

Speech (HLS) by Ms. Aqeela Asifi
Nansen Refugee Award Laureate

Aqeela's HLS speech

6 October 2015

Honorable representatives, respectable guests and my dear brothers and sister,

Please accept my gratitude for providing me the opportunity to speak at such an auspicious forum and to share my thoughts with you. Respectable speakers before me have already spoken at length about different pressing issues of our time so I would like to focus my views more on education which directly impacts the lives of individuals and is also directly associated with the social and economic wellbeing of a societies, especially in those country which are struggling with wars and conflicts.

In our world today, we see many people being displaced due to ongoing wars and are compelled by the circumstances to take refuge in other countries. These people are confronted with difficult situations. The international community does support refugees, but let's not forget what suffers the most in such situations is the education for children. Children are the ones who bear the brunt of wars more than anyone else; growing up without education obscures their future which leave negative impact on the future generations to come.

If you look at Afghanistan, the 35-years long war has devastated the country and shaken its foundations. The three decades of war have impacted the education system of the country so badly. Although we see the situation improving gradually; during the past 13-years there has been some positive developments overall including in the sector of education, however there is a lot more to be done. For example, in Kabul and in other bigger cities of Afghanistan, due to the shortage of space schools are conducted in three shifts and in total every shift lasts for three hours only, these three hours include the recess and assembly time as well. Are three hours at school enough for quality education?

Similarly a large number of Afghans are living as refugees in Iran and Pakistan, these refugee children too have limited access to quality education. Poverty has forced many parents to take their children out of school and send them to do hazardous jobs to support families. A large number of poverty stricken Afghan parents are sending their 12-years-old children to bigger cities to collect garbage. While indulged in child labour these children are not only deprived of their basic rights including the right to study but are also exposed to and fall prey to myriad types of illnesses at such a young age.

Unfortunately we have many families among us who are forced by the circumstances to give their children in the hands of human traffickers, just because they need someone to keep feeding the family. Our youth takes perilous routes to reach into the developed countries; and the whole world is witnessed that many of them have perished in international waters.

Let me tell you, who else but a refugee knows the pain of being homeless more than anyone else. I have been a refugee for over 23 years now. I have been through the anguish of displacement. I know the pain of losing home and going far away from one's loved ones. No one out of choice decides to be a refugee. I see many youngers and families running for their lives and knocking at the doors of European country and asking for refuge. No one sleeps at train tracks out of choice in chilling cold night.

If the world wants the underdeveloped countries to progress and prosper, their foremost priority should be providing access to quality education for both young boys and girls. Remember women and girls constitute almost 50 % of the world's population including Afghanistan and many out of them are deprived of their right to education. Can you imagine a society progressing with 50% of its population having no access or limited to education?

I am an educated woman, when I came to Pakistan as a refugee and started living in a refugee camp, the only thing I brought along was education. It was my education only which enabled me open the door of knowledge and learning for the young Afghan refugee women and girls. The only key to success in my opinion is education. Our young daughters are the mothers of our future generation, educating one woman is equal to educating the whole society.

I would like to call upon the international community to make education an integral part of their assistance packages. Funding and supporting education should be made a priority number one. No country or society can progress until it's liberated from the chains of ignorance. Education is the first step to development and prosperity. Those countries who made education a priority and paid particular attention to their education system are prosper and developed. The secret to their development is nothing else but education.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is a lot of potential, talent and competence in the people living in devastated village and torn off tents but due to poverty and negligence much of such a talent has been languishing and then burnt to ashes.

Afghanistan is a country of talented people, Afghanistan is the land of great teachers and scholars, our youth is so full of potential, this is the right time to invest in the youth of Afghanistan, which constitutes almost 70% of the country's overall population.

My plea to the countries who receive humanitarian assistance and the countries and humanitarian agencies who provide such assistance is to allocate more funds for education in order to improve the quality and quantity of education system in Afghanistan. More schools should be built, teaching material should be provided, science laboratories should be constructed and particular attention should be paid to teachers with more incentivized approaches who are currently working at very low salaries.

I hope that the international community will play its due role in taking pragmatic steps and in getting united with one voice and one heart to join hands in making access to education possible equally to everyone in the poor and war-impacted countries. At the end I hope to see a day when the dream of developing countries to progress turn into a reality.

I thank you all for your kind attention.

Thank you.