

## LEADING WOMEN ADVOCATES CAMPAIGN AGAINST RE-ESTABLISHING NOTORIOUS AFGHAN VICE AND VIRTUE DEPARTMENT

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AdvocacyNet

News Bulletin 83, September 22, 2006

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September 22, 2006, Kabul and Washington, DC: The largest women's advocacy network in Afghanistan is campaigning against re-establishing the vice and virtue department that was notorious under the Taliban for meting out harsh punishments for women.

Women were publicly beaten for showing too much skin, wearing nail polish or not being accompanied by a male relative. But the government says the re-established department will focus on promoting morality by preventing alcohol, drugs, crime and corruption. It is still not clear how much enforcement power the department would have, but the name alone fills many women in Afghanistan with fear.

The women met at the headquarters of the Afghan Women's Network (AWN), a partner of the Advocacy Project (AP), on August 13. This strong criticism of re-establishing the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice is the first collective action taken by over 3,000 Afghan women from 94 organizations.

The government has not been transparent, which has created "suspicion" over the need for re-establishing the department, said Erica Isaac, AWN's advocacy director. Already-existing agencies, such as the Ministry for the Haj and Religious Affairs (MoRA), are and should continue to reduce unethical social behavior and spread religious education messages.

A statement released by AWN calls for Imams and other religious scholars and organizations to "take responsibility for the moral and religious education of Afghan society" and for the government to control corruption. The re-establishment of this department would only increase corruption. Instead, the government should focus on eliminating corruption within three agencies – the police, justice and school systems – so that they can enforce the law.

President Hamid Karzai, under pressure from conservatives, established a panel earlier this year that drafted a proposal for the recreation of the department. Parliament will meet later this summer to vote on it. If the department is reintroduced, AWN is demanding that representatives from women's rights groups be involved with the selection of staff.

AP intern Erica Isaac, who worked with AWN this summer, helped draft the statement. Ms. Isaac has taken a semester away from school to serve as AWN's advocacy director this fall.

- For Erica's blogs, visit: <http://www.advocacynet.org/author/erica-isaac/>

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