



THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF

Afghan Women

Protecting women's rights is a prime consideration after the military drawdown in 2014



ABOVE: Tahmina Kohistani of Afghanistan competes in the women's 100 meters at the London 2012 Summer Olympics.

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LEFT: Fawzia Koofi, a champion of Afghan women's rights and a legislator, is a candidate for her country's presidency in 2014.

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By per Concordiam Staff

Prior to 2001, Afghan women only dreamed of serving in the parliament, running for president or representing their country in the Olympic Games. But since the Taliban's ouster from power 11 years ago, some Afghan women are seeing their dreams come true. Dr. Massouda Jalal ran for president in the 2004 election, Fawzia Koofi is a candidate in the 2014 presidential campaign, and track star Tahmina Kohistani represented Afghanistan in London's Summer Olympics in 2012. These women are all breaking new ground and pioneering new paths to capitalize on newfound opportunities for females in Afghanistan.



Epic as their achievements are, so is their uncertainty about the future. Women worry that the Taliban will re-emerge when the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) leaves in 2014 and that the country will descend into barbarism. Some fear the future so much that a brain drain of educated women has begun, the *Guardian* reports, and more women are abandoning jobs and schools for the safety of home.

“We cannot speak about the future of Afghanistan without talking about half of the Afghan population: Afghan women – and the vital role that Afghan women are playing in paving the path toward the bright future that we all seek for this great country,” Gen. John Allen, the ISAF commander, said in February 2012.

Dr. Jalal made history in 2004 when she ran for president – marking the first time a woman ever ran for the highest office. Jalal had been a medical doctor and professor and campaigned on the principle that she was an outsider un beholden to past regimes and regional warlords. She lost the election but was appointed minister of women’s affairs and served two years. Jalal, who champions equality for Afghan women, began the Jalal Foundation, an organization dedicated to educating and empowering Afghan women.

Koofi followed in Jalal’s footsteps and has announced a run for president in the 2014 election. Her supporters have praised her courage, starting with the time she braved assaults to attend school. Koofi became the first female elected to Afghanistan’s parliament in 2005. She applied for the deputy speaker position on her first day and prevailed against male rivals, marking the first time a female was appointed to the position. While in office she raised money to build roads, fought to send more girls to school and encouraged more women to seek higher education.

Her presidential campaign will focus on “a responsible, accountable, good government,” she told Reuters in April 2012. Her intentions are to confront corruption, achieve financial independence for the country by capitalizing on the country’s rich mineral wealth, and pursue equality for women. “Our daughters are like the hope, the future of Afghanistan. I think we have to stand up. They have to raise their voice,

Former Afghan Minister of Women’s Affairs, Massouda Jalal, discusses the changing role of women in her country. Jalal was the first woman presidential candidate.

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- Dr. Massouda Jalal

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Like Jalal and Koofi, 23-year-old Kohistani is considered a symbol of female empowerment. Her training grounds and equipment were quite different from most athletes training for the Olympics – a derelict stadium and the absence of expensive coaches and pricey track shoes. She instead donned a hijab and covered her body to conform to her religion, ignoring the disadvantage that more clothing would slow her down. For running a brief 100-meter sprint, she received threats and was told she was shaming Muslim women. She vowed to quit many times but always returned to her passion. She refused to believe that the act of running was defaming Islam. Although Kohistani didn’t place in the Olympics, she says she runs for every little girl who is told not to run because of their faith. “I knew I was not going to win a medal when I came here; I am here to begin a new era for the women of Afghanistan to show people that we can do the same things that people from other countries can do. There is no difference between us,” Kohistani told *The Telegraph* in August 2012. She is now training for the 2016 Olympics.

Women struggle daily in most parts of Afghanistan. Oxfam, a nonprofit organization aimed at ending poverty, reported in March 2012 that 87 percent of Afghan women have been physically, sexually or emotionally abused. Jalal told the *Deutsche Welle* in October 2012 that women in Afghanistan are disposable to men because 60 to 80 percent of marriages are arranged and compulsory. Moreover, there are about one million male drug addicts in Afghanistan and in some of these households women assume the roles of breadwinners. The justice system is comparatively primitive. Child marriages still take place, and women are arrested and imprisoned daily for fleeing abusive husbands and forced marriages. Nearly 70 percent of the 700 female inmates in Afghan prisons are there for escaping from domestic violence.

The Afghan government has sent mixed signals on women’s rights, and many blame President Karzai for not supporting them, according to Heather Barr, the Afghanistan researcher in the Asia division of Human Rights Watch. In September 2012, high-level Afghan government officials stated that it was not a criminal act

for women to run away from violence and that it was not a reason for prosecution, Human Rights Watch reported. Justice Minister Habibullah Ghaleb, Women’s Affairs Minister Hassan Bano Ghazanfar and Deputy Interior Minister Baz Mohammad Ahmadi vowed to end imprisonment of women for fleeing abuse. The declaration is a step forward for women, but many still await release. “Now the onus is on President Karzai and his government to promptly free the women and girls that have lost months or years of their lives on these bogus charges,” Brad Adams, director of Human Rights Watch’s Asia Division, said in a September 2012 article on their website.

Many of these imprisoned women have endured pain and injustice. “While the women and girls who flee abuse often end up incarcerated, the men responsible for the domestic violence and forced marriages causing flight almost always enjoy impunity from prosecution,” a Human Rights Watch report states. For this reason, if and when these women are released, they in many cases will need protection.

Afghan women need to preserve the progress they have made, as well as expand their rights. The rights of women must be addressed in any negotiation process, advocates contend. “If more women were allowed into the provincial and peace councils, this would be a big show to the insurgents that they cannot reverse 10-years of women’s advancements,” Guhramaana Kakar, an advisor to President Karzai, told the *Guardian* in a May 26, 2012, article. “Security for women cannot be divorced from the wider security agenda in Afghanistan,” Melanie Ward, an ActionAid representative, said to the *Guardian*.

The international community also has a vital role to play in protecting women’s rights beyond the 2014 withdrawal of coalition forces. It must work to sustain the peace by helping to rebuild the infrastructure, maintain foreign investment and lay the foundation for economic development. This includes engaging in cooperative efforts to mitigate the collateral damage of illicit drug cultivation and promoting viable employment alternatives for all. The international community must recommit to fostering a stable Afghanistan not only for the sake of women, but also for the future of all citizens and the nation as a whole. □