

Sustain and deepen women's rights in Afghanistan, says UN Women Deputy Executive Director



Farewell to Ingibjorg Solrun Gisladdottir

Ingibjorg Solrun Gisladdottir left Afghanistan as UN Women Country Representative to start her new post in Istanbul in December 2013, concluding a two-year assignment. She played a key role in the transition of the ACO from UNIFEM to UN Women, and we wish her all the best in her new assignment as Regional Director for Central Asia and Europe.



John Hendra meets H.E. Hush Banu Ghazanfar, Minister of Women's Affairs, Kabul, 6 October, 2013. (Photo: MoWA)

During his first visit to Afghanistan from 4-7 October, UN Women Deputy Executive Director John Hendra met with several national and international officials as well as civil society representatives to discuss advancing women's rights, women's empowerment and gender equality in Afghanistan. As preparations for international troop withdrawal next year and national elections accelerate, he emphasized the need for greater political and economic empowerment of Afghan women while safeguarding existing gains in women's rights.

Mr. Hendra commended achievement towards gender equality over the past decade such as the Afghan Constitution, increased women's political participation, signing of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) without any reservation, creation of the EVAW Law by Presidential Decree in 2009 making violence against women a crime, and increased girls enrollment in schools. "While I have only been in this country for a short time, there are certainly serious concerns," said Mr. Hendra. "One is clearly the very high levels of violence against women and girls. Secondly, the series of targeted killings against senior female journalists and senior female government officials, and that is of great concern. And thirdly, to ensure that there will be much more focus on women's political and economic empowerment." *Continued on page 4*

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UN Women commemorates 25 November- International Day for Elimination of Violence Against Women

“Say NO to Violence Against Women and Girls and Create a Positive Legacy for Afghanistan’s Youth”



Afghan rappers share EVAW messages through their songs.
(Photo: UN Women/Ahmad Shikib Dost)

UN Women’s Afghanistan Country Office recently supported innovative activities to commemorate the International Day for Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW), followed by the 16 Days of Activism on Gender-Based Violence.

As part of the activities, a youth contest and cultural performance was hosted in Kabul on 9 December 2013, with a view to enhancing awareness among Afghan youth on women’s rights-related legislation and to promote support for the EVAW. Under the theme “Say **NO** to Violence Against Women and Girls and Create a Positive Legacy for Afghanistan’s Youth”, more than one hundred representatives drawn from youth and civil society organizations gathered for a contest testing their knowledge of the EVAW Law, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and other laws on women rights. Afghan performing artists, including traditional musicians, pop singers and rappers, shared their EVAW messages through music and songs and were honoured by UN Women for their positive commitment to the cause. The event was opened with a song from Ms. Shahla Zaland, who had the audience on its feet with her message for women: “I’m not the weak tree in fear of every storm...”



Participants discuss the Afghan Criminal Law in a conference hosted by UN Women in Kabul on 1 December, 2013 . (Photo: UN Women/Ahmad Shikib Dost)

Afghanistan has laws to protect women and girls from violence, but few youth are aware of them. The EVAW Law criminalises child marriage, forced marriage, selling and buying of women and girls for the purpose or under the pretext of marriage, *ba’ad*(giving away a woman or girl to settle a dispute), forced self-immolation and 19 other acts of violence against women including rape and physical assault. It also specifies punishment for perpetrators. Application of the law is limited however and to date, convictions obtained are low in number.

According to estimates, youth make up more than two-thirds of Afghanistan’s estimated population of 27 million. UN Women is committed to working with Afghan youth and exploring how they can contribute to nation-building initiatives, particularly with regard to eliminating violence against women and girls.

A change is needed in attitudes as well as legal practices, and youth are the key to that change. As UN Women Country Representative Ingibjorg Gisladdottir stated, “Youth can bring change; youth have the energy to advocate for ending the culture of impunity in Afghanistan.”

Mariam, a young activist, noted “The younger generation has great potential for raising awareness in society. In particular, we need to support universal education for girls to help prevent and decrease violence against women and girls.”

UN Women also marked 25 November by hosting a two-day national conference on promoting women’s participation in the Criminal Law reform process. The conference was supported by two international experts and gathered 70 people from women’s rights groups, Civil Society, academia and international institutions that work on gender and legislation. “This conference is a significant step towards ensuring women’s contribution to the Criminal Law reform process. Women voices must be considered in all stages in order to have women friendly laws and policies.” said Shafiqah Habibi, a prominent Afghan women activist who attended the conference.



Afghan Minister of Justice, H.E. Habibullah Ghalib addresses national conference on promoting women’s participation in the Criminal Law reform process. (Photo: UN Women/Ahmad Shikib Dost)

Supporting Afghan female entrepreneurs in showcasing their products in regional markets



Afghan women entrepreneurs showcase their products at the 33rd India International Trade Fair held in New Delhi. (Photo: UN Women/Anil Chandrika)

Afghanistan's leading exporters presented their agricultural goods, carpets and gems at the 33rd India International Trade Fair (IITF) held in New Delhi from 14-27 November 2013. IITF is organized annually by the Indian Trade Promotion Organization (ITPO) since 2004.

This year, UN Women supported seven Afghan female entrepreneurs to showcase their handicrafts and other products in two stalls along with other private companies from 22 countries. Hundreds of traders and investors from 70 countries visited the fair. "I sold about 80 percent of the products, earning USD 2,500. It was a good experience, and I learned a lot on product's selling, quality, marketing requirements, and customer demand," said Freshta Safari, an Afghan entrepreneur. "Personally, it was a good learning experience for me. I would like to thank UN Women for providing us this opportunity", she added.

According to the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries, Afghan exhibitors and visitors utilized the opportunity and sold large amounts of goods. Afghanistan has been attending the fair since 2007 and in 2010 obtained the gold medal for the excellent decoration of its pavilion.

UN Women releases its report "Afghan Women Oral History"

UN Women's Afghanistan Country Office released a report on 7 December 2013 documenting the accounts of women and girls who have experienced and witnessed widespread violence during the conflict from 1978 to 2008 at the hands of different perpetrators.

This report contains testimonies from victims and their immediate family members covering several forms of violence during the conflicts. Most commonly reported were force marriages, rape, abduction and disappearances. Women and girls were abducted by armed groups and forced into marriage with commanders, raped or detained for longer periods in conditions that could be described as sexual slavery.

"We have to address the atrocities of the past. It's not enough to report. We have to continue with producing such reports so as to make relevant bodies consider and address the cases of violence against women and girls," said Ingibjorg Gisladdottir, UN Women Country Representative. UN Women based its 80-page report titled *Afghan Women Oral History* on 730 testimonies from women and girls in 34 districts of 7 provinces. This report documented Afghan women's experiences of violence over thirty years of conflict through an "oral history"-styled format. It is not intended to offer a comprehensive, chronological account of the conflict in Afghanistan, nor does it provide an assessment of who bears greatest responsibility for the commission of violations. **Continued on page 4**

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Launch ceremony of OHP report in Kabul on 1 December, 2013. (Photo: UN Women/Ahmad Shikib Dost)

However it does provide 26 recommendations for the government, civil society and the international community to address the findings and ensure that such atrocities are stopped and perpetrators brought to justice.

In a panel discussion convened to identify the recommendations, Dr. Sima Samar, Chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission noted: "To end the culture of impunity we need strong political will. The elimination of violence and ending the culture of impunity first require the confessions of the perpetrators."

Among other recommendations, the report specifically calls upon the Government of Afghanistan to end the culture of impunity, acknowledge the commission of wartime atrocities, develop protection programs and support services for victims and witnesses of attacks against women, and foster an institutional culture in which women's participation in the justice system, whether professionally or personally, is promoted and encouraged.

The report also calls on the international community to make their governments' aid conditional upon demonstrated respect for human rights and to support Government and Civil Society initiatives that promote an end to violence against women and the cultural practices that have detrimental effects upon women and girls such as child/forced marriage. The report also urges civil society to continue to document, raise awareness and speak out about past and present human rights violations, including gender-based violence. The full report can be downloaded in English, Dari and Pashto from the following website: <http://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/publications/2013/12/like-a-bird-with-broken-wings>

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During his four-day visit, Mr. Hendra also traveled to the central province of Parwan, where UN Women supports an Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) Centre run by the provincial Directorate of Women Affairs. Mr. Hendra met with Abdul Basir Salangi, the Provincial Governor of Parwan, who has been supportive of women's participation in social and political life. "In one of the districts of Parwan there were only two girls enrolled in schools 12 years ago, but now there are as many as 10,000," said the Governor, who is also Chair of Parwan's EVAW Commission.



Girls study computer skills at ICT Centre in Charikar, Parwan province. (Photo: UN Women/Ahmad Shikib Dost)

Mr. Hendra met with Afghan women activists and representatives of civil society organizations who briefed him about their achievements and especially the challenges they face ahead of elections and the reconciliation process. Underlining his deep admiration and respect for their courage and resilience, Mr. Hendra offered continued support of UN Women for their work which he said has been "instrumental in bringing about the changes that Afghan women have experienced over the past decade." During the visit, Mr. Hendra participated in an international conference on Women, Peace and Security organized by the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kabul. In his speech, he noted: "To fail to achieve the empowerment and inclusion of women is to fail Afghanistan."

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