

**Statement of James Bever**  
**USAID Afghanistan-Pakistan Task Force Executive Director**  
**before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee**  
**Subcommittees on International Operations and Organizations, Human**  
**Rights, Democracy and Global Women's Issues and**  
**Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs**  
**Tuesday, February 23, 2010**

**“Assistance to Women in Afghanistan”**

**Introduction**

Chairmen Boxer and Casey, Ranking Members Wicker and Risch and distinguished Members of the subcommittees, thank you for the invitation to testify before your subcommittee on this vitally important topic. I look forward to outlining the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) efforts in Afghanistan to provide assistance to women and girls throughout the country. My oral remarks will stay within the requested three minute time frame, but I ask that my full written statement be submitted for the hearing record.

We know from an accumulating body of studies authored by representatives of investment banks, foundations, think tanks, and other major organizations that investing in women is the single most efficient international development strategy available. These studies indicate that women reinvest up to 90 percent of their earnings in their families and communities, which is twice the rate of men. The status of women is a bellwether for the viability of a nation.

USAID is committed to providing assistance for development that improves the lives of women, men, and children around the world. USAID has a special interest in the advancement of women worldwide and is working to improve women's equality and empowerment. Not only because it is just, but because it is necessary for successful development.

In my written statement, I would like to briefly comment on USAID's actions to provide assistance to women and girls in Afghanistan; the progress that has been made; the challenges that remain; and, our thoughts on moving forward to help this sector of Afghan society.

## **USAID Engagement**

In Afghanistan and throughout the world, USAID policy requires the incorporation of gender considerations into all of our project designs. The mission-wide gender team ensures effective integration of gender policies throughout all programs. Furthermore, in order to strengthen and coordinate gender related efforts and projects on the ground, the Embassy has an Interagency Gender Policy Group, of which USAID is a leading member. Chaired by the Embassy's Ambassador-ranked Coordinating Director for Development and Economic Affairs, the group also includes representatives from the Embassy's Political, Economic, Public Affairs, International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, and Rule of Law Sections. Finally, since 2002, USAID has had a full time gender advisor dedicated to leading the mission's efforts regarding assistance to women.

I recognize that Congress has shown great interest over the past several years in the status of Afghan women and girls and has directed funds for the purpose of improving their lives. In recent years, USAID has met and in some instances exceeded the women and girls funding requirement based on our own programming. By our own calculations, since 2004 we have provided approximately \$500 million in assistance for women and girls in Afghanistan.

We will continue to provide direct and project-based assistance to women and girls in line with the priorities laid out in the Afghanistan National Development Strategy and the National Action Plan for Assistance to Women of Afghanistan.

## **Progress**

The rule of the Taliban regime had a devastating effect on development in Afghanistan, and women and girls continue to bear the brunt of these development challenges. Under the Taliban, Afghan women and girls were systematically denied the opportunity to engage in the political, economic and social sectors of the country. Stripped of their most basic human rights, women were forbidden to obtain an education and to participate in the workforce. Their health and education indicators were among the worst in the world. Only 900,000 students were enrolled in school – almost all boys. Since most female doctors were banned from the workforce, women frequently lacked access to even the most basic health care. As a result, Afghanistan had the highest infant mortality rate in the world. Women were

prohibited from participation in civil society and politics. They were required to remain hidden and voiceless.

Considering the plight of women and girls under Taliban rule, the achievements in Afghanistan since 2001 are especially remarkable. Girls and women are back in school at all levels, and school enrollment tops six million students, with women and girls making up over 35 percent of that population. Women and children make up 70 percent of those seeking health services, and the maternal and child mortality rates have decreased. The infant mortality rate has fallen by 25 percent. The number of women entrepreneurs and women-led and/or -focused NGOs is increasing, and more women are participating in the public and political sphere.

### **Challenges**

While much progress has been made, many challenges remain. These include, but are by no means limited to: violence, a challenging legislative process, and overcoming misperceptions regarding female participation in USAID programming. Implementation of projects and programs overall is made much more difficult by the level of violence the country is currently experiencing as a result of the ongoing insurgency. That violence is compounded in its effects on women and young girls as they traditionally bear the brunt (both physically and emotionally) of societal upheaval. Be they young girls seeking to go to school or women politicians and police officers seeking to go about their given tasks, these women and girls deserve to be praised for their courage and efforts. USAID will continue to do all we can to provide access to education and health services; training for politicians; and support to entrepreneurs as these women are essential to the advancement of their country.

Furthermore, we have been concerned with developments as they relate to the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law (EVAW), the Shia Personal Status Law, and the recent Parliamentary decree on elections and related matters.

The EVAW is a noteworthy piece of legislation that if implemented and enforced consistently could provide tangible benefits and protections for women. I am concerned that this has languished in Parliament for quite some time and that eventual enforcement of its various provisions will not be consistent.

Despite revisions through the spring of 2009 and extensive domestic and international controversy, the Shia Personal Status Law still contains many provisions that are quite troubling regarding the status of women in Afghanistan. Articles in the law of particular concern included minimum age of marriage, polygamy, inheritance rights, right of self-determination, freedom of movement, sexual obligations, and guardianship.

As this decree is a fairly new development that we are still looking into, I would simply like to note that this is on our radar screen and we hope that it fully protects the advances and rights of women.

Finally, one of our ongoing challenges has been to overcome societal misperceptions regarding female participation in USAID programming. We have found that in order to enable women to obtain even the basic necessities of life, USAID needs to provide outreach to provincial and district leaders and village elders prior, during and following completion of activities.

By framing the need for the participation of women and girls in various education, health, income generation and other activities in terms of family and community well-being and benefit, we find that activities can be undertaken with the participation of both men and women, albeit separately. In other words, we consistently look for “buy-in” from families and communities, and that has led to an increased acceptance of women and girls in school, lower maternal and child mortality, increased numbers of women and children receiving basic health care, ever increasing numbers of women in business, and women in all levels of the political process.

### **Moving Ahead**

As we work to make substantial and sustainable gains for women in Afghanistan, the U.S. Government is taking steps to ensure that we obtain maximum impact from available resources. Towards that end, we promote “Afghanization,” the U.S. Government effort to support sustainable Afghan-led projects. In that vein we are also working to provide more of our assistance directly to and through Afghan entities.

As it relates to the provision of assistance to women and girls, this includes, but is not limited to, our work with the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) and National Solidarity Program (NSP), non-governmental

and civil society organizations as well as project level and direct assistance to Afghan Ministries.

As you are aware, the U.S. Government is a key contributor to the ARTF. Both the recurrent cost (which funds government operating expenses such as salaries, operations and maintenance) and the investment windows (which funds programs) benefit women and girls. One of the largest expenditures within the recurrent cost window is salaries for teachers, which increases girls' access to education.

Gender is taken into consideration for all ARTF project designs. The ARTF does have several projects that have developed good operational policies for women and girls that are being tracked, including the NSP, Microfinance for Poverty Reduction, the Education Quality Improvement Project, and the Horticulture Livestock Program. ARTF funding supports 15 microfinance institutions throughout 24 provinces. Women comprise 62 percent (about 273,000) of the program's clients and 39 percent (about 1,882) of the program's 4,825 employees. The repayment rate is 94.4 percent. Since 2004, ARTF supported the construction of more than 800 schools, organized 8,000 school management committees, financed 2,500 school improvement plans, trained 45,000 teachers and provided technical assistance to the Ministry of Education (MOE); the program specifically targets women and girls.

The NSP is designed to ensure gender equity at every step of the process: community mobilization to Community Development Council (CDC) elections to Community Development Plan formulation to subproject implementation, operation and maintenance. NSP is generally acknowledged as one of the most inclusive forms of community-development in Afghanistan. In particular, NSP has quantitative targets in the field of activities and women's participation in CDCs. At least one project per community financed from NSP must have been prioritized by the women.

In so far as assistance to non-governmental and civil society organizations is concerned, USAID has two primary programs that work to provide funds to those organizations that are either led by or focused on women. Through our Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society Program (I-PACS) as well as the Ambassador's Small Grants Program, USAID is working to provide

training, technical support, strategic planning assistance, and grants support to non-governmental and civil society organizations throughout Afghanistan.

As part of the overall U.S. Government strategy in Afghanistan, USAID is on track to increase the amount of assistance we provide directly to Afghan Ministries. This is done through assessments and certifications. The Ministry of Women's Affairs has not yet been certified to directly receive USAID funds, however, the Ministries of Public Health and Communications have been certified and provide services that directly benefit women. Furthermore, although the Ministry of Women's Affairs has not been certified to receive funds directly, we do continue to provide capacity-building activities at the Ministry and provincial level programs through the Directorates of Women's Affairs.

### **Conclusion**

The United States and other donors recognize that while much has been achieved, much work also remains to be done with and for the benefit of women and girls in Afghanistan. Consequently, the international community will continue to work with the Government of and people of Afghanistan and international donors to develop strategies and plans supportive of the needs of women and girls. While Afghanistan's partners have gained valuable insights into development issues related to women and girls based on its work in the country, additional focus has been provided through the Afghan National Development Strategy and the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan. Activities focused on women and girls will include protection, governance, rule of law, human rights, political participation, economic growth and social development in education and health.

The U.S. Government recognizes that the needs of women and girls will change as Afghanistan moves across a spectrum of relief, stability, reconstruction and sustainable development programming and into long-term development assistance. Providing assistance to women and girls and encouraging Afghan society's efforts to integrate them fully as productive contributors to a peaceful nation and growing economy will be long-term efforts.