

CIDA-Funded ACCC Marks International Women's Day by Graduating 242 Women

Despite being one of the world's most dangerous places in the world for women to educate and work, Afghan women at the Afghan Canadian Community Center (ACCC) in Kandahar braved to walk on to the graduation stage. With full enthusiasm and eagerness they received their certificates of achievement after completing courses in business management, computer technology, English language and communications. Certificates were distributed among the graduates by the ACCC Director and guests who included Mahmood Karzai, the elder brother of President Hamid Karzai and President of Ayno Foundation, Dr. Rangina Wisa, the Kandahar Governor's wife, Roqia Achakzai, the Director of Women Affairs, and the Director of Kandahar Women Association.

The graduation ceremony included sixteen students dressed in the caps and gowns of the South Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT), among them two male teachers, for completing SAIT's two-year online business management certificate program. As well, sixty students from a one-year ACCC-AIWR (Alliance for International Women Rights) English and communications skill training project funded by the US State Department, and 165 more ACCC students graduated in computer technology, English language and business management. They were inspired by the guests and their parents showed obvious pride to see their daughters' achievements.

Inspiring speeches were delivered to mark the achievements of the women at ACCC, Afghanistan and all over the world. Slide shows were put on displays at the ACCC resource room and prominent international women and women champions were shown to the participants. A congratulatory video clip from the SAIT president and CEO was played to graduates, the audience and guests, which was highly appreciated by all.

The speakers praised the Afghan Canadian Community Center for its tangible services in empowering women with needed education, knowledge and information within existing cultural and religious traditions in Kandahar. They thanked the government of Canada for supporting Kandahar women's education.

Dr. Rangina Wisa, Kandahar Governor's wife said, "You truly have been provided a very valuable and internationally recognized education at your homes in Kandahar. I urged you to use these skills to serve your country and I urge your parents to allow you to get education and work. Education enlightens your lives."

She praised Ehsan for his untiring efforts in making sure girls have access to better education and information and assured him, ACCC students, teachers and parents that she would support the ACCC to become a better facilitated and a state-accredited institution. She said she was grateful to the Canadian government for supporting this center. She also thanked Mahmood Karzai for his donation of land to the ACCC.

She also liked the video clip message sent from SAIT president, Irene Lewis, for the graduates at ACCC and she praised SAIT Polytechnic for providing employable skills to the women of Kandahar.

The Director of Women Affairs Roqia Achakzai said, "These achievements are highly praiseworthy." She congratulated SAIT and the ACCC graduates. "I am deeply grateful to Mahmood

Karzai for his donation of land to the ACCC and I also would like to thank the Canadian government for supporting the ACCC in which my daughters are also studying. My message to Afghan women is to obtain knowledge and information so that they can secure their rights. I request you to use this knowledge in the service of your communities. I am pleased to be invited by Mr. Ehsan and I would like stand with him in his noble efforts in providing education to the women of Kandahar." She also presented ACCC Director with appreciation certificate signed by Dr. Toryalai Wisa, the governor of Kandahar for his services and the services offered by teachers at the ACCC.

Mahmood Karzai, brother of president Karzai indicated that he was surprised to see that this thriving and prestigious institution had not received the attention it needs from president of Afghanistan, the private businesses and government officials including Kandahar governor.

He said, "I call on the president, Kandahar governor, local businessmen and international donors to support this Center. I have visited other provinces, but I haven't seen such a quality school as ACC Center is."

He assured Ehsan that he would ask businesses, government and international organizations to support the ACCC to have and better facilities so that more people of Kandahar can benefit from. "I am given a great hope to see so many women graduating ACCC today through which they are marking the international women day, but if you really want to secure your full rights then go out to learn and to vote and take active participation in any election."

Ehsan, the Director of the Afghan Canadian Community Center said, "Let me congratulate all of you for this remarkable achievement you have made and for the bravery and courage you have shown against challenges to complete this long journey to graduate today. We are proud and honored to have been working in close partnership with SAIT Polytechnic in providing women in Kandahar the education they need. You learn what a Canadian student would learn, but you do it from the Afghan Canadian Community Center in Kandahar. You were provided access to the most modern and internationally recognized education. You must be proud of this – congratulations again."

Ehsan also said, "I am impressed by the courage you have shown during your studies in the region where the female population is still threatened by ultra-conservative cultural attitudes, poverty and the ongoing war. You are all fortunate to have enrolled at ACCC through which you gained access to Canadian and US education professionals."

Ehsan said, "I, on behalf of hundreds of students and teachers at the Afghan-Canadian Community Center, would like to reiterate my profound gratitude to the Canadian International Learning Foundation and to the great Canadian people for supporting our women and their access to education. We are yielding this result it is thanks to the Canadian government financial support provide to ACCC through the Canadian International Development Agency. This support from Canada demonstrates Canada's commitment to the spread of knowledge and information and respect for human rights and education."

A student graduate, Anita Taraki, said, "Education is a light that can help take us out from darkness and backwardness to dignity and prosperity. I am proud to graduate today to serve my nation. I believe educated Afghan girls will finally be serving Afghanistan and saving it from

evils." She thanked SAIT, Canadian donors and Canadian government for their support to the women education at the ACCC.

Finally gifts of kitchen sets, stationery, school bags clocks, shoes, clothes with teapots were distributed among the participants. They also enjoyed refreshments, all of which were arranged by the ACCC and its student contributions. The gifts were prepared by UNHCR and ISAF.

Media representatives covering the event included Kandahar Television, Hewad Television, Afghan Azada Radio, Shamsh Television, Killid Radio and Benawa News.

The ACCC receives over half of its financial support from the Canadian government through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The ACCC also receives both technical and financial support from the Canadian International Learning Foundation.

Ehsanullah Ehsan speech on IWD 2011

Distinguished guests, parents, fellow teachers and dear students Asslamu Alaikum Wa-Rahmatullahi Wa-Barakathuhu and welcome to ACC Center and thank you all for joining us on this auspicious occasion of International Women's Day, March 8. ACCC is proud to mark this important day with an outstanding achievement.

Today over 242 women students of ACCC are graduating in leadership, human resources, business communication, project management, organizational behavior, accounting, computer technology and English language which signify remarkable accomplishments of the ACCC's students who studied hard and completed this journey. Let me congratulate all of you for the remarkable achievements you have made and for the bravery and courage you have shown against challenges.

ACCC is deeply honored to acknowledge women's significant role and celebrate their critical contributions they have made to economic, social, and educational advancement. To help support women in Kandahar, ACCC is proud to have opened courses in business management, English language and computer technology through the very generous financial and technical support of Canadian volunteers, Canadian government, Canadian International Learning Foundation, Canadian Women for Afghan Women, the US based Alliance for International Women's Rights and Canadian educational institutions including SAIT Polytechnic Institute as well as Education Generation, Roshan Telecommunication and the US based National Educator Program. We together have given voice and empowerment to hundreds of women and now they have been enabled to learn to serve and go beyond the four walls they were confined in.

The ACCC has become a major leader in professional education, not just for Kandahar, but for the nation of Afghanistan as a whole. Through the support of these institutions and benevolent people of Canada and US, over 1,700 students, half of them women and girls have gained access to very valuable and employment oriented education.

Approximately 250 women students visit ACCC internet facility free of charges on a daily basis. Through the internet our women students are exposed to information and education, new ideas and businesses, research and cross-cultural understanding.

Over 1,100 women students have graduated in the field of Project Management, Leadership, Human Resources, Organizational Behavior, Business Communication, Accountancy, Computer Technology and English language since ACCC was established in late 2006.

This past year ACCC was able to secure 30 jiribs land and \$100,000 in donation for the promotion of your education. Mr. Mehmood Khan Karzai, the Head of AFCO International and Ayno Foundation announced that he would provide the Afghan Learning and Development Organization (ALDO) and its subsidiary education institutions, the Afghan-Canadian Community Center (ACCC) and the newly proposed Afghan-American Career Academy (AACA) in Ayno Meena for the construction of a building and campus to support these institutions.

Last year we announced to you that we were working in close consultation and partnerships with the US based National Educator Program to establish the first Career Academy outside of the United States as another major education development project at ACCC. Due to lack of funding and facilities at ACCC we were unable to take practical steps. But this does not mean this will not happen. We are together working with teachers and academicians in US on this initiative to formally begin its work in the near future. The career academy structure, which would be utilized at ACCC, is one of the most researched and proven instructional structures in American education. This academy will provide disadvantaged youth an entry point into university and the workplace. NEP is also working out way to provide professional development training to the teachers and staff of the ACCC. With this new partnership, 600 academicians, school principals, teachers, parents and students across United States signed a petition in your support and 20 students took upon themselves in a cold morning making grueling trip from New York to Washington D.C. to support your education here.

Last year and the year before last we were celebrating the enrollment of new students and securing of new scholarships for you on SAIT online education program and this year, after a two year journey of your studies, we proudly announce 16 more students have completed SAIT's online business management full certificate program. You were provided access to the most modern and internationally recognized education. You must be proud of this – congratulations again.

Last year we announced marking of the Women's Day with starting a training project in leadership and communication via Skype by professional American teachers from the United States of America. Today we take deep pride in successfully implementing that project with funding from U.S. State Department through Alliance for International Women Rights, 260 girls benefitted from this project and 60 of them are graduating today.

Now over 600 women students of the ACCC have secured highly-paid employment and scholarships with prominent national and international organizations in the region and both inside and outside of Afghanistan.

During the last year, we were able to conduct 65 workshops for our students. The workshops covered topics from science, economy, politics, religion, communism, Islam, democracy, human rights, rule of law, importance medial and education to wars and conflict resolutions.

It is widely believed that education plays a significant role in the progress of a nation and that education is the backbone of a nation and nothing is more essential to the well-being and progress of every nation than education. When a society educates a girl, it gives her the tools to support herself and improves the lives of those in her family. Now you are all fortunate to have enrolled at ACCC through which you gained access to Canadian and US education institutions. ACCC has a strong commitment to assist in various programs to support the empowerment of women in Kandahar.

Islam entitles women to the same rights as men in terms of education and cultivation. The Prophet of Allah (Peace be Upon Him) said, as reported and authenticated by the scholars of prophetic traditions: "Seeking knowledge is compulsory for each and every Muslim man and woman."

You women at ACCC are a privileged group. You are well looked after and allowed to study and develop yourselves. Now it is your obligation to take maximum advantage of these opportunities provided to you today by your Afghan, Canadian and US fellows. We are helping because we believe you are the future of a better, peaceful and a progressive Afghanistan. I strongly encourage you to take advantage of all the opportunities available to you so you will become role models for your younger sisters and brothers, as well as for your families and communities.

There are, however, still numerous challenges faced by you. They are illiteracy, poverty, violence, disease and discrimination. Forced marriages, underage marriages, selling girls to older men for property and forcibly giving a girl to a man to settle tribal feud are still common practices and go unchecked in our communities. Extremism, warlordism and tribalism rules are still in place and threatening women's freedom and women's rights. Women are deprived of basic rights to education, decision-making and freedom of expression.

Islam indicates that a man who honors, respects and deals with women justly and integrally, possesses a healthy and righteous personality, whereas a man who mistreats them is an unrighteous and unrespectable man. The Prophet of Allah (Peace be Upon Him) has said: The most complete believer is the best in character, and the best of you is the best to his womenfolk.

But there are still people among us who do not believe the fact that opportunities for women in education, participation in social life and government, control over personal choices and decision-making are the rights of women. They ban women from going to school or work and they have confined them to their houses or abused them on their way to school or work.

I am impressed by the courage women have shown in this remote corner of the world where the female population is still threatened by ultra-conservative cultural attitudes, poverty and the ongoing war. We need to continue to fight this injustice, this impunity, this violence, this harassment. We need to make every effort possible with consistency to reach our goal of gender equality promotion. This should not only be on Women's International Day, but every day. We should speak out and do what is required to ensure that women have an open access to education and to demonstrate that violence and harassment against any human being cannot be tolerated.

And there are competent women in this country who are sacrificing for a peaceful and violence free Afghanistan. Many women have made their way to the Afghanistan parliament, provincial councils, government and non-government institutions to serve.

Now that a man without a woman is incomplete and that a woman is life and civilization, let's take some practical steps to save this human being from oppression and deprivation. Action speaks louder than word. Action without personal interest can bring not only the female population, but the entire nation of Afghanistan the brighter future.

By receiving the knowledge imparted to you by your teachers, you have been entrusted with a sacred gift, one that few people in this world have the opportunity to receive. The importance of this knowledge cannot be overstated – it empowers men and women alike to support themselves, their families, and improve their community. Knowledge is the backbone of society, and the key to peace and prosperity.

I hope that you will use this gift to realize your dreams – and to help others realize theirs. As one of the keepers of the sacred gift of knowledge, you have a remarkable opportunity to share this gift and, by doing so, to save humanity from the threat of oppression, war and deprivation. I urge you to use this knowledge not only to benefit yourselves, but to also create hope for those who would learn, if only given the chance.

We have grown to family of more than 7,000 people, including teachers, students, graduates, and the many people in Kandahar who now have financial support because of the courses we've offered.

For all those of you who have studied, worked, or provided support to the ACCC - I thank you dearly, and hope that you are proud of the wonderful institution which you have helped to build.