

Chairman Russ Carnahan
Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights and Oversight

Opening Statement

“Women as Agents of Change: Advancing the Role of Women in Politics and Civil Society”

June 9, 2010

In the last decade, we have seen a meaningful shift in momentum surrounding the need for gender equality and especially a growing call for women’s voices in decision-making processes, from the international arena to local communities around the world. Nonetheless, despite increased momentum around women’s empowerment and political participation, there is still much more progress to be made.

Today, while women account for over half of the population, they occupy slightly less than 19% of seats in national parliaments on average worldwide. In many countries, steps have been taken to increase the number of women in government and political life, such as constitutional reform mandating quotas at the national level and the introduction of programs that help female candidates win election to political offices.

Critics claim this doesn’t do enough to give women equal voice in decision-making and meaningfully institutionalize gender equality. It levels the playing field, but doesn’t guarantee greater policy attention or social change. It is imperative to increase not just the numbers but also the effectiveness of women in political and civil leadership roles.

This includes ensuring that women elected to offices and appointed to ministries have real power to enact legal reforms that address the needs of women, children and families, which are inseparable from the needs of the community as a whole. It also includes ensuring increased training and education for men and boys to work with women as equal partners and change negative socio-cultural stereotypes.

Women face particular challenges such as equal access to health care, education and economic opportunities, violence, and lack of legal rights and judicial process. It’s been amply documented that they are also disproportionately affected by problems such as climate change and conflict.

These unfortunate realities have put women to the test as keen innovators and leaders. Women bring an important perspective to policy and play instrumental roles in reconstruction and peace-building efforts. Moreover, equality of gender representation is shown to increase transparent and democratic governance. These are benefits the U.S. cannot afford to ignore in an increasingly challenging global environment.

Women in Northern Ireland were essential in initiating the peace process there; women in Rwanda rebuilt their country after the horrific genocide and currently rank first in the percentage of women in parliament; women in the Democratic Republic of Congo are likewise being recognized for their central role in rebuilding, resettling and opening dialogue.

Last week, national, provincial, and tribal Afghan leaders gathered in Kabul for a peace jirga to outline a path forward for lasting stability in Afghanistan. The rocket attacks launched by insurgent Taliban members at the jirga underscore the dire need for a resolution with the Taliban, especially one that protects and promotes the rights and well-being of Afghan women and girls who suffered disproportionately under the Taliban's brutal rule.

Of the approximately 1,500 Afghan leaders represented at the jirga, about 21 percent were women. This representation was hard won, yet, not a single woman was among the five prominent speakers who addressed the jirga on its inaugural day, and all four members of the appointed leadership were men.

Commenting on the involvement of women in brokering negotiations with the Taliban, Samira Hamidi, Director of the Afghan Women's Network, asserted "we have not been approached by the government." Such realities lend legitimacy to claims that the level of women's participation was symbolic at best and certainly insufficient to present a voice for at least half of Afghanistan's population.

As Secretary Clinton and others have rightfully articulated on several occasions, women's rights are human rights, and women's progress is human progress. The world simply cannot achieve lasting peace and prosperity if half of the population is not allowed or not able to participate fully. For real advancement in women's rights, we must take a comprehensive approach that combats all obstacles—physical, economic, socio-cultural, psychological and otherwise—to women's equality. And, for this to work we need women at the helm of policy formulation and decision-making.

This administration has taken important steps to raise the profile of women's rights, including empowerment of women to engage politically in their societies. This is exemplified in the White House Council on Women and Girls and the Office of Global Women's Issues, created last year, which work to advance anti-discrimination laws and policies that enable more women to participate in political and civic life, judicial training on gender equality, and the mainstreaming of women's issues in government.

Likewise, the United Nations has been a key force in pressing the international community to definitively adopt gender equality principles through various Resolutions and now a new composite gender entity still in the final planning stages. In fact, this year marks the 10th anniversary of the adoption of U.N. Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security.

The resolution stresses the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace building and urges increased representation and participation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional, and international institutions that address conflict

resolution, management, and prevention. Debate over the adequacy of women's involvement at the Afghan peace jirga reiterates both the significance and the relevance of gender equality in peace processes.

There is a renewed push for gender equality at all levels of policy and development strategy, and it is the job of Congress to conduct oversight of United States Government and UN programs to contribute to meaningful progress on these issues. We must take a serious look at our own foreign assistance contributions to ensure maximum effectiveness and transparency.

Everyone benefits when women have equal rights and women have a voice in decision-making at all levels. When women are empowered to engage in the political process governments are more effective and responsive to their people and nations are more stable, peaceful, and prosperous. I look forward to hearing testimony today from both the Administration and the private witness panels on the status of their efforts to enhance women's political participation, their analysis of the best practices for increasing levels and efficacy of participation, and how to maximize U.S. assistance.

I will now recognize our Ranking Member, Representative Rohrabacher, for his opening statement.