

From NGOism to Creating a movement

A talk of Nooria Haqnigar delivered on the 26th of April in Kabul during the seminar “Strengthening Women’s Movements: National and Transnational Experiences” Nooria Haqnigar

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Although Ms Guissou Jahangiri has spoken and explained very well the importance of NGOs, the values and aims of NGOs, and NGO-ism both inside and outside of Afghanistan, I would like to talk about an issue that needs to be discussed in more detail. I agree completely with what Ms Jahangiri has said and I build on that by saying that Afghanistan is a country with a very long history and an ancient culture, but with an underdeveloped economy. So much effort has been made for many years to improve the culture and economy of Afghanistan. Therefore, these efforts have had their own particular impact and contributed to the country’s history.

I do not intend to talk about the history of places that are located outside Afghanistan (the time girls used to be buried alive). I will just talk about Afghanistan and its history. We’ve had women like Rabia Balkhi who challenged the traditions. As you all know, centuries ago, Rabia Balkhi left us with a very tragic, bloody and traditionally challenging memory. Moreover, Afghanistan has always had qualified and skilled women who challenged the traditions in their poetic works. We are all familiar with the poems of Ms Sajida Milad, who actually prolongs this history. As I mentioned earlier, this provides evidence for what I have stated. There is a lot to say about these women and how they managed to live their lives, how they made their voices heard in society and how they spoke out and changed history. Their names have been recorded in the history of Afghanistan. As the time is limited for this speech, I will not analyse the lives of Afghan women historically and would just like to draw your attention to recent history and ask you to take a closer look at it. I would like to talk about the movement of women and the improvement of the situation of women during the golden, historical age, the time of Amanullah Shah. During that period, Queen Soraya broke the traditions -the traditions that had kept women down and out of sight of the public- and appeared in public among the leadership bodies of the government, thus proving her courage and capabilities in the history of Afghanistan. This act was actually the starting point of the emancipation of women in Afghanistan (She may rest in peace). During the rule of Amanullah Shah, we can see some movements initiated by women. For instance, the establishment of the Institute of Neswan, Mir Meno Tulnah, the Journal of Shadol Neswan, the school of Masturat and the departure of a team of women to Turkey for training.

For sure, these women, with the experience they had gained, were able to continue their social lives during that time; they proved and recorded the capabilities of Afghan women in the social, political and cultural history of Afghanistan and bear witness to the country’s history. After that, we see women taking on higher managerial positions in the government, girl schools being opened, and more girls going to school and university, which shows that the improvement of the situation of women was being taken more seriously. I would like to focus on the fact that women had taken on high managerial and governmental positions, they had shown leadership and participated in parliament both during mono-political party states and dynastic states. This means that the issue of the women’s movement and improvement is not without a history in Afghanistan. Present-day women can proceed on the way paved for them by women in history.

Even during the critical situation, the anti-invasion and anti-colonial wars and civil wars that our generation experienced for three decades, women were not indifferent to the events happening in society, and took part as much as they could. They took appropriate actions by

getting involved in both private and governmental organisations. For instance, if the government was active in addressing one issue, non-governmental organisations were active in addressing so many other issues. It was NGOs that were in reality helping people in need. The issue regarding NGO and NGO-ism became very serious, particularly during the thirty years of war, and was almost institutionalised. Some of them were active inside the country and others outside the country. This means that some Afghan NGOs operated outside of Afghanistan and in exile, but took action in order to support and help women in terms of education, training, health etc.

There are also NGOs that operate inside the country. These NGOs go to the provinces, which the government has not yet managed to reach, and provide assistance to the war-stricken people and to the victims of war. These NGOs supported the public and distributed humanitarian aid. What I mean to say is that these non-governmental organisations or non-governmental social institutions helped women, children and people and saved people's lives from the freezing weather, hunger and so many other disasters. I stress again the fact that the Taliban period was actually the darkest time of the state. Our generation witnessed that. It may simply be a legend for future generations, or maybe nobody will even listen. Only by remembering this and refreshing it in each seminar can we prevent it from turning into a legend. During the dark period of the Taliban regime, women were kept at home and the doors of schools, governmental organisations and educational institutions were closed to them. Not only were women not considered human, they were not even seen as living beings. The Taliban's social and human values were under questions with such policies of the government during that time.

But by remaining in the country, the pioneering women of this society did not keep quiet, non-governmental organisations did not keep quiet and continued to feel responsible, sending aid and support to women, young girls and children. They knew how to take these women by their hands in order to lead them out of illiteracy. They made a great effort to help women in need not suffer from illness or lack of medical treatment. This is the reason why we now have many of our friends here that were the heroes of that time. These women took young and teenage girls by their hands and prompted them to continue their education underground and in houses with dimmed lights, where communication took place with muted voices and gestures of the eyes. These women provided education and training that was poor and low-quality, but they still tried to keep it operating underground. As we witness now, when the new government came into power and allowed women and girls to go to school, they were offered the opportunity to come out of their homes and go to school. Girls got the highest scores. This is a result of the efforts of those sisters of ours who tolerated the pain of lashes, kept on resisting any obstacles, and took their fellow country-women and people in need by their hands. In economic terms, they were also able to organise work that could be done at home, and provided people in need with any possible help and support they could offer.

For sure, this is what makes our history beautiful, and we cannot deny the pride associated with this time, the pride linked with activities of pioneering women in Afghanistan. The eyes of justice must be blind if this cannot be seen. After September 11, women could enter into governmental organisations, schools, higher education, universities – the thousands of positions existing in higher educational institutions. We are all witnessing this right now. Finally, we see the development of NGOs. We see that many NGOs are located outside the country, while hundreds of them are established here. I agree with what Ms Guissou Jahangiri said here, that the government realises that it is the public that shoulders the burden of tasks. Therefore, the burden of the government has been lessened and the responsibilities of the NGOs have been increased. For example, the Ministry of Health takes into account how many health-oriented NGOs we have. They think it would be good to carry out some campaigns via these NGOs. They count how many education-oriented NGOs we have, without taking their own responsibilities seriously. But if the tasks that are being carried out by NGOs were acknowledged and conducted by the government and the legal system,

they would be more beneficial. Or sometimes they become very weak, and the need to create another NGO is identified in order to reach new villages. Yet another private school ought to be built in order to reach children of another village. The evolution and improvement of NGOs and NGO-ism under the war-stricken and crisis-stricken conditions of Afghanistan, in which people can hardly make a living, is a help. It is an issue that leads us to a minor aim or strategy framework that is similar to those of the NGOs. But it leads us towards a generic goal, a scientific goal, a goal that saves human lives, particularly those of women. We may not reach that goal soon. We do not say it will not be reached, but that it will take time. It means an NGO cannot exert pressure on legal sources. An NGO's work cannot bring about changes in law. It can only be socially active.

In response to this issue, four years ago -or perhaps the fifth year has passed already– the Political Participation Committee of Women of Afghanistan started dealing with the political and social thoughts of women in society, particularly of those who work in the social field and have direct contact with people and a detailed understanding of the lives of these people. They came together and set up an institution named Political Participation Committee of Women of Afghanistan. The general aim of the Women of Afghanistan is to examine human issues, particularly women's issues, from a political point of view and not just from a social perspective. Social impact is an issue. But when we say social-political, we try to analyse and discuss two issues at the same time. When we look at these issues from a political perspective, we are actually focussing on the importance of life, applicable laws, equality etc. We seek justice and open up evolutionary solutions for that and resist injustice, just as much as we seek to change the law. How can we achieve this? This can only be achieved through a political movement, political pressure and a political voice. But this is not possible merely through a small Political Participation Committee of Women of Afghanistan.

This small committee, which is actually a voluntary organisation, is run by our qualified and busy sisters. They introduced themselves. You can see that they bear great responsibility. Yet they still spare time for political thought, for elaborating a political programme and exerting political pressure on legislative or regulatory bodies. The efforts are aimed at this goal and we not only put pressure on the domestic policies of the country, we also try to make these policies and laws just and fair. But when we bring together all our political thoughts, we certainly see the international strategies pressuring us. As the publications cited by Ms Guissou revealed, foreign investments in an underdeveloped country like Afghanistan can change its policies and strategies without taking into consideration what the real needs of its people are.

What do women need? These foreign investors just think of how to promote their campaign here and take advantage of the economic resources and utilise them for their own benefit. Dear friends, based on this, I would like to stress that in a time in which the theory of globalisation prevails, a time in which our country is still suffering from war and the crisis of war –they want to take advantage of the theory of globalisation, the colonising policies and business economy– the pain and sorrows of women will increase tenfold. We can feel this pain deeply. And some may suffer even more. We cannot just ask the NGOs to do this or that and cure the pain.

The perception of the Political Participation Committee of Women of Afghanistan is that we respect all the institutions that work within the frame of infrastructural strategies like NGOs, political, social, legal institutions etc. We deeply keep them in our mind. But we do not know how to save human lives, humanity and particularly the lives of women. We believe and may see this need to be small and limited. This need seems small to us and appears small in comparison to the time we live in. We are victimised by the international policies and colonising competition of superpower countries. How can we, as small forces, resist them, individually or collectively; should we form groups or all get together and become a strong force? We can establish a big force and become an example of saving humans in the region. Afghans have many examples of this kind of pride, for they have managed to defeat the

powerful and invading foreign forces in different periods of their history. When we look at history, we realise who was defeated for the first time and where. These investments and colonising policies once more teach us the lesson that we, as women of Afghanistan, should move forward from the small meetings in the city towards bigger gatherings to establish large communities and think of saving humanity and mankind.

For sure, these small meetings and gatherings appear minor in face of the big demands. Perhaps our concepts are small, but when we get together with our friends in the regions and share our experiences, we will have a very big plan, and perhaps we can make the voices of those heard, who are victimised by drugs, of women who are victimised by human-trafficking. We can put pressure on legislation so that others will not suffer from it. We can draw up rules and laws that can rescue human lives and aim at doing away with colonising policies.

Dear friends, all thoughts and theories that you conceive in this world come from the minds of humans. It was not an inspiration, it did not come from another planet, but was based on experiences of human beings, on research done by human beings, and it resulted from people who got closer to each other, started consultations and collaboratively harmonised with each other to finally come up with a theory and formula. Therefore, let's sit together, let's attempt to form a movement, to move towards evolution and completion, to think about establishing a movement in Afghanistan, a women's movement. When I say female movement, I never want to mention it without implying the movement of women and of the emancipation of humans.

Because when a woman is free, she can have a better role in society and can be a better and more thoughtful person and transfer this freedom to other generations. Because of this, the need and necessity of a women's movement in Afghanistan has been addressed by establishing the Political Participation Committee of Women of Afghanistan, which has been newly founded, is totally voluntary and charitable. It is working towards the aim of connecting and organising scientific, social and human thoughts. We can expand and develop all social institutions and make history regarding Afghan women, and make our prepared strategy more complete. We can underpin the principles of an Afghan women's movement. We can use the experiences of our friends from outside the country, like the friends from Iran, India and Europe. Our academic contact should be informative and lay the foundations for the 21st century: We do not want to be ashamed by the young generation, especially the girls, who might then say: What situation have you left us with, what have you done for us?

We just feel one danger that the next generations are more exposed to that. Dear friends, do not think that the conditions will improve for the future generations, as the situation has not changed from the time of our fathers, so far, and the obstacles have increased. It will be worse for our future generations, since things are developing and advancing more and more, and we are not adapting accordingly. Therefore, many obstacles will face our young generations. Dear friends, Political Participation Committee of Women of Afghanistan, in collaboration with groups of social institutions and national and international friends, would like to be loyal and faithful sisters for the sake of supporting and improving women's movements in Afghanistan. We take the burden of the work and ask for your thoughts and ideas. Help us and give us some ideas, and we will help you implement them.

Thanks for your patience,

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