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A Transformation: Afghanistan Beyond 2014

Chairman Kaine, Ranking Member Risch and other members of the committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today about the progress, challenges and hopes of my sisters in this critical year of transition in Afghanistan.

Let me also thank you for your long time support of the Afghan people and especially Afghan women. Without your support, the support of your colleagues and support from the people of the United States, Afghans would likely still be living under Taliban rule, deprived of everything, including basic human rights.

The suffering of Afghan women, especially in the last three decades, is widely known and extensively documented. Some Afghan women became victims of war and insurgency but we also must remember and celebrate that many of us are survivors. Born and raised in war, my earliest childhood memories from the 1990s include collecting golden and bronze bullet shells from my neighborhood in Kabul and building castles out of them. My personal life is intertwined with the political struggles of my country, making my political and policy views inseparable from my story.

I was barely a teenager when the Taliban took over Kabul in 1996. One of the first things they did was to close all schools for girls, leaving me and millions of other Afghan girls locked up in our own homes with no hope of receiving an education.

Even though things were not easy before the Taliban took over my city, I was still able to go to school and see my friends. But after the Taliban I was denied basic rights and opportunities because of my gender.

Yet despite the Taliban's ban on girls' education, many brave women started secret schools in their own homes. I was overjoyed when I found out about one such secret school in our neighborhood, Shar-e-Now. Even though my parents knew I could be harmed by the Taliban for attending school they agreed to enroll me.

I walked to school every day with fear as the Taliban had security checkpoints in almost every block. I hid my books in an unmarked bag and changed my route to school constantly.

Once inside the class, I was happy to see another 28 or so girls. I was not old enough to wear a *chaderi*, a long cloth covering women from head to toe, but the older girls did. They'd throw their *chaderis* to the side as soon as they'd stepped into the class.

We were enjoying our secret classes until one day a little girl studying with us burst into the room. "The Taliban are coming," she screamed.

Everyone rushed to grab their *chaderi*. Some of us wrapped up our books in whatever we could get our hands on. Some of us threw our books in the closet, hiding them under piles of clothes. Everyone was trembling as the Taliban blasted through the door and rushed in carrying whips, some of them with rifles hanging from their shoulders. "What are you doing here?" one of them asked. "Learning to sew," one of our teachers said, her voice shaking. The Taliban soldiers looked around and saw twenty or so girls with needles, threads and cloth in their hands.

Pretending to sew was a backup plan in case the Taliban raided our secret school. One of the Taliban soldiers wanted to know why we wanted to learn to sew. Our teacher replied, "Because you do not let us go to a tailor shop and we want to learn to at least sew our own clothes." The Taliban gunman asked my classmates to show their work. All we had was unstitched cloth. He then hit our teacher with a whip.

Another Taliban gunman opened the closet and saw our books. He called us "shameless and dirty" and tore some of our books. I was in tears because my English vocabulary notebook was there too. I had spent so much time putting all of it together. My notebook also contained my drawings of girls studying by candle, something which perhaps made the Taliban gunman even more upset.

The Taliban ordered all of us out of the building. Some residents watching us pleaded with them to let us go, citing the Taliban's own edicts to be in presence of women without a *moharam*, an immediate blood relative. The Taliban finally let us go but took our teachers. I remember running home in tears, fear and shock.

Months later, I learned about another secret school teaching English. I enrolled, but within a week or so I found a note behind the door which said the Taliban had closed down the school.

When I was old enough and had to wear the *chaderi* outside, I once stepped out in my neighbourhood wearing a *chaderi*, and suddenly felt the burn of a lash on my back. I began to run... the man hit me with second and a third lash. I still don't know why I had to be beaten on the street at age 13. I only remember hearing, "*Palan tu kujas?*"... "where is your skirt?"

After these experiences I refused to live under their rules, but at that age and in those circumstances, the best I could do was to wage a silent resistance. By myself, I started studying harder than ever because I knew I could only fight such an ideology through the power of education. My home became my school and I became my own teacher. Of course, I needed books, which were forbidden to girls. I asked my male relatives for books, including some in English. I also wanted recorded materials, CDs, DVDs, tapes. Since the Taliban did not allow these, I had to ask my families and friends traveling outside the country to bring me English movies or recorded books secretly. A few of them agreed to take the risk. My uncle brought me the movie Titanic. It was the only English movie I had and so I watched it over

and over, learning every single word. I even cut my hair to look like not Kate Winslette but Leonardo Dicaprio, the male star of the movie. At that age it seemed like a good idea, especially since I wanted to speak English just like he did.

After working on my English for three years, I started teaching it to seven young girls in our neighborhood. I practiced Urdu, Pashtu and Dari by reading novels, poetry and any book available. I memorized Suras of the Quran in Arabic and verses of Hafez poetry. I also became interested in arts and started painting, cooking, and knitting. The Taliban wanted to create a prison for me. Instead, I created my own school.

My story is not unique. Unspeakable suffering, unbearable pain and unimaginable oppression were the norm for millions of Afghan women under the Taliban. Now

And this is where we started our fight for equal rights after the Taliban regime finally collapsed. Since then our accomplishments have been monumental, though we also know there is far go.

In terms of education, there are millions of Afghan girls enrolled in primary, secondary and high schools. Hundreds of thousands of girls have graduated from colleges and universities.

In terms of media, under the Taliban regime everything was forbidden except for one Taliban radio station, the content of which included announcing the new limits imposed on civilians by the Taliban's Department of Vice and Virtue, the religious police. For instance, they would announce the number of hands chopped, some of the hands were hanged in trees for public display, or forbidding white shoes since it would be disrespect to the Taliban's white holy flag. For entertainment, the radio program included reciting *tarana*, men singing Taliban poetry without music. The sound of the Taliban's chants was so mournful. Like other girls, I'd turn off the radio once informed of the new rules I had to obey in order to avoid being beaten on the street the next day. It's unfortunate that some of that dreadful Taliban poetry can now be found in a book published by the Taliban's former Pakistan ambassador Mullah Abdul Salaam Zaef's book the "Poetry of Taliban."

But things have changed now. There are more than 70 TV network and hundreds of radio stations in Afghanistan. During my trip to Kabul in 2012, a young woman was singing and dancing on stage at an Afghan TV station for Eid celebrations. I thought this program, with the modernity and liveliness of it, was being produced outside of Afghanistan. But I was wrong; my family said this was being broadcast from a live concert in Kabul.

In terms of technology, the only tech equipment available to Afghan civilians were old fashioned analogue phones that were always monitored by the Taliban. We had no way of communicating with our fellow Afghans and no means of communicating to the outside world. The country had become a giant prison inclusive of public punishment and humiliation.

Today, almost 90 percent of Afghans have access to cellphone and over 6 million Afghans have access to the internet, which was also banned under the Taliban regime. (CITE)

Access to healthcare has dramatically improved for Afghan women since 2001. Under the Taliban regime, child mortality rate in Afghanistan was the highest in the world. For example, one in every four children died before the age of five. Today, it is one in ten, a dramatic reduction (NPR). Back in 2001, life expectancy was estimated by the United Nations to be around 45 for Afghans. Today, it has increased to

60 years, an astonishing improvement in just a decade. For comparison, it took four decades to achieve the same level of improvement in life expectancy in the United States from early 1900s to the onset of World War II (USAID).

In terms of employment, tens of thousands women work as government employees, in the private sector and as teachers, journalists, doctors, engineers, college professors, business owners, security officials and in many other public and private spheres.

Prior to 2001, political participation for women in Afghanistan was nonexistent. But today, women make up 28% of Afghanistan's parliament, higher than the US Congress where it's at 18% (World Bank). Afghan women have served as governors, district governors, and many other high profile positions since 2001.

Perhaps, the most striking indicator of increasing political participation for Afghan women came on April 5th of this year when around seven million, or 60 percent of eligible voters, went to the polls to cast their ballots for a new elected leader. According to Afghan election officials, women made up 36 percent of voters. In the former Taliban stronghold of Kandahar province, women made up 10 percent of candidates running for provincial council seats. And during election campaigning, the presence of women in election rallies was something international media outlets could not ignore. The New York Times wrote: "There is finally the sense here, after years of international aid and effort geared toward improving Afghan women's lives that women have become a significant part of Afghan political life, if not powerful."

Aside from the elections, since 2001, Afghan women have taken the lead in organizing themselves as part of the growing Afghan civil society and fighting for their rights, at times successfully overturning laws which restricted women's rights. For example, Afghan women rights groups successfully fought the Afghan government when it wanted to close shelters for battered women under pressure from Islamic clerics in 2011 (NPR). Another example was of Afghan women stopping the Afghan government from including a new criminal penal code which barred family member's testimony in cases of domestic violence, effectively making it impossible to convict those accused of violence against women. My organization, Women for Afghan Women, took the lead on this and we lobbied the Afghan government hard until President Karzai agreed not to sign the new bill into law, eventually sending it back to parliament for further review.

In just over a decade, Afghan women have come a long way since the dark days of the Taliban regime. Yet despite the immense progress, the gains made so far remain extremely fragile. With U.S. led coalition forces scheduled to leave by the end of this year, the security situation in Afghanistan facing related uncertainty, and existing questions concerning future U.S. funding, many Afghan women question if their gains can be sustained.

I was in Afghanistan in February-March of this year and the one common sentiment among all Afghan women is their shared fear of being abandoned by the international community while the Taliban and insurgency continue to threaten our hard-won gains.

The Taliban continue to attack education. The UN reported more than 1,000 attacks on education in 2009-2012, including schools being set on fire, suicide bombings and remotely detonated bombs, killings of staff, threats to staff and abductions (Global Collation to Protect Education from Attack).

The Taliban have stepped up their attacks on prominent women in the Afghan government and also in local communities. For example, Sitara Achakzai, a prominent Afghan women's rights activist was shot dead by the Taliban after leaving a provincial council meeting in Kandahar. Last year a Taliban attack targeted Islam Bibi, a top female police officer in Helmand province. Two other female police officers were killed within six months in 2013 in Laghman province in eastern Afghanistan. "Female police officers seem to be a favorite target of [Taliban] insurgents," (The Guardian).

Taliban's opposition to media and women's participation in public life is no less severe than it was a decade ago. For example, in 2012 the Taliban beheaded 17 people, including two women, for attending a mixed-gender party where there was music and dancing (ABC News).

Despite increasing targeted attacks on Afghan women and girls across the country, it has not stopped them from joining security forces or serving as public officials. While women are in the frontlines of fighting for their rights, their success also depend on the continued support of the international community and the Afghan government.

While I am inspired by the progress made, I am most concerned with the future. Before discussing specifics, I would like to make one point.

Since moving to the U.S. and having the opportunity to learn about the international community's interventions in countries such as Afghanistan, I am often struck by the short point of view policy makers are forced to adopt.

As we all look toward the future, I would like to ask you to remember that a country cannot be built in 13 years or even 20. Afghanistan's development as a more stable, rights respecting partner for the U.S. in an incredibly unstable region cannot be measured in years or election cycles. This is a process that will take decades and generations.

My generation is the first that has been educated and brought up in largely democratic society. Young Afghans, male and female, are better educated and more connected to the world than any generation before us. This was evident in the fact that 70 percent of the candidates for provincial council seats were youth (TOLO TV). Afghan media, which have witnessed an explosive growth over the last 13 years, are mostly run by youth. Mine is a generation full of hope but we also face incredible uncertainty as the international community prepares to withdraw from Afghanistan.

For my generation to be the force that allows democratic foundations to permanently take root in the country while eventually coming to power, progress and stability must be maintained as the torch is passed. This is now taking place but the sustained involvement and support of the international community is critical for the process to be completed.

Looking forward, we understand the U.S.'s civilian financial commitments will be significantly less than over the past 13 years. However, we need to know your support will not waver, even if funding levels drop. The Bilateral Security Agreement, which has the support of almost all Afghans will be signed by our new president, some U.S. troops need to remain and funding must continue in order to allow my generation to complete the hard work of reclaiming Afghanistan from a generation of war and fundamentalism to a generation of hope and democracy.

Having considered this, I share with you a set of recommendations which I hope will help better shape support for the Afghan women beyond 2014.

- 1- The Taliban, their supporters, and the like-minded groups across the region continue to pose a threat to women's social, legal, economic, political and basic rights. Based on the experiences of Afghan women activists, the Taliban have refused to show any changes towards the treatment of women since their fall from power in 2001. In case of any peace talks with the Taliban, all parties involved must be extremely cautious of the fact that a peace deal with the Taliban would compromise women's rights and erode their gains.
- 2- It is vital that women's rights remain central to the relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan: To preserve the gains of Afghan women, the U.S. must continue pushing Afghan politicians and diplomats to do the right thing. As a funder, ally and partner, the U.S.'s role in Afghanistan hopefully will not soon disappear; meaning every conversation a U.S. official has with an Afghan official should mention the importance of women's rights.
- 3- While millions of Afghan girls have been enrolled in primary schools since 2001 (USAID), it's important to continue investing in education and to further invest in higher education for women through scholarships, technical programs and other educational opportunities beyond 2014. Afghanistan's next generations will depend on continuation of such support.
- 4- Continued support for Afghan civil society organizations, especially those involved in promoting women's rights: Through strategic investments and mentorship many women leaders have been brought up in Afghanistan. Continuing to support such agents of change and progress will encourage the continued transformation of Afghan society.
- 5- Supporting Afghan National Security Forces beyond 2014: I believe one cannot support women's rights, human rights or development in Afghanistan without also supporting a strong ANSF because security is the foundation from which all Afghan progress can grow and be sustained. We at Women for Afghan Women believe it's vital some U.S. led international troops stay in Afghanistan, supporting and training our military while also symbolically assuring the Afghan people they won't again be abandoned by the international community. This also means continuing to fund the ANSF. I know this is not cheap (\$4 Billion annually +/-), but it is necessary.
- 6- Continued support for the Afghan media and freedom of speech in Afghanistan. The explosive growth of Afghan media and the rapid rise of freedom of press have been two key and major gains of the last 13 years. Afghan media have also played a critical role in enabling democratic principles to take root in Afghanistan.
- 7- Supporting women's shelters, educational programs to highlight domestic abuse, and other social programs which tackle the multitude of issues facing Afghan women.

Thank you all for your support of Afghanistan. We would not be in the midst of a successful election or be here talking about progress made without you and the American people's immense sacrifice on our behalf. We are also grateful to our American sisters who have supported us and stayed with us through the bad and worst times. It's because of your support and sacrifices that we, the women of Afghanistan, have been empowered to fight for gains despite all odds against us. We are determined to move forward and strengthen the foundations for a better tomorrow and hope our friend and ally the United States will walk with us.