

Kickoff of the Women National Business Agenda (WNBA) – An Advocacy document for challenges and solutions of Women in Business in 34 Provinces of Afghanistan

Afghanistan Women’s Chamber of Commerce and Industry (AWCCI) as a national chamber to represent women in business and their economic role in Afghanistan. Its main mandate to continuously advocate and lobby for the concerns and interests of Afghan women in business has proudly held the inauguration of the Women National Business Agenda (WNBA) on Sunday, 5 July 2020, through the Zoom software at 9:00 a.m.

In the kickoff session of the Women National Business Agenda the participants were; H.E Rula Ghani, First Lady of Afghanistan, H.E. Hasina Safi, Minister of Women’s Affairs, H.E. Abdul Kareem Malikyar, Acting Minister of Commerce and Industry, Mrs. Afsana Rahimi, Chairperson of AWCCI, Mr. Mohammad Nasib, Country Director of CIPE in Afghanistan and Mrs. Manizha Wafeq, President of AWCCI and more than 50 Businesswomen from more than 20 provinces of Afghanistan.

Chairperson of AWCCI, Mrs. Afsana Rahimi started the meeting by welcoming participants. She added “As a National Chamber of Commerce we are determined to advocate for national challenges Afghan women businesses are facing and propose the right solutions in the national legislations and policies as the action has been taken on women’s capacity building, production, packaging and exhibitions”. In addition, she also mentioned that today we are in the edge of inaugurating the process of Women National Business Agenda. WNBA will explain what the provincial level and national level challenges are for women in business and how those can be addressed at provincial and national levels. She thanked H.E. President and H.E. First Lady’s and some ministries like the Ministry of Women’s Affairs and the Ministry of Industry and Commerce support to AWCCI’s work.

Furthermore, Mrs. Manizha Wafeq the President of AWCCI thanked H.E. Frist Lady of Afghanistan Rula Ghani for nonstop support of the Chamber. She also briefly explained the agenda to the participants that this is the first national document that will explain what are the provincial and national level challenges that women in business are facing and how those can be addressed at provincial and national levels. This will be a unique advocacy document with 34 provincial chapters and one national chapter. The document will not only categorize the challenges and solutions on sub-national and national levels but also based on urgency; short to longer term issues. This unique document will not only serve AWCCI to carry on systematic advocacy to women in business issues but will also help government and international community to design short to longer term programming developing women-owned businesses and increasing women-owned businesses in the country. The Provincial women will be organized as committee to start advocating for the issues listed in the document in their own provinces. They will be trained on leadership and communication skills so they conduct effective advocacy. This document will be developed with the technical and

financial support of the Center for the International Private Enterprise (CIPE) and she expressed gratitude to them.

The inaugural speech of the Kickoff session for Women National Business Agenda was given by H.E. First Lady of Afghanistan Rula (Bibi Gul) Ghani started by thanking the businesswomen for their hard work. She continued "Unfortunately the situation that we are in today posed by corona virus makes us to held the meeting virtually, and its pleasure to meet you all through the new technology. I have remember some years ago business women gathered to active the business field and the only aim was to create Chamber of Commerce Industry and they succeeded in establishing offices and training centers in four zones. According to AWCCI One thousand and four hundred women in business in all over the country are active. I am not surprised for their hard work, while some of them are engaged with productive activities from home. We are currently in a bad situation posed by Covid-9, where question has been created for everyone, if the situation will remain the same or different."

The three main points that has to be mentioned:

"Firstly, if transport changes in foreign and domestic markets, the businesswomen should not limit themselves to the situation. Secondly, you have to take initiative in the field of health services and education. Thirdly, foreign countries have been good supporters of Afghanistan, but they have their own priorities when time comes to such situation. So you have to be creative and self-sufficient to stand strong."

H.E. Mrs. Hasina Safi, Minister of Women Affairs congratulated leadership of AWCCI on inauguration of Women National Business Agenda and it shows that chamber has broad and long term plan for business women of Afghanistan. Furthermore, Mrs. Safi added, these women with limited resources will create this unique document, if all business women share their challenges and reality of the situation in their provinces then they can make this document more practical and national. "I hereby on behalf of the Ministry of Women's Affairs express to support in all aspects, business women keep in touch with us through the chamber". Inauguration of this agenda shows that you have taken steps towards long-term undertakings to improve women's situation.

In addition, H.E. Mr. Abdul Kareem Malikyar, Acting Minister of Industry and Commerce explained the vision of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan for business sector. "Afghanistan has to be transformed from import market to export market. Based on this vision the Ministry of Industry and Commerce has worked on three major issues. First pillar was trade, we were able to change deficit spending to surplus and exports grew by one billion. Second pillar, was to improve business environment, before those who were applying for business licenses they had to wait for three months, now based on the reform that we made, a person can get it in three hours. Last year Afghanistan was among one of the best reformed countries. Third pillar is to improve industries, as we know trade without industry is meaningless. He also added that we are not craftsmen and nor traders, but we are mandated to provide services to private sector both craftsmen and traders."

Country Director of CIPE Mr. Mohammad Nasib addressed the session that "I am honored to join the inauguration of the Women National Business Agenda. This unique document is very important and it's going to collect data for business women from all the provinces. WNBA is not an elite but grass roots level document, as Minister of Women Affairs has mentioned, this document has to be implemented once developed in the national level. Moreover, this document is practical and it's a sequential to open the door for other activities. More importantly, it is the implementation of the document, as much as it is used that much it is effective or else it will remain just a document. There

should be collective action for implementation. The participation of government representatives and private sectors in advocacy taskforce is mandatory. The role of each person in advocacy taskforce should be clarified. For WNBA we should create tracking system for the challenges addressed and solutions turned to action, this way we can analyze its success, we can update that document when it gets prepared after fourth to six months and we will provide our utmost cooperation with AWCCI on the areas needed."

The program ended with answering the questions of the participants from different provinces of Afghanistan.