



Tribute to International Women's Day

Women Leading Change: Protecting the Right to Equality

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INTRODUCTION

Fellow speakers, distinguished participants, fellow women and advocates of gender fair society, I greet all of you "Happy International Day of Women".

As we gather today, let us remember the women who lived and died before us. The women who made it possible for our voices to be heard today, the women who made it possible for us to work for the fulfillment of our dreams. Today, let us pay tribute to the women in the fields, in the classrooms, in the streets, in wherever they may be, because the life that they live forms the foundation of our quest for liberation and equality.

MY LIFE AS A PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

In 2004, I stepped out of my ordinary life to become the first woman Presidential candidate in the history of my country.

I decided to run for President because I could no longer tolerate the sufferings of my people. The ousting of the Talibans was also a golden moment in the life of our nation. The people were optimistic, support were pouring from the international community, there is a general sentiment to change, to improve, to grow, to embrace what is positive. I dreamed beyond what an ordinary Afghan woman would dream of. I dreamed of transforming my country and liberating my people from poverty and deprivation. I never wanted the men to become our first President after the long years of war because I know Afghan men. They will

not believe in the capacities and potentials of women as much as a woman like me would.

More importantly, I dreamed of instant changes in the lives of women. I thought that if they will have a woman President, all the perceptual barriers about women's political participation and leadership will be instantly demolished. And if I will succeed, I would have paved the way for many women leaders to come out of their shell and lend a hand in rebuilding the country. I knew I was running against a stalwart who had the backing of the international community and all the political acumen needed to win a Presidential seat. I knew that I may have a slim chance to win as President. But I also knew that I have a big chance of demonstrating to the women and to our people that the era of women's confinement in the home is over.

Looking back, I may have lost the Presidency, but my ambition to get rid of perceptual barriers against women's political participation was more than a victory.

My campaign was difficult. I faced a lot of difficulties but I never talked about it in public because I do not want to discourage the women from running for public office.

It was difficult because I was a woman and I am running as President in a culture where people are not used to listening and believing in the words of women - where a woman in public space is considered an aberration, and where society thought that a woman aspiring to become head of the nation is probably crazy. Second, it was hard because I did not have the resources, so I had to count on my informal networks and circle of friends. I had to resort to creative means of getting votes such as standing alone in a busy street and starting to deliver a campaign speech. Sometimes people thought that I was out of my mind. But I was gifted with a loud voice and convincing ability. So, those difficult moments of campaigning alone in the streets under the heat of the sun were the ones that earned me votes.

Third, it was difficult because the electoral machinations were not something I was familiar with. I did not know the processes and the politics that undergird the many major events. But I tried to learn and it paid off. In fact, I myself was surprised that I ranked fourth among nine candidates. It impacted positively on the women because more women entered politics. During the last election, two women ran against the very same President who defeated me in the 2004

elections. And Afghanistan is the 10th country in the world with the highest number of women in the Parliament.

I believe in the creation of a community of women leaders. Nobody could be a successful activist in isolation. But I also believe that this community of women leaders should be bonded together by a shared vision and commitment to make life a little bit better for other women. I believe that a community of women leaders would be stronger if they stand in the platform of sisterhood and solidarity. And these women should believe in a vision of women and men living in harmony and sharing opportunities, decision making and resources on equal basis.

THE SITUATION OF WOMEN TODAY IN AFGHANISTAN

Whenever I encounter the question of whether the status of Afghan women today is better or worse, I could only say that we have been through the worst situation. So, it could not be any worse than during those times, under the Taliban regime.

Afghan women are better off today than before. They have rights equal to men before the law. Gender based discrimination has been outlawed. For the first time in our history, we have a ten-year plan of action for women's advancement and we have a law on the elimination of violence against women. Our girls are back to school. Our women could access services. They can enter the mosques now. They can vote and get elected. They can work. In other words, they are beginning to become human beings again.

However, these gains are very limited compared to the magnitude of problems that still have to be confronted. Majority of our people are really poor, and among the poor, women bear the greatest consequences. Domestic violence is still prevalent. Women in public life are still marginalized. Afghanistan has still the second highest maternal mortality rate in the world. Yes, these problems remain. But these problems were there in greater magnitude before the ousting of the Taliban. And when you experience these problems in a situation where there is not even a glimmer of hope, it is blown in greater proportion than when it happens in an environment of national reconstruction.

Nowadays, women still wear burqa, particularly in remote provinces and among illiterate women. To some, it is their way of life. They feel more protected and secured under the burqa. And if you have been accustomed to the use of burqa

since you were a teen ager, removing the burqa could be very uncomfortable. Seeing women without burqa is also uncomfortable to men and children. But this is a process of change. There will be resistance, there will be surprises, but all of these will gradually die down.

In terms of education, women and girls in urban areas have greater access to education than those in the rural areas. But this is also true for males. The real factor that makes it difficult for females to acquire education is the lack of security in the schools and in the road. There were a lot of incidents of threatening or throwing acid in the faces of girls. So, these are enough reasons for parents to stop their girls from going to school. Another factor is that the schools are remotely located from the residences. There are usually poor toilet facilities in the schools, and there is still an acute shortage of female teachers. In addition, families do not appreciate much the value of female education. Finally, under-age marriage is very rampant in my country. The moment a girl is married off, the prospects for finishing her education are diminished.

HOW CAN THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY HELP

There is a saying that sisterhood is global. The women have no particular country because the country of women is the whole world. No matter where you go, women are disadvantaged, except for Nordic countries perhaps. So, the cause of the Afghan women is the cause of women all over the world. You cannot say that you have succeeded in improving the status of women unless the status of the Afghan women has improved.

If we are able to achieve something, that is because of the support of the international community. I remember that when I was Minister of Women, the Parliament would always think about abolishing the Ministry of Women. But with the help of the international community, and in God's graces, the Ministry of Women in Afghanistan continues to exist.

For the international community to help advance the status of Afghan women, there is a need to continuously raise the issue in global fora like this. You should not stop holding my government accountable over their performance on gender equality.

You should continue sending missions to my country to check on the implementation of international commitments such as the Millennium Development Goals, and the Beijing Platform for Action which is celebrating its

15th year today. You should keep on making statements whenever the rights of women in Afghanistan are being violated. You should support the development of a critical mass of women leaders in all sectors of my country. But you should also continue talking and getting the support of men and imparting among the young boys the value of egalitarian relations between females and males.

Finally, the best that you can do is to continue improving the status of women in your respective countries. By attaining the highest possible status of women, you serve as our inspiration and you also create standards for governments to follow in advancing the status of women globally.

CLOSING

As I close, let me thank you for giving me a chance to share with you my humble experiences coming from the country which is known to be the worst place in the world to be a woman.

As we celebrate the International Day of Women, let us think of what we inherited from the women who struggled before us. And likewise, let us also think of what we will hand down as inheritance to the girls and young women who will live after us.

Thank you very much.