

A STONE IN THE WATER

Report of the Roundtables with Afghan-Canadian Women

On the Question of the Application UN Security

Council Resolution 1325 in Afghanistan

July 2002

**Organized by the The Honourable Mobina S.B. Jaffer
of the Advocacy Subcommittee of the
Canadian Committee on Women, Peace and Security
in partnership with the YWCA of Canada**

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Speechless

At home, I speak the language
of the gender that is better than me.

In the mosque, I speak the language
of the nation that is better than me.

Outside, I speak the language
of those who are the better race.

I am a non-Arabic Muslim woman
who lives in a Western country.

Fatema, poet, Toronto

Dedication

*This report is dedicated to the
women and girls living in Afghanistan,
and the future which
can be theirs*

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Background

***“If you put a stone in the water, from one small circle it grows on and on.
We need to start with that circle.” (Durkhanai, Toronto)***

In May and July 2002, a series of Roundtables were held across Canada to solicit the views of Afghan-Canadian women regarding the implementation of UN Security Council 1325 in Afghanistan. A total of seven Roundtables were held in Ottawa, Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto. One hundred and fifty nine (159) Afghan-Canadian women participated in these exciting gatherings, where we voiced our opinions on what is needed to bring long-term peace and security to Afghanistan. For many of us, it was the first time we had an opportunity to contribute to such a consultation.

The Roundtables are part of the Canadian Government’s efforts to fulfill its obligations under the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security which was unanimously passed by the Security Council on October 31, 2000. This historic resolution acknowledged that war affects women and men differently, recognized the unique contribution that women can make to peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts, and called upon states to ensure that women have the opportunity to participate as full partners in these efforts.

In some of the points of the 18 point Resolution 1325, the United Nations Security Council,

- ◆ Urges member states to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels.
- ◆ Encourages the Secretary General to implement his strategic plan of action (A/49/587) calling for an increase in the participation of women at decision-making levels in conflict resolution and peace processes.
- ◆ Urges the Secretary General to appoint more women as special representatives and envoys.

- ◆ Urges the Secretary General to expand the role and contributions of women in UN field-based operations, including among military observers, civilian police, human rights and humanitarian personnel.
- ◆ Requests the Secretary General to provide training guidelines and materials on the protection, rights and particular needs of women.
- ◆ Urges member states to increase their voluntary financial, technical and logistical support for gender sensitive training efforts.
- ◆ Calls upon all parties to armed conflict to respect fully international law applicable to the rights and protection of women and girls, especially as civilians.
- ◆ Calls on all parties to armed conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse.
- ◆ Emphasizes the responsibilities of all states to put an end to impunity and to prosecute those responsible for genocide crimes, including those related to sexual and other forms of violence against women and girls.
- ◆ Calls upon all parties to armed conflict to respect the civilian and humanitarian characters of refugee camps and settlements with particular attention to women's and girls' special needs.
- ◆ Invites the Secretary General to carry out a study to be presented to the Security Council on the impact of armed conflict on women and girls, the role of women in peace-building, the gender dimensions of peace processes and conflict resolution, and progress on gender mainstreaming throughout peacekeeping missions. (www.peacewoman.org)

We, the participants, were drawn from different ethnic and religious groups within the Afghan-Canadian community. We were young and old, from different professional backgrounds and personal experiences, but shared a mutual love for our homeland, a shared vision for its recovery from 23 years of war and internal strife, and a collective commitment to play an active role in the ongoing reconstruction efforts.

The recommendations we propose are specific and realistic, and call upon the governments of Canada and Afghanistan, as well as the international community to continue their commitment to the Afghan people, and redouble their efforts to bring peace, security and stability to Afghanistan.

We don't want Afghanistan to be forgotten like it has been in the past. We hope that this report will encourage the recipients to be partners for change, and ensure the continued support for Afghanistan.

Our central concerns include:

I. Physical and personal security

- The lack of a well-trained police force
- The absence of security forces throughout the country
- The ever present danger of landmines
- The consideration of how security fears impact women's free mobility

II. Justice and accountability in the current Afghan government

- The power of warlords throughout the country and within the government
- The weakness of the current central government in Afghanistan

III. Education

- The lack of education opportunities for women and girls throughout Afghanistan, particularly in the rural regions

IV. Health

- The poor physical and mental health of women and girls
- The lack of prenatal and postnatal care, leading to high maternal mortality

V. Religion and Culture

- Afghanistan's patriarchal culture
- The misinterpretation and misuse of religion to oppress women

VI. Economic Empowerment and Employment Opportunities

- The effect of lack of infrastructure on women's ability to travel to school, work and thus depriving them of opportunities for employment and economic empowerment.

VII. Political Participation

- The lack of leadership opportunities for women
- The lack of institutions representing the unique needs and interests of women
- The lack of support for and coordination among women's groups
- Insufficient support from the international community

Many of us expressed the personal pain of lost life opportunities, and our anger at being denied our right to achieve our full potential. One participant poignantly described the '**stillborn desires**' that women in Afghanistan have had to endure. We talked of longing to resume our professions as doctors, engineers, judges and teachers, jobs that we were forced to abandon. We proposed that 'refresher courses' be provided to allow us to update our skills and return to the work we love.

We would like to express our profound appreciation to the Canadian government for its continued commitment to Afghanistan, and for the opportunity to participate in these important consultations. For many of us, this was the first time that anyone had asked for our opinion on the situation that has so greatly impacted our lives. In this way, the Roundtables served as a healing process; one participant explained that it "***made me feel like a real human being for the first time.***"

We also want to thank each of the participants who with honesty, sensitivity and dedication enhanced the outcome of this unprecedented project. The well-informed, balanced and sensible perspectives presented at the Roundtables will surely assist the Canadian government to formulate policies that we hope will have long term impact in the region, highlighting Canada's leadership on human security issues.

Finally, we are united in pleading with the Canadian government and the international community not to forget Afghanistan. We urge the international community to meet its commitment to Afghanistan, complete

the work it has begun and not to turn their back on the suffering people of Afghanistan.

We remind Canada and the international community that 23 years of internal violence and conflict has now been replaced by constant bombing from external forces in their 'war against terror.' These efforts to uproot Al-Qaeda have led to further devastation, destruction and death of an innocent and already traumatized civilian population. The international community owes it to Afghanistan to continue its efforts in rebuilding a beautiful country which has been destroyed by war, and is longing to return to normalcy and peace. **We pray for that day.**

Objectives

We are the Voice of the Voiceless

“Since we are Afghan women, we know the pain of women in Afghanistan. The voice of women in Afghanistan can’t be heard, but we can be their voice, because we feel their pain. We can do this through these Roundtables. We can voice their opinions to our government in Canada.”
(Mariam, Calgary)

The purpose of the Roundtables was to create an opportunity for Afghan-Canadian women to participate in consultations regarding the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in Afghanistan, and to empower these women to play a more active role in the peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan.

The Roundtables were inspired by the principle, recognized in Security Council Resolution 1325, that women have a critical role in post conflict reconstruction, and must therefore be given the opportunity to participate fully in these efforts. The Roundtables were aimed at taking advantage of the wealth of knowledge and experience within the Afghan community in Canada in order to determine the best way for Canada to support the full implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325. This report also refers to other relevant international instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and other documents that share the spirit and goals of Resolution 1325. Canada has a proud tradition of peacebuilding, and as such plays an important role in the international community. The Canadian government is committed to formulating a foreign policy that is politically-appropriate and culturally-sensitive. The Canadian government recognizes that the advancement of women is a necessary component of peace and social progress, and has made a commitment to the women of Afghanistan by providing voice to the diaspora in Canada.

The stipulated objectives of the Roundtables were threefold:

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| I. To inform and invoke discussion on the situation of women in Afghanistan; |
| II. To explore ways in which the Canadian government can support the effective implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325; and |
| III. To provide Canadian policy-makers, government departments, NGOs and others with recommendations for prioritizing initiatives to support for the women in Afghanistan |

Three questions were devised to guide the discussions. These questions were:

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| 1. What barriers are preventing Afghan women from securing a greater participation at all levels of Afghan society? |
| 2. In overcoming these barriers, what strategies can be identified for women living in Afghanistan to ensure their full participation in peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan? |
| 3. What strategies can be identified by Afghan-Canadian women in Canada (or outside Afghanistan) to ensure their full participation in efforts relating to peace and security for women in Afghanistan? |

This report provides answers to these questions. It summarizes the contributions of Afghan- Canadian women to the consultation, and outlines their recommendations for the Governments of Canada, Afghanistan as well as the United Nations and the international community.

Report of the First Afghan Women's Roundtables on Resolution 1325

*We, Afghan-Canadian women
Call on the Government of Canada
Call on the Government of Afghanistan
Call on the International Community to ...*

Introduction

The precarious cessation of hostilities in Afghanistan has not led to the expected inclusion of women as equal participants in Afghan society. Women in Afghanistan today do not enjoy personal safety and security, they are poor, and do not have access to education, health, employment opportunities and other basic human rights. This in no way reflects on the capacities of Afghan women themselves; rather it points to the impact that decades of internal strife, extremism and societal upheaval have had on women and the opportunities afforded to them.

The current incapacity of women in Afghanistan is a testament to the destructive powers of war and gender-based persecution. Over the years, the educated women of Afghanistan emigrated to other countries such as Canada, while those who remained suffered physical and psychological trauma, loss of loved ones, dislocation, poverty, and even death. Notwithstanding these horrors, Afghan women have distinguished themselves for their courage, strength of character, and resilience, in facing unspeakable personal challenges. Despite years of injustice and injury, we continue to carry a vision of a better society for all Afghan women and children, and are fully committed to engaging in this process.

We, the Roundtable participants, highlighted **security** as the primary barrier to women's full participation in Afghan society and eloquently described it as the foundation for the rebuilding of Afghanistan. We addressed the issue of the *burqa* and showed that while some women choose to wear *burqa* for traditional and cultural reasons, it is the fear for personal safety and security, and continued extremist attitudes that compel Afghan women to continue their use of what has become a symbol of the Taliban's oppression of women. We pointed out that while there has been some improvement in Kabul, the rural areas continue to be dangerous. Women and girls are routinely raped, and therefore prefer to remain at home. We strongly feel

that special programmes be devised to expand the opportunities available to these women.

We pointed out that justice and accountability are the twin pillars upon which the new Afghan government must base its legitimacy.

We highlighted the need to distinguish between Islam and the extreme interpretation that has been imposed on Afghans. We argued that it is the misinterpretation and misuse of religion that has created barriers to women's equality, not the religion itself.

Finally, we talked, cried and outlined concrete strategies to overcome years of oppression and inequality, and made a renewed commitment to play an active role in this process.

If the governments of Canada, Afghanistan and the International community are interested in long term social, economic and political transformation in Afghanistan, there needs to be a deep commitment to address some very difficult issues. **We are ready and waiting to work with you in partnership to this end.**

Question 1: What barriers are preventing Afghan women from securing a greater participation at all levels of Afghan society?

The many years of war and internal strife in Afghanistan have deprived women of the rights they enjoyed during the rule of King Mohammed Zahir Shah. We pointed out that the 1964 Afghan Constitution guaranteed women equal rights to education and employment, rights which many women proudly and competently embraced. Although some of us felt that women did not enjoy universal rights even before the war, we did agree that 23 years of conflict greatly impacted women's existing challenges in a patriarchal culture.

I – Personal Safety and Security

***Items 1, 4, 6 and 10, Resolution 1325**

While many of us identified and highlighted different barriers, we agreed that the central and fundamental barrier to women's full participation in Afghanistan is the lack of personal safety and security. We felt that the weakness of the current government to ensure law and order was a barrier to personal safety and security. Reliable reports confirm that women throughout the country – especially in the rural areas – continue to be victims of physical – including sexual – violence. Tor, a teacher from Vancouver asked, *“If the present government can't guarantee the security even of its Ministers, then how can it guarantee that women can go to work, that they are secure, and that they can get their rights?”*

Item 10 of Resolution 1325 *“Calls on all parties to armed conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, and all other forms of violence in situations of armed conflict”*

The inevitable consequence of this violence and insecurity is a restriction on women's freedom of movement which predictably prevents women from full participation in public life, and limits their access to basic human rights such as health, education and economic empowerment. The prevailing atmosphere of fear also prevents women from exercising their rights in even small ways such as removing their *burqas*. These fears follow women even

when they leave Afghanistan. One participant, a young woman from Calgary said that, *“I’ve only been here for one year, so I still have my fears.”*

Warlords

The persistent presence of warlords, and their enduring influence contributes to the country’s instability and the lack of security, especially for women. The warlords and other gunmen are present throughout the country and have immense control, in effect holding the Afghan people hostage. We find the presence of the warlords in Afghanistan, and their power and authority within the Afghan government ethically objectionable. We demand that their role in the destruction of our country be recognized, and their crimes punished. Our concern was best summarized by Karima, a former teacher in Montreal who said, *“These people now in power killed people in the past, so how can we trust them again...how can we trust those who killed our brothers and sisters.”*

We urge the Canadian government to join the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, and request that ISAF’s presence spread throughout Afghanistan, beyond the cities. We urge the United Nations and the international community to ensure ISAF’s presence in Afghanistan until such time that an independent and well-trained security force can establish and maintain law and order throughout the country, especially the rural areas where conflict between warlords and their forces continue. As Adeena from Toronto emphatically stated, *“The only chance we have now to establish security will be lost if we don’t take it seriously and if the international forces leave Afghanistan prematurely.”*

In accordance with **Item 1, 4, and 6 of Resolution 1325**, we would like to see an increase in the number of women peacekeepers, a focus on gender-sensitive training for peacekeepers, military observers, civilian police and humanitarian personnel to address the special needs of women.

Another point we’d like to address is the issue of small arms and landmines in Afghanistan, and their impact on women’s freedom of movement. The proliferation of weapons, particularly small arms, have been an unfortunate consequence of the war in Afghanistan. This severely compromises possibilities for peace and order. One of the participants from Calgary felt that, *“whatever we say is meaningless if Afghanistan is not disarmed.”* We felt that improving the economy would contribute to disarmament by

providing young men with an alternative to fighting, amongst other things. Latifa from Calgary said, ***“If they have more jobs, then they don’t have to use their weapons any more. They will be busy with something else rather than fighting.”***

Lack of civilian police force and an army

Afghanistan presently lacks a civilian police force as well as an army. This absence greatly impacts the maintenance of peace and security. Canada and the international community can make a valuable contribution by encouraging the establishment of a civilian police force and military, and providing the necessary training to make these forces as capable and efficient as possible in the near future.

On the matter of landmines, we feel de-mining programs, including mine awareness education should be made a matter of priority.

II – Justice and Accountability

***Item 11, Resolution 1325**

That peace cannot exist without justice is a truism, and the issue of justice and accountability was a central concern of Afghan women across Canada. As one woman said, ***“Peace cannot be maintained if justice is not served. We all know how many atrocities took place and to give blanket impunity to all those who committed atrocities, how can we talk of peace?”***

During the war in Afghanistan, many atrocities were committed, including genocide against certain ethnic minorities, rape, forced marriage and murder. These were largely perpetrated by warlords and their armed forces. The impunity of the warlords who continue to exert power has left an indelible impression on all of us. One of the participants from Toronto declared, ***“Many women were raped, kidnapped and killed. Who was responsible for all these crimes? They are still in power.”***

We are seriously troubled by the presence of warlords in Afghanistan, and their role in the deterioration of internal safety and security. We are particularly concerned that the international community is granting these individuals too much authority, allowing their presence in the *Loya Jirga*, and turning a blind eye to their past and present atrocities. The *Loya Jirga* was not an open and democratic process for consultation and decision-making. The presence of the warlords intimidated other participants, and critics were threatened and labeled as traitors to Islam. The *Loya Jirga* was characterized by manipulation, violence and vote-buying

More than 80% of the Cabinet Ministers serving in the present Afghan government are warlords. These warlords continue to control much of the country, and have contributed greatly to the escalation of internal conflict and the destruction of infrastructure, property and the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent civilians.

We opposed the attendance of the warlords at the *Loya Jirga*. Their presence did not reflect the people’s wishes, and provided them with ‘legitimate’ power to continue their political manipulation.

If we are to rebuild Afghanistan on a firm foundation of peace, equality and justice, it is morally imperative that those who have committed war crimes in Afghanistan's past be held responsible and brought to justice in the present. Maryam, a former journalist from Toronto expressed her frustration by saying, ***“Those who were involved in war before should not be involved in making laws now.”***

Failure to administer justice will cast doubt on the strength and legitimacy of the present government in Afghanistan, and put into question their commitment to social and political transformation in Afghanistan.

Now they are in power. All these ministers who had no sympathy for people. They won't be faithful to the US government. If they're not faithful to their own blood and people, how can they be faithful to others. If they have these people in power, women will always be oppressed, women will have no education, no rights. If the UN including the Canadian government really want peace in Afghanistan, then these people should be taken out of power.

We appeal to the Canadian government and the international community to initiate the process that would bring these individuals to justice. Mary from Toronto emphatically stated, ***“These are people who committed human rights violations, who played a role in the genocide, and in particular against women. We can't just let them go. If we bring these people to justice, only then can we pave the path to peace.”*** We even went so far as to suggest that the Canadian government help Afghanistan to create an institution that could try individuals charged with genocide and war crimes, including sexual crimes, to be tried and sentenced in Afghanistan. Justice is the first necessary step toward bringing peace or mind and closure to the victims, and deter others who are inclined to commit such crimes from doing so.

Importantly, the presence and active participation of the warlords in the *Loya Jirga* contravened **item 11 of Resolution 1325** which ***“emphasizes the responsibility of all States to put an end to impunity and to prosecute those responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes including those relating to sexual and other violence against women and girls, and in this regard stresses the need to exclude these crimes, where feasible from amnesty provisions.”***

III- Education

“Kids need to get educated. The government should set up more schools, especially for girls.” (Sara, Calgary)

***Article 28, Convention on the Rights of the Child**

***Paragraph 69, Beijing Platform for Action**

The education of women and girls is universally seen as one of the priorities to empowering women in Afghanistan, and throughout Canada, all the participants agreed that the education of women was the most essential first step toward the advancement of women and social change in Afghanistan. We strongly felt that educating women is a key to achieving many of the other goals for Afghan society, such as peace and economic prosperity. One of the participants in Calgary stated that, ***“The more we can get women educated, the more problems we can solve overall.”***

Why are women so important to these goals? Because she plays a central role within the family, and therefore in society. She is the primary educator of the next generation, and an educated mother easily transfers her knowledge and awareness to her children. An educated woman’s children are usually healthier, both physically and emotionally. One of our participants, Latifa from Calgary noted that, ***“A woman is a mother, a sister, a daughter and a wife. She can have a main role in the family to educate her brother, husband and son. We can start with families. If the women can educate the men in their family, then it will have a great effect on the whole of society.”***

After decades of being denied the right to study and work, many women in Afghanistan have internalized this subservient status which has effected their self-confidence, self-esteem and most importantly, their sense of self. As Mariam, a university student in Edmonton remarked, ***“The barriers have been implanted in people’s minds.”*** With three years remaining in the UN Decade for Human Rights Education, we request that the UN encourage the immediate inclusion of human rights education programmes throughout Afghanistan in order to raise women’s awareness of their rights under international law.

In the past two decades, most of the educated and professionally trained Afghan women have emigrated to other countries. This has resulted in a marked ‘brain drain’ that has left Afghanistan with inadequate human resources in a critical time in its history.

Most of the women who remain in Afghanistan are uneducated and poor, especially in the rural areas with its even more limited resources and access to educational facilities. This was true even before the war, where the absence of schools for girls forced rural girls to either forego literacy or travel great distances to attend school. In a particularly emotional statement, one of the participants Sahib, from Edmonton, shared her pain and said,

I used to live in the rural areas, and I suffer now because I had no education. I was a very clever girl. I am talented. Here, I am very good in my English class...[In Afghanistan], I remember my brothers studying in school but I couldn't go, I didn't have the right. I cried every day. There was no way for me to study, there was no school, and it was not my parents' fault.

We strongly felt that the lack of educational opportunities is a major obstacle to the participation of women in Afghan society, and their contribution to the rebuilding of their country. We propose that the government of Afghanistan – with the support of the international community - undertake a massive education programme aimed at women and girls, especially in the rural areas. The Ministry of Women’s Affairs, along with the Ministry of Education could devise creative arrangements – such as literacy classes in the workplace - that would allow women to work and study at the same time. We pointed out that these Ministries will need to be mindful of the need for adult education courses. As Sayeda, a participant from Edmonton pointed out, ***“Now there are women in classrooms again but these women are 15-16 years old and they don’t want to sit with first graders.”***

In accordance with the **Convention on the Rights of the Child**, this programme should make primary education compulsory and freely available to *all* children up to and including age 18.

We have seen the inevitable social erosion that accompanies female illiteracy and lack of educational opportunities for women and girls, and argue that there is no justifiable basis – moral, cultural, religious or social – to allow for this deprivation to continue. We believe that long-term peacebuilding and effective post conflict reconstruction of Afghanistan

depends on the nation's ability to increase its human resources, and encourage a more equitable society. We confer with paragraph 69 of the **Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action** which states that,

Education is a human right and an essential tool for achieving the goal of equality, development and peace. Non-discriminatory education benefits both girls and boys and thus ultimately contributes to more equal relationships between women and men. Equality of access to and attainment of educational qualifications is necessary if more women are to become agents of change. Literacy of women is an important key to improving health, nutrition and education in the family and to empowering women to participate in decision-making in society. Investing in formal and non-formal education and training for girls and women, with its exceptionally high social and economic return, has proved to be one of the best means of achieving sustainable development and economic growth that is both sustained and sustainable.

More than twenty-five years of data confirms the correlation between the education of women and girls, and a range of development indicators. Educating women and girls has proven to reduce fertility and maternal and infant mortality rates; general health and hygiene; as well as national social-economic development; and environmental protection. Studies also show that these positive effects increase with every additional year a girl stays in school. In fact, according to Lawrence Summers, the Vice President and Chief Economist of the World Bank in 1992, ***“educating girls yields a higher rate of return than any other investment that can be made in the developing world.”***¹

We felt that Afghan women outside of Afghanistan have an important role to play in supporting educational opportunities in Afghanistan. Most of us who participated in the Roundtables are highly educated with backgrounds as diverse as engineering, medicine, teaching and the law. Many of us completed our education in Afghanistan before coming to Canada. Since moving to Canada, we have had opportunities to improve our skills and our self-confidence, both of which would greatly benefit the women in Afghanistan.

We would also like to suggest that efforts be made to devise new curricula, discussed the urgent need for peace education in the schools, and the

¹ “Investing in All the People”, 1992.

important role that women can play in this regard. The present curricula are too narrow and **“teach about guns.”** The teachers amongst us would be prepared to work on various curricula that promote peace. Gulalai in Vancouver said,

Peace starts at home. Women can be peace educators. In the families, that is naturally their role...They have the influence of changing attitudes of male family members. Women played an important role in telling their men not to fight. So they have that important role.

We proposed the establishment of programs that would enable us to return to Afghanistan for short-term social-economic development projects where we can transfer our skills to our sisters in Afghanistan.

IV- Health

Afghanistan has the second highest maternal mortality rates in the world; 17 of 1000 women die in labour which constitutes one death per 30 minutes. Although the situation has improved since the time of the Taliban, there is still a severe lack of healthcare services including prenatal and post-natal maternal care. Today, only 10-12% of Afghan women have access to health care; this number is even lower outside of the cities.

In addition to the need for attention to their physical health and well-being, the women in Afghanistan would benefit from medical attention focusing on the psychological and emotional health as well. Afghan women and children have endured traumas which have impacted their psychological and mental health; unless these issues are also dealt with in a comprehensive and immediate fashion, the trauma will be passed on from generation to generation.

V – Religion and Culture in Afghanistan

“Islam does not say that women should not have equal rights.” (Nafissa, Edmonton)

“That’s political Islam” (Latifa, Edmonton)

One of the most animated and most interesting discussions at the Roundtables was the question of women’s rights and opportunities within Islam. Many participants spoke of their loyalty to Islam and made a distinction between Islam as it is defined in Islam, and Islam as it is being applied and practiced by extreme forces in Afghanistan. They asserted that the treatment of women under the Taliban, and to some extent today, is in fact inconsistent with Islam, which does provide Muslim women with the right to education, employment and equal rights and opportunities with men. In fact, women in early Islam were active and equal partners of the **umma**.² Hence, we believe that Islam has been influenced by patriarchal, cultural forces in Afghanistan and misused to suppress the women of Afghanistan. Qudsia, a young woman in Toronto suggested that, **“Misinterpretation of the Muslim religion is one of the biggest barriers to the participation of women in Afghan society.”**

Some participants suggested that *“We have to differentiate between religion and politics ... We mix the two up, that is the reason why we are here today. There’s misinterpretation and misuse of politics in the name of religion.”* In contrast to this opinion, some others felt that it is impossible to take religion out of Afghanistan; because of the important role of religion in Afghan society. We agreed that one solution to this dilemma would be to work toward the realization of women’s rights within Islam.

We felt that efforts to ensure women’s rights within the context of Islam requires the education of women regarding their rights within Islam, as well as the support of religious leaders including Mullas who have great a great influence on social thought and action. On the first point, Hafiza, a student in Toronto felt that, *“We should prove to the world that Islam is not what is represented by Western countries. We should start by educating ourselves as to what Islam means.”* On the second point, Karima, a former teacher

² The Umma refers to the community of believers in Islam.

who now lives in Montreal suggests that, ***“All those people who have power, if they don’t want women to progress, they won’t progress. If the mullas don’t want it, then nothing will happen.”***

In addition to discussing religion, we felt it important to consider cultural barriers to women’s human rights in Afghanistan. Our consultation established that women’s rights is not an exclusively Western concept, and is not contrary to the norms and values of Afghan culture. In essence, we felt that while certain elements of Afghan culture have served as barriers to women’s equality and human rights in Afghanistan, it has largely been the culture of war, and not Afghan culture per se, that has made the greatest impact.

Specific cultural practices that we felt continue to harm young girls and women included the practice whereby someone found guilty of murder can prevent sentencing by giving his daughter in marriage to the victim’s family.

The patriarchal structure of the family in Afghan society, and the attitudes of some Afghan men were identified as another barrier to women’s rights. Some participants shared their personal stories in this regard, some were positive, and some negative, and illustrated the diversity of experiences among Afghan women in their families. Some spoke of not being allowed to attend school even when the opportunity presented itself, others described their parents’ encouragement and support of their academic and professional pursuits. Parwin, a housewife from Edmonton felt that, “If men have an education, they can hear the voices of women. If men are not educated, even if women are educated, they won’t understand us.

Some of the young women amongst us felt that not all Afghan women enjoy true equality even within the Afghan-Canadian community. Sayeda who lives in Edmonton said that,

Even though we live in Canada, we can’t defend our rights. Even now in our families, we have difficulty expressing ourselves. If someone voices their opinions, they are accused of being un-Islamic.

Some of us noted that some of the barriers are erected by Afghan women themselves. For example, Palateen who now lives in Toronto mentioned that, **“If women raise their voice, they are criticized by**

10 women. If we, ourselves don't accept that women have rights, how can we expect men to accept our rights.”

Our discussions also included some sharing of thoughts and opinions on the *burqa*, which one participant in Ottawa described as a ‘dark grave.’ We were concerned with the lack of balanced discussion in the Western media about the *burqa*. Women’s use of the *burqa* has been condemned by Western feminists and the media since the Taliban regime’s laws regarding women’s dress came to international attention. What the media failed to express in their analysis is that many Afghan women wear the *burqa* by choice; either for cultural reasons, as well as for reasons pertaining to personal safety and security, or other equally compelling reasons. We found that the Western media’s focus on the *burqa* – also referred to as the *chadari* - quickly transformed it from a cultural ‘dress’ that women in Afghanistan have worn for decades, to a symbol of Taliban oppression.

It is important that women live in a safe society, with guaranteed rights so that they can wear what they like based on personal choice and preference. And we feel, it is important that the Afghan government attempt to begin to abolish cultural barriers to women’s human rights by declaring that women are equal to men; passing laws guaranteeing women’s human rights; and making the education of girls mandatory.

VI – Economic Empowerment and Employment Opportunities

“Not only in Afghanistan, but everywhere, the main barrier for women is poverty.” (Fatema, former military officer, poet, writer, Toronto)

Most women in Afghanistan are faced with crushing poverty and a lack of employment opportunities. As Zahra, a university student from Montreal noted, ***“Women don’t have goats, they don’t have food, they don’t have houses, they don’t have anything.”*** Their preoccupation with feeding themselves and their family prevents them from becoming more involved in public life, thereby depriving themselves of opportunities for employment and economic empowerment.

This is particularly true for widows. Adeena from Toronto stated that, ***“Women who have lost their husbands have the burden of raising children. Because they are struggling so much with their own lives, they can’t participate in society.”*** Improving women’s economic security is an essential component to their empowerment.

We also talked about issues like the lack of infrastructure which predictably affects women’s mobility and her ability to partake of education, and employment opportunities which in effect impact her economic status. Poor roads and the absence of a transportation system prevent women from travelling to schools and from meeting with other women. The foreign aid pledged by the international community for Afghanistan is essential to changing the present situation. Froozan, a humanitarian worker from Vancouver said that,

Many promises have been made. In order to create and preserve peace, we need money. In order to remove mines, we need money. I ask the Prime Minister: Where is the money the Canadian government has pledged to Afghanistan.

We would appreciate if the Canadian government could keep us informed of the status of Canada’s pledge. We would also like to propose that foreign donors, including Canada, ensure that substantial aid is directed to programmes that would benefit women and girls. Parwin from Toronto requested that, ***“foreign governments give the most financial help to women because they are the most needy.”***

Before Afghanistan was invaded by Soviet Russia, Afghan women made up 70% of school teachers, 40% of doctors in Kabul and other major cities, and 50% of government workers. Today, women are absent from all fields of employment. We dream of the day when we, along with our sisters in Afghanistan can take our rightful place as equal, active and contributing members in Afghan society.

VII – Civil and Political Rights and Political Participation

***Article 7, CEDAW, *Article 1, Resolution 1325**

Presently, only two of Afghanistan's 26 Cabinet Ministers are women, the Minister of Health and the Minister of Women's Affairs. We are concerned that there are no legal guarantees for women's inclusion in governance, and urge the government of Afghanistan to institute a minimum quota for government positions to ensure greater participation of women in political life. The government of Afghanistan needs to ensure that in future elections, women are not intimidated by local authorities in their quest for candidacy.

We feel strongly that the **United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)** is a necessary tool for ameliorating this and other human rights issues pertaining to women in Afghanistan. Afghanistan signed CEDAW on August 14, 1980, we now strongly urge the government of Afghanistan to take the final step and ratify the Convention as an expression of its commitment to Afghan women in the post-Taliban era, and take its place in the community of nations who are committed to women's human rights.

CEDAW provides a framework for the protection and promotion of women's human rights and opportunities. It defines discrimination, outlines a program of action, and highlights areas that are of particular importance to women's issues. **Article 7 of the Convention** states that,

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right:

- (a) To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies;*
- (b) To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government;*
- (c) To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.*

Moreover, **Article 1 of Resolution 1325**, which was signed unanimously by the Security Council in October 2000, urges “*Member States to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict.*”

While the establishment of the Women’s Ministry is a necessary and welcomed first step toward addressing the issue of women’s human rights and opportunities in Afghanistan, the Ministry has faced obstacles from the beginning of its formation. Dr. Sima Samar, the first Minister for Women’s Affairs has experienced threats to her physical security, and later denounced as a traitor to Islam in a petition circulated by extreme factions at the *Loya Jirga*. She has subsequently left the Ministry.

Also, we’d like to point out that the Ministry of Women’s Affairs requires an estimated \$70 million dollars (US) to initiate and maintain various ministry projects including: educational and vocational programs, legal advocacy, as well as health and hygiene initiatives.

Despite the change in government, and the presence of military forces in Afghanistan – including ISAF – women in Afghanistan are unable to enjoy freedom of expression, assembly, and movement. As recent months have shown, those who do express themselves such as the former Minister of Women’s Affairs, are threatened with violence. We need to ensure that women enjoy the fundamental freedom of expression and movement, and initiate and support leadership and governance training for women in Afghanistan. Many of us participated in the three-day leadership and governance training in Toronto and Ottawa and can provide similar programs in Afghanistan.

Much work remains to be done in Afghanistan. Only by mobilizing the energies and skills of the entire population, including the women, can Afghanistan emerge from its current status. One participant beautifully described her vision for women in Afghanistan in the following words, “***On a bird, one wing is woman, and the other is man. If one wing is broken, the bird can not fly straight.***” (Najiba, former banker, Toronto)

Question 2: What strategies can *women in Afghanistan* undertake to ensure their full participation in efforts relating to peace and security in Afghanistan?

“Does anyone ask the women in Afghanistan what they think?” (Nooria, student, Edmonton)

Many of us felt that the women living in Afghanistan faced too many obstacles to be able to advocate on their own behalf without support from outside. One participant pointed to the fact that even a woman minister within the Afghan government was not capable of making decisions because she was disempowered and criticized.

We felt that while there is the potential for women to mobilize themselves in Afghanistan, that they are weakened from many years of oppression and disenfranchisement, and will need training, some minimum rights and opportunities and support from within and outside of Afghanistan to begin a process of mobilization.

The participants were aware that the situation of women was tied to that of the rest of society, and that peace and security for all was a precondition to improving the situation of women. As one participant stated: “If you want to help the women, you have to help the whole community.” (Mahbuba, manager, Edmonton.)

We felt that women in Afghanistan were in a special position to contribute to peacebuilding; as a result of their forced exclusion from public life, they have not been tainted by the politics of war and are therefore detached from tribal loyalties and political affiliations. They simply want to create a peaceful society for themselves, their families, and especially their children. Gulalai, a former engineer, now living in Vancouver said, “Women are not corrupted by war, so women are in a better position to speak about peace, and to build up an environment for peace.”

Afghan women will have to work very hard to carve a place for themselves in the reconstruction efforts, and we felt the following strategies may be of help to them.

- 1. Use of Afghan media to promote human rights and peace throughout Afghanistan: publishing newspapers about women, using the television and radio to broadcast shows about women's human rights, health and education issues,**

In our discussions, we recognized the important role that the media in Afghanistan can play in human rights education and peacebuilding efforts. Many recommendations were directed at using the media to overcome the barriers faced by women in Afghanistan.

One participant referred to an IMPACS (Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society) project that has been implemented in Afghanistan to strengthen the role of the Afghan media in the peacebuilding process. We suggested that the IMPACS project be used as an educational tool to empower women in civil society.

- 2. Establish organizations within Afghanistan that are focused on women's rights advocacy, and link these to women's rights organizations outside Afghanistan.**

Question 3: What strategies can *Afghan-Canadian women* undertake to ensure their full participation in efforts relating to peace and security?

“We can give them the message of peace and unity, and the message that we understand them and that we feel their pain, that they are not alone, that we are with them, and that we will help them” (Roya, Calgary)

Although we have been living in Canada for different amounts of time, we all still feel very connected to our sisters in Afghanistan. We all feel that part of us remains in Afghanistan, and many of us spoke of the pain of seeing our nieces and nephews growing up in Afghanistan, while we are able to provide our children with a better life here.

Participants throughout Canada agreed that it is not realistic to expect women in Afghanistan to fully participate in Afghan society without assistance from outside. We felt that even if women began enjoying educational opportunities, the reality of limited resources and support from the Afghan government would hamper their ability to contribute fully to Afghan society.

Much of our consultation focused on how we, Afghan-Canadian women, would like can contribute to the rebuilding of Afghanistan. We strongly feel that we are in a good position to help the women in Afghanistan to improve their situation and be more active and productive members of their society. Some of our strategies included

1. Lobbying the government to maintain a focus on Afghanistan, and not forgetting it in a changing international political climate

We felt it especially important to continue our relationship with our MP’s, MLA’s and other politicians who are concerned about Afghanistan, so as to provide them with accurate and updated information on the situation on the ground, which differs greatly from the information provided by the media.

2. Lobbying the media to continue paying attention to the situation in Afghanistan, and providing the Canadian public with a more

balanced and informative coverage of the situation in Afghanistan, and a more accurate portrayal of Afghan women

There was much criticism of the Western media among us. One woman stated: **“The media doesn’t cover what women are going through, what is really happening to them.”** (Fousia, Calgary) Some participants expressed resentment toward the media’s treatment of Afghan-Canadian women during the bombing of Afghanistan. Some of us felt they media treated them with insensitivity and misrepresented their views.

3. Sharing the knowledge and skills that we’ve developed in Canada with our sisters in Afghanistan.

We are fortunate enough to live in Canada and to have all these programs. We should concentrate on exchange programs, and have young women volunteer in Afghanistan. They could organize themselves and counsel the women travelling to Afghanistan... This is how we can build a better future. (Mary, former relief worker, Toronto)

4. Being the voice for Afghan women through advocacy, activism, and volunteerism

“Many educated Afghan women are in Canada... Canadians should help them financially, and should raise their voices through the newspapers and media. Women’s organizations in Canada should work together with women in Afghanistan, send them resources. They should also pressure the Afghanistan government to respect women’s rights.” (Royhana, student, Edmonton)

5. Travelling to Afghanistan on a short term basis to provide training and support efforts to rebuild infrastructure

Many of us feel that our lives are now rooted in Canada, but we would welcome opportunities to travel to Afghanistan on a short term basis if some form of protection can be offered to us.

I am ready to go back and help even for 1 year or 2 years or 3 years, but only when we have security... We had a meeting in our community and some people said they’d never go back. But if we don’t go back,

who can do this for us, we have to help our country. (Sharifa, former teacher, waitress, Edmonton)

I can't leave my life in Canada and go back to my life in Afghanistan, but I can go back as an Afghan-Canadian. We don't want to take over the jobs they have there. We just want to go for a short time to give training. I can't go back and leave the freedoms that I enjoy in Canada. (Nazila, teacher, Toronto)

- 6. Fundraising within and outside of the Afghan-Canadian community, and sending these funds to women in Afghanistan in order to provide them with some measure of financial independence, and enable them to initiate and maintain social-economic development projects in their communities.**

Afghan-Canadian women can also contribute to peacebuilding in Afghanistan by sending money to women there. The participants noted that small amounts of money for them meant a great deal to women in Afghanistan. However, some participants were uncertain about the best way to send money to Afghanistan so that it benefited the most needy people. They therefore asked the Canadian government to help them send money to women in Afghanistan.

- 7. Maintaining the momentum of the Roundtables by establishing networks among ourselves: launching websites, creating listserves, and founding a national Afghan-Canadian women's organization**
- 8. Organizing a national conference and meetings, and including women from Afghanistan**
- 9. Educating people here in Canada about Afghanistan, its history, peoples, and culture by holding informal gatherings such as, "An Evening About Afghanistan"**
- 10. Monitoring what the Afghan government is doing for women, and bringing it to the attention of the international community**
- 11. Letting Afghan women know that we are here, ready and waiting to assist them in any way we can**

- 12. Empowering Afghan women to know that they can accomplish anything they want to**
- 13. Connecting Afghan women with women abroad who can offer them encouragement and support**
- 14. Educating ourselves about Islam and its teachings on the status of women in the umma**

Recommendations

We, Afghan-Canadian women, call on the *Government of Canada* to:

- Establish an office in Kabul
- Do not withdraw from Afghanistan
- Do not force Afghan refugees to return to Afghanistan
- Fulfill its proud legacy of peacekeeping and join the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, (not the US-led coalition), and ensure that ISAF presence extends throughout the country until such time that a competent, ethical and dependable Afghan army is established and able to main law and order independently.
- Demonstrate its commitment to international law and the principles of the International Criminal Court, and encourage that all those guilty of war crimes, including those relating to sexual and other violence against women, be tried and brought to justice in an effort to end impunity and begin the process of reconciliation.
- Follow through on its pledge to provide financial aid to Afghanistan, and make this aid conditional upon the participation of women in peacebuilding and reconstruction, as required by **UN Resolution 1325**.
- Support the infusion of foreign aid into the Women's Ministry (\$70 million US needed) in order to provide it with the necessary funds to initiate and maintain its various social and economic development programs
- Establish programs through which Afghan-Canadian women can return to Afghanistan on short-term social-economic projects to teach and train the women of Afghanistan. Provide physical protection for these women.
- Sponsor projects to have Afghan-Canadian teachers prepare curriculum for schools in Afghanistan
- Provide us with funding to establish a network of Afghan-Canadian women across Canada

We, Afghan-Canadian women, call on the *Government of Afghanistan* to:

- Implement Security Council Resolution 1325
- Make a special declaration that women are free; free to pursue an education, engage in employment, enjoy freedom of movement, be free from violence and threats to personal security, and free from all forms of gender discrimination
- Declare that women and men are equal before the law
- Pass laws guaranteeing women's human rights
- Ratify the **UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women**
- Mainstream gender into all government Ministries in order to avoid the marginalization of women's issues solely to the Women's Ministry
- Make primary and secondary education compulsory, with an emphasis on girls
- Invest funds in building schools, employing teachers, and providing new curricula that focus on peace education
- Direct funds from foreign aid to the Ministry of Women's Affairs as well as to women's organizations. Such funding should be adequate enough to allow the Ministry to carry out its programs to educate, rehabilitate, and train women for employment and financial independence.
- Initiate human rights education programmes – in the schools and the media - in order to familiarize Afghans, and especially Afghan women, with their human rights under international law
- Utilize the Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society (IMPACS) as an educational tool to empower women in civil society
- Establish adequately-funded programs to provide job training to women and assist them in securing a job.

We, Afghan-Canadian women, call on the *United Nations and the International Community* to:

- Not forget Afghanistan while dealing with other international issues
- Maintain international security forces (ISAP) presence in Afghanistan until such time as the country has a well-trained police force and army to maintain internal peace and security
- Fulfill its financial obligations in the form of pledges, to Afghanistan
- Establish an institution to monitor the situation of women in Afghanistan
- In accordance with **Items 1 and 4 of Resolution 1325**, include women in positions of power within the UN offices in Afghanistan
- Make aid conditional on women's participation in peacebuilding
- Establish an institution to investigate and prosecute those who have committed crimes against women such as kidnapping, rape and murder
- Prevent the interference in Afghanistan by neighbouring countries such as Iran, Pakistan and Russia

Appendix A

Organization and Process of the Roundtables

This project was the initiative Senator Mobina Jaffer of the Advocacy Subcommittee of the Canadian Committee on Women, Peace and Security. The Canadian Committee on Women, Peace and Security was struck in the fall of 2001 to facilitate Canadian implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325. It is comprised of Canadian Parliamentarians, officials from several Canadian Government Departments, and civil society representatives.

The Roundtables were funded by the Human Security Program of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. This initiative was supported and organized jointly by The Aga Khan Council for Ontario, The Canadian Committee on Women, Peace and Security, and the YWCA of Canada.

The Roundtables were chaired by **Senator Mobina Jaffer** and moderated by **Marzia Ali**.

By choice of the participants, the Roundtables were mostly held in Dari, with interpretation available into English. Each Roundtable lasted about four hours.

Organizers in each designated city identified Afghan-Canadian women to participate in the Roundtables. The Organizing Committee consisted of the following people:

Project Coordinator: **Almas Jiwani**
Ottawa coordinator: **Malu Hamidi**
Montreal coordinator: **Marzia Ali and Sultana Nathoo-Jinah**
Toronto coordinator: **Maryam Alefi**
Calgary coordinator: **Janice Eisenhauer**
Edmonton coordinator: **Safia Gillani**
Vancouver coordinator: **Rozina Janmohamed**
Translator: **Amina Ali-Mohammed**
Administrative Assistant: **Shaida Kassam**

The Organizers would like to thank all the volunteers who gave their time to help organize the Roundtables.

A special thanks goes to **Ayesha Rekhi, Carmen Sorger** and **Alexandra Humphrey** at the Peacebuilding and Human Security Division, Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

This report was written by **Barbara Bedont** and **Cheshmak Farhoumand-Sims**

Annex B

Schedule of Roundtables

- 9 May 2002: Ottawa, Ontario
21 Participants, 21 Observers, 4 Organizers
- 12 July 2002: Calgary, Alberta
29 Participants, 4 Observers, 6 Organizers
- 13 July 2002: Edmonton, Alberta
19 Participants, 1 Observer, 6 Organizers
- 14 July 2002: Vancouver, BC
22 Attendees, 5 Observers, 5 Volunteers, 6 Organizers
- 19 July 2002: Montreal, Quebec
24 Participants, 6 Observers, 5 Organizers
- 21 July 2002 Toronto, Ontario
Morning session: 21 Participants; 6 Observers; 8 Organizers.

Afternoon Session: 23 Participants; 7 Observers; 8 Organizers

Appendix C
Final Report to CIDA
Afghan Women's Leadership and Governance Training
Toronto and Ottawa, February 23-25, 2002

Afghan women living in Canada - half under the age of 30 - participated in the training and mutual learning sessions designed with the Afghan Women's Organization to increase their leadership capacity and to support their training of other women in their communities, in Canada and Afghanistan, with a focus on:

- Communication, collaboration and consensus-building skills, including an experiential workshop on capacity-building and effective interventions, based on women's experiences in other international post-conflict situations;
- Building strategic partnerships and alliances to promote gender equity in governance in Afghanistan;
- Building and managing relationships with key stakeholders in research, international aid and foreign policy to support women's human rights in Afghanistan.

A Steering Committee co-chaired by Adeena Niazi of the Afghan Women's Organization, Senator Mobina Jaffer, Carolyn Bennett, M.P., and Marilou McPhedran of York University worked with Afghan women living in Canada and members of the Canadian Coalition for Afghan Women to design an intense 3-day session of interactive, mutually respectful learning at York University in Toronto and on Parliament Hill in Ottawa.

This training project was undertaken with the financial and in kind support of the Government of Canada provided through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the Afghan Women's Organization, the Body Shop Canada, staff in the offices of Carolyn Bennett, M.P., and Senator Mobina Jaffer, as well as crucial support from three centres at York University: the National Network on Environments and Women's Health (NNEWH), the Centre for Feminist Research (CFR) and the York Centre for International and Security Studies (YCISS).

As the keynote speaker for the first morning, the Hon. Maria Minna, formerly the Minister for International Cooperation, provided a context for discussing women's empowerment through their involvement in community rebuilding projects.

The post-Taliban situation in Afghanistan has often been described as an “incomplete peace.” There remains much work to be done in rebuilding as the country has experienced war for more than the last two decades. Remnants of war can be seen in the millions of landmines that continue to kill and maim people throughout the country. Participants expressed fears of the possibility that the conflict may intensify rather than end as the term of the provisional government draws to a close, leading up to the *loya jurga* in June. Barriers to Afghan women's participation in the political process and the economy and other spheres of society include unemployment, underemployment, limited access to education and professional training programs, lack of access to political

institutions and ill health due to the years of severe deprivation under the rule of the Taliban.

A common theme throughout the training program was that the lessons learned from experiences of conflict in other parts of the world such as Kurdistan, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, the former Yugoslavia and East Timor will be invaluable to the process of increasing the role of women in the reconstruction in Afghanistan. Strategies from these experiences include women working together across national, religious, ethnic and linguistic boundaries and the use of storytelling to communicate and inspire women to seek positions of leadership and influence. An awareness that women's oppression extends beyond patriarchal domination means recognition of the connections with their political and social empowerment. Afghan women are not portrayed accurately in the media and these images are used by Western politicians to advance an agenda of liberation that often does not take into account the context in which they exist.

The violations of the human rights of women and girls are criminal, not cultural. Sally Armstrong reported on her recent visit to Afghanistan, where important changes in the Ministry of Women's Affairs headed by Dr. Sima Samar is attempting to establish a law commission on both constitutional and sharia law and a nationwide literacy program. A distinct statement on the rights of women will provide a legal basis for confronting discrimination. Improved access to all levels of education for girls and women will pave the way to lessening the gender gap in education and political representation.

The second part of the training program took place in Ottawa, hosted by Senator Jaffer and Dr. Bennett. Participants travelled together by train to Ottawa, working on a draft Action Plan, which was finalised in a late night meeting in Ottawa on Sunday evening and presented on Monday to the Minister for International Cooperation and her officials. Senator Jaffer and Dr. Bennett facilitated introductions to several members of the Cabinet in the House of Commons and other influential parliamentarians throughout the day, which culminated in a spontaneous evening session organised by Senator Jaffer with Afghan women and officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) to begin planning for a series of roundtables for Afghan Canadian women in major cities on implementing Resolution 1325 of the United Nations Security Council.

As the opening guest speaker on Monday, the Honourable Susan Whelan, Minister for International Cooperation, discussed the role of Canada and its assistance to Afghanistan through humanitarian aid, peacebuilding and reconstruction with a focus on gender equality. Having attended the International Conference on the Reconstruction of Afghanistan in Tokyo, Minister Whelan relayed that improving the status of women was high on the agenda of members of the international community. She reported that Canada committed to supporting Afghanistan's efforts to building civil society as well as establishing stability during the term of the interim administration. The December 2001 federal budget set aside \$100 million in emergency humanitarian assistance as well as support for initiatives to help create long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan and the surrounding countries which are host to considerable numbers of Afghan refugees. The minister reported that Canada's collaboration was to be quick impact programs that

offered opportunities for women's leadership in Afghanistan without further compromising women's safety. The Minister's officials assured participants that Canada's contributions were to be directed through recognized NGOs working in the region.

In the afternoon, participants were briefed by Muslim-Canadian women working in senior governmental positions in the House of Commons (“on the Hill”) as well as specific tools, such as gender-based analysis of laws and policies, which assist policy makers in identifying factors that contribute to equality-seeking outcomes. As guests of Senator Jaffer and Dr. Bennett, participants attended Question Period of Parliament and met in person with Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, Deputy Prime Minister John Manley, as well as The Hon. Bill Graham, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, The Hon. Anne McLellan, the Minister of Health, the Hon. Allan Rock, Minister of Industry. As well, participants were invited to meet in her offices by the Hon. Sheila Copps, the senior minister for Status of Women and Heritage Canada, to discuss a possible international conference in Canada as follow up to the Brussels Conference of Afghan women.

Over the course of the three days, discussion ranged widely within the context of women's role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Several participants expressed interest in returning to work in Afghanistan but had reservations about the security available. They expressed concerns with organizations that do not recognize their non-Canadian training and qualifications. Afghan-Canadians who would like to offer their experience and expertise by assisting with reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan were invited to contact CANADEM (the Canadian Resource Bank for Democracy and Human Rights) and CIDA's Canadian-based NGO partners such as Oxfam Canada, Care Canada and the Red Cross. It was made clear that during such a volatile period, neither the Department of National Defence nor the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade would guarantee the security of individuals in Afghanistan. It was acknowledged that women who go to Afghanistan jeopardize their personal security and women living there are already targets of gender-based violence.

There was also interest in sharing information about how Afghan women living in Canada may help Afghanistan without physically returning there. The actions of Afghan women who have settled in Canada were also viewed as important. However, several of the participants with direct personal experience reported that as writers who would like to use their work as a vehicle for raising awareness about Afghan women's lives, they had been disappointed by the lack of publishing opportunities in Canada and discussed their concern with Minister Copps and her officials.

The following issues were raised in the course of the sessions:

- Solidarity amongst women in Afghanistan and with women around the world is important
- Women in the West need to listen to Afghan women to find out what their priorities are (i.e. food shortages, education, employment, health, etc.) and provide support for those goals

- Over-emphasis on the *burqa* in the West: the *burqa* is misrepresented as solely a source of women's oppression in Afghanistan
- Women in the West need to critically analyze their own positions within society and refrain from over-simplifying the state of women's equality in Afghanistan by comparison
- Recognition that even Afghan women in the diaspora cannot assume that they know what Afghan women living in Afghanistan need although they can offer their perspectives

Questions raised:

How to ensure the protection of local women and Afghan nationals who return temporarily

- What is the Canadian government doing to study and build projects to include Afghan-Canadians in psycho-social reconstruction in mental health?
- What can DFAIT do to facilitate Afghanistan's ratification and implementation of CEDAW - the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women?
- Why is Canadian money that has been promised by our government months ago not yet in the hands of Afghan ministries, especially the Ministries of Women's Affairs, Health and Education?

Recommendations from participants to the Government of Canada:

- Facilitate ways for interested individuals to return to Afghanistan
- Provide short-term intensive training to Afghan qualified doctors and other health professionals
- Take a lead role in lobbying the international community to adopt a policy of gender equality in political representation and decision-making
- Ensure that the funds reach those who need it the most and use various avenues for distribution
- Ensure prompt delivery and accountability of funds administered to assist Afghans
- Provide opportunities for grassroots Afghan organizations to access Canadian funding to build capacity.

Summary of strategies for advocacy discussed

- The mothers and grandmothers (Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo) who defied Argentina's military junta by demanding the return of their "disappeared" sons and daughters exhibited the persistence that is necessary to affect change in their struggle for justice
- Seek out mentors and role models

- Become a role model for other women and girls
- Leadership requires responsibility and can be lonely: seek support networks for your work
- Write to senators and members of parliament (free postage)
- Invite senators and members of Parliament to speak in your community
- Inform the Canadian public of the many non-military ways in which Canada is making a difference in Afghanistan

Summary of steps for securing funding

- Identify the actual needs of the affected communities.
- Identify where the money is
- Find out who the funders are and what their funders' priorities are (i.e. is their emphasis on physical infrastructure, social infrastructure or both?).
- Don't assume that NGOs and funders know everything already; inform them of priority areas and key concerns.
- Ensure local women's participation at various levels of projects, particularly in leadership roles; training for local women. Create partnerships with women's organizations at the local level.

On the third day of the program, participants met with government officials and politicians up to the last possible moment before leaving to travel to their homes in different parts of Canada. (Please refer to Appendix B and C for the Program Agenda, and the Action Plan developed by the participants and presented to elected officials in Ottawa).

Appendix D

Afghan Women's Leadership and Governance Training Action Plan

Afghan women living in Canada met for two days of training and discourse at York University and traveled to Ottawa for a day of meetings with officials and parliamentarians in the Parliament Buildings of the Government of Canada. On the evening of Sunday February 24th, the group unanimously agreed that the Government of Canada would be asked to provide immediate financial support to implement, on an urgent basis, the Action Plan developed by the group, in consultation with advisors from universities, government and the media.

To ensure rapid response, the Afghan Canadian women agreed upon three priorities subject to the overarching principle that all possible funding that could go to Afghanistan must go to support capacity building in Afghanistan. It was agreed that any funding to support initiatives with Afghan women living in Canada should come from sources dedicated to domestic activities within Canada.

For example, Status of Women Canada (SWC), which will not pay for travel outside Canada, has been asked to support the international conference listed as the second priority because such support from SWC will not detract from any possible funding from Canada for capacity building in Afghanistan.

** Adopted unanimously by participants in the Afghan Women's Leadership and Governance Training Program at York University in Toronto, February 22, 2002*

| |
|---|
| TOP PRIORITY: WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN REHABILITATION & RECONSTRUCTION |
|---|

1. Capacity Building for rehabilitation and reconstruction in Afghanistan must:

- Begin with the most vulnerable members of Afghan society, particularly women, including widows, children, people with disabilities, and include psycho-social supports in the aid programs;

- Move skills and resources into Afghanistan on an urgent basis, with an emphasis on increasing women's leadership in health, education, employment and governance; and
- Develop and support Afghan women's leadership in the fields of health, education, employment and governance at every level of society - community, municipal, regional, national and international.

2. International Conference in Canada

- As a key component of capacity building for Afghan women's leadership, Canada should convene and host an international conference as a follow-up to the conference of Afghan Women held in Brussels in December 2001. This conference will apply the principles in the Brussels Proclamation;
- Participants will be invited on the basis of nominations for participation from the Ministry of Women's Affairs and from the NGOs in Afghanistan that make up the "grassroots" network. Invitations will not be exclusive and NGOs in Canada, such as the Canadian Coalition for Afghan Women, the Afghan Women's Organization and Women for Women Afghanistan (W4W Afghanistan) will reach out to increase awareness among potential participants in different parts of Afghanistan;
- Conference participants from Afghanistan and the refugee camps bordering Afghanistan need to be financially supported to ensure their attendance. Advocates for Afghan women's human rights from other countries and international agencies, many of whom participated in the Brussels Conference, need to be funded to participate;
- In preparing for this international conference, it is understood that the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs is to be the lead ministry to ensure coordination of efforts by the whole government and that the participation of other Afghan ministries, such as Health and Education, is essential;
- This international conference will emphasize Afghan women's leadership in health, education, employment and governance. The conference will focus on implementation strategies (such as shipping books and supplies to Afghanistan) and the tools needed to implement priorities set by the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs. Two key areas to be explored are:
 - i. Constitution building for Afghanistan following through on the commitment in the Afghan Constitution (1964). Women's human rights standards in United Nations human rights treaties, especially the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) need to be incorporated with the full commitment of the Afghan Government to ratify all the United Nations human rights treaties, CEDAW in particular. Research on constitutions, Sharia law and international covenants needs to be produced and circulated in advance of the conference;

- ii. Social determinants of health: such as women's access to health services, education and employment, conditions of employment, human security (for example food and shelter security, de-mining by women, access to resources, human rights).

3. Follow-up Work

Follow-up on the implementation of the Action Plan must include:

1. Resources for capacity building beyond the term of the provisional government and
2. Coordination of efforts through collaboration and networking, rather than in ways that foster competition and duplication
3. Extending opportunities to other Afghan women in Canada to learn about Resolution 1325 and related international women's rights as tools to support women in Afghanistan.

For more information on the Afghan Leadership and Governance Training Events and Action Plan, please contact

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