Delegation from Afghanistan Represented by Emily-Leslie-Stevenson

**Position Paper for the Commission on the Status of Women**

*Topic 1: Women and Sustainability*

The government of Afghanistan recognizes that gender inequalities lead to environmental degradation. Afghanistan signed the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Our country recognizes that agriculture is important to reducing our dependence on foreign aid and creating a more sustainable future. Men dominate agriculture in Afghanistan. They are more likely to work harvesting lucrative cash crops, while women work in fields or tend livestock, especially on family plots. Women have limited access to resources or profits, and thus, have higher levels of poverty. Empowering women will help reduce hunger and malnutrition, improving food security. Women are central to any plan to create a sustainable agricultural policy.

Our country has developed a number of initiatives to help improve sustainability. The National Environmental Protection Agency has arranged a number of workshops for female teachers on the role women can play in addressing climate change (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2014). Another initiative includes the creation of farming unions, which receive support from the Ministry of Agriculture (Mashal, 2016). These unions are headed by women, and are spearheading a new movement to diversify agriculture beyond the current focus on wheat and potatoes. Unions grow a wide variety of vegetables, such as cabbage, cauliflower, tomatoes, and beans. Women involved in these unions gain additional status in their communities, helping to address food security, but also gender inequalities. The government of Afghanistan welcomes these programs and is committed to the development of further local agricultural projects headed by women. Following the example of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, we would like to encourage the production of more native foods in place of more ecologically demanding export crops. Afghanistan is also committed to improving women’s access to microfinance loans to help get these projects off the ground.

*Topic 2: Elimination of Gender-Based Violence*

Afghanistan recognizes the problem of violence against women. A Global Rights report estimates that almost 90% of women in Afghanistan experience some form of abuse in their lives (Vyas, 2015). It is mainly families committing these crimes. Sima Samar, the Chairperson for the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, notes: “It’s a male conservative, selfish mentality. They believe that they have the superiority of being men and having a long beard. They are not there to think that every human being is equal” (Vyas, 2015). Honour killings are a particular problem (Banerjee, 2016). This is when a daughter is killed if she brings shame to her family, by refusing an arranged marriage or marrying someone of her choice. Another problem is self-immolation, which is where a young girl sets herself on fire to escape an abusive marriage. Our government launched a campaign to raise awareness about this problem and self-immolation has decreased from 350 cases a year to 70 cases per year in Herat province (http://www.trustineducation.org/resources/life-as-an-afghan-woman/).

Many improvements have been made since the fall of the Taliban. In 2009, our government introduced a law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. This law set new penalties for underage and forced marriage and rape. We need to protect this law and to ensure its enforcement. A new Ministry of Women’s Affairs was also set up to defend women’s rights, as well as a High Commission for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (Vyas, 2015). A Prosecution Office for the Elimination of Violence was created. A key problem is that culture and beliefs are slow to change. The government has begun a number of campaigns to help change attitudes, but more work is needed. We also need to ensure an adequate network of shelters for women who are victims of violence (Rubin, 2015).. It is important to stop corruption in the government (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2014). The best solution to violence, however, is to fight poverty. This can be achieved by making sure women get an education, and are empowered at home and at work.

*Topic 3: Women in Education and Employment*

Boys in Afghanistan are three times more likely to go to school than girls. Eighty five percent of women have no formal education and are illiterate (http://www.trustineducation.org/resources/life-as-an-afghan-woman/). A key problem is that 60 percent of girls are married by age 16 (http://www.trustineducation.org/resources/life-as-an-afghan-woman/). Marriages in rural areas are mostly arranged or forced (http://www.trustineducation.org/resources/life-as-an-afghan-woman/). Girls who marry young do not continue their education. There are also severe health implications. Young girls are five times more likely to die during childbirth than older women (http://www.trustineducation.org/resources/life-as-an-afghan-woman/).. Their low status also makes them more likely to be abused. The Taliban banned women from going to work and school. Even though the Taliban are not in power now, insurgents’ still attack schools and threaten teachers. They send death threats to women who work. Several prominent women have been murdered (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

Many gains have been made. Women’s rights are recognized in the new constitution signed in 2004. Article 22 states “the citizens of Afghanistan- whether man or woman- have equal rights and duties before the law” (http://www.trustineducation.org/resources/life-as-an-afghan-woman/). Our country has also signed the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which states that every child has the right to a free basic education. Girls’ education has improved in Afghanistan. Since 2002, the number of girls going to school has increased by over 30 percent (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2014). The government has also worked to change the legal age of marriage for girls from 16 to 17 (although many men do not bother reporting their marriages) (http://www.trustineducation.org/resources/life-as-an-afghan-woman/). Women can be employed, if their male relatives permit it. They have now the right to vote and to go into local politics (Human Rights Watch, 2015). These rights are fragile, however, and must be constantly defended. Gains have also been unequal, mainly benefitting elite and urban women, instead of women in poor and rural areas where the Taliban are still prominent. We need to increase the number of schools for girls and the number of female teachers. Increasing the number of female dormitories at universities is also important.

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