

Security Council Open debate on women, peace and security – 5th October 2009

Statement by Ambassador Zahir Tanin, Permanent Representative of Afghanistan to the United Nations

Afghanistan

Mr. President,

First, allow me to congratulate you for assuming the presidency of this Council for the month of October, and thank you for convening this meeting so early in your presidency. There has recently been noteworthy positive momentum in these halls concerning the rights of women, and it is my hope that we can benefit from that momentum here today.

Mr. President,

Worldwide, women start at a disadvantage. In some countries, this means wage discrepancies and debates over harassment at the workplace. But in conflict and post-conflict situations, the substantial ills facing these societies are magnified when it comes to women. When a society is poor, proportionally more women go hungry. When education or healthcare is lacking, women and girls are the first to be deprived. And when a nation faces substantial insecurity, women find themselves more vulnerable, more restricted, and more cut off from necessary resources.

Mr. President,

The situation of women in Afghanistan became an issue of wider international interest when the Taliban first began enforcing their brutal, misogynistic social policies and Afghan women became hunted people in their own homeland. Thus, when the Taliban were toppled in 2001, it was seen at least partially as the stroke that freed Afghan women from their chains. Afghanistan and the international community made a promise to each other that what happened under the Taliban would never happen again. More importantly, we made the same promise to the women of Afghanistan.

Mr. President,

Over the past eight years, we have kept those promises to the best of our abilities. The Afghan Constitution guarantees equal rights to women and representation in the government. Afghanistan has endorsed the Millennium Development Goals, is a signatory to the Beijing Programme of Action as well as CEDAW, fully supports the implementation of resolutions 1325 and 1820, and has put in place a legal and political framework that protects and promotes the rights of women.

Beyond these legal initiatives, Afghan women have seen a tangible improvement in their daily lives, including improved access to education, healthcare and basic infrastructure. Afghanistan's National Action Plan for Women ensures that women and girls receive equal access to these resources.

Further, and perhaps most importantly, Afghan women now play an active role in the sociopolitical life of Afghanistan. Women have been appointed to high governmental posts, and they represent a guaranteed percentage of both local and national governing bodies. In this most recent election, women ran for positions in provincial councils in greater numbers than ever before - and there were even two female candidates for president. More than 60 thousand women were trained and volunteered as observers, poll workers, and ballot counters. And, despite the increasingly turbulent security situation, more than two million women across the country came out to vote.

Mr. President,

Despite these positive developments, Afghan women do not enjoy the freedom and security that they deserve. In order to fully satisfy our promise to the women of Afghanistan, we need to understand the roots of the problems as well as the situations today that frustrate our efforts.

First, enduring insecurity has always played a central role in women's suffering in Afghanistan. In the past, insecurity caused a complete breakdown in infrastructure and resources, resulting in backbreaking poverty and lack of access to healthcare and basic education. Today, restricted access to the most insecure parts of the country perpetuates this situation and hinders progress. The Taliban are increasingly targeting civilians, particularly women and girls, to deny them access to basic services and rights. In addition, insecurity promotes a gun culture that values brute force over rule of law. The resulting danger keeps women confined to their homes out of fear for their safety and honor, further fettering their access to services and public life. Second, extremist ideologies of oppression have primarily threatened women over the past thirty years. Throughout the 1990s, the Taliban and other armed groups engaged in severe violence against women. Crimes against women, including sexual violence and forced marriage, were justified and protected by extremism. Unfortunately, as long as insecurity and extremism persist, Afghanistan cannot be freed of this perversion of perspective and action regarding women.

Mr. President,

In addition to these root causes, weak and fragile state institutions in parts of Afghanistan have regrettably restricted the ability of the government to fully protect the rights of women. An infant justice system and police force do not yet have the training or resources to investigate, adjudicate, or punish crimes adequately. And our underdeveloped bureaucracy has not yet acquired the capacities necessary to meet the demands placed upon it. In Afghanistan, there is not a lack of will for progress, but circumstances have proved to be a formidable opponent to its achievement.

Mr. President,

Despite these continuing challenges, Afghanistan is committed to ensuring that all women enjoy the full use of their rights in safety. With the help and support of the international community, we are addressing weak and insufficient governance through capacity-building and the strengthening of our institutions and security apparatus. In this regard, we emphasize the importance of the international forces' new focus on protecting the population, which will help to minimize violence against women. Further, we are continually trying to improve the legal status of Afghan women and uphold the international juridical and legislative standards, for example through the review of over 60 of the more controversial articles of the proposed Shia family relations law.

Mr. President,

The Government of Afghanistan is committed to representing the interests of all Afghans: male and female, young and old. We are encouraging Afghan women to take a proactive and vocal role in their future, as this is essential to reknitting the economic, social and political fabric of Afghanistan. Above all, in our political pursuit of national reconciliation, we must not break the promise that we made to ourselves and to Afghan women in 2001. We cannot betray women's rights and security in exchange for a shallow peace in Afghanistan, because in doing so we would betray our own hope for a stable future. We must instead unite around the ideal of equal justice and rights for all.

Thank you, Mr. President.