Woman Affairs and an Independent Human Rights Commission. However, attention to women's issues is often overshadowed by other pressing concerns, such as security and the narcotics trade. Simply establishing institutions dedicated to gender sensitivity and tolerance does not ensure gender equality. As the Afghan government recognizes, attention to women's issues across all government bodies and aid delivery organizations must be established. Accordingly, the government has prepared a National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan, which will provide a comprehensive, cross-ministerial approach to improving the condition of women.

Without popular support, however, this laudable effort cannot be effectively implemented. Sadly, the very brave individuals who speak out on behalf of vulnerable populations in Afghanistan are targeted by insurgency and extremist groups. As Shukria Barakzai, Member of Parliament from Kabul province, recently lamented: "When I leave home these days for work, I am not quite sure whether I will be back [alive]."

The persecution of these individuals fighting for Afghanistan's progress is partly driven by Afghanistan's male-dominant, conservative culture. Achieving gender equality will therefore

require a fundamental change in Afghan societal norms and perceptions, over many generations.

Intensified education efforts at the village level can advance this long-term transition in Afghan culture and teach the equality of all Afghans under the law. Also, with half of the population under the age of 18, there exists a youth and vitality in the population that is conducive to this transformation. However, the youth have not yet been fully recognized or appreciated as a driver for progressive thinking.

Though six million Afghan children are now enrolled in school, millions more miss the opportunity of education, due to security concerns or employment demands. About a quarter of all children aged 7 to 14 must work to support their families. Criminal networks within the country also traffick children abroad, as far away as the Middle East and Africa, where they are subjected to forced labor or even sexual exploitation. Desperate to pay off debts, Afghan poppy farmers will give for marriage daughters as young as seven years old.

Because Afghans are a very family-oriented people, empowering women will help improve the condition of Afghan children and deliver positive effects far beyond social equality.

Since Afghan women have an average of about seven children, typically their time is devoted to housework and child-rearing, which severely limits any opportunity for them to contribute to family income. If Afghanistan is to achieve the double-digit growth needed to build a robust economy, women must contribute on a much larger scale.

One program designed to help women be more economically productive is micro finance. The Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan and other sustainable micro-credit programs reach out across the country, with 75% of the beneficiaries women.

Employment opportunities for women would enable the approximately three million war widows to provide for themselves and their families. As the 2003 Golden Globe-winning film *Osama* illustrated, when women are left without a male to support the household, they lose the ability to earn any income.

Along with improved educational and employment opportunities, women are in dire need of medical services. Due to a lack of resources, women and children feel the brunt of insufficient health spending levels, at just \$1 per capita. One Afghan woman dies in childbirth about every half-hour, and 20 percent of children never make it to their fifth birthday.

The good news is that when funding is made available in this sector, it can have a dramatic impact. The Afghan Ministry of Public Health has been able to expand access to basic healthcare across Afghanistan. As a result, the infant mortality rate declined to about 135 per 1,000 live births in 2006, from an estimated 165 per 1,000 in 2001. The number of women receiving prenatal care increased to 30 percent in 2006 from 5 percent in 2003. Additionally, 19 percent of pregnant women were attended to by a skilled health worker last year, up from only 5 percent in 2003.

The development of a prioritized National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan is a monumental step in underscoring the importance of women's issues in Afghanistan's development. The question remains, however, whether the Afghan people and international community will rally to make the vision of the Plan a reality.

As Malalai's story reminds us, women are the pillars of Afghanistan.

By enhancing attention to women's issues, more than half of the Afghan population can be socially, economically and politically empowered to make a significant contribution to Afghanistan's long-term development. The international community must help the Afghan government approach the task of empowering Afghan women as a continual process, going beyond the one-time establishment of institutions to serve and protect women. As we have seen, establishing legal equality does not translate into equal treatment.

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