

Mr. President, Excellencies, Ladies, and Gentlemen,

Good Morning,

I am Jamila Afghani, the President of WILPF-Afghanistan, a feminist and pacifist organization working for peace through equality, justice, and demilitarization. I also serve as executive director of Medica Afghanistan, an organization that provides psychosocial and legal services to around 2,000 victims of sexual and gender-based violence a year.

In my twenty-two years as a feminist religious leader in Afghanistan, I have trained more than 6,000 imams on the principals of moderation, social justice, tolerance, balance and participation, and 10,000 women as advocates of human rights and women's rights. More recently, I have been engaged in building alliances among silenced Afghan girls and women to bridge the gaps in the ongoing reconciliation process and ensure a path to sustainable peace for all Afghans.

Today my statement will focus on 3 key issues:

- The gendered impact of the conflict
- The importance of free and fair elections, and
- The need for women's meaningful participation in the current peace talks

The conflict in Afghanistan has resulted in civilian deaths and injuries and displacement of more two million, with over two million refugees outside the country. Just in the first quarter of 2019, 110,000 people were reported newly displaced by the conflict. Compounding the situation is the impact of the 2018 drought and flooding, which has affected markets and agricultural output.

Undoubtedly, the humanitarian and human rights situation in Afghanistan remains serious and requires immediate action. Women, alongside ethnic minorities, have suffered the heaviest violations of human rights and armed violence over the last four decades of conflict.

Women are also adversely impacted by gender-based violence, armed violence, and unequal access to education and poverty alleviation. Women live under constant threat of insecurity with profound limits on their political, civil, economic, social, and cultural rights. Their ability to freely access education and work is affected by attacks on schools and places of work, and their ability to safely travel between their homes and these points. The situation is worse for women and girls in rural areas.

Gender-based violence against women and girls by state and non-state actors continues. More than 60% of women have experienced violence. In 2017, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) reported that 4340 cases of violence against women had been registered, increasing by 11.7% in one year. Very few cases are reported due to family and social pressure. Women and girls are also prevented or hesitant from reporting violence due to stigma, discrimination, fear of reprisals, and due to the treatment of victims of sexual abuse.

Targeting of schools and education personnel, night raids on households, abduction and recruitment of boys for armed violence, violence against journalists and media workers and healthcare facilities, torture of conflict-related detainees, abduction and assassination of religious leaders and sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls continue to exemplify the human rights situation in Afghanistan.

Yet despite the fact that women are disproportionately affected by the conflict, and although women and youth make up the majority of our population, they are minor players in political life and the economy. Women remain excluded from public life and sidelined in the current peace talks.

After four decades of war, Afghanistan is today at a critical juncture. Two important tasks lie ahead of us: the peace process and the upcoming presidential elections.

Free, fair and secure elections are critical for intra-Afghan peace talks and formal negotiations with the government and the Taliban to be successful. Elections initially planned for 2015 were held in October 2018, with polls accounting for about 4.2 million out of the 8.8 million registered to vote. Many Afghans appeared to have stayed at home instead of going to the polling stations due to fears of violence by the Taliban, who had issued threats and warnings at voters and demands for 2,500 candidates for the lower house of parliament to withdraw their participation. This organized campaign of threats and intimidation have likely disproportionately impacted women's participation as well.

Voting was also marred by technical obstacles limiting access to the polls. The upcoming September presidential elections will require addressing these issues in order to ensure full participation of Afghan voters, especially women. We are also concerned about the possibility of a failed election and waste of resources where the gap among political parties, Afghan government and Taliban is wide, which requires immediate attention by the UN and other relevant actors.

The United States and other States have quickly facilitated the efforts toward a negotiated peace settlement since September 2018. There has been a clear absence of meaningful participation by women and other actors in the peace process, alarming many who know that an inclusive delegation for peace is critical to ensuring the success of the process and the sustainability of any settlement.

Afghan women must be able to meaningfully participate in decisions that directly affect them, including in the design, implementation, and monitoring of such decisions. Women currently make up about 26 percent of the Afghan Peace Council and only 20 percent of those in the Provincial Peace Councils.

Although the United States is obligated to ensure women's active participation by its domestic Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2015 and Women, Peace, and Security Strategy of 2019, its approach to the US-Taliban peace talks has instead led to the marginalization of Afghan women.

While women have participated as members of the High Peace Council (HPC) in

discussions for a future peace agreement, this is no longer a viable pathway to meaningfully contribute since the HPC now only serves as a consultative body and to raise public awareness rather than to directly contribute to the peace process.

Furthermore, Afghans and others remain concerned about the politicization of the peace talks by national, regional and international actors who do not reflect the interests of Afghans. At the recent peace talks in Doha, 11 strong women who participated proved their solidarity and commitment to the national interest and communicated directly with the Taliban about their rights.

Afghan women today are not the women of 30-40 years ago. We know our rights, granted by our faith and guaranteed by the constitution of Afghanistan as well as required by the international conventions ratified by Afghanistan such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The international community must stand with us at this critical moment and ensure that our rights will not be compromised for a political peace deal, or after a settlement is reached. It is not enough for Member States who support women's meaningful inclusion in the peace process to voice support or offer closed-door consultations with Afghan women. They must actively push for women to be publicly and actively engaged at the table and in building the future of their country in order to ensure sustainable peace for the nation.

I therefore urge the Council to ensure clear procedures to engage Afghan women from diverse backgrounds in peace negotiations and conflict resolution efforts, including as negotiators, developed in consultation with woman members of the High Peace Council.

Furthermore, the Council should ensure that the organization and facilitation of the elections scheduled for later this year make space for women through enhanced security for women voters and candidates and for networks between government, civil society, and other stakeholders to promote women's participation in elections as voters, candidates, and electoral observers.

Finally, the Council should inquire information on measures taken to ensure the security and protection of women officials and leaders, women's rights activists, women human rights defenders, and journalists.

Thank you, Mr. President.