

**Testimony before the Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights and
Oversight
House Committee on Foreign Affairs**

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

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Thank you. I am honored to be here this afternoon to discuss the role of women in politics and civil society around the world and U.S. government efforts to advance women's participation in the political lives of their societies. I'd like to extend my thanks to Chairman Carnahan for convening today's hearing to highlight this important issue, which too often goes overlooked. I'd also like to thank Chairman Berman and Congressman Delahunt for your leadership on behalf of women's empowerment. We appreciate the interest the Committee is taking in our work in support of the advancement of women around the world.

I welcome the opportunity to address the topic of women's leadership at today's hearing, as this is a fitting time to take stock of the status of women globally and to recommit ourselves to the cause of women's progress. This year marks the 15th anniversary of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women that took place in Beijing, where a Platform for Action was adopted by the United States and 188 other countries. This ambitious blueprint for women's global progress served as a call to action on multiple fronts, including advancing women's access to education and health, the right to be free from violence, and the opportunity to participate fully in the economic and political lives of their country. According to the Platform for Action: "Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of the perspective of women at all levels of decision-making, the goals for equality, development, and peace cannot be achieved."

It is also 10 years since the UN Security Council adopted Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, recognizing the important role that women must play in conflict resolution, peace negotiations, and peace building. This year also marks 10 years since the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to eradicate poverty around the world. The third MDG -- gender equality-- is integral to the realization of all of the MDGs. Women's political participation is a crucial indicator of women's equality. In sum, these anniversaries provide an added impetus to measure women's progress in many areas, including political participation.

Around the world, women are entering the field of politics and government in growing numbers, yet their gains have been uneven and their leadership often goes unrecognized. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, women hold almost 20 percent of seats in parliaments worldwide, and serve as heads of government in over 20 countries, including in Costa Rica, Bangladesh, Liberia, and Lithuania. While these are positive developments, women are still vastly underrepresented globally. Women are half the population yet they hold less than one-fifth of positions in national governments. They are still significantly outnumbered in the chambers of parliaments, in provincial councils, and they are often missing from negotiating tables where conflicts are to be resolved. All too often, important decisions that affect women, their families, and their societies are made without their having a voice.

When women are discriminated against in the political arena, their experiences, talents, and perspectives are shut out of the policy decisions of our democracies, and prospects for a better world are short-changed. Moreover, according to the World Bank, at the country level, higher rates of female participation in government are associated with lower levels of corruption.

I have been fortunate to see firsthand how women are making a difference in the political process at the local level.

Women in Kuwait struggled for many years to get the right to vote and to stand for office. Several years ago, a Kuwaiti activist told me, “We don’t want a skim milk democracy; we want a full cream democracy.” The women of Kuwait finally achieved their goal in 2005, but it wasn’t until last year that they finally took their place in parliament when four women were elected. Already, they are making their voices heard for the betterment of their country.

In India, approximately 40 percent of all elected representatives in villages and municipal councils are women. More than a million women across the subcontinent have been elected at the local or *panchayat* level, the highest such female representation for any democracy.

The success of India’s *panchayats* has often been referred to as a silent revolution within the democratic decentralization process. According to many studies, women-led *panchayats* have provided more public services, from building wells to roads, and they acquired more public funding for local projects. These *panchayats* have improved attention to service delivery such as the water supply, sanitation, and other issues including education. The large presence of women in local governments has brought women considerable gains— both social as well psychological— including enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence, which has led to a greater role for women in their households and in the community.

In Afghanistan and Iraq, women who have been committed to building their nascent democracies, exercising their right to vote and to run for office, often do so at great personal peril. Last year, I traveled to a remote province in Afghanistan prior to the elections there. More women were running for the provincial council than the quota allocated. They told me that, despite the threats to their security, they were willing to make the sacrifice to run for office because it is their hope that they can help make life better in their communities.

Women are a vibrant force in civil society, from Iran to Kenya to Chile—and every place else, as they work to advance social, economic, and democratic progress, safeguard human rights, and promote peace. Women in these countries, and the world over, are strengthening democracies and creating more equitable societies.

U.S. Government Efforts to Promote Women and Democracy

Women’s political participation, role in civil society, and government decision-making are key ingredients to building democracy. Democracy without the full participation of women is a contradiction in terms. It is a simple fact that no country can progress or prosper if half its citizens are left behind. Progress for women and progress for democracy go hand in hand.

Today, investing in women is at the very heart of U.S. foreign policy. We know that women’s participation is essential to addressing virtually every challenge we face as nations and as a community of nations. We are implementing policies and programs to grow women’s leadership capacity in all areas of political participation and decision-making. Women are also at the center of the U.S. Government’s development work, including the Food Security Initiative and the Global Health Initiative. Women are also integral to our national security. The 2010 U.S. National Security Strategy Report that the Obama

Administration just released notes that “experience shows that countries are more peaceful and prosperous when women are accorded full and equal rights and opportunity.”

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Women must not only be more engaged in governance, they must also be at the table in peacemaking, peace negotiations, and work on post-conflict reconstruction. We know that without the voices of women contributing to the delicate process of conflict resolution, peace is less likely to take root. We have seen, from Guatemala to Northern Ireland to Liberia to Afghanistan, that women can be powerful peacemakers, willing to reach across deep divides to find common ground.

Women, Peace, and Security

While my distinguished colleague Assistant Secretary Brimmer will be going into more depth about UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in her remarks, I just want to underscore the significance it represents in terms of the role of women’s participation in peace and security and our work in critical areas, including in Afghanistan and in Iraq. The Security Council adopted this resolution in order to increase women’s representation at all levels of conflict resolution. As we approach the tenth anniversary of its adoption, it is especially imperative that the international community accelerate its implementation. In areas of post-conflict and transition, it also means that we need to ensure that women gain the skills and access to opportunities to participate in peace processes, political transitions, new constitutions, and the electoral process. U.S. support for quotas for women in Afghanistan and Iraq, which were chiseled into their constitutions, helped pave the way for women to enter politics and participate in policymaking in these two countries at critical times. The gains that have been made are precarious, and must be nurtured and consolidated or women will risk seeing them erased or eroded.

Afghanistan

As we all know, women in Afghanistan suffered the worst kind of oppression under the Taliban. They were denied the right to live as human beings —deprived of access to education, health services, and participation in employment and public life. The Bonn Agreement of December 2001 required Afghanistan to draft and adopt a new constitution. A 502-member delegation of the Constitutional Loya Jirga convened in Kabul in December 2003 to consider the proposed Afghan Constitution. After much debate, they adopted a strong constitution with human rights provisions, including the protections for the rights of women and the establishment of a 25 percent quota for female representation in Parliament. Quotas and reservations are often the only way that women are able to break into the political process. In countries with 30 percent female representation in parliament, quotas have been instrumental. Between 2001 and 2005, Afghan women entered political life at the most senior levels: There were three female ministers in national government, and there was a substantial increase in women striving to assert their rights and seeking legal support. However, since that time, deteriorating security conditions have made the prospect of women’s participation in public life more difficult, and women politicians are often threatened and prevented from engaging in the political arena.

Yet, Afghan women continue to persevere against all obstacles and barriers to progress. They refuse to be victims. Visiting Afghanistan, I saw firsthand how many capable Afghan women risk their lives every day, working alongside men to create a better future for their country.

In recent months, the role of Afghan women in reintegration and reconciliation has been of paramount consideration. At the London Conference on January 28, Secretary Clinton made clear that reintegration of former Taliban can only take place if they reject violence, renounce al-Qaida, and accept all the tenets

of the Afghan constitution, including its commitment to protect women's rights. Afghan women want a process that promotes peace in their country, but they also want to have a voice about the future of their country. The United States has advocated for at least 20 percent women at the Consultative Peace Jirga in Kabul just concluded, as well as follow-on shuras and consultations at all levels. The United States has provided key support for Provincial Council candidates, parliamentarians, and civil society representatives. During my trip to Afghanistan last summer, I announced the Ambassador's Small Grants Fund, which aims to strengthen the technical and organizational capacity of Afghan women-led NGOs. Through this fund, the United States was able to provide support for a pre- Peace Jirga conference for all female Jirga participants, and to provide them with the training and skills necessary to assist them serve as key participants and facilitators in the Consultative Peace Jirga. We are supporting political development programs to train female Parliamentarians and their staffs. We are funding local civil society organizations providing civic education to increase the participation of women and youth in the electoral process. Under the USAID Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society, we are also committed to allocating at least fifty percent of the grants to female-led or female-focused organizations. The challenges remain significant, but our commitment to the women of Afghanistan must not wane.

Iraq

As with Afghanistan, the United States remains deeply committed to empowering Iraqi women in all sectors of Iraqi society. Despite uncertain security, women have bravely sought a leading role in Iraq's political life. Based on the Constitutional quota for women's political participation, women hold 25 percent of the seats both in provincial councils and in the national Council of Representatives (CoR). In March, only a limited number of women received enough votes in their own right to be elected to the CoR. In other cases, women had to be named to the CoR over male candidates who received more votes. While women for the most part have not played a leading role in the CoR, we believe that the 25 percent quota remains absolutely essential if there is any possibility for Iraqi women to play a leading role in the political system.

The U.S. Government has begun a concerted effort to reach out to women in the provincial councils to help to build their capacity and assist them in networking. The potential for strong leadership of women at the provincial and local levels needs to be nurtured.

Since 2004, the Department of State's Iraqi Women's Democracy Initiative (IWDI) has worked through U.S. non-governmental organization partners on the ground in Iraq to build the capacity of Iraqi women. To date, programs under this initiative have trained nearly 10,000 Iraqi women in several key skill areas in support of women's leadership, coalition-building, negotiation, and constitutional rights. In 2008, we expanded our efforts to include areas such as women in justice, women and peace building, and increasing women's political participation, advocacy and leadership.

For example, one of the IWDI programs provides strategic planning training and consultation to existing regional multi-party women's caucuses on how to monitor legislation, identify opportunities to advocate for women's issues, and develop a strategic plan to continue these activities in the future. Through these activities, the North Multi-party Women's Caucus succeeded in their one-year campaign to overturn a passport application procedure that contradicted the constitutional requirement mandating equal travel rights to all citizens. As of May 2009, Iraqi women over 18 years of age can obtain passports without restrictions.

Under one of these programs, in March of this year, we sponsored a provincial council leaders conference which convened in Washington, D.C. for approximately 15 Iraqi women. They represented eight diverse provinces from all regions. Out of their diversity, one common element gradually emerged over the course of the two weeks: they were all determined, dedicated, strong and resilient leaders, who came to

learn from their meetings in the United States, and to learn from each other. One woman who'd become the unofficial spokesperson for the group put it simply, "We all came here leaving our home in Iraq, but are returning with 14 new homes."

Secretary of State Clinton met with the delegation to underscore the important role of women in creating strong societies that are peaceful, stable, and tolerant, and to demonstrate our commitment to building a long-term, multi-dimensional relationship between our two nations.

It is a critical time for women in Iraq. Their fragile gains must be solidified, and we must continue to support civil society to address the issues that remain, including violence against women, healthcare, income-generating opportunities, education and support in rural areas. Women have expressed concern that the gains they have made will be pushed back as U.S. forces are drawn down.

Capacity Building and Training for Women Leaders

I have learned from the numerous women I have met around the globe that one of the key needs women have is for leadership training programs that enable them to be more effective candidates from national to local levels of elected office. Moreover, because of obstacles to political power, women need stronger and broader networks and alliances to enhance the kind of participation that will enable them to surmount barriers.

Civil society activists require capacity building support for the range of needs that they confront. One of the key ways that women have gained access to power is through their engagement with NGOs. Many have developed the leadership skills and relevant experience to run for office through their engagement with national and international NGOs. Another area of need is capacity building for governance; it is not enough to be elected or to be appointed to government service without the ability to exercise that responsibility effectively. To address this need, the United States has invested in programs to strengthen the skills and leadership abilities of female parliamentarians and other elected officials.

Through our efforts to ensure that women are integral to all aspects of U.S. foreign policy, we have identified opportunities and created synergies to strengthen their ability to tap into opportunities for political empowerment, participation, and decision-making. Many U.S. training, exchanges, and small grants programs are specifically aimed at creating targets of opportunity for women's political participation and leadership development. The State Department regularly brings groups of women from government and civil society to the United States under the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA) International Visitors Leadership Programs, which are aimed at strengthening participants' understanding of the United States and to grow alliances with American officials and NGO leaders. In fact, a group of 20 women will be traveling to the United States mid-June to take part in a multi-city program under the theme of the "Role of NGOs in Global Women's Issues." These types of exchanges can have a powerful impact on the lives of women. A young woman from Matagalpa, Nicaragua who participated in a program focused on civil society last year told us that the experience changed her life and also motivated her to do more to help her community, in spite of the difficult situation in her country.

The Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) currently supports ten programs totaling approximately \$7 million to promote women's political and economic empowerment, participation, and decision-making in the Near East, South and Central Asia, and Africa. From linking civil society and media representatives in Tunisia and collaborating on promoting women's involvement in Tunisian politics; to building networks among female NGOs and male counterparts in Bahrain in order promote women's empowerment in unions and the workplace; to empowering internally displaced women and girls in Sudan to participate more fully in the economic, civic, and educational arenas--these initiatives are expanding the realm of opportunities for women in diverse parts of the globe.

The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), located in the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, is committed to empowering women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Through implementation of practical programs in each of the 17 countries and territories in the region, MEPI advances the full range of women's legal, political, economic and human rights. More than half of MEPI's \$584 million total funding is devoted to projects that significantly focus on women's empowerment, and its activities have continued to focus heavily on supporting women and building their capacity to advocate for positive change in these countries. Women are on the frontlines of moderation and they are often the strongest advocates for positive political, economic, educational, legal, and social reform, and MEPI's assistance makes them more effective agents of change. Specifically, MEPI's work has helped women's rights leaders and organizations in the broader Middle East region to become more vocal and better organized, enhancing the ability of these individuals and groups to advocate for their causes. For example, in Kuwait, MEPI programs have focused on empowering women to organize and run effective campaigns at the local and national levels. In 2009, four of the women who received training through MEPI programs were the first women ever elected to the Kuwaiti Parliament.

Consistent with USAID's recently strengthened requirements mandating gender analysis to underlie all strategies and programs in every sector, USAID carries out activities to help build capacity and provide technical assistance to empower women for democratic action in their societies. From the Burundi Policy Reform project, which trained 200 women leaders, including parliamentarians and women from civil society, in conflict resolution and anti-corruption skills, to the Women's Rural Development Societies representing 20,000 women in the conflict zone of Sri Lanka, the United States is making the integration of women, development, and political participation a priority. In addition to women-focused programming, USAID has mainstreamed gender analysis and integration into its \$26 million Reconciliation Program worldwide, demonstrating that security issues are also women's issues. USAID has also launched a new research program on gender and conflict, examining the relationship between gender inequality and the risk of violent conflict around the world.

We are also working with our democratic partners around the globe to further progress on women's political participation. As co-chair of the Community of Democracies' newly launched Working Group on Gender Equality, the United States is taking a leadership role in promoting gender equality and governance. Under the auspices of the working group, the U.S. is developing a women's leadership and entrepreneurship training conference for women from the Caucasus at the end of this year, gathering national best practices and laws on women's rights; and supporting additional training opportunities for female political and economic leaders via exchange programs and on-the-ground training, in conjunction with civil society and private sector partners.

The State Department's Office of Global Women's Issues has just launched the first small grants initiative to fund projects that promote women's political, economic, and social advancement in developing countries. The overwhelming response to our call for proposals is perhaps a barometer of the critical need that exists among female citizen activists in developing countries for this type of funding. The projects, comprised of grants under \$100,000 and managed through our Embassies worldwide—from Ankara to Ulaanbaatar—will help advance self-reliance and foster development for non-governmental organizations, schools, community groups, and local associations to advance women's political, economic and social rights. Projects will support efforts ranging from training women candidates to run for office to helping women take the lead in preserving and strengthening democratic spaces and institutions, raising political awareness, and fostering civic activism. Programs funded will train rural women to exercise their rights, and promote emerging women leaders to improve access to justice and the rule of law. For example, a small grant to an NGO in Benin will be used to train women candidates in communications and management skills and will raise awareness of political parties, community leaders, and the public about the importance of having more women leaders in parliament. We are confident that

these small grants—which are aimed at the local and community level, will both empower the female beneficiaries and produce a multiplier effect among civil society, government, and business communities.

Conclusion

Women everywhere continue to face challenges and barriers to productive participation in political engagement and government. In countries mired in conflict or cursed with poverty, the obstacles to overcome are even greater. Nevertheless, progress is occurring, but at a pace that is still too slow.

The State Department and USAID are deeply committed to advancing women’s opportunities for meaningful participation in politics and civil society. We embrace the opportunity to continue to promote women’s empowerment and participation at all levels of society. Moving forward, we will build on the strengths of our accomplishments, including those in Afghanistan and Iraq; continue to fund projects to enhance women’s political and democratic participation; leverage public private partnerships to broaden opportunities for women; and increase our work with the international community to ensure that women are included in peace and security negotiations. We will work in partnership with our Embassies overseas to identify and support emerging women leaders and democracy defenders. This task requires collaboration and leadership at all levels of the U.S. government and with the international community. In this way, more women will be able to take part in the democratic process and serve as examples for future generations. With the support of Congress, we look forward to continuing this collective endeavor. I am happy to answer any questions you may have. Chairman Carnahan, we are deeply grateful for your support and that of your colleagues, to enable us to achieve our mission.

Thank you.