

**Commentary by Sweeta Noori, Country Director,
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May 13th, 2009 Briefing:
Forging an International Diplomatic Strategy for
Afghanistan**

My name is Sweeta Noori; I am an Afghan, a woman and I currently serve as the Afghanistan Country Director for Women for Women International, a development and humanitarian NGO headquartered in Washington. Today I hope to offer you some insight on the way forward in Afghanistan. I will do this not only as an expert on Afghanistan's history, development and social issues, but also as a daughter, mother, teacher, leader, and three-time refugee from various conflicts throughout the history of Afghanistan. Each of these experiences informs my perspective as I speak to you today about the way forward in Afghanistan in this new political landscape, and I congratulate and thank you for opening this forum to the grassroots of Afghan society in opening it to me. I thank you for thinking regionally, and I thank my distinguished panelist Dr. Parsi for his presentation to this end. And I encourage us all to think inclusively and globally as we envision a creative way forward for Afghanistan.

The region and the world are looking to see how the new Administration and new Congress will define itself in Afghanistan. I encourage you to be collaborative, to work in partnership to empower and advance Afghans and their country. We all know about the importance of development for Afghanistan—development of stronger economies and governance. What we need to recognize now more than ever is that this effort must empower Afghans, the grassroots, marginalized groups, like women and the very poor. I fear that we have forgotten the people in our quest for the state. I am here to remind you today of the power of Afghan people, a strong and passionate people, and to remind you that putting the people first in Afghanistan will send a strong message of goodwill and empowerment throughout the region and the international community. The theme of our discussion today asks how we might achieve the most effective diplomatic strategy in Afghanistan, and my answer to you is by prioritizing grassroots and marginalized populations—including women—in your efforts and in your dialogue. I am glad to see we are starting here today.

I would like to give you a quick history lesson in support of my argument that strategy in Afghanistan must be inclusive, collaborative, united. This history lesson is afforded in the story of my life, the course of which has been always at the mercy of whatever political currents prevailed. My life is a case study of the fits and starts progress in Afghanistan has suffered, but it is also a symbol of the opportunity we have to work together to ensure that Afghanistan thrives.

The year of my birth, 1973, was the same year Afghanistan was established as a Republic and welcomed its first President, former Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud Khan, a man whose progressive politics and pursuit of modernity inspired him to encourage women's education and protect their human rights. A woman of the times, my mother was a doctor and a professor who for seven years served as the chairperson for the Kabul Institute of Medicine. I followed in her footsteps to become a doctor of medicine, nearly completing my studies until I was forced to withdraw from school after the rise of the Mujahidin prohibited me from continuing my education.

My family and I fled to Rawal, Pakistan, exhausted by the endless violence and constant shooting along the streets of Kabul. We were refugees for the first time in our lives, though it wouldn't be the last. It is no accident that Afghanistan's plunge into restriction and exclusion of women coincided with a surge in violence, political instability, and economic crisis.

Following the Mujahidin, many greeted the Taliban with hope. Billed as a return to core Islamic principles, the Taliban regime implemented a heavily restrictive, fundamentalist, and patriarchal interpretation of Islam that rendered Afghan women far less free and empowered than before. Access to education remained out of reach for me and my Afghan sisters; we were not allowed to leave the house by ourselves and were relegated to the position of animals, forced to walk behind, rather than next to, our husbands. Returning to Kabul the year the Taliban took power officially, I withdrew inside my home where I did not wear the burqa and could do as I pleased. Inside the relative security of my own home, I taught English to other women, a crime and a heresy at that time but a personal duty to my sisters and my sole source of stimulation.

Like everyone else, I became adaptable. I desperately yearned for education; because I was forbidden to seek it outside the home, I administered it within. Rather than participate in the formal economy, I bided my time at home. When threats and violence became too severe, I left again. Following an especially dangerous threat against me and my family, my husband and I had no choice but to again flee our home and seek refuge in Pakistan, where we remained until 2001, just before the attacks on the US of September 11th. When we were able to return home, it was to prepare again for invasion and conflict. As we lay in wait of the American invasion that eventually deposed the Taliban in Kabul, we prepared for what we hoped would be a new beginning, inspired by talk of democracy and free elections, of an Afghan republic that would restore our rights under internationally accepted principles and nationally enforced law.

After the Taliban fell, I poured myself into the rebuilding of my country. I was determined to help in any capacity I could. I assisted with the convening of the Loya Jerga to form a new and democratic Afghanistan. Like so many other Afghans, my commitment and my idealism were resources ripe for cultivation of a progress and stability. I wanted then—as all Afghans want now—peace, stability and development for their families, communities and nation. In this way the Afghan people represent a powerful asset—a key ally—in the quest for a strong, secure Afghanistan. We must invest in the tremendous resource this offers for nation-building. Empower the grassroots, give Afghans agency in and ownership of Afghanistan.

Afghans are your greatest allies for Afghanistan's development and security. They're the most invested, and the most informed. In 2009, Women for Women International released a report detailing the current circumstances for women of Afghanistan. We found that the majority of Afghan women - 66% - think the government should address the security situation first, followed by 41% of women who think the government should address commodities and 26% who are primarily concerned with employment opportunities. These are real challenges in Afghanistan, and Afghans are calling for their resolution. They're talking about—and voting for—peace, development and education.

Women work tirelessly to feed and clothe their families, to educate girl and boy children, to build and maintain peaceful communities. And they're optimistic despite the greatest of odds.

In fact, our report found that over 80% of women polled are optimistic for the future of Afghanistan, which tells me that investing in women makes everything possible, even in a country without much cause for hope left. The important thing is to cultivate this optimism, to invest in women and in peace so that this fledgling trust is not squandered.

For Afghanistan to thrive our diplomatic strategy must take into account all willing partners for progress that present themselves—internationally, regionally and most importantly, internally. Internally, we must engage the grassroots, we must empower the marginalized. As my story shows—regardless of regime change, my dedication to Afghanistan is unshakable as an Afghan—it is the grassroots that are most invested in the success of any Afghanistan strategy, yet who are most often overlooked. This strategy—taking Afghans into account for a stronger Afghanistan--will take time, training, and a strong community development strategy to be sure, but these measures are as necessary as they are beneficial.

Since the fall of the Taliban, I am often heard to speak of “two Afghanistans” – one, in Kabul, where women’s rights are preserved as women gain access to social, economic, and political opportunities, and another outside the capital where socially excluded and rural women are subject to a different set of rights and laws that restrict their socioeconomic development and endanger their lives and violate their human rights. Issues such as mandatory marital sex, forced marriages, self-immolation, and honor crimes continue to plague rural communities and force women to remain excluded from the sphere of influence, a condition that threatens the safety and sustainable development of Afghanistan. We have 25% women in parliament but extremists retaliate, threatening the brave women who do seek leadership. We are building bridges and schools every day but women are not safe enough to walk across alone, nor are girls sure that they will not be attacked if they dare to fill the schools.

Yet as Country Director for Women for Women International- Afghanistan, I have witnessed the inspiring results that can be achieved when Afghans are engaged as allies in Afghanistan. Since 2002, I have seen more than 35,000 women rebuild their lives and their communities through simple investment in their education, social and economic wellbeing. In July 2004, I launched one of the country’s first micro-credit lending programs targeting women, which has since

disbursed over \$2 million to approximately 14,000 women while maintaining a 95% repayment rate. There is no denying that this is progress.

The time has come to invest fully and continually in all Afghans. We have seen with the controversy over the Shiite Personal Status Law these last few weeks that not all Afghans are necessarily considered equal under law in Afghanistan – differences such as gender, religion and ethnicity threaten to divide groups, empowering some at the expense of others. We must unite for all Afghans—prioritizing human rights, agency and involvement in the economy and society, and security and stability above all. Development and diplomatic efforts in Afghanistan should not just serve as a justification for military activity; they should be expanded, empowered, and strategic, bringing women and other marginalized voices to the decision making table and allowing them to impart their vision for a stronger, more stable Afghanistan. To fail to take Afghans into account in our diplomatic strategy in the country and the region is to waste a valuable resource, to ignore a key ally, and to risk failure altogether. To educate, empower and include signals to the country, the region and the world that progress is possible and peace attainable. I look forward to what lies ahead for the future of my homeland and our partnership for progress. Thank you.