



## To The Gatekeepers of Women's Honor: an open letter from the Women of Afghanistan<sup>1</sup>

This is not the first time we have gathered here. These walls, this table, this stove, this teapot – how often they have witnessed our gatherings, our frustrations, our stresses. How often they have welcomed this group of frustrated women friends, activists, and allies. How often they have heard us unload the same concerns: how fragile have been our gains, how meaningless have been the laws we've fought to have passed, how useless have been the policies we struggled to see implemented in this land where there is no belief in women's rights. Where a woman's position in society is considered a mere extension of her role in her family and tribe, and where ethics and beliefs are exclusively understood through a masculine definition, for which women pay the price every day.

Today, the latest blow: women's shelters. Let us recall the story. First, an incredible media related to power circle report falsely decries women's shelters as dens of prostitution and immorality. In response, the government creates a Commission of high level officials – none of them experts, none of them shelter managers, none of them having ever lived in a shelter – to assess the situation. They produce a biased and incomplete report, without discussing their findings with the shelters themselves or the experts and organizations who support them.

We, the women activists, are now accused by the government of having dis-honoured the national pride of the country by publicly exposing the egregious and often humiliating violations of rights that women are exposed to. This, they said, shames us in the eyes of the world. This? The revelation of human rights abuse? Not the widespread corruption, the failure of governance? Instead, what shames us is the age-old Afghan tradition of providing safe shelter to those who most need it, and fighting for the rights of the vulnerable? This shames us?

In an attempt to 'mend' these problems and divert international assistance from independent women's shelters into a regularized government channel the government is using women ministry as tool of curtailing women's rights. The minister is shamelessly accusing women group of corruption without presenting firm evidence or taking initiative of correcting where problem exist.

On other hand according to the January financial report of the government, most of the ministries have failed to spend even 50% of their national development budget. And now they want to transfer yet more money into a government system that can't even cope with the money they already have.

But the biggest question is not the funding – at least not for Afghan civil society, and for women's groups in particular (who have, by the way, routinely optimized their minimum budgets in the past, making the most out of every single dollar received, and whose own financial reports are testament to that). No, the biggest question is *what will happen to the women*.

Unfortunately, the grandiose vows to protect and respect women's rights that were made in the London and Kabul conferences and through the Lisbon Declaration have hardly been translated into real action by the Afghan government and its international allies. In fact, since those vows were made, the government has slipped *backwards* in its commitments to women's rights. And now we are to put the most vulnerable women of our society fully in the hands of the government??

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<sup>1</sup> Afghan Women's Network is an umbrella organization of women organizations, activists and human rights defenders in Afghanistan, with membership of over 5,000 individual women and over 75 non-government organizations.

The experience of running shelters in the last nine years shows that there have always been threats from state institutions and society's informal power holders to both the women who run the shelters and those who seek refuge in them. These are not threats to cut funding, no. These are insidious threats; threats of betrayal of trust of the worst kind. For example, a 12 year old girl from Shindand District in Herat recently sought refuge in a shelter, but the government, under pressure from a Member of Parliament, handed the girl back to her family who then cut her to pieces.

And her story doesn't even stand out from the rest. Her story is *common*. Some of the women we know are taking huge risks – heroic risks – not only with their own lives but also those of their children, to find refuge from abuse in these small safe houses. Some receive threats daily, hourly even. But the risk, for them, is worth it. These are women who have witnessed up close the torture and killing of other women, and have themselves been the victims of horrific abuse. They are already taking the maximum risk to escape it: they are putting everything on the line. Under this new regulation women would suffer even *worse* odds to protect themselves and their children. How can we allow that?

Today there is a woman in Takhar who is crying out and seeking justice against the powerful perpetrator who abducted, imprisoned, and then killed her daughter. The perpetrator is criminal nephew of an MP who right this moment is sitting in Parliament in Kabul, considered above law by the district authority. How much more blatant can this get?? Don't you realize that every woman in Afghanistan knows that this is the situation? That for the Afghan government, this is considered *normal*??

Women who run shelters work every single day to safeguard the lives of their Afghan sisters, regardless of their politics and ethnicity, but are already up against tremendous odds in succeeding. Somewhere between 40 to 60% of all cases of known abuse are manipulated by an influential power holder, who uses his ability to pressure government to have his woman handed back over to her abusive husband or father from whom she sought to escape.

We ask our government – can you really take on the responsibility of safeguarding the lives of these women??

Will controlling women's welfare, right down to their place of last resort, help you build your international image? Is this decision really made with the best interests of women in mind, even when you know that you rule the second most corrupt government in the world? Will this regulation be magically saved from the powerful and corrupt influences that infect every other part of your government? How could you do this? And more importantly, how can we make you stop it?