
UNIFEM AT A GLANCE

Supporting Women's Leadership and Participation in the Reconstruction of Afghanistan

More than two decades of war and the systematic exclusion of women from social, economic and public life have had a severe impact on Afghan women. Almost two years since the fall of the Taliban regime, the challenges to the Afghan people remain enormous. Despite their increasing role and participation in the reconstruction of their country, women in particular continue to face extraordinary obstacles to their social and economic development. More than 2 million women are war widows, and an even larger number are de facto heads of households — many face intensified prejudice and violence. The illiteracy rate is about 78%, and maternal mortality rates are dangerously high. Security is a major concern for women and children, especially in the provinces where fighting continues.

As the only UN operational fund established specifically to support women, UNIFEM is committed to enabling women of all skills and professions to substantially participate in the reconstruction of their country. As early as December 2001, UNIFEM started to bring together Afghan women for consultations on their needs and recommendations for the future of their country.

UNIFEM's Response

The consultations with Afghan women formed the basis for UNIFEM's work in Afghanistan since early 2002. UNIFEM's activities are focused on the following areas:

- **Support for women's leadership and participation in decision-making.** In December 2003, the Constitutional Loya Jirga enshrined equality between men and women in the new constitution. This achievement required broad-based alliances and ongoing advocacy, a process in which UNIFEM and many of its national and international partners played a key role. A UNIFEM-facilitated Gender and Law Working Group — composed of the Office of the State Minister for Women, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Supreme Court judges, and women's NGOs — reviewed the draft constitution and submitted recommendations to the president, the Constitutional Commission and the media, as well as to women delegates. At the request of UNAMA, the United Nations Mission in Afghanistan, UNIFEM seconded three of its staff members to the Constitutional Commission to support women delegates to the Loya Jirga who worked to ensure that at least two women per province be elected to the Lower House.

To raise awareness of women's rights in the constitution, UNIFEM is supporting organizations like the Afghan Women Judges' Association, Afghan Women Lawyers and Professional Association, Afghanistan Women Lawyers' Council and Afghan Civil Society Forum. UNIFEM also provides support to the Afghan Women Journalists' Forum and other organizations to provide training and raise awareness of gender issues among journalists.

- **Support to the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA).** MOWA's mission is to restore the rights of Afghan women and girls and to improve their legal, economic, political and social status throughout the country. In collaboration with UNDP and others, UNIFEM is supporting the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) to mainstream gender into the work of other ministries, and linking newly emerging advocacy NGOs for women's empowerment and rights with each other and with government bodies.

Barely a year ago, we began to confront the formidable challenge of bringing women and their perspectives back into the mainstream of national reconstruction with nothing except optimism and commitment. We had no office and no clear idea of how to find the resources that we needed to proceed. UNIFEM was among the first international organizations to help us, setting no limits and boundaries to its scope of assistance, from office equipment and supplies, to deploying technical staff and brokering donor assistance. During the formulation of the Afghanistan National Development Budget, UNIFEM coordinated a process that helped clarify our vision, mission, roles, functions and strategies, enabling us to analyze the gender dimensions of the National Development Framework and to propose projects to address the gaps. Last year, UNIFEM also demonstrated how to galvanize sections of society when it helped organize numerous public events to highlight women's issues. I profoundly appreciate UNIFEM's very valuable support to the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the women of Afghanistan.

—Habiba Sarabi, Minister of Women's Affairs, in early 2003

- **Women's Development Centres.** In response to the urgent need for safe meeting places for women to discuss their priorities, gain access to social services, and improve their education and skills, UNIFEM supports the establishment of 6 Women's Development Centres (WDCs). In areas that have large populations of internally displaced persons (IDPs), smaller sub-centres are also being set up to support the reintegration of IDPs into their communities. The Women's Centres bring together several local NGOs that provide a range of services, including health education, literacy classes, income-generation and vocational skills training, legal/psychosocial support, childcare and computer training. So far, UNIFEM has supported the development of four WDCs in the provinces of Parwan, Ghazni, Kandahar and Hirat and three IDP sub-centres in the Shamali Plains and one in Mazar-e-Sharif, capital of Balkh Province. Two more WDCs are planned.

All by ourselves we have raised US\$300 because we belong to the centre and have organized ourselves. We want to start a shoemaking business. Now UNIFEM with the NGOs is helping us with training and marketing so that we can make a profitable business. We have a small shop in town where we sell our products — this is the first time ever that women can trade in Charikar. It was never allowed before.

—The leader of a widows' organization of 340 widows, many of whom are disabled and caring for four or more dependents, about her experience at the Women's Development Centre in Parwan