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**AFGHANISTAN**

## HUMAN INTEREST STORY

# Gul Paida Manesh – Giving Women a Voice in Municipal Governance



Gul Paida Manesh, Secretary of the Chaghcharan Municipal Advisory Board



Photo: RAMP UP West

Gul Paida participates at the second Mayors' Meeting representing Chaghcharan Municipal Advisory Board

**“It was not easy to reach the point where the men and women of my community wished me to be their voice”**

**- Gul Paida Manesh**

In Chaghcharan, the capital of Ghor, a small, sparsely populated and very conservative province in Western Afghanistan, women face strong social pressures to conform to traditional societal roles.

Meet Gul Paida Manesh, a married mother of seven in her forties with 3 grandchildren. Gul Paida lives in Chaghcharan and serves as the Secretary of the Municipal Advisory Board, General Director of Ghor kindergartens, and Head of *Afghan Women for Democracy*, an association she started in 2009.

Gul Paida remembers the many ups and downs she experienced, saying “It was not easy to reach the point where the men and women of my community wished me to be their voice.”

At the age of 14, the Taliban closed her school, thus confining her to her home. Here she learned how to tailor clothes and spent time listening to the everyday worries of her neighbors. She became interested in giving a voice to the unheard women in her community.

At 15, as the eldest girl in her family, she married a local teacher. She and her husband started a family but she never lost her desire to finish her education. After the fall of the Taliban she returned to school and, upon graduation, started training as a teacher. She also pursued her desire to contribute to her local community, first as a social worker at the Department of Women’s Affairs, and later as a local election promoter for the first national presidential elections.

In 2005 women in the community encouraged Gul Paida to stand for election to the Provincial Council. She was elected and served as a member of the council until 2009 when she established *Afghan Women for Democracy*. This organization promotes human rights, encourages democratic engagement, and supports women’s advancement by encouraging access to education as well as running tailoring classes.

In 2012 USAID’s Regional Afghan Municipalities Program for Urban Populations (RU-W) worked with Chaghcharan to establish their first ever Municipal Advisory Board (MAB). These voluntary bodies involve citizens in municipal planning and decision making and serve the function of a municipal council until they can hold municipal elections. Gul Paida, along with 30 other women, attended an orientation session on the role and responsibilities of the MAB. The participants nominated Gul Paida as a candidate for the board, she won and Chaghcharan’s MAB elected her as Secretary.

Since then she actively speaks up before the MAB about local concerns and priorities, saying “Women have their own concerns [and] we need to help

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Gul Paida participates in a meeting of MAB with the Chaghcharan Mayor to ensure they consider citizen priorities in the 1392 budget



**"Chaghcharan municipality benefits from the expertise of its Municipal Advisory Board members. Now women have a voice there and Mrs. Manesh is one of the strongest members of the Board."**

**- Chaghcharan Mayor at the second Mayors' Meeting**

women express their needs [so] when we need to select a new project, I meet different groups of women and hear their suggestions." She also acts as a focal point for women to speak out when municipal services need improvement.

For example, in January 2012 she attended a wedding party and women complained to her about overflowing garbage bins in their neighborhood, spoiling the environment and posing a health hazard for children. Gul Paida raised the issue at a meeting between the MAB and the Mayor, and secured a promise to resolve this problem. As a result, the municipality increased collections from bins in that neighborhood and the Advisory Board continues to monitor this issue and hold the municipality accountable at citizen engagement forums like the recent mid-year review.

Women also spoke to her about expired food on sale in the local market. Gul Paida, and other members of the MAB, met the Market Control Officer and reported the problem to him. Municipal staff immediately audited the shops and confiscated the expired items.

In these ways, Gul Paida helps citizens and especially women voice their issues and concerns in municipal affairs, even in a conservative community such as Chaghcharan. Her commitment helped her gain the trust of the community and of many women, who now come to her with their problems. She welcomes this important responsibility, saying "Either I do not accept a responsibility or, if I do, I devote my time and do my best to gain a favorable result..

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