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Senate Foreign Relations Committee**

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Afghan Women and Girls: Building the Future of Afghanistan

I am honored to appear before you today to describe why women and girls represent one of the most powerful – but underused – forces that we have to advance security, stability, and development in Afghanistan. I'd also like to recognize Senators Kerry, Lugar, Boxer, and Casey for the leadership they have shown on issues affecting Afghan women and for recognizing the crucial role that women hold in advancing progress in that country. In some significant ways, this hearing builds on the October 1, 2009, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations hearing on the global costs and consequences of violence against women. I commend the senators here today for their recognition of the enormous costs exacted by violence against women, no matter where it occurs in the world, and their recognition of the enormous development gains that could be made if we free

women from its ever-present threat and work to enable them to fulfill their potential.

In his State of the Union Address, President Obama declared that the U.S. government's policies in Afghanistan reflect our national values, including support for universally recognized human rights. Our civilian assistance strategy in Afghanistan incorporates the values of inclusive human rights, good governance, and rule of law. Women's empowerment in Afghanistan and their full and equal participation in their society are fundamental prerequisites for achieving this strategy. Secretary Clinton recognized and underscored this in her remarks in London on January 28 at the International Conference on Afghanistan, when she emphasized that women need to be involved at every step of the way in the process of rebuilding Afghan civil society. The participation of Afghan women is critical for sustainable development, better governance, and peace – in short, they are essential to securing a better future for Afghanistan.

The era of brutal repression by the Taliban has passed, yet on every measure of development and in every sphere, women in Afghanistan continue to suffer solely because they were born female.

In the political realm, women made immediate gains after the Taliban era. Between 2001 and 2005, many 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. In 2008 alone, at least ten women in public positions were assassinated. Women have suffered abuse by the police forces responsible for protecting them. They lack significant representation in the justice system, and the government denied women judges the right to have their own independent professional association. In the recent presidential election, women's political participation was hampered by fear and intimidation by the Taliban, as well as lack of adequate provisions for women at polling stations. Women politicians are often threatened and prevented from engaging in political life. Qualified and experienced women are rarely included in government decision-making or political negotiations. Their political gains today appear fragile and require urgent and sustained attention from the international community.

Under the Taliban, fewer than 900,000 boys – and no girls – were enrolled in Afghanistan's schools. Today, more than 6.2 million students are enrolled in Afghanistan's schools, and 35 percent of them are girls. Nonetheless, overcoming years of exclusion from education is a long process. Only an estimated 21 percent of Afghan women are literate, and the female illiteracy rate is as high as 90 percent in rural areas. Although there is broad popular support for girls' schooling,

extremists still try to impose their brutal agenda by force, by burning down schools, gassing schoolgirls, or throwing acid in the faces of female students.

In health as well as in education, the Taliban excluded women from all services. The legacy of those restrictions has left Afghanistan with the second-highest maternal mortality rate in the world, and other health indicators for women, particularly in the area of reproductive health, are similarly low.

Perhaps the greatest remaining impediment to women's full civic participation is violence against women and girls, which remains endemic in Afghan society. In addition to facing pervasive discrimination at every level of society, Afghan women suffer domestic abuse, rape, forced marriages, forced prostitution, kidnappings, so-called "honor" killings, and cultural practices that use daughters as payment to settle disputes and that condone self-immolation. Crimes go unpunished because of anemic rule of law and weak institutions of justice. Approximately 80 percent of crimes and disputes are settled through traditional justice mechanisms. Absent the types of reform the USG is promoting, these institutions are often flagrantly discriminatory toward women. Violence against women and girls in Afghanistan cannot be explained away as cultural or private; it is criminal and must be addressed as such.

In the face of so many deeply entrenched problems and barriers to progress, it would be tempting to see Afghan women as little more than the victims of the

enormity of their circumstances. Nothing could be further from the truth. I traveled to Afghanistan just before the 2009 presidential elections there to reaffirm President Obama's and Secretary Clinton's commitment to Afghan women and girls and to hear from them how they were faring.

To visit Afghanistan is to become aware of just how many capable Afghan women leaders risk their lives every day in order to work alongside men to create a better future for their country. Some of these are prominent women leaders who are doing crucial work, such as Habiba Sarabi, governor of Bamyan province; members of Parliament who are advocating for women's rights, such as Fawzia Koofi or Shukria Barakzai; or women in the civil service, such as Rahela Sidiqi, who created the Afghan Women's Leadership Caucus Group, which works to increase the number of women in executive positions in the government. Some are prominent businesswomen, such as Amir Taj Serat, who owns a soccer ball manufacturing business called Green Way that employs over 250 women; or Massooma Habibi, who is helping build Afghanistan's electricity and power sector and is supporting U.S. military needs through the company she founded and continues to run despite harassment, discrimination, and threats to herself and her family. Some are leading educators who integrate community education into the framework of Islamic values, such as Sakena Yacoobi, founder of the Afghan Institute of Learning; or legal expert and former State Minister for Women's

Affairs, Professor Mahbooba Huquqmal. And some are leaders within civil society, such as Dr. Sima Samar, Chair of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, with whom I am proud to testify today; or Andeisha Farid, Executive Director and Board Chair of the Afghan Child Education and Care Organization, which operates four orphanages in Afghanistan, and two for orphaned Afghan refugees in Pakistan, overseeing the care of over 300 orphans; or Arzo Qanih, an activist in the area of education, who presented recommendations on behalf of Afghan women at the recent London Conference, and who spoke passionately about the role that women must play in Afghanistan's security, governance, and development.

Many other women are helping to create a better life for the Afghan people in other ways, large and small: they are teachers, members of the police force, midwives, farmers, and provincial council members. Clearly, Afghan women are agents of democracy and change, and yet their potential is largely untapped. That pace of positive change can be accelerated if we work to remove the barriers that prevent them from working for the good of their country.

It is a simple fact that no country can get ahead if half its population is left behind. We know from an accumulating body of studies and research from governments, multilateral organizations, corporations, and think tanks that investing in women is the single most effective development strategy that we have

for poverty alleviation, economic growth, and a country's general prosperity. This is true the world over; it is no less true in Afghanistan.

On January 28, leaders from around the world gathered in London to discuss Afghanistan's future. Secretary Clinton underscored the importance of women in Afghanistan's development and unveiled the Women's Action Plan, which is incorporated into our U.S. Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy. As Secretary Clinton said, "the plan includes initiatives focused on women's security, women's leadership in the public and private sector; women's access to judicial institutions, education, and health services; and women's ability to take advantage of economic opportunities, especially in the agricultural sector. This is a comprehensive, forward-looking agenda."

The Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy recognizes women as agents of change and underscores their importance to our civilian stabilization plan and our efforts to strengthen Afghan communities' capacity to withstand the threat posed by extremism. It establishes women's empowerment as critical to unleashing the full economic potential of the Afghan people.

To combat barriers to women's political empowerment, the United States has launched a broad grassroots effort to train women at local levels and to build their capacity to take on leadership roles. We also recognize that increasing women's political participation requires working with both women and men in law

enforcement and in the judicial system, to diminish the impunity that allows the threats, intimidation and violence to continue that keep women out of public life.

The U.S. government has been supporting local civil society organizations in providing civic education through a coordinated approach of training, capacity building, and support for media programs. Department of State programs within the Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) have trained 525 female police officers and more than 600 women working in the justice sector. They've supported the creation of police Family Response Units that are staffed primarily by female police officers and that offer a safe place for women, children, and families to report crime and seek dispute mediation. INL has funded workshops for more than 550 male and female police officers on domestic violence. We are also supporting political development programs by providing training to 35 female Parliamentarians and their 165 staff, and have assisted the Ministry of Women's Affairs in strategic planning, communications, and institution building.

Our efforts focus not only on building the capacity of women and mitigating the security issues that impede their political progress, but also on securing prominent allies within Afghan culture and society. Through the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL), the Department of State currently supports four programs, totaling more than USD 2 million, that promote women's

rights at the local level by engaging religious leaders and local officials to engage women in the electoral process and to develop women's participation in local governance. In one such project, more than 800 religious leaders, government officials, media representatives, and civil society members received training on human rights concepts, including the rights of women, within the context of Islam. One of the mullahs who participated in the training now has a regular one-hour program on Sharq Television, in which he has spoken about the rights of women, children, and families.

The United States prioritizes these programs for women's political empowerment not only because women have the right to participate in the processes and decisions that affect their lives, and not only because their country – and the world – needs to hear their perspectives and experiences, but also because the scale of security, economic, healthcare, and educational reforms that the country must tackle cannot happen without the commitment and involvement of women and men to good governance and rule of law.

Freeing women to participate in public life also frees them to participate in the economic activity of their nation. Job creation is among our most urgent goals, and agricultural development in Afghanistan is a top U.S. priority. Eighty percent of the people in Afghanistan earn their income from agriculture, yet only 50 percent of the arable land is currently under cultivation. The key to increasing land

yield and productivity is to increase the skilled human capital and boost land productivity – and an efficient way to accomplish that is by training women to participate in the workforce.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has pursued this kind of economic development in a program involving 52,500 women working as goat herders – teaching them about the high value of cashmere and the proper methods to harvest and market this commodity.

Other USAID and U.S. government programs partner with the Afghan government to expand women’s role in animal husbandry and commercial agriculture. For example, USAID has partnered with the provincial Ministry of Women’s Affairs and the Ministry of Agriculture Irrigation and Livestock to train 180 women in poultry breeding and management, and provided them with the birds they need to start their small enterprises. A similar U.S.-supported program called the Alternative Development Program Southwest began in 2008 and provides training and support in raising poultry, along with the creation of greenhouses, for hundreds of female farmers, many of whom are widowed and supporting families. Thanks to these types of initiatives, chicken egg production is now a sustainable enterprise for a number of Afghan women. Programs like these are having a positive impact. As one Afghan said “It is unbelievable how our family life changed from misery to prosperity.”

During my trip to Afghanistan this past summer, U.S. Ambassador Eikenberry and I announced a new USD 26.3 million fund for small flexible rapid-response grants to empower Afghan women-led NGOs at the local level and to build their skills. These small loans are already supporting the work of Afghan-led women NGOs, including those working in the following areas: computer and English skills, handicraft training, radio programming for women, and the provision of dairy cows for women's agricultural initiatives. A portion of the grants will also promote groups that seek women's political empowerment. Future grants will help these organizations grow and manage their own financing. In these ways, Afghan women are helping each other improve their own lives and those of their families.

Beyond agricultural assistance, we're working to provide Afghan women with the tools they need to begin a microbusiness or to take an existing business to the next level of development. As of September, 2009, USAID had provided over 108,000 microfinance loans to Afghan women via its Agriculture, Rural Investment, and Enterprise Strengthening Program, and the organization has provided skills training to 4,300 female business owners over the past two years. Their cash-for-work programs have reached over 21,000 women, providing them with both income and business development assistance. The U.S.-Afghan Women's Council is also active in this area, and is working with private industry to

promote women's economic skills and entrepreneurship. They have, for example, set up a partnership with the hand-knotted carpet industry to provide training, literacy skills, and access to health care for Afghan women and their families.

To further build Afghanistan's skilled workforce, as well as to extend the many other benefits of education, the United States has promoted programs that rebuild the education infrastructure for women. Through two major partnerships between USAID and the Afghan government, we are taking on the enormous obstacles that remain to women's educational equality. The Partnership for Community Education in Afghanistan establishes primary school classes in previously remote areas and integrates them into the public system. The project also supports adult literacy and trains teachers. To date, 2,446 primary grade classes have been established; 60 percent of participants are female. The Afghanistan Learning for Community Empowerment Program provides literacy and productive skills training to young people and adults and helps the newly-literate translate their skills into jobs. More than 50 percent of their learning centers are for women.

The United States has also worked to rebuild Afghanistan's healthcare services. INL funds the only three residential drug treatment centers for women in the country, in Kabul, Herat, and Balkh. Three new centers will open in 2010. With USG assistance, access to health services has risen dramatically since 2001.

The number of midwives available to assist with deliveries has quadrupled; the number of health facilities with women health workers has more than doubled. There has been a 26 percent increase in the total number of antenatal visits, and a 30 percent increase in the number of women delivering with the assistance of a skilled midwife.

The U.S. counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan addresses issues of security, economic development, social development, good governance, and rule of law. The future security, stability, and development of Afghanistan depend in large part on the degree to which women have an active role in rebuilding its civil society and a voice in their nation's political process. To reach that level of participation, women need to be included in the political process at all levels, including in greater numbers in civil service positions, and they must have an active role in the peace process. This principle is formulated in UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which sets out women's role in international peace and security. Women's inclusion is critical for negotiations on lasting peace worldwide, but perhaps nowhere is this more critical than in Afghanistan. Their voices must be heard.

As reintegration efforts move forward, the United States is committed to ensuring that Afghan women's rights will not be sacrificed. At the London Conference, Secretary Clinton made clear that reintegration of former Taliban can

only take place if they renounce violence, renounce al-Qaida, and accept all the tenets of the Afghan constitution, including its commitment to protect women from violence and oppression. Afghan women want a process that promotes peace in their country. They must be part of that process. Secretary Clinton introduced the Afghan women who attended the London Conference and honored them by saying, “They are among the women who have been working in Afghanistan for the last years on behalf of expanding opportunities for women and protecting human rights and women’s rights. I’ve had a chance to work in the past with some of the Afghan women who were here for the conference today, and they are very much committed to their country’s future, but they’re also very committed to making sure that women in Afghanistan play their rightful role in that country’s future.”

If a peace process is to endure, women need to have a voice in the decision-making about the future of their country. Their rights must not be endangered or diminished in efforts to reconcile competing factions. There can be no progress, in Afghanistan or in any other part of the world, without women’s progress.