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Strategic Communication and Spokespersons Unit, Kabul, Afghanistan

Press Conference

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PRESS CONFERENCE (near verbatim transcript)

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Kabul – 25 November 2010

Ines Alberdi: Thanks for being here. I am delighted to be here in Afghanistan for the first time. I have my offices in New York, and for me and UNIFEM Afghanistan is very important. We have here a very large team and for us the connection with the work of our team is a priority. I have been here only three days, but I have had the occasion to hold very good meetings.

Yesterday I had the opportunity to meet with the High Peace Council, where we had a very good discussion with some members of the steering committee. I am impressed by the advancement of their work, the importance they put on human rights and the presence of women in the Council and even in the steering committee of the Council.

We told them our hopes for their work to spread all around Afghanistan to all provinces and to be able to reach the collaboration of women and women's organization in the important work of the High Peace Council.

Yesterday we also had the opportunity to meet the Minister of Women's Affairs and we commend her role and her leadership for all the advances Afghan women have got in those years. We commend Madame, the Minister, for the new law to fight violence against women.

And also yesterday we had the opportunity to attend the conference to launch the campaign of 16 days to fight violence against women. It was a very important gathering and especially the presence of President Karzai was very well received.

I commend President Karzai's clear message on the need to work and to advance on the fight in the eradication of violence against women that I am sure you already know.

He was very clear in his messages for the need to get the support and the collaboration of religious leaders and elders of the communities of the whole society to join forces to improve girls' and boys' education. especially for girls, and to end violence inside the family.

He was also very clear on the need to respect the freedom of girls and women in reference to marriage, to avoid early marriage and to respect the will of men and women to marry together.

At UNIFEM we welcome all these messages and the purpose of the Government of Afghanistan and we are willing to work with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to implement the changes in respect to the status of women.

In these days, I also had the opportunity to meet with my colleagues in the UN system and also with many representatives of women organizations in civil society.

As you know our main counterpart to work here in Afghanistan is the Government, especially the women's machinery inside the Government and women's organizations, and because of that I feel that my visit here has been very successful. I am very thankful for your attention and am willing to respond to any questions you may ask.

Questions and Answers:

Negah TV [translated from Dari]: You just stated that you met with some relevant organisations who are working for women in Afghanistan. You also had meetings and sessions with the High Peace Council and you talked about positive issues that have happened in the last eight years. During your discussions you may have become aware of the fact that there are problems that women face here with respect to certain issues such as drug addiction? In general, how do you find the status of women here? And do you have plans and programmes to be implemented for the betterment of women in Afghanistan?

Alberdi: I understand perfectly your concerns. As you say, there are very important problems for women in Afghanistan. We give great importance to education levels here and the need for all children, especially girls, to finish primary education. As far as health is concerned, the maternal mortality levels are very high. But at the same time, we can see some advances and commitments from the Government and from the international groups of donors that are willing to help the Government to cope with this main problem.

Bakhtar TV [translated from Dari]: The issue of women in Afghan, especially violence against women, is a hot issue and statistics show that such violence is increasing in Afghanistan. What should be the response of UNIFEM to address this violence and the number of the cases that are on the rise?

Alberdi: You are right. As I was talking about two main issues, about the situation, the status of women and violence could be one of our priorities of our work. The level of violence is very high. It is difficult to view the numbers and to view the trends, because there are no exact statistics. But, anyhow, we know that the level of violence against women is very high.

There is the question of violence inside the home, mostly between fathers and the daughters, married people, husbands and wives and also the violence, for instance in early marriage—many of these aspects could be seen as levels of violence against women. For UNIFEM, and now UN Women, that is a priority to work to eradicate violence. This is one of our main areas of concern and work.

We have a trust fund to implement programmes for prevention, protection and attention to the victims of violence. At the same time, we know that violence against women is widespread and there are high levels in Afghanistan. We see this new law as a very important first step to eradicate violence. Acknowledgement of the violence is the first step to start finishing the situation and then the second step is to define it as a crime - to maltreat or to do any harm or to harass or abuse women.

Then we have these two steps that are very important, the recognition of the problem and a new law to cope with the problem. And you are right, the question of violence is still our main concern and in that respect UNIFEM has been working, mobilizing the mentality of the people and mobilizing the society to end violence

In that respect, because violence against women is one of our main concerns and also a main concern for the Government of Afghanistan, I have to add that UNIFEM is working closely with the Commission to end violence against women. The Commission that is chaired by the Minister of Women's Affairs, but that includes certain Ministers also involved such as the Justice Ministry and the Interior Ministry.

Then I think it is a step which we can use here in Afghanistan and all of you can use to end violence against women. For the part of UNIFEM, we have been working in many respects to try to make advocacy against violence. But also starting programmes to engage men and boys in the fight against violence, because it is very important to view the question of violence against women as a problem for men and women, for all of us. In that respect, the UN Secretary-General has been launching a campaign since 2008, a campaign that will end by 2015 to fight violence against women all over the world. It's not just a problem of just Afghanistan, but all over the world.

There is one question that is related: there is a main partner we need in this campaign to change the view as we see the violence and to change the behavior and that is the partnership of the media. The role of the media is the key to change our view of violence and to change the behavior of men and women in relation to violence against women.

BBC Radio [translated from Dari]: Are you not concerned that the achievements in the last few years regarding women will be jeopardized by the programme of talks that the Government has started?

Alberdi: I hope not. I hope the achievements and the most open views on the status of women that is their reality in the Afghan society, will also influence the Taliban behavior. I hope they will be answering the needs and demands of most women in the country. I understand that the need for peace and stabilization requires negotiations with all people in the country and with all the population. I guess it is a difficult aspect, but we can hope that with this democratic structure, with the Constitution, even some groups that are coming from more strict traditions in relation to women's issues will accept, especially, the need for education. That is the most important aspect of the future of the Afghan society. I hope they will understand it that way.

BBC English: Did you come across any individuals or any story that exemplifies the problems you are dealing with?

Alberdi: I don't find exactly the relation with any case because I have been here for only a short period. But talking with my team in UNIFEM, I learned about stories and situation of women, especially women who have been through terrible times, have been victims of violence. And one of the aspects that is more surprising and I admire most is their resilience, their capacity to start again...who are willing to start another way of living, to decide to go on even with the enormous damage they received. I think the example of many women reaching education and educating their children with no livelihood—you know the strength of women and their stress and their violence is very, very often amazing.

Shamshad TV [translated from Dari]: Were there any issues faced by women with respect to the last parliamentary elections?

Alberdi: More than problems, we now have a big challenge. In the last elections, there have been a higher number of women in Parliament. That's an important challenge to have the voices of the women to have the possibility to support their needs and demands. I think this is a big step, a big change. But still we have to support and continue to respect the possibility and right to be a part of the Parliament and the Government.

There is another meeting that I want to talk to you about with the governor of Daikundi. Daikundi is a province that apparently has low levels of development. UNIFEM together with other agencies are working to prepare a pilot programme to work with the Government in the direction of development with a very important gender perspective. Yesterday, the Government of Daikundi was responding very positively to this proposal. The Governor was talking about two important needs for his province: education and the need for schools for girls, and the question of health. The level of attention to health is very low and they do need support to build places and to have doctors in the province. At same time, he offered the full support of the Government and the population. UNIFEM and other UN agencies are working on this. They are preparing for a meeting on this in Daikundi next month to start this programme together, in order to increase development with the important perspective of the development of women and girls.

Salaam Watandar [translated from Dari]: When you actually refer to the law on the elimination of violence against women, to what extent do you think has this law been successful? And what have been important drawbacks and problems in the way of implementation of this?

Alberdi: You know the first step is to have a law. It is true that we now have a very big challenge: how to implement the law? This is the story in most countries where they made this change. First, they pass the law that defines violence against women as a crime. And then to implement this has been very big challenge. Because we need the support of the security forces, police, the judiciary, and then to be sure that the perpetrators will be punished. That is true, that is an important step, but still we have now a big challenge, how to implement the law?

Anyway, I would like to add something. To pass a law on this question is not only the possibility to punish this behaviour and the commitment of the Government to work against violence, but always the law has a pedagogical aspect. It is also a signal and message for the whole population for men and women that they are changing their behaviour. For women their dignity will be enforced by law and the respect for the rights of women will be an obligation. We have seen in many countries – because this kind of change is similar and very recent in most of the countries around the world – and these kinds of laws against violence against women are quite recent in most countries, even Europe, America, and Africa. This is a completely new thing in the last decades, but the message of change is important.

TV 1: Civil Society announced that the Karzai Government itself has violated the rights of women. When Government violates the rights of women, how can we be partners with that sort of a Government? How do you think this partnership will yield success because, based on what civil society has announced, the Government itself has a hand in violations against women.

Alberdi: Well, I think this is an important aspect or a need for the Government to respect the human rights of women. In respect of violence against women, the declaration at yesterday's conference of President Karzai was very clear. I hope the Government will respect this clear

message. That was a very clear message from him. He was speaking to a very large audience in his willingness to eradicate violence, respect the rights of women and girls, and asking all parts of society, especially religious leaders and elders in the community, to view in another way the situation and the dignity of women. In that respect I think this call is a very good move. I understand perfectly your demand, but I think yesterday's declaration about this situation, about the needs from the Islamic point of view, that the dignity of women is a main issue to respect and to support from the Government.

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