



Gender Equality Today for a Sustainable Tomorrow
ACBAR Statement on International Women's Day
March 8, 2022

On International Women's Day, 2022, ACBAR celebrates the achievements of women in Afghanistan, who comprise nearly 50 percent of the population. Afghanistan has experienced many setbacks in its tumultuous journey of recovery and resilience – time and again. Afghan women have consistently, through their sheer courage and their individual and collective agency, played a vital role in humanitarian action, rehabilitation, and peace and development in their country.

Throughout history and despite all odds, Afghan women have taken up the mantle in their households, communities, and workforce. In Afghanistan, women and their concerns and priorities were an integral part of the national construction agendas as early as 1921. Queen Soraya Tarzai, the first queen consort of Afghanistan, was one of the first revolutionary champions of women's education and their active participation in nation-building. She opened the first primary school for girls in Kabul in 1921, the first hospital for women in 1924, and established the first women's organization, *Anjuman-i Himayat-i Niswan*, in 1928. In 2020, she was featured in Time magazine's 100 influential women of the past century because of her contributions in pioneering reforms to support and improve the lives of women.

No matter the circumstances, nor challenges they face, women in Afghanistan have assumed positions of significance in diverse sectors and roles in government, civil society, private sector, and as entrepreneurs, care-givers, farmers, and community leaders, through all the wars and the aftermaths that the country has faced. In recent decades, it is now widely understood that gender equality is crucial for post-conflict development, reconstruction, and rehabilitation of war-ravaged countries; and can only be truly ensured through greater women's participation in the work force.

Before August 2021, however, women accounted for a meager 20 percent of Afghanistan's formal workforce - a figure that may have staggeringly declined because of newly imposed restrictions on women in government and other sectors. These restrictions on women potentially translate to an economic "loss of nearly \$1 billion dollars in the GDP. A complete ban on female employees, who account for about 3 percent of total employment, may reduce output by the same percentage," states a

UNDP report released in December 2021. On the other hand, the economic impact of educating a girl in Afghanistan is more than double than that for educating a boy.

Women have played a crucial role in the humanitarian and development sector in Afghanistan. They are a fundamental pillar of society, with outreach in the heart of the communities and informal access to women, children, and sub-national governance structures. Child protection, women's health, and provision of psychosocial support services to the population are just few of the sectors predominantly reliant on a female workforce, largely because of their sensitive nature in Afghan culture. In various engagements convened by ACBAR and other sources, NGOs working in Afghanistan have reported a sharp decline in the number of women accessing health and psychosocial support services since August, 2021, because of restrictions on deployment and mobility of aid workers in the provinces. At present, 97 percent of the population in Afghanistan is at risk of sinking below the poverty line, resulting from a potential economic collapse, coupled with a humanitarian economic crisis. After decades of war, economic marginalization of women will further add to the economic constriction in Afghanistan and slow the pace of any rehabilitation efforts.

An inclusive gender-sensitive policy is required for equitable participation of women in the workforce, developed in close consultation with all stakeholders including civil society organizations. This is the key to removing numerous systemic barriers for women's equitable participation, ensuring a safe space for women leadership and providing a principled humanitarian response at all levels. As a nation, we need a social discourse to highlight the need and contribution of women in all walks of life to #BreaktheBias and create a safe space for women and girls to fulfill their potential. We must realize that gender balance is closely knitted to economic growth – and that one cannot occur in the absence of the other. And for that, it is important that women have unimpeded access to education, health, economic well-being, and protection from violence.

In one of her historical speeches, Soraya Tarzai is quoted as follows: *“Women should also take their part as women did in the early years of our nation and Islam. From their examples we must learn that we must all contribute toward the development of our nation and that this cannot be done without being equipped with knowledge. So we should all attempt to acquire as much knowledge as possible, in order that we may render our services to society in the manner of the women of early Islam.”*



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A Young girl pictured after graduation from the last batch of SCA's Community Health Nurses Education (CHNE) in 2020. Her sash reads: *We provide quality health services to communities.*

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