

“The Vital Role of Afghan Women in Peace, Security, and Economic
Development Processes”

Remarks by Melanne Verwee Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women’s Issues

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Good morning. It is such a delight for me to be back in the Netherlands. Your country and mine have enjoyed close ties for more than 400 years when Henry Hudson first landed in Manhattan and we had very strong diplomatic ties going back to the earliest days of the United States. We have worked together bilaterally to address a range of global challenges and we have worked together multilaterally to address peace and security around the world. So it is so fitting that we come together today to address another extremely timely and important subject.

But before I add my comments, I want to thank Ambassador Hartog-Levin for the extraordinary service she has rendered on behalf of us in your country for the last two years and for bringing us all together this morning. And I know from my conversations with her, that it is very difficult for her to take leave of a place she loves. I know she will take a good chunk of your country home with her. So thank you, Ambassador Levin.

I also want to thank Foreign Minister Rosenthal for his comments today and for his leadership. We had a very excellent meeting yesterday and he conveyed to me personally much of what he said this morning.

And I want to mention the two Palwashas who are with us today. One, Palwasha Kakar, is in her government as a deputy minister and is doing excellent work. The other Palwasha is Palwasha Hasan - she is with the Afghan Women's Network. She is an exceptional leader in civil society. And I think the two Palwashas represent a kind of coming together of women leaders in powerful positions, one in government and one in civil society. They are making a strong difference for their country, particularly in these times. And I want to add my acknowledgement to the Atlantic Commission for its great leadership in co-hosting this session.

Now in the aftermath of 9/11, the world's eyes focused on Afghanistan and we made collective efforts to root out al-Qaeda, to overthrow the Taliban and to usher in peace, stability, and a better life for the people of that country. And I also want to add my acknowledgment to the role that the Dutch have played as a partner in Afghanistan, especially your contributions to security, stability, humanitarian relief, reconstruction and development in Uruzgan Province and more broadly across the country. You have been a key partner in organizing elections, fighting the epidemic of opium production and trafficking, and assisting aid organizations with clearing away deadly land mines. And this summer you have launched the

initiative that the Foreign Minister talked about this morning in the northern province of Kunduz to better equip Afghan police forces with training that they need to strengthen the rule of law and assist in the very hard work of reconciliation. You have understood both in your development work broadly and in your engagement specifically in Afghanistan that the future of Afghanistan depends, in many ways, on the degree to which women have an active role, a power sharing role in participating in the political process - certainly in re-integration and reconciliation - and are fully engaged in the economic sector and have their rights protected. Investing in women and girls is one of the most effective investments that can be made for poverty alleviation, for security, for a country's prosperity – and even to decrease corruption. Yes, there are studies that show as women's roles increase in government decision making, corruption decreases.

Now I have read about your government's recently propagated policies on development cooperation and your focus on the four areas in which the Netherlands can bring special value. And I am pleased that Afghanistan will continue to be one of your partner countries in that work. I was also pleased that the Dutch government launched the Funding Leadership Opportunities for Women fund - (the acronym, FLOW, I like the sound of that) - to promote security, economic opportunity, and political participation. You've clearly been guided by

the research and the data which documents the soundness of these priority investments. I couldn't agree more with your Minister for European Affairs and International Cooperation, Minister Knapen, who said, "Investing in women and girls is smart politics, smart economics, and smart security." The concept of women as agents of peace and stability is also embodied in President Obama's national security strategy, which says in part, "countries are more peaceful, more prosperous when women are accorded full and equal rights and opportunities." And Secretary Clinton has echoed this view countless times. "The status of women," she said, "is not only a matter of morality and justice, as important as that is - but is also a political, economic and social imperative. Put simply, the world cannot make lasting progress if women and girls in the 21st century are denied their rights and left behind."

Following their bilateral meeting a few months ago in Washington, Secretary Clinton and Foreign Minister Rosenthal issued a joint statement on supporting women's political empowerment in emerging democracies. Their statement said, "Experience shows that integrating women into transition, reconciliation and peace-building processes from the start helps to promote long-term peace and stability by ensuring a focus on critical broader priorities and needs." They went on to say, "Where women are oppressed and marginalized, those societies become more dangerous and breed intolerance. The subjugation of women is a threat to the

common security of our world, because the suffering and denial of the rights of women and the instability of nations goes hand in hand.” The United States is implementing this understanding in our strategy in Afghanistan – and obviously the Netherlands is also. We agree that Afghan women need to be involved in every step of securing and rebuilding their country.

Now let me turn for a moment to the continuing commitment of the United States to Afghanistan in this time of transition and add to what Ambassador Hartog-Levin has said this morning. In a recent address in India, Secretary Clinton described the Obama administration’s policy. “The United States is committed to Afghanistan and to the region. We will be there. Yes, we are beginning to withdraw combat troops and transfer responsibility for security to the Afghan people, a process that will be completed in 2014, but drawing down our troops is not the same as leaving or disengaging. We and the Afghans are making progress on a new strategic partnership declaration that will define our relationship after 2014. And through that partnership, we will continue to assist the Afghan army and police and the Afghan Government. And we will do everything we can to help the Afghan people rebuild after decades of war. At the same time, we are pursuing an active diplomatic effort with all the countries in the region toward two goals: First, a responsible political solution in Afghanistan, and second, stronger

economic ties through South and Central Asia so that goods, capital, and people can flow more easily across borders.”

Those unambiguous redlines that Ambassador Hartog-Levin laid out, including she said, ensuring that the rights of women will be protected as the Constitution of Afghanistan provides – and let me say clearly that those rights include the right to an education, to participate politically and economically in their country’s public life, to be free from violence in their homes, workplaces and communities.

Now no one wants to see the conflict end more than the Afghan women and I have spent much time with many of them and you will hear from them again this morning. They have suffered unspeakable atrocities under the Taliban. So they want this conflict to end and they want a better life for themselves and their country but they want to be part of the process to ensure that the eventual peace agreement is sustainable. They want to be part of that power sharing that the Foreign Minister discussed this morning. This is not a favor to the women of Afghanistan. It is not just a nice thing to do. It is a necessity. Because any potential for peace will be subverted if women’s voices are silenced or marginalized. The United States will not abandon our values or support a political process that undoes the progress that has been made over the last decade.

Secretary Clinton also noted that the diplomatic and political effort will only succeed if it is paired with a strategy to increase economic ties in all the countries

of the region. None of us can provide aid forever. It is critical that Afghanistan's economy gets going in a very strong way, that it achieves trade and investment.

An Afghanistan firmly embedded in the economic life of the region would be able to attract new investment and connect to markets abroad. This is the vision of a new Silk Road – a 21st century regional economic network that enlists the international community and private sector to ensure a sustainable, economically viable future for Afghanistan.

I had a glimpse of what is possible just a few weeks ago because the State Department sponsored as significant coming together, a conference for female entrepreneurs from Central Asia and Afghanistan that took place in Kyrgyzstan. It was called "Invest in the Future." The women were so eager to accelerate their economic journey together, across borders, in order to grow economic opportunity. As a result of the conference, the United States, multilateral organizations and the private sector have committed resources to provide women with greater opportunity for success. So simply put, neither reintegration and reconciliation nor the promotion of economic opportunity can succeed without Afghan women's full participation.

The United States, like the Netherlands, has been committed to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. It links women with peace and security. It says that we must ensure justice for acts of violence against women and ensure that

women's participation in conflict prevention, management, and resolution, and strengthening the conditions for lasting peace and prosperity, are real. Evidence shows that integrating women into peace building processes helps promote long-term peace by ensuring that a broader set of critical priorities and needs are on the table and addressed. Moreover, women's leadership in peace processes positively correlates with a reduction of violence and armed action, the sustainability of those peace agreements and post conflict political frameworks, as well as the evolution of democratic systems of governance.

Women have been distinguishing themselves in Afghanistan. As you heard from the Foreign Minister, the role they're playing in Parliament, ministries and in the provincial government – and they also need to be fully included in the peace and reconciliation process as it moves forward. We and your country have advocated for their inclusion, as we have for women's participation in the London Conference that the Foreign Minister mentioned, Kabul conference, in the Consultative Peace Jirga where the women so distinguished themselves several months ago and where they constituted roughly 20 percent of the participants, and now the High Peace Council – the lead Afghan body guiding the ongoing reintegration and reconciliation process. This has to take place on all levels - the national, provincial and local level, where real reconciliation will have to take place if the prospects for peace will truly take hold.

This is also true for the Bonn conference that will take place in December. The Afghan Women's Network has described this as a step toward defining a vision for Afghanistan beyond 2014 and the transition. But for women to be included in the Bonn II conference, it will be up to the Afghan government, because they are in the chair of the conference and they will be putting together the Afghan delegation. And prior to Bonn II, there will be a civil society meeting and it is our hope that representatives from the civil society discussion will also participate in the Bonn conference.

Countries that exclude women do so at their own peril. No country, especially one emerging from war, can afford to exclude and suppress the vital driver of economic growth that women represent. For every dollar a woman earns, up to 90 percent of it is spent reinvested in to her family and in her community. When girls go to school, even just for year, their income dramatically increases after they finish, their children are more likely to survive their families more likely to be healthier for years to come. Women's capacity to participate and contribute economically is directly correlated to their ability to exercise equal rights, inheritance rights, land rights bear particular significance. Ultimately, access to equal economic opportunity for women and men form a very integral dimension of lasting stability and prosperity.

One of the key sectors for women's economic participation is agriculture. I know that the Dutch, as has been said, have a great deal of expertise in this sector, as well as water management. And you are the world's second largest exporter of agricultural goods. You have also developed a robust educational and training system for agriculture that offers so much to places like Afghanistan, which is traditionally an agricultural society. According to USAID, agriculture represents one third of Afghanistan's economy and 75 percent of its population is engaged in farming – and that includes between 30 –60 percent of women, depending on the region they are from and what the season is. They are involved in farming, herding or otherwise connected to the agriculture industry. Women are playing an extremely important role in all dimensions of agricultural production. Increasingly their role is growing in livestock production and processing of dairy products. They make major labor contributions to a number of the marketed products. Fewer women own either land or livestock because of cultural subordination, traditions, pressure of women to cede inheritance to a relative, lack of credit, and like factors that diminish their prospects.

I remember on an early trip to Afghanistan, I had heard about how the country was importing chickens and I couldn't understand how, when there was so much potential, that was the case. However, over time I have seen great expansion of poultry programs, through business trainings and other projects. One woman

commented that she was now able to open her own poultry business. She said: "It is unbelievable for all of us how soon our family life changed from misery to prosperity. Many chicks have grown, laid eggs. We are selling eggs, using them as a source of our food for our family and our lives are completely transformed." And today increasing numbers of women are being trained in veterinary fields as more and more Afghans own their own livestock. The United States development and agriculture programs have focused on improving food security, increasing agricultural productivity and rural employment and to improve family incomes and well being. And this factor is particularly important for the livelihood and security of women. All of this also has a profound impact also on peace and stability. Our agriculture development programs have also focused on the high value fruit and nut production which Afghanistan has always enjoyed an extraordinary reputation. And we are working to train farmers in improving crop yields and business skills, to enable Afghan traders to expand their export markets which will be absolutely critical in the months to come.

The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) devoted this year's study – they do an annual study on food and agriculture – on the vital role that women play in the agricultural sector. What the study showed is that there is a very strong economic argument for focusing on investing in women in agriculture. Yet women farmers do not have equal access to resources and this significantly limits their

potential in enhancing productivity. They are often at a severe disadvantage when it comes to securing land tenure rights or owning land outright, owning livestock, accessing credit which is a major issue in Afghanistan, receiving the kind of extension training and resources that will grow her output. The FAO study shows that when women are provided with equal resources they can produce yields equal to those of men, if not greater. But because there is a gender gap in access to resources in everything from seeds and fertilizer to training, the opportunity to improve overall productivity has been limited.

We also know from the World Economic Forum's Annual Gender Gap Report that in the countries that are closer to closing the gap between men and women on 4 metrics, including economic empowerment, those countries are far more economically competitive and prosperous.

When I was at the FAO I participated in a dinner with the Afghan Minister of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock. He described the progress that was taking place in Afghanistan in his sector and he also described some of the key challenges that Afghanistan confronts. And he said that it is absolutely vital to the future success of agricultural production that women play a greater role. His ministry has adopted a gender mainstreaming policy and strategy. However because of a lack of capacity, it has not been implemented to the degree that it needs to be.

Unleashing women's potential by closing that gender gap in the agricultural sector is a win-win strategy. We all need to do better in our collective efforts to focus on women in the agricultural sector, as well as to ensure that they are getting a greater percentage of resources than they are currently.

Let me just say that to visit Afghanistan, whether in the capital, big cities or in the provincial and rural areas, one is immediately struck by the number of strong, courageous and capable women, many of whom are risking their lives every day in order to work as they do – alongside the men – to create a better life for themselves and their country. One evening when I was in a discussion with some Afghan women, the session opened by one pleading, “Do not look at us as victims but as the leaders that we are.” Afghan women's contributions are critical, whether in the peace process or advancing economic opportunity and greater productivity in the agricultural sector. They are leading the way. And with our support, they can go that much farther and do that much better.

A friend gave me a small calendar that has a quotation for every day of the year and I think the quotation for today says a great deal about the collaboration between the United States and the Netherlands. It is from an African proverb that says, “If you want to walk fast, walk alone. But if you want to walk far, walk with others.” And your country, together with mine and so many others, are walking the distance, walking together to make a difference for peace and progress in

Afghanistan and for a better world for everyone. I thank you for this and I thank you for all the things we are doing together.

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