

Remarks by David Cortright,  
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I am here today to share the findings of our recent report, *Afghan Women Speak*, produced by the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, co-authored by my colleague and research associate, Sarah Smiles Persinger. The report is based on more than 50 interviews Smiles Persinger conducted last April and May in Kabul with policymakers, diplomats, ISAF officials, and most importantly Afghan women, including female parliamentarians, activists, health and NGO workers.

Since 2001, Afghan women and girls have made significant gains. They have seized opportunities to go to school, earn an income and participate in public life – all denied to them during Taliban years. As of last year 7.3 million Afghan children were in school – 37 per cent of them girls - compared to only 900,000 boys in 2002. Hundreds of midwives have been trained in a push to tackle maternal mortality. The Afghan Parliament has a 25 per cent reserve quota for women.

These gains are real but they are in danger because of rising violence and insurgency. Hundreds of schools have been closed in the south and southeast, with girl students targeted for attack. Health clinics have been closed as health workers are abducted and killed. Insecurity has limited women's participation in the electoral process and public life. Electoral participation rates for women and men have declined since the high point of 2005.

The U.S.-led coalition and the Afghan government have officially adopted a policy of political reconciliation with the Taliban. U.S. and NATO policymakers are committed to beginning troop withdrawals this summer and turning over security responsibility to Afghan forces by 2014. Some form of political power sharing between the Kabul government and elements of the Taliban seems likely, and may help to reduce the level of armed insurgency.

But such a peace process could pose significant human rights challenges. The horrendous record of the Taliban and other insurgent groups is well known regarding human rights abuses and disregard for the social, economic and political rights of women. In places where insurgents have gained local power in the south and east of Afghanistan today, women have faced renewed restrictions on political, economic and social opportunities.

The central policy challenge our research addresses is how Western governments can begin to disengage militarily while preserving the gains women have achieved and guarding against a human rights reversal.

During her interviews with Afghan women in Kabul last year, Smiles Persinger found that all of her interviewees want an end to the armed violence, but they also harbor serious fears about reconciliation with the Taliban and other insurgent groups.

U.S. and NATO officials have said that insurgents seeking reconciliation must renounce violence, sever links to Al-Qaeda and respect the constitution. Insurgents have called for the withdrawal of foreign troops, an overhaul of the constitution, the implementation of Sharia law and the re-islamization of the Afghan state.

The women we spoke to are concerned that ceding to these demands may undermine the status of women and girls. They worry that Taliban or other insurgent leaders who enter government may use their positions to overhaul the constitution and scrap the clause stipulating gender equality, or change the education curriculum and scrap subjects like science and IT, or close co-educational and private schools, which currently offer the best education available in the country.

Already the parliament is dominated by conservative forces, including ex-Mujahideen warlords and conservative clerics. Members of the Afghan government and parliament supported the notorious Shia Personal Status Law of 2009, and today are seeking a government takeover (and shutdown) of foreign-funded shelters that provide support for women abused at home.

The women we interviewed are also concerned about the call for Sharia law. They have no problem with Sharia law, and indeed the Afghan legal system already draws heavily from it. The problem is with Taliban-style Sharia law, which draws as much from Pashtun customary law, or Pashtunwali, as it does from Sharia, and is seen as explicitly discriminatory towards women.

They are also worried about the prospect of civil war, which could become more likely if foreign troops are withdrawn precipitously – given the instability of the Kabul regime and the weakness of Afghan security forces.

Despite all these concerns, the majority of women we interviewed support a peace process because they recognize that women and girls are suffering from the violence. They know that rights are eroding as violence increases.

One female parliamentarian we interviewed, Sahera Sharif, who is from Khost province, a conservative, predominantly Pashtun province in the south-east – said nearly all of the schools for girls in her province are now closed.

She said there has been a complete breakdown of law and order in Khost. Five years ago, she could drive out to schools in the villages which offered accelerated learning classes for girls – and now she is afraid to walk around the provincial capital.

Another woman we interviewed, a midwife from the same province, said her husband had pulled their seven-year-old daughter out of school because he is afraid she might be kidnapped or her school attacked. This woman was very sad, because she does not want her daughter to be uneducated.

The insecurity also has impacted women's mobility, leading to the reinforced cloistering of women by their families. A British report published last year quoted a group of women in Kandahar saying that their lives are no better now than they were under the Taliban. They can't leave the house to get an education, or earn a living.

As anger towards the military occupation has risen, there has also been a backlash towards the 'women's rights discourse', which is seen as an alien, Western intrusion by many Afghans. Women exercising leadership skills are often called anti-Islamic, Western agents, or prostitutes, and subject to death threats and intimidation. Some high-profile women have also been assassinated.

All of the women we interviewed acknowledge that it will be impossible for women to consolidate the gains they have made in a militarized environment. And because of this they support a peace process. But they want assurances that they will not be the 'victims' of the process, that peace will not be bought at their expense.

In our report, we have attempted to offer suggestions for demilitarizing U.S. policy while maintaining assurances for Afghanistan's security, protecting human rights and preserving political, economic and social opportunity.

Addressing the security situation is paramount. To provide for the protection of civilians and avoid a security vacuum, our report has recommended the deployment of an UN-led interim security force from Muslim countries, to be deployed as ISAF troops withdraw.

The proposed security force would operate under the auspices of the United Nations, with a mission of providing population-centric protection during an interim period. Taliban leaders have suggested the deployment of such a force. In December 2008, Taliban leader Mullah Omar proposed the introduction of peacekeeping forces from Muslim countries as part of a “seven point plan” to resolve the conflict. Taliban spokesmen have pledged not to attack such a force.

The interim protection force would not be a replacement for ISAF, which is engaged in active combat. The mission of the interim force would be different, focused on peacekeeping and civilian protection. For these purposes, a modest-sized force should be sufficient.

As U.S.-led forces cease operations and pull back to their bases in advance of withdrawal, the interim security force could be introduced. It would need to be paid and equipped by the United States and its NATO allies. Remaining U.S. and NATO troops could help train the force. The interim security force would operate for a limited period under UN authority with the consent of the Afghan government.

Any draw down in foreign troops also must be accompanied by long-term, sustained investment in aid projects that support Afghan women and families.

Because development funding has been linked to military objectives and aid money has been concentrated in areas where there is fighting, foreign governments will be tempted to reduce aid programs as they begin to withdraw troops. This would be a disaster for Afghanistan’s future, and a slap at women’s rights.

CARE and other aid organizations have identified social programs that are effective at improving the lives of women and families, especially in the areas of education and healthcare – such as improving access to secondary education for girls, training midwives and expanding economic opportunities for women in rural areas.

One of the best ways to prevent a roll back in women’s gains is to ensure that women are meaningfully represented in all peace discussions and forums. So far, Afghan women’s organizations have had to fight hard to have their voices heard around the various discussions and peace jirgas of recent years.

Officials of the Kabul government have shown repeated disregard for including women in high-level decision-making forums. Western policymakers have significant leverage with the Afghan government they can and should use to advocate for women’s interests.

The commitment of U.S. and NATO policymakers is sometimes uneven. While Secretary of State Clinton has displayed exemplary leadership in advocating for Afghan women's rights, political will among other officials is less certain. Some consider the issue "soft" and incongruent with security concerns, but this ignores now widely acknowledged understandings of the links between human rights and peace.

In our report we recommend support for Afghan women's organizations and Afghan women in professional and leadership roles. A practical model would be exchange visits for women parliamentarians, public servants, judges, lawyers, and also long-term mentoring and training for police officers.

Another way to increase the profile of women in public office is to ensure that all visiting Afghan government delegations include women. Our understanding is that this approach is already being adopted by the State Department.

The last recommendation in our report relates to vulnerable Afghan women. The prospect of reconciliation is extremely risky. As troops are withdrawn and political alliances shift, the danger of a roll-back in women's rights is very real, and Afghans who have worked directly with the military intervention will be particularly vulnerable. We argue as well that Afghan women who have occupied leadership positions or are perceived to have been associated with Western interests are also extremely vulnerable.

Given this, our report recommends that the U.S. Government should consider giving Afghan women priority in any asylum programs that are established for Afghans, specifically women who face ongoing threats and attacks on their lives because of perceived association with Western interests. This may include women working for the government, aid agencies or in association with PRTs, for example. Our research shows that the military intervention and this focus on women's rights by the West have made many Afghan women very vulnerable. Many women have been threatened and may face even greater dangers in the future as troops are withdrawn.

The rights of women must be protected as the U.S. begins a much needed military disengagement from Afghanistan. As outlined here, the drawdown of forces must be accompanied by a range of security, political and development policies to secure and stabilize Afghanistan's future.

Many stakeholders in the West have high expectations about empowering Afghan women, but we know that deeply rooted gender prejudices and misogyny will not be erased rapidly and

certainly not by outside forces. Nonetheless the United States and other donor states have significant leverage, which must be used to improve security, preserve women's political rights, support Afghan women's organizations actively working for change, and sustain programs for public health, education, and economic opportunity that have improved women's lives.