

March 9, 2019, International Women's Day Speech

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Dear mothers, sisters, brothers and esteemed guests: I would like to welcome and thank you all for joining us, and to extend my sincere gratitude to the well respected Daunesh association for partnering with our organization Family Service Toronto, as we proudly celebrate this auspicious International Women's Day together. It is indeed a great honor.

The topic and purpose of my speech today is gender-based violence, and violence against women, around the world and in our community; and how it is not only a woman's issue, just because it contains the word *gender* or *woman*, it is everyone's issue or problem in a society.

Therefore, as women, we are calling out to our community leaders, brothers, fathers and male youth, to join us as allies and partners in the struggle and effort to prevent and end all forms of violence against women and girls, because this issue affects us all; as families, as a community, and as a society.

Why do we celebrate International Women's Day?

International Women's Day is celebrated around the world on March 8, to commemorate the political, social and economic achievements of women. Over the decades, the objective of this day has been to celebrate, appreciate, love, respect and empower women. In fact, women should be valued and appreciated every single day, because the survival of humanity is largely dependent on them. But unfortunately, this is often not the case!

Instead, women are often victims of violence, just because they are women.

In many countries across the globe, including Afghanistan, human rights violations and gender-based violence against women and girls remains widespread and continues to rise. These countries suffer a profound gender inequality that is nurtured by social patriarchal norms and laws that have yet to be reformed. Their harmful customary practices, which aim at preserving suppression of women, are defended and sanctified as cultural traditions with religious overtones. I acknowledge, however, that these issues are often intensified or become worse in a country where there is increasing political unrest.

So yes, Patriarchy is the root cause of this violence and inequality in many societies. Through male domination and marginalization of women, these societies perpetrate a culture of violence and impunity, where women continue to remain second-class citizens, and face many barriers that impede on their human rights. Oftentimes, such attitudes and belief systems are continued by people across the globe and wherever they resettle, even in democratic civil societies that adhere to the rule of law.

Unfortunately, patriarchal values and attitudes are deeply embedded in the Afghan society, and these determine the subordination of women. It is also unfortunate that men have been largely kept out of the conversations on a subject that is central to men.

We need the help of good men like you, to help us prevent and end violence against women through education and constructive discourse.

Violence against women is a social epidemic that is rooted in unequal power relations between men and women in any society, and therefore we cannot deny that it also exists in Canada.

Violence against women, or domestic violence, is often perpetuated in the home. It can have countless devastating consequences on women's health and wellbeing, as well as their families and especially children. Victims of domestic abuse belong to any socioeconomic background, race, ethnicity, or culture.

At a young age, boys can be profoundly affected and severely traumatized by the violence against their mothers, against themselves, or their sisters. Statistics show that sometimes abused boys, when they grow up, become abusers themselves, jeopardizing their chances to have a normal life as adults.

Similarly, one of the direct impacts of violence against women, also include women exerting power and control over other women. In other words, when a woman becomes abusive toward another woman or a girl, it could be a manifestation of internalized oppression by a patriarchal system.

Domestic violence or abuse can be described as a pattern of behaviour, used by a person to gain power and control over another person, especially in intimate or family relationships, such as, towards a wife or partner, daughter, sister, children, and even towards elders. The behaviours may include physical violence, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, psychological intimidation, verbal abuse and stalking. Abusers can also be from any socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. They can be young, old, educated, illiterate, rich or poor. When it comes to violence against women, sometimes, the abusers are also men who are well-educated, rich, and well-respected community members, who misuse their influence, social status, and power in the community, to manipulate, use and abuse women, including their own family members. Because of their social status and name in the community, we often do not believe their victims, nor do we have the courage to hold them accountable for their actions

If anyone who consciously decides to ignore, turn away or remain quiet about abuse or misuse of power towards a woman, they become complicit in the violation and the crime committed against a woman, which is a crime against another human being.

Asserting abuse and power over a woman is either a conscious choice a man makes, influenced by problematic beliefs and attitudes, or it is as a result of a mental health issue.

Now let me share some important statistics with you about the prevalence of violence against women, both globally and nationally:

- According to "World Health Organization": Approximately 35% of women worldwide have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence by their partners or other men.
- According to "Canadian Women's Foundation": Every 6 days, at least one woman is killed by her partner
- According to "YWCA Canada": Most women do not report it, and out of every 1000 sexual assaults in Canada, only 33 are reported to police and only 3 lead to a conviction

While all communities experience domestic violence or violence against women, research shows that immigrant and refugee women, including Afghan women in Canada, who experience domestic violence, often do not report it and they face many barriers to access support. Some reasons for this include: lack of information about the laws and women's rights; fear of the police; lack of trust in the justice system; and fear of being judged, ostracized and punished by her family and her community. This is when domestic violence is either compounded or turns into community violence against women. So, who should a woman turn to when her home and her community become perpetrators of violence against them? That is why, they often lose hope and continue to endure abuse and all forms of violence for years, which can lead to various physical and mental health issues, and even death. It can destroy families and have a negative impact on the community.

Now I ask, what can men and women do together, as active allies, to end violence against women and girls, in our communities?

Many men like you, care deeply about these issues; but caring deeply is not enough, we need action. We need more men with the courage, strength and the moral integrity to break the complicit silence, challenge each other and stand with women; not against them.

Remember, you owe it to the women, to your mothers, to yourselves, and to your sons. You also owe it to Afghan youth in Afghanistan and around the world, who grew up in a patriarchal society, especially during the decades of war, and did not have a choice to decide how to be responsible honorable men who respect women, as their mothers, their sisters, and their partners.

So what are some of the steps you can take as our allies to prevent and end violence against women?

You can:

- Help promote gender equity, healthy relationships and positive ideals of manhood.
- Speak out against violence, and do not be complicit with the crimes against a woman by staying quiet

- Learn about the impact of violence against women in our communities.
- Examine and challenge your own attitudes. Be true to yourselves and do what's right.
- Never use force, threats, manipulation or violence in your relationships with family and others.
- As an ally, collaborate with women in this movement to tackle the root causes of violence in our communities
- Challenge institutions that perpetuate violence against women
- Be a good role model to your sons, and share with those around you the importance of respecting women and girls
- And, as Gandhi said; “Be the change that you wish to see in the world.”

I hope, that going forward, men and women working together, can begin the much-needed change and the transformation, so that future generations won't have the level of tragedy that we deal with, on a daily basis.

It is time to break the cycle of violence against women.

Let us all fight for women's rights, because “women rights are human rights!”

Thank you