



An Innovative way of bringing awareness and stimulate advocacy! NFA to NFA. Try it!
By Marianne Singh-Waraich Canadian Federation of University Women, May 2021

GWI has created a place for NFA-to-NFA projects in the Membership Marketplace and CFUW decided to explore this option by twinning with the Dutch NFA for a six months project on raising awareness about the plight of women in Afghanistan, specifically the Afghan peace negotiations and their perilous significance for the women of Afghanistan. We held a series of ZOOM meetings and attended webinars to educate ourselves on the topic. Hally Siddons, CFUW Ottawa and Eileen Focke-Bakker, GWI -NL led their respective teams.

CFUW organized a Stand on the Bridge demonstration as shown in the photo below. A number of Canadian clubs stood on a local bridge with posters asking for human rights and the right to education for the women of Afghanistan on International Women's Day, March 8, 2021.



CFUW also organized a Walk to Kabul in which over 600 club members across the country walked, cycled, skied and ran. then pooled their mileage, starting in Ottawa to reach Kabul symbolically by April 24th, the date of our final webinar.

By April 24th, over 500 people from 27 different countries had registered to attend this webinar to hear firsthand from three prominent Afghan women about the current situation in Afghanistan.



Dr. Samar
Afghanistan Independent Human
Rights Commission Founder



Dr. Sarabi
1 of 4 women on 42 member
negotiating team



Mary Akrami
Afghan Women's Network,
Executive Director

Our first speaker was Dr Habibi Sarabi. hematologist, activist, winner of Human Rights awards, minister of women's affairs and culture, currently a negotiator on the Afghan government's team located in Doha. Our second speaker was Dr Seema Samar, who spoke from Geneva. Dr Samar, twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, is a medical doctor by training. She was initially forced to flee from Kabul to Pakistan where she operated hospitals and schools in both Pakistan among the refugees and later again, in Afghanistan. She is the founder of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and recently member of a UN High Level Panel for Internal Displacement. Our third and final speaker spoke from Kabul. Ms Mary Akrami participated in the 2001 Bonn conference, helped establish the first woman's shelter in Kabul and in 2009 the first gender-based violence law in Afghanistan and since 2018 she is the Executive Director of the Afghan Women's Network.

Since these women covered many of the same points, I have combined some of them for the sake of brevity.

Dr Sarabi came to Doha to negotiate with faith and a strong commitment to peace after so many years of war but the Taliban wasted three months with talk about rules and procedures.

Ms Akrami, too, when the peace process was first announced, along with many others, responded with huge hope for a sustainable peace, sick as they were of war. We were prepared for the peace talks, she stated. We consulted women around the country. We are united, she said, but the changes are happening quickly so it is hard to keep up. We want peace and we want women to work for a responsible peace, taking part in discussions.

All three contributed to our understanding of the current situation. They explained who the Taliban are and what they want. The Taliban, on the whole, are madrasa educated which means they have learned to read the Koran. They are fundamentalist in their view of Islam and want to impose Shariah law. Shariah was written in early medieval times and no Islamic country today follows it. e.g. The Taliban lashed a man for not fasting during Ramadan and stoned women. As Muslim women, these three feel that fasting is a personal choice. The Taliban want to create an Islamic emirate as government. Iran under Khomeini would be the closest equivalent, one ruler for life. Afghans deserve to choose their own government and during the last 20 years, they have made a lot of progress.

Women are going to school and working outside the home. Their constitution now guarantees equality and right to education. Women can not accept a return to being confined to homes and denied education.

In Doha the Taliban wasted three months on procedures, waiting to see if Trump would be re-elected and then to see what Biden would do. With Biden and then NATO deciding to pull out by September, they see themselves as having defeated the US and are uninterested in further negotiation so have been boycotting its continuation in Istanbul

In any case, these negotiations were really not a peace process but a political deal between the US and the Taliban. The Americans made several strategic errors according to Dr Samar. They made the Taliban winners by leaving and not including the elected government of Afghanistan in their exit strategy. They made no reference to women or human rights, thus undermining the people and government of Afghanistan. They made their withdrawal unconditional, writing off their years- long investment in money and casualties. The Taliban are drunk with their victory and expect to impose their rule once the Americans leave.

Another factor in the current situation is Pakistan. They have supported the Taliban over the years, allowed them to cross the border in both directions whenever it suited them, hosted Bin Laden. Since the Taliban consult with Pakistan regularly, the world can also pressure Pakistan to change its collaboration. Afghan forces have lost morale and feel deserted by their American and NATO allies. Promises of development aid will be meaningless if there is no internal security. The victorious Taliban are a threat to the whole world. They are terrorists as is borne out by the increased attacks on schools, hospitals and assassinations of journalists, especially females. They expect to be able to impose Sharia but this is not acceptable to Afghan women.

The Taliban support themselves through the cultivation and export of opium. This creates problems for the whole world as it is and it will only increase when they take over the government. Their fundamentalist rule will result in floods of Afghan refugees to the West. There will be a third generation of terrorists like ISIS under their rule which again will be exported to the West.

So, what is the remedy or what can we do?

Remember that in the past, when the US abandoned Afghanistan, it was a big mistake because it became the host of terrorists and the US was forced to return in 2001 There is still time to attach conditions to the peace process These must include human rights' and women's rights' guarantees.

All three speakers felt as Ms Akrami stated, that it gave them strength to see so many committed women on the webinar and said she counts on them to stand with Afghan women and help them maintain the gains they made over the last 20 years. We can do this by pressuring our own governments on their behalf and ask for conditions imposed on the peace, guaranteeing human and women's rights. She identified with the global women's movement to achieve equality and urged us to support and finance women's

education. Quality education is sorely needed. Fund organizations like the Afghan Women's network and *University Women Helping Afghan Women* scholarships at Garharshad University. These are effective and work at creating systemic change. Strengthening them is the shared responsibility of all the women of the world

Above all do not forget us, urged Ms Sarabi. Be our strong voice, for after the US withdrawal, disaster will ensue.