

Statement by
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on

**“The Centrality of Gender Equality to National Cohesion and Sustainable
Peacebuilding”**

Honourable ministers and members of the International Dialogue, distinguished guests, dear activists and women from all over the world, thank you for being here today.

Seeing as I am Dutch, and we have a specific reputation to uphold a very strong sense of directness and honesty, I better pay tribute to this character trait of ours. So to be blunt - I should not be sitting here, but I have the honour to work with partners and colleagues in several fragile countries, and since I have privilege that they often don't have, the freedom to fly all over the world, the responsibility to share their perspectives and needs fell into my hands today.

I am Anne Kwakkenbos and I work as an expert on Gender, Peace and Security for Cordaid, a Non Governmental Organisation specialised in working in the most fragile countries in the world. Cordaid is a member of the CSPPS and a proud host of its secretariat. Countries where the implementation of SDG 16+ is of the highest priority but at the same time also an enormous challenge. For me, combining SDG 16 and SDG 5 is not just important, but it is a necessity. Peace, justice and strong institutions are not sustainable if we do not involve 50% of the population. It's a one liner that is often heard, but is it genuinely understood? What does this mean in practice?

I have seen women in Central African Republic taking the floor to create structural dialogue with local security and justice actors to ensure that their needs and perspectives are met. Before this meeting, the idea that women had different security issues had not occurred to many of these actors.

I have seen young women in Libya creating civil society from scratch and fighting various patriarchal governments in the most creative ways, and challenging the international debate on migration. For most Libyan women migration is not an issue, the lack of governance and the safety is. Standing up to the international community and bringing in their voices is and demanding attention for their challenges is not easy.

And two weeks ago, when I visited an Internally Displaced People camp in South Sudan with partners who are collecting stories of the security situation of local women, it became clear that many women do not know how to access local institutions that can improve their personal security situation.

No knowledge, no access, no influence, no change.

Again, why am I sitting here? And not a representative from one of the many countries Cordaid's works in?

My colleagues and myself worked very hard to have several representatives from Afghanistan present for this panel. As you are aware, currently there are US lead peace negotiations taking place in Doha with the Taliban. There are no women present.

The Afghan women did not accept this, and they have been working around the clock to make sure their voices, opinions and statements are shared. However, the impact of these negotiations is already clear. At this very moment, there are hardly any women from Afghanistan present for the CSW.

Visas are being denied?

Why?

There is a fear, that due to the deteriorating climate in Afghanistan, and the potential for a backlash on women's rights in Afghanistan due to the talks with the Taliban. High potential and well educated women in Afghanistan are leaving. There is a serious risk for a female brain drain.

For years the international community worked on improving the situation in Afghanistan for both men and women. A partnership between governments and NGOs. And there are still serious issues women face on a daily basis, but there has been a lot of progress.

I will share some of the statements on behalf of the Afghan Women's Network (AWN) and many other (women's) organisations from Afghanistan. But this is precisely where I see the added value for International Dialogue members. Fight together to keep the civic space open for local men and women. To avoid a privileged woman from Europe to be on another panel, to make certain that the women in the conflict affected countries themselves can grab a seat at these important tables.

Because we have to be very honest, civic space is already limited, and women face many more barriers compared to men. At this rate, the gender gap will only be closed in 2 centuries. This is not fast enough. We really need to step it up. If we really want to make peace more sustainable we can no longer get away with the one liners (and I am very good at the one liners myself, I am just as guilty). We really need to question ourselves, are we really doing enough? And what can we do more? And we also have to ask the women themselves, what do you need? How can we support you? A context based approach is necessary, and we need to be well informed.

Today I am trying to support my sisters from Afghanistan by sharing their statement. A partnership between Cordaid and AWN, being put to practice.

We, the women of Afghanistan, have cautious optimism for peace. Yet we are concerned - more than ever - that women's human rights will be compromised in the name of peace.

An inclusive approach to peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan will ensure the voices of all Afghans, in particularly women, are included and that the material benefits of the peace process are shared.

Any agreement relating to peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan that fails to meaningfully engage women, fails promote and protect the rights of women, or reflect the priorities of women will not result in peace for women. Rather, it will serve to bring Afghanistan back towards the social and political exclusion women were once subjected to and exacerbate the drivers of conflict.

Today, in Afghanistan, women play a significant role in every sector in the country, including in decision- making. In the parliamentary elections of October 2018, men and women from diverse areas of Afghanistan chose to vote for women candidates, dispelling myths around women's participation and demonstrating that many Afghans have turned towards supporting women's rights.

In 2018, the Afghan Women's Network led a series of consultations with women and women's organisations across Afghanistan. Through this statement, the Afghan Women's Network shares the voices of these women from all 34 provinces of Afghanistan:

- 1. The women of Afghanistan call for their **full, equal and meaningful participation in peace and reconciliation processes** relating to Afghanistan. Women are best placed to raise the concerns and priorities of women, as well as find broad solutions that benefit all of society. Afghan women emphasize the need for a transparent and accountable peace process that protects and promote women's human rights, supports justice for victims of violence and wars, and, prevents a culture of impunity.*
- 2. As we see momentum towards a ceasefire, it is critical that women, including women in the security sector, as well as gender experts be **included in all stages of a ceasefire**. An inclusive process will ensure that a ceasefire includes gender-awareness provisions, identifies violations relating to gender-based violence, and provide for women to monitor compliance with a ceasefire agreement.*
- 3. The **Constitution provides women and men with equal rights**, in line with the Sharia and Islamic principles. The Constitution was agreed upon by men and women across Afghanistan at the Constitutional Loya Jirga. It is imperative that these voices are respected, and the gender equality provisions of the Constitution maintained.*
- 4. **Violence against women and girls** remains a serious concern for women and girls in Afghanistan, despite the introduction of new laws, such as the Law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women and the Anti-Harassment Law. There remains persistent obstacles to the implementation of laws, with women and girls, as well as broader communities, not yet fully aware of their rights and protections under the laws. Planning and investment are needed to improve protections and ensure access to justice for all.*

The IDPS aims to work together with countries affected by conflict and fragility, development partners and civil society.

If we want to keep the civic space open, especially for women. There has been no greater urgency for a strong and committed IDPS. To push governments to open their doors for meaningful international dialogue for all. Help your organisations to get the women who are really impacted at the table. For our civil society organisations, make sure that if women are not allowed at the table, that you provide a folding chair for them. Push your fellow governments to not fear migration, but embrace activism. Dedicate more, flexible and easy accessible funding for women's organisations.

If you want to champion this agenda, we do not only need words, this has to be translated to tangible support and actions on the ground.

The International Dialogue has so much potential, I look forward to your commitment.