



Statement for the Record: Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

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Women in Afghanistan

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On behalf of UN Women, I extend my deep appreciation to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for organizing this hearing on Women in Afghanistan at this crucial moment. I thank co-Chairpersons McGovern and Wolf for their serious attention to this issue.

In 2005 Womankind Worldwide, an NGO in the U.K, called Afghanistan ‘the most dangerous place in the world to be a woman,’ not just because of the day to day violence that women endure but also the risks that women take in simply standing up for their rights. We pay tribute to and take heed from the women human rights defenders who put themselves at risk every day, sometimes with devastating outcomes. The successions of assassinations of women who have chosen to stand up for women’s rights are well known. Let me name but a few, all of whom were based in Kandahar: Safia Ama Jan, Director of the Department of Women’s Affairs in Kandahar, assassinated in September 2006; Lieutenant-Colonel Malalai Kakar, assassinated in September 2008; and Sitara Achakzai, Kandahar Provincial Council Member, assassinated in April 2009.

Despite the enormous challenges and risks, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, with the support of the international community and the Afghan people, has made progress in addressing gender inequality, discrimination, and social exclusion. We are all familiar with many of these achievements, but if you'll allow me, I'll go through some of the most prominent. These include the establishment of a Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) in 2002, which now has extended its reach to 34 provincial offices; Afghanistan's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women in 2003; inclusion of Article 22 in the Constitution providing women and men with equal status as citizens in 2004, as well as the creation of an enabling environment for women's active participation in the country's first-ever direct presidential election; inclusion of gender equality as one of the six cross-cutting themes of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy, signed by the President in 2008; adoption in 2009 of a Law on Ending Violence Against Women; and, currently, the inclusion (albeit limited) of women in the ongoing peace and reconciliation process.

These markers of progress go hand in hand with tangible differences made in women's and girls' lives since 2001, with many now having the chance of going to school, returning to work, and taking part in public life, like the 2.4 million Afghan girls enrolled in school this year¹ and the record number of women who ran for parliament in 2010. 406 women ran for office for at least 68 reserved seats out of 249.² Afghan women ended up securing 69 seats, resulting in 27.7 % representation in the parliament, placing Afghanistan as 29th in the global ranking of countries

¹ While this is an staggering increase from the 2001 figure of 5,000 enrolled Afghan girls, a recent Oxfam report indicates that there is a significant gap between enrollment and attendance. Oxfam. "High Stakes: Girls Education in Afghanistan." Accessed 29.4.2011. <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/education/high-stakes-girls-education-afghanistan.html>

² Boone, John. "Afghan elections: Record number of women stand for parliament." The Guardian UK. 24 August 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/aug/24/record-women-candidates-afghan-election>

with the highest number of female Parliamentarians.³ We are also encouraged by efforts to increase the numbers of women in the security sector, with 1,241 women recruited in the Afghan national police as of mid-April 2011.⁴ Five female lieutenants recently graduated as pilot officers for Afghanistan's nascent air force.⁵

These are successes, but they are fragile. We are alarmed at signs that some of the measures for which Afghan women have fought could be in danger of being traded off or bargained away as political currency in national and local processes of reintegration and reconciliation. Some of these signs include the passing of the Shia Personal Status law in 2009, the debate about the management and regulation of women's shelters and referral centers, and attacks against girls' schools. However, rather than telling you our concerns from the Global perspective, I will use this opportunity to relay what Afghan women themselves asked for at the London Conference on Afghanistan last year, and subsequently at the Peace Jirga and Kabul conference last summer.

They asked for transparency in **decision-making** and for national gender equality policies to be implemented. In spite of laudable efforts from the United States and others, women's rights programmes continue to be under-funded. For example, the relatively modest \$29.7 million dollar budget for the implementation of the National Priority Programme of the Ministry⁶ of Women's Affairs has still not been met, although USAID has generously committed to partially

³ Inter-Parliamentarian Union website. Accessed 29.4.2011. <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>

⁴ SDC Swiss Agency of Development and Cooperation. "Security for All: Women in the Afghan Police Forces." 21 April 2011 <http://www.humansecuritygateway.com/showRecord.php?RecordId=35089>

⁵ NATO. "Afghan Women Soar to New Heights." 03 March 2011. http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_71148.htm

⁶ The MOWA National Priority Programme is focusing on six components, namely internal reform and advocacy, gender training of key government staff, piloting of gender mainstreaming in key policies and programmes, gender policy research and development, public education and advocacy and establishment of macro-mechanisms for compliance and M&E.

funding the internal reform and capacity building of the MOWA and fully funding its public education and advocacy initiatives.

Women asked to be represented in all **peace and reconciliation processes** to guarantee women's rights and greater security measures to protect women. UN Women has been funding women's peace networks and positioning them to participate in the negotiations. From the inception of our programme in 2002, UN Women has made supporting Afghan women to participate in peace processes and negotiations, both in Afghanistan and abroad, a high priority.

The Government has responded, firstly by nominating nine women out of seventy representatives to participate in the High Peace Council, at the national and provincial level. UN Women welcomes the appointment of women on the High Peace Council but changing the numbers is only part of the challenge. We would hope to see regular and structured consultations between women and men on the Council and women in civil society around the country to ensure that women's priorities are well understood and given careful consideration.

Women have also asked that they have equal representation in all monitoring bodies set up to oversee the reintegration and reconciliation process. Monitoring mechanisms should be established within communities and should include monitoring of violence and violations of the rights of women to ensure that these are not being compromised through this process. We would like to note that in our own reviews of women's engagement in peace processes around the world, the under-representation of women in peace negotiations of all kinds remains a constant – with on average less than 8% of negotiators being women, and with little structured effort to assess and include women's priorities.

We cannot stress enough that women's priorities tend to be vital matters for effective and sustainable reconciliation and reconstruction. From Liberia to Timor Leste, we have seen the power of women's networks and grassroots groups taking leadership to call for and sustain reconciliation and peacebuilding. Women in Afghanistan must be supported to put their priorities on the peace-building agenda. These include attention to the needs of families and children -- from education to health -- as well as determination to prevent violence against women and to obtain justice for its victims, and measures to ensure women's meaningful participation in public decision-making and women benefit from economic development.

UN Women supports women's leadership and rights in 25 conflict or post-conflict countries. We have seen too often that in conflict, peace building, and political transition, women's rights and security are not considered a priority. The failure to build on this asset represents a flaw in the logic of building peace. Just because women tend not to control the conduct of warfare is no reason to neglect their vital role in building the quality of the peace and the speed of community recovery. A failure to engage women fully in shaping the terms of reintegration of ex-combatants or reconciliation means that we are conceding to a perpetrator-centered approach to conflict resolution, not a survivor-centered one. In order to ensure that women can engage effectively in these processes, the critical priority must be to finance women's organizations so that women in civil society are prepared to take leadership roles when opportunities arise. However, across the globe, women's organizations, especially in conflict contexts, struggle to find resources to carry out their vital work. U.S. support is vital to reversing this trend.

An important priority for bilateral partners to Afghanistan is to develop funding modalities to build the capacities of women's groups from the community to national levels to influence policy

and to develop robust constituencies that can advance women's interests. In this regard, UN Women welcomes the USAID global grant programme to increase the involvement of women in peace processes and recognizes this as an important step towards building women's civil society capacities on the ground. UN Women has also received a modest amount of funding for a joint strategy on mediation with the UN Department of Political Affairs, which will be allocated to support women to participate in peace negotiations in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Finally, women at the conferences last year repeatedly raised extreme concern over the ongoing lack of **security** that women experience across the country. On top of the harm to women's health and well-being, violence against women, threats and intimidation constitute major barriers for women and girls to participate in public life, go to school, engage in livelihood activities, and so forth.

A report recently released by UNAMA (December 2010)⁷ found that the 2009 Ending Violence Against Women Law is not being implemented robustly enough to make a difference in women's security. Harmful practices, such as forced marriage, so-called honour killings and giving away girls to settle disputes continue with impunity, despite being illegal under Afghan law. UNAMA found that although knowledge is increasing, many law enforcement and judicial officials did not know about the EAW law, especially in remote areas.

Despite the continued and joint efforts to address VAW in Afghanistan, most women do not have access to protection, adequate safe shelter and legal aid. Currently there are 12 shelters

⁷ UNAMA and OCHHR. "Harmful Traditional Practices and the Implementation of the Ending Violence Against Women Law." December 2010. http://www.afghan-web.com/woman/harmful_traditions.pdf

(according to MOWA), all of them are run by NGOs and funded by international donors. There is weak sustainability of these shelters and staff working in these shelters receives continuous threats to their lives. There are clients who have been in shelters for over 6 years with no possibility for reintegration and necessary medical treatment because they will be killed by their family or perpetrators if they discover where these women live. We have seen this happen. We need high level political voices from the national and international community to speak out against this horrific practice.

It is essential that women have alternatives when they are faced with violence in their homes and communities. That is why women's groups, UN Women and many other supporters, including the U.S. Government, have placed a high priority on expanding the network of referral and protection centers available to women and girls who are at risk of domestic and other forms of violence. UN Women has been taking a lead role in coordinating the UN support to the government on the regulation of Women's Protection Centers. The improvements in this regulation demonstrate the effectiveness of partnerships between the UN and bilateral organizations, with the U.S. and other donors taking leadership in asserting how important it was for Women's Protection Centers to have independence while meeting quality standards. MOWA and UN Women have been facilitating civil society engagement in the revision of the regulation, and lobbying with the Ministry of Justice to adopt the proposed revisions resulting in the most recent draft (25 April) being much improved from previous iterations.

UN Women's support in Afghanistan depends on its close partnership with the government, civil society, UN entities and bilateral actors. Among other successes, UN Women supported the

drafting and adoption of the Ending Violence against Women legislation, the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA), which is the government's primary mechanism for implementing its commitments to women's empowerment and gender equality, and others. UN Women supports an inter-ministerial commission to end Violence against Women, bringing together government officials from 13 ministries. UN Women established a multi-donor funding mechanism to expand and strengthen EAW response measures, which has now disbursed grants to 41 civil society projects in 21 provinces and has been working on various protection measures, such as referral centres, shelters and legal aid programmes. We have supported paralegal training in nine provinces, especially to enhance access to justice for women in rural areas. This has produced a manual endorsed by the Afghanistan International Bar Association and the Ministry of Justice. UN Women also assisted the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission to promote the implementation of the Civil Service Gender Equality Policy, and continues to partner with the Central Statistical Organization to build their capacity to regularly issue statistical reports on the status of women and men in Afghanistan. UN Women leads the UN Country Team Gender Working Group. The UN system is piloting an integrated development approach in the province of Dai Kundi, with all UN organizations working together on the local implementation of the National Action Plan for Women's Advancement. Getting it right at the local level is key to getting it right at the national level.

Your good offices can be used to consistently remind leaders at national and international levels of the obligations that they have made to Afghan women. We hope that every effort will be made to engage a cross-section of Afghan women directly in consultations with the Taliban and

anti-government groups, whenever and wherever these take place. Where women are reluctant to be involved directly, then we ask you to ensure that side-consultations are held with women on the terms and agreements that are being discussed. UN Women can support such activities. The United States could support an inclusive national consultation of women and men to discuss the possible impact of national reconciliation, as suggested by other partners such as the Institute for Inclusive Security. Local peace councils should be supported to monitor the impact of reconciliation on local levels of violence against women and girls, as well as the impact of reintegration on girls' safety in schools, women's access to business opportunities, and women's engagement in public decision-making. Finally, we must all invest more in strengthening women's networks, women leaders, and the men who stand up for women's rights in Afghanistan, undoubtedly one of the best ways of ensuring that women will be ready and able to participate meaningfully in peacemaking, peacebuilding, and the shaping of their country.

Thank you for your attention and especially for the US government's steadfast support of Afghan women.