

**Remarks by H.E. Rula Ghani
First Lady of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
National Democratic Institute
Madeleine Albright Award Luncheon
Washington, DC, May12, 2015**

In the Name of God the Merciful the Compassionate

*Madam Secretary,
Honorable and Distinguished Members of the Audience
I come to you in Peace*

(The request from this distinguished gathering was that I speak on the situation of women in Afghanistan.)

It is an accepted convention, at least in the western media, to depict Afghan women as weak souls, helpless and hopeless, living a debased life in a tyrannical society.

I beg to differ. Afghan women are among the strongest women I have ever had the privilege to know. Yes they live under very difficult circumstances. Yes the challenges they face, especially in the provinces, can appear insurmountable. Yet, with very limited means, these women are striving to make a better life for themselves and their families. They are the glue that keeps society together, they are the conscience that goads the leaders onto the right path. They are hardworking, persistent, resourceful, and they are tough.

If they need support and help, it is not because they are too weak or clueless, but because they are strong and will put every little bit of support to good use.

During the first six months of my assuming the role of First Lady of Afghanistan, I have had over 300 encounters with groups of women coming from all corners of Afghanistan. Some groups were highly organized other were more spontaneous gatherings of like-minded women. They all struck me as thoughtful individuals who were coming to me to share their concerns and complaints. They often were able to articulate solutions to the challenges they were facing. They told their respective

stories in plain terms, without bravado or embellishments, but with clarity of purpose. They taught me a lot. Indeed, the information they brought to me was invaluable as I became familiar with their living conditions. But more specifically they taught me what it means to remain dignified under pressure and adversity.

Let me relate to you one of their stories to illustrate that last point. A few years ago, in a village of the province of Kandahar, a woman who had recently lost her husband, decided to move with her five under age children to the city so that she could find gainful employment. She remained in contact with her village relatives and would visit them from time to time. On one of her visits, she found out that one of her cousins, who had also become a widow, had been kicked out with her children from her modest house by a Taliban commander newly arrived in the area.

Without losing a minute, she brings some water to boil, prepares some tea, then proceeds to the house tea kettle in one hand and three glasses in the other. She enters the one-room house where the commander and two of his aides are sitting on a mat. She greets them respectfully, sets a glass in front of each one of them and pours them tea. Then she starts telling them softly the story of her cousin, how she had lost her husband, how she now was responsible to feed her young children, how this modest one-room house and the little vegetable plot was all that she had. She keeps repeating her monologue while continuing to pour some more tea, regardless of the fact that the three men barely acknowledge her presence. Finally, after a couple of hours, the commander gathers the kalashnikov that was nestled between his knees, stands up and tells his companions: "Let's go. Let the widow get back her house!"

As I said earlier, Afghan women are not meek. They can be resourceful, persistent, courageous, and though often illiterate they are proficient in the ways of their world.

This is not to say that their lives are easy or that they do not face enormous challenges to their dignity and even threats to their lives. You must have heard of Farkhunda, the 27-year old woman, student of theology, who dared confront the sellers of amulets in the courtyard of a mosque and

question the religiosity of their trade, and who was attacked and beaten to death by a mob of young men.

But look beyond this horrific event, look at the collective indignation it has triggered throughout the country, look at the picture of the women who, against all conventions and traditions, carried her casket to the grave. Read in the Afghan press and social media and listen on the radio and on TV to the debates that are questioning the credentials of the clergy and the apathy of the police. There is no doubt in the minds of the protesters that women are human beings with the same rights as all other human beings. There is no doubt that they are calling for an end to the gratuitous and senseless violence that is still lingering after 23 years of civil war. And maybe this tragedy happening at a time when there is at the helm true political will for reform, maybe this tragedy will usher a new era of mutual respect between men and women and of enforcing the rule of law.

Almost two months later, the foreign media is just waking up to these repercussions. Maybe it is better so, because this process needs to be a local process among afghans without intervention or guidance from the outside. It needs to be the result of home grown discussions so that the majority of the people adhere to the new principles. And you will agree with me that that is what true democracy is.