

## **Statement for the Record**

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

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**Women in Afghanistan**

**May 3, 2011**

Chairmen McGovern and Wolf, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the challenge of supporting gender equality, women's empowerment, and socio-economic progress for women and girls in Afghanistan. It is an honor to testify before this respected body which continues to be a strong voice on the importance of human rights both in Congress and world-wide. Recent reports on women's shelters, the viability of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, land tenure, and USAID's own commitment to the cause of Afghan women serve to underscore the urgent need to today.

As you will hear, the Obama Administration has adopted a whole-of-government approach to promoting female literacy, comprehensive health care, economic empowerment and political inclusion in Afghanistan. My agency, USAID, has more than doubled spending on women and girls since 2008, created and fully staffed a new gender unit in 2010, required all programs to integrate gender in their project design and evaluation, and provided more than 500 grants for capacity building for civil society, basic education, women's equality under the law, land reform, micro-enterprise, and political and social advocacy. Improvements in access to education, health care, employment, political office, and economic opportunity have been notable since the fall of the Taliban, including the return of 2.5 million girls to school.

But there is still a long way to go, as shown by continuing cases of girls having acid thrown in their faces for daring to return to school and continuing threats against women stepping forward to exercise their political and economic rights. Our administration is committed to making these gains deeper and irreversible. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently said, "No society can advance if 50 percent of its population is left behind." Our efforts in Afghanistan are not simply a matter of fairness or equity, but a recognition that investments in women and promotion of women's participation and equality are non-negotiable requirements for lasting peace, stability, and social progress. Let me repeat: gender integration, equality and empowerment are not secondary priorities or pet projects to be addressed once the insurgency has been defeated: they are essential to the success of that effort.

Since 2004, UAID has progressively increased its funding devoted solely to the advancement of women in girls, while concurrently increasing and improving our efforts to oversee and report on this assistance. For example, in the three year period from 2008-2010, USAID doubled its assistance to women from \$79 million in Fiscal Year 2008 to over \$200 million in Fiscal Year 2010. Furthermore, I feel it is important to note our advancements in oversight and reporting of these funds which is evidenced not only through our increased staffing, but also our recently completed impact assessment and directives to implementing partners. Throughout the summer and fall of 2010, USAID/Afghanistan

conducted an impact assessment on its activities relating to assistance to women. The final report states that we are having significant impact in certain sectors, such as health and education, and activities in those sectors should be greatly scaled up. Additionally, we require our implementing partners to establish the necessary implementation, management and reporting systems to separately track and report to USAID data on female beneficiaries and measurable impacts of activities intended to address the needs of women and girls. We are happy to brief the Commission staff in further detail on this issue.

I would like to focus my remarks on USAID's efforts to increase the substantive involvement of women in the development of Afghanistan; the progress that has been made and challenges that remain; and our thoughts on the empowerment of women moving past the 2014 transition deadline.

In particular, I will describe our work to strengthen civil society, ensure equal access to justice and human rights, support economic advancement, promote improved outcomes in girls' education and women's health care, and encourage women's political participation.

### *1. Civil Society Strengthening*

Through our civil society strengthening programs, USAID has established a Civil Society Task Force in Afghanistan on U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 with two specific objectives: 1.) to monitor all activities related to negotiation with warring factions, reconciliation and reintegration and to ensure women's inclusion in the process and implementation of Resolution 1325; and 2.) To encourage and advocate for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to become involved in Resolution 1325 public outreach activities, including (whenever possible) conducting public forums to discuss the importance of women's inclusion in the peace process. This Task Force is currently coordinated by the Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society II (I-PACS II) and USAID is an active participant in their quarterly meetings. The Task Force has already had two successful meetings and plans to have a third meeting around May 2011.

Furthermore, during the course of Fiscal Year (FY) 2011, USAID plans to provide grants on the following: Community Conflict Resolution & Peace-building Grants; Women Reintegration Grants - activities to include women in the reconciliation and reintegration process; and CSO Engagement in Afghan National Development Initiatives - support for CSO participation and coordination in consultation and implementation of Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) and National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) priorities.

### *2. Access to Justice*

Through our rule of law activities we are focusing on strengthening both the formal and informal justice sectors. We support independent Afghan legal aid societies to implement their programs around the country and provide their services free of charge to indigent clients, a significant portion of whom are female. Through this support, women are able to gain better access to courts at the local level. In

addition, in order to ensure women are truly able to access formal sector justice, the program works to examine ways to effectively overcome the obstacle of transportation to courts.

USAID is also working to ensure that women are not only able to access justice, but become active members in all levels of the judicial sector.

In February 2011, the USAID-funded Rule of Law Stabilization-Formal (RoLS-F) program hosted over 75 female students from the Secular and Sharia Law Faculties at Herat University for a day-long forum titled “Women in the Judiciary.” The second such forum of its kind in Afghanistan, this event afforded students the opportunity to come together with Herat-based female legal professionals, including three judges - one each from the Civil Court, the Juvenile Court, and the Anti-Corruption Tribunal. Top on the agenda was discussion of the *Stage*, the Afghanistan Supreme Court’s two-year judicial training program, completion of which is the only path to becoming a judge in Afghanistan. In addition to discussing entry into the judiciary, the forum also addressed issues such as: challenges to working in a male-dominated profession; rights of women (including in the workplace); and advocating for additional opportunities for women in the judiciary. In light of the difficulties women in the judiciary face in Afghanistan, the judges offered the students words of wisdom, sage advice, and most importantly inspiration, as they encouraged the women to continue “working hard even in this challenging environment.” The legal professionals attending the event also offered to mentor the students during their continued classroom studies and help them prepare for the *Stage* entry exam.

In September and October 2010, the USAID funded Rule of Law Stabilization – Informal Component project (RLS-I) invited wives of *jirgamaran* (elders) and influential leaders to participate in their first forum to strengthen community-based dispute resolution in Kandahar and Nangarhar. The meeting is one RLS-I activity that aims to build stability and citizens’ capacity to strengthen the rule of law in Afghanistan. Men sit on all jirgas in Nangarhar Province, and women are typically excluded. However, elder’s wives often facilitate by bringing disputes involving women before jirgas. The women elders agreed to participate in RLS-I upcoming activities, which will include regular network meetings and basic legal workshops on property and family law.

Finally, with regards to civil society strengthening and access to justice, it is important to note the work of the Ambassador’s Small Grants Program to Support Gender Equality in Afghanistan. Announced in 2010, the program has promoted efforts to enforce the Elimination of Violence Against Women Act (EVAW) through Advocacy Coordination Grants to Afghan groups. One grant in particular provided to the Civil Society Development Center in the Nangarhar province was solely to promote advocacy and capacity building for EVAW. This legislation can provide landmark improvements in women’s rights and USAID is working through mechanisms like the Ambassador’s Small Grants Program to support awareness and enforcement.

### 3. *Economic Advancement*

Thousands of widows have few resources or ways to earn a living. In response, USAID supports programs for women that promote broader economic independence and provide credit and business training. USAID plans to increase activities to build the financial sector with a focus on micro, small, and

medium enterprises throughout Afghanistan. Over the next year, we will begin to design and implement a follow on to our very successful small and medium enterprise program, which by the end of Fiscal Year 2010 had supported 2,300 women owned small and medium enterprises, helped to establish 400 women owned enterprises, and provided training to more than 5,000 women as well as more than 560 internship and mentorship opportunities. The design for this program builds on previous lessons learned in the provision of support to women owned and women run businesses, associations, and cooperatives, including start-ups. This will generate quality employment, particularly in the agricultural sector in the southern and eastern regions of the country.

In that same vein we have also begun to support Farm Service Centers throughout the country. In late summer 2010, the first Women's Farm Service Center opened in Kabul. With a \$3.5 million U.S. Government investment through USAID's Afghanistan Farm Service Alliance program, this first women's farm service center will benefit more than 10,000 Afghan women. The center will serve as the prototype for several women's Farm Service Centers to be located throughout Afghanistan.

#### *4. Education*

Since 2002, we have noted strong advancements for women in education. We currently have 6.8 million children attending school, and 38 percent of them are girls--a seven fold increase from 2002. Further, we have seen increasing numbers of women involved in education as teachers and administrators; strong female participation in literacy courses; and continuing school construction, both by USAID and the international community, which enables young girls to attend school.

Despite the successes in recent years, significant obstacles remain to female education. Forty-two percent of school aged children (approximately five million) do not have access to education, and the majority of the schoolchildren are girls. Cultural issues such as lack of parental awareness about the importance of educating girls, traditional social values, the ongoing insurgency and early marriage continue to contribute to the gender gap in education. To tackle these and other ongoing difficulties, USAID is working with the Ministry of Education as it implements its second National Education Strategic Plan, which gives special attention to girls' education and to developing policies and strategies for improved participation of women and girls in education.

Social and economic indices from across the world show that countries with high levels of female education have better overall health, more functional democracies, and better economic performance. Multiple studies from developing countries indicate that investments in female education result in lower maternal and child mortality, smaller and more educated families, and delayed marriage. In sum, women and girls are the strongest potential agents of change in Afghanistan and education is the tool to empower them.

#### *5. Health*

Afghan women suffer from extremely high rates of maternal mortality, malnutrition, anemia, tuberculosis, post-war trauma, and clinical depression. USAID works to bring basic health and hospital services to women in 13 provinces. Programs include the provision of maternal healthcare and

immunizations, malnutrition and communicable disease treatments and diagnosis of mental illness and diabetes. As a result of USAID's contribution to health, nearly 60 percent of the population lives within two hours walking distance to the nearest health facility, up from nine percent in 2002.

Further, in continued support of the reduction of maternal and infant mortality, more than 1,640 midwives have graduated from USAID supported programs to date. USAID is currently working to train an additional 1,000 community and hospital based midwives. It is through programs like this that national attitudes to pre- and post-natal care have improved and infant and child mortality rates have fallen 22 percent and 26 percent respectively since 2002

*6. Legal Protections and Human Rights:*

Women have long been restricted from public life in Afghanistan, even though the Afghan constitution protects them. Afghan women have limited awareness of their rights, and the formal justice system has limited reach outside of urban centers. To promote change, USAID, in conjunction with our interagency colleagues, provides women's rights awareness training for female law students and judges, sponsors roundtables to promote public debate and dialogue on women's rights, and helps build women's skills to influence public policy and advocate for reforms. We have trained 78 female judges to officiate over the courts, manage cases, and provide due process.

To further strengthen the enforcement and protection of human and legal rights, we are working with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to adopt and enforce policies that focus on combating violence and harassment against women in the public and private spheres, including awareness raising and effective implementation of the Elimination of Violence Against Women Act.

*7. Leadership and Political Participation:*

USAID provides extensive support to bolster women's participation in the political process and foster democracy in Afghanistan. To further women's participation in the electoral process, we have conducted outreach and education to inform and encourage women to participate and vote in national and provincial elections. Further, influential women are trained in the nuances of the electoral process so they may reach out to other women in their provinces.

USAID will continue to ensure female Members of Parliament participate in Parliamentary development projects and that their membership in the projects will be a percentage higher than their membership in the National Assembly. Specific gender development projects for Members of Parliament will include capacity building and rights awareness.

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The world is watching as we move closer not only to this summer's expected beginning of withdrawal of combat troops but also to the early stages of the reconciliation and reintegration process and the effect it will have on the hard won rights of Afghan women. President Karzai said recently that the rights of women will not be sacrificed for political expediency as it relates to the reintegration of former combatants. The U.S. continues to urge the Afghan Government to ensure that human rights, especially women's rights, remain paramount in any discussions of reconciliation and reintegration and that women are fully engaged at all levels in these discussions, including decisions regarding amnesty and immunity for former combatants.

I would like to end my statement by expressing my thanks to the Co-Chairs and other distinguished members of the Commission for holding this hearing. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.