

# WOMEN'S CENTURY OF PEACE

## *A Constructive Vision, from Afghanistan to the World*

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The little girl was selling dried fruits out of a cart on the streets of Kabul. My sister approached her and asked how old she was and why it was that she wasn't in school. The girl said she was 13 and that her mother was sick and her father was killed in the war so she had to work like her other two siblings. When my sister bought something from the girl, she opened up about how happy she was to be able to go outside the house and work. She said that she rarely went outside fearing she would be beaten or taken away by the Taliban. My sister was quite surprised at her tenacity and sense of optimism in her disposition despite her misfortunes.

My sister recently went to Afghanistan almost 20 years after immigrating to the U.S. It was one of her dreams to go back to Afghanistan, but traveling there was too risky a couple of years ago for anyone, let alone for a woman. I was expecting some horror stories about how poverty stricken and diseased the people might be because of the constant violence. While there is some poverty and malnutrition, much to my surprise, people are picking up what they are left with and are getting on with life. I think that it is a sign of relief for people of Afghanistan to have relative peace after 25 years of turmoil which started with the Russian invasion in 1979, followed by constant civil war, and then the infamous Taliban which the U.S toppled in 2002. Afghans have a resilient and courageous spirit about them that has sustained their hopefulness. That hopefulness comes from their decision to put violent animosities to rest and embrace the changes—though the changes may seem miniscule by our standards here, it is an incremental and forward-looking one by their war-weary souls. The conclusion my sister made from her observations was that people wanted to simply live their lives free of any violence. After a generation of people has been exposed to such a violent environment, the hope for a peaceful change seemed almost unachievable. But there has been some progress toward peace and nonviolence by women in particular. It has given them a chance to participate in a meaningful capacity. Although, they are far from reaching their goals, the debate alone has shed light to the plight of women in Afghan society. Women are demanding that they be allowed to work in order to liberate themselves from dependence on handouts and other less reputable means. Led by a few brave women active in politics, women are able to voice their opinions about their plight and how to

make it better.

While there is relative peace, there needs to be a solid foundation for peace to be long lasting. For one, women should be given a bigger representation in the government. Women make up a larger segment of the population, but they are still browbeaten by the local warlords while the central government contemplates women's role in policy making and in society. If more women were allowed equal rights in owning property and running their own businesses, there would be less poverty and unemployment. Women in the rural areas and various other areas are still afraid to walk on the streets by themselves fearing the worst. Gandhi grappled with the same issues in 1941 when

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he wrote the Constructive Programme handbook to inform the people of India on how to build long-lasting and self-sustained social programs and discontinue their reliance on the British for economic and social well being. It is a 30 page handbook that gives us more valuable instructions about nonviolence than many larger books about the subject. Gandhi emphasizes the role of women in rebuilding and reconstructing a country. It is just as relevant to Afghanistan today as it was and still is to India. Gandhi Writes:

*Woman has been suppressed under custom and law for which man was responsible and in the shaping of which she had no hand. In a plan of life based on non-violence, woman has as much right to shape her own destiny as man has to shape his. But as every right in a non-violent society proceeds from the previous performance of a duty, it follows that rules of social conduct must be framed by mutual co-operation and consultation they can never be imposed from outside. Men have not realized this truth in its fullness in their behaviour towards women. They have instead considered themselves to be lords and masters of women instead of considering them as their friends and co-workers. (CP 16)*

A large number of men in Afghanistan think that women are helpless creatures that have to be protected from exposure to society because of cultural and religious reasons, but it goes deeper than that. In Afghanistan women are referred to as *siya-sar* which means dark or black mind in a literal sense. Men and some women use this term in a normal everyday conversation. It is supposed to be a polite term to refer to women as helpless beings who have no mind of their own and so they have to be kept in a certain

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way to make sure they do not do something bad out of their helpless ignorance. I was quite shocked to learn that the word *siya-sar* had such a degrading connotation. I had used it myself without knowing what it meant because I have heard others use it in everyday language. I am told by some that the word is not really derogatory but a sort of "endearment" term that is supposed to be mindful of women's role in society. The role of women in society should never be degraded to such terminology and most would agree. It is difficult to erase such terms from society's mind when women are constantly undermined in their status as human beings.

Despite all this, progress is being made. Women business entrepreneurs and educators are returning to Afghanistan from all over the world to rebuild and reconstruct society by employing other women and empowering them to be self-sufficient and rely less on handouts. Women's clinics are being built which, of course, are in need of women's help. Schools are being built and expanded to accommodate space for girls. Programs such as these are stepping-stones to a better future for women. I believe that women have to be empowered before true peace is acquired in Afghanistan and other places.

Everyone should take a lesson from the women of Rwanda after the genocide of 1994 and see how they have rebuilt a country after an atrocity that was compared to the Jewish Holocaust. Women's representation in the government in Rwanda is unmatched compared to any other country. Their efforts have started many programs that educate and empower women in a society that 10 years ago had no rights, including a vital economic right, the right to property. Women are educated in numbers that are unprecedented for that country.

I have great hopes for the future. We must not forget the plight of women in Afghanistan and around the world. It has been too long in earthly terms for half of the population of the world to be uninvolved in bringing about peace and justice in the world. I am an optimist and I think that there will be significant changes in women's role in the future and I would like to dedicate this century to women and call it "Women's Century."