

## Afghan women are recovering stolen time

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This year, International Women's Day is occurring at a time when many countries, including Canada, are debating their future role in Afghanistan, and either have decided or will decide the direction and focus of that role for some years to come. Many issues have been raised and arguments presented both for and against the mission.

However, if a central issue is still to help the Afghan people, especially to uplift women and children in terms of human security and socio-economic opportunities, none of this is possible without a relatively secure and peaceful environment, backed by sustainable growth, and provided by the efforts of Canadian and other allies in the troubled areas of my war-torn nation.

We must remember that it has only been six years since the Taliban regime was driven from power in Kabul. Since that time many positive developments have occurred, especially in relation to improving Afghan women's rights and participation in society. Under the Taliban, women were not allowed to work, attend school or pursue an education, receive medical care from male doctors or travel without a male relative, and were regarded as non-citizens without rights or representation.

Over the last six years, millions of women and girls have had the chance to attend school, return to work, open businesses, gain access to health care, and generally attempt to catch up with the time and opportunities that were stolen from them during those oppressive years. Afghan women have a presence in government, and strong voices in the parliament and in the media, and they have no intention of giving up these progressive strides ever again.

Already touting 23,000 members, the first political party for women was recently formed to develop a stronger platform for women's rights throughout the country and in political arenas. However, their organization and Afghan women in general cannot accomplish their goals of developing a gender-balanced civil society with more access to education, training and rule-of-law protection without the sustained help of the international community.

Nearly six million children have returned to school since 2002 with at least 1.5 million Afghan girls in attendance.

Boys still attend in greater numbers due to security concerns and other restrictions. The increasing insurgency of Taliban and terrorist forces in the south and east has only deepened this divide, and last year saw nearly 150 schools burned to the ground, 305 schools closed, and 105 students and teachers killed, all accompanied by warnings to locals not to send their daughters to school.

With the situation still so tenuous and under threat by those who prefer darkness created by illiteracy and separation from society to the freedom and opportunity gained through education and economic livelihoods, Afghan women need the continued presence of the international community to ensure that their human rights will be protected and upheld.

The Afghan people, and especially Afghan women, continue to be hopeful and grateful for all that Canadians and the international community are doing to uphold the noble cause of helping a struggling nation onto a path of progress and peace so desperately needed after three decades of war and destruction.

The stakes for Afghan society are indeed high, but clearly worth it.

Khorshied Samad is the former Kabul bureau chief and television correspondent for Fox News and the wife of the Afghan ambassador to Canada.

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