

AFGHAN WOMEN'S NETWORK CALLS FOR SWEEPING CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES TO IMPROVE WOMEN'S RIGHTS, UNVEILS NEW WEBSITE

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In a major push to improve the rights of Afghan women, the Afghan Women's Network (AWN) has called for sweeping changes in the Afghan Constitution that would permit Afghan women free health care in all maternal health facilities as well as equal rights in all aspects of divorce and the custody of children.

The demands are among a lengthy list of proposals that were submitted on March 3 by the AWN to a Constitutional Commission that has been set up by the Karzai government to engage the Afghan population in the redrafting of the Constitution. The Commission is due to submit its conclusions in October.

The AWN is a coalition of over 25 Afghan Nongovernmental Organizations and several hundred individuals, with offices in Peshwar (Pakistan) and Kabul (Afghanistan).

The entire network has been engaged in the constitutional process. Two AWN working groups have spent the past five months surveying AWN members on both sides of the border, and also analyzed human rights law, Islamic law, and previous Afghan constitutions before coming up with recommendations. AWN teams visited refugee camps in Pakistan and remote rural areas.

The AWN's proposals were announced before a packed press conference in Kabul Thursday by Sadiqa Basiri, 23, who heads the AWN's External Affairs Unit. Ms. Basiri also announced the posting of a new AWN website, which carries information about the AWN, its members, and its constitutional proposals: <http://awn-af.net/>.

"Afghan women have been oppressed and have been made second-class citizens," said Ms. Basiri. "If the Commission accepts our proposals, women will have new freedoms under Afghanistan's civil, judicial and penal codes."

Among the AWN's demands:

- Respect for the legal age of marriage (16). According to the AWN, girls as young as 9 are being married off by fathers and grandfathers;
- The elimination of a provision in the current Constitution that allows in-laws to marry off a widow to her late husband's brother;
- Women and children should enjoy free health care in all maternal health clinics;

- Law courts should take all decisions regarding child custody - this is currently left to the father when a child is older than 9;

- Equal rights for the wife in all aspects of divorce: this would allow a woman to divorce if her husband is dangerously ill for more than three years, changes his religion, or secretly takes another wife.

In addition to generating support for its constitutional campaign, AWN members hope that their new website will increase membership, attract funds, and even allow AWN members to vote online. A Dari language version is currently under preparation.

Ms. Basiri hailed the launch at today's press conference. "The website will help the women of Afghanistan to stay connected and organized," she said. "It also will provide the outside world with a clear picture of what is happening with Afghan women."

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The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children and the Advocacy Project are assisting the Afghan Women's Network with its advocacy. Working with grants from the Central Eurasia Project of the Open Society Institute and the East-West Management Institute, the two organizations have recruited an experienced American reporter, Mary Moore, to support the AWN on both sides of the border. To read Ms. Moore's illustrated diaries visit http://www.advocacynet.org/afghan_diary_1/.

- To contact the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, visit <http://womensrefugeecommission.org/>; Telephone 212 5513115 (New York) or e-mail info@wrcommission.org.

- To contact the Advocacy Project, visit the AP website (<http://advocacynet.org/>). Telephone 202 758 3328 (Washington DC) or e-mail dcoffice@advocacynet.org.

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