

Prepared Testimony

House Armed Services Committee

“Challenges to Securing Afghan Women’s Gains in a Post-2014 Environment”

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Introduction

Chairman Roby, Ranking Member Tsongas, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today. I’d also like to thank you for the continued support you have shown for Afghan women, particularly on the issue which I’ll testify to – the recruitment and retention of women in the Afghan National Security Forces.

The nongovernmental organization I work with – Inclusive Security – is dedicated to increasing the inclusion of women in peace and security processes. We’ve worked in Afghanistan with Afghan women leaders for more than a decade. Traveling to Afghanistan regularly, we collaborate with local organizations to train women in political participation, inclusion in the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program, and security sector development. We also host delegations of Afghan women in Washington, facilitating meetings with members of Congress and the Administration for discussion of how to advance peace and security in their country. Informing today’s testimony are consultations I’ve led in country with women and men in the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), officials in the Afghan Ministries of Interior and Defense, and representatives of the International Security Assistance Force, among others.

The strides Afghan women have made since 2001 are many. Gains have been made in access to public services, justice, and political participation that have had a real and tangible impact on Afghan women’s quality of life. But, as U.S. and Coalition forces draw down, what I’ve observed is this – it’s no longer a question of whether the security transition will have a negative impact on women, it’s a question of how to mitigate the backsliding we’ve already seen. In many provinces, limitations on women’s freedom of movement are re-emerging, as well as restrictions on their participation in public life.¹

In determining how to maintain progress for women, we must evaluate women’s direct participation in the institutions mandated to protect these gains – chief among them, the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP).

¹ See AWN-CORDAID report for additional information on the impact of transition on women’s security: <http://www.cordaid.org/nl/publicaties/afghanistan-monitoring-womens-security-transition/>

In total, the U.S. has appropriated \$52.8 billion through the Afghan Security Forces Fund to support the ANSF.² Prior to 2013, there had never been authorizing or appropriation language in law that specifically addressed recruitment and retention of women in the Afghan forces. It's time for a change. It's time for a new approach – one that equally engages men and women in ensuring the endurance of these hard-won advancements.

The presence – or absence – of women in the ANSF has implications in areas the U.S. has deemed top priorities including: democracy promotion, countering terrorism, and provision of security to the Afghan people with minimal or no assistance from Coalition forces³; particularly as we understand “Afghan people” to refer equally to men, women, boys and girls.

Allow me to elaborate briefly on these three points:

- **Democracy promotion:** Without female security personnel, Afghan women will not be allowed to vote. The political transition will be defined, in part, by the extent to which elections are free, fair, and accessible to all. The majority of voter registration and polling stations are sex-segregated, and voters are subject to a body search before entering. An Air Force Colonel told me, “If there is no female searcher at a given voting station, that station will be effectively closed to women due to the security risk presented.” Female security officers are required to staff the women-only stations. In the absence of sufficient numbers of female security personnel, women-only voter registration and polling stations remain closed.
- **Counterterrorism:** Last year in Afghanistan, on at least 13 recorded instances, male insurgents dressed as women entered restricted areas from which they've launched attacks. There were no female body searchers to stop them. Due to prohibitive cultural norms, male security officers cannot conduct body searches of women, security checks of homes that have a female present, nor effectively gather information from or conduct interrogations of females. Units that include females not only expand female search capabilities, but also improve the operational effectiveness of that force and bolster its credibility by enabling adherence to cultural values.
- **Local Security Protections:** Sexual and gender-based violence is endemic in Afghanistan: as many as 87 percent⁴ of Afghan women experience some form of domestic abuse or forced marriage. Cultural norms prohibit or limit communication between unrelated men and women including between a woman experiencing abuse and a male police officer. In cases where women report these crimes to male police, they're often blamed for the abuse or worse, abused by the officer. With female police officers, these crimes are more likely to be properly registered, investigated, and prosecuted.

Women in the forces have proven more effective than men at engaging civilians on issues that extend far beyond sexual and gender-based violence. Effective engagement allows for a better understanding of community needs, localized security threats, and options for

² SIGAR, Report to United States Congress, (30 July 2013).

³ DOD response to SIGAR March 25 Inquiry

⁴ Global Rights, “Living with Violence: A National Report on Domestic Abuse in Afghanistan”, (March 2008): 3.

response. This yields particular benefits when the ANA is called to respond to natural disasters or distribute humanitarian aid.

Challenges to Recruitment and Retention

Of the myriad institutional and social impediments to recruitment and retention in the Afghan security forces, I'll highlight a select few of priority concern to women:

- 1) **Recruitment process:** Women have reported ANP recruitment officers turning them away, heckling them as bad women, and asking for sexual favors in exchange for enrollment. Within the ANA, there have been complaints of undue testing delays preventing women from entering training required for initiation of service.
- 2) **Assignment and rank promotion:** In some areas, women report being assigned to positions below their ranks – including officers serving in positions reserved for non-commissioned officers and soldiers relegated to carrying out menial tasks such as cleaning the office or serving tea. Policewomen are regularly denied rank promotions and career advancement opportunities, or will receive their rank promotions without the accordant increase in policing responsibilities.⁵
- 3) **Equipment and transportation:** Women have reported not being assigned weapons, despite being trained in how to use them. They report never receiving uniforms or being issued uniforms made for men. Further, women officers staffing Family Response Units report having rare access to vehicles, limiting their ability to investigate crimes, respond to ongoing incidents, and conduct outreach to communities.⁶
- 4) **Sexual harassment:** Complaints of sexual harassment, assault, and coercion within the forces are widespread. The existing complaints response mechanism has proven ineffective in addressing abuse and holding perpetrators accountable.
- 5) **Public perceptions of police women:** While surveys show that communities are increasingly supportive of policewomen⁷, families are still reluctant to encourage or allow female members to serve. This is partially attributable to conservative cultural norms but also a direct result of the rampant sexual harassment and assault within the forces and lack of female-only facilities which lead to rumors of prostitution and un-Islamic behavior.
- 6) **Inadequate facilities:** Twenty-nine of the 30 police training centers do not have dormitories for women. Without appropriate facilities, women trainees need to travel home each night, which effectively limits enrollment to women in the immediate vicinity of the training center. Some insist there must be a critical mass of female recruits to warrant construction of the women-only dormitories. I'd suggest, if you build it, they will come.

⁵ Oxfam, "Women and the Afghan Police", (173 Oxfam Briefing Paper, September 2013): 23.

⁶ Oxfam, "Women and the Afghan Police": 24.

⁷ Heinrich Boll Stiftung – Afghanistan, "Women's Perceptions of the Afghan National Police", (2011); and Oxfam, "Women and the Afghan Police".

A Path Forward

We have targets but we're not on track to meet them. The Afghan government set a goal of retaining 5,000 women in the ANP by 2014⁸. Right now, there are approximately 1,490 women in the ANP, comprising nearly one percent of the total force. The ANA has ambitiously stated they'd like to see 10 percent of its force comprised by women; currently there are 426 women in the ANA, which is just under .2 percent of the total force size⁹ (though it's worth noting that number now includes female commandos serving as ANA Special Operators).

We have not made enough progress toward goals set for recruitment and retention of women in the ANSF. This is partially attributable to the environment, but also to an under-resourced effort. With an eye toward ensuring the national security forces serve all Afghan citizens – men and women – and an understanding that female presence will improve force effectiveness, the U.S. and its allies must reinvigorate efforts to reduce institutional barriers to women's participation and increase female representation in both the ANA and ANP.

We are grateful Congress has already taken steps to support these goals. The National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2013 – specifically Sections 1214 and 1223 – emphasizes the importance of recruitment and retention of women in the ANSF. In addition, the House version of the NDAA for FY 2014, as well as its version of the FY 2014 Defense Appropriations bill specifically authorize and appropriate, respectively, \$47.3 million for the recruitment and retention of women in the ANSF. I am pleased that the Senate Appropriations Committee's version of the FY 2014 Defense Appropriations bill also includes specific funding for this use.

With many competing priorities, efforts to support women in the ANSF will be sidelined if money is not specifically reserved for these purposes.

To clarify, reserving funds specifically for women doesn't imply adding another line of effort to train and assist the ANSF. To effectively *integrate* women into the forces, interventions designed to recruit and retain women must be integrated into current U.S. efforts to support the ANSF under the primary funding categories of sustainment, infrastructure, equipment and transportation, training and operations. Making small modifications to the ongoing activities within each of those areas, we can create an environment within the forces that is less hostile to women. A safer work environment coupled with targeted recruitment campaigns will sustain, if not expand, female presence within the forces post-2014.

Allocating Resources

1) Sustainment

- a. Develop and expand female-targeted recruitment campaigns including commercials, seminars, open house events, and pamphlets detailing the different career paths within the ANA and ANP.

⁸ The Afghan government set forth targets in recruitment plans issued by the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Defense, including the Directive on Female Recruiting (2009), National Police Plan (2010), and National Police Strategy (2011).

⁹ SIGAR, Report to United States Congress, (30 July 2013).

- b. Support supplemental training for career progression within the ANA and ANP including driving courses, computer training, and language training.
 - c. Increase contact between police and communities to cultivate an understanding of the role women play within the ANP.
- 2) Infrastructure
- a. Construct bathrooms, prayer rooms, and other facilities specifically dedicated for females on existing bases.
 - b. Refurbish training facilities with additional security infrastructure including female search buildings at gates, security cameras, and building repairs at possible security breach locations.
 - c. Build housing and childcare facilities on large garrison installations where women will be posted.
- 3) Equipment and Transportation
- a. Provide appropriately-sized boots, winter coats, gloves, jackets, and uniforms.
- 4) Training and Operations
- a. Expand accelerated literacy training for women with additional facilities, teachers, and associated materials.
 - b. Provide small grants to female entrepreneurs to establish childcare operations in training locations.
 - c. Contract teachers and associated material for annual training of every ANP unit at the district level and above and every ANA unit to the battalion level in women's inclusion in the forces as a component of improving operational effectiveness, elimination of violence against women, and mitigation of trafficking in persons.
 - d. Build the capacity of female officers to staff and lead the ANP Family Response Units (established to address reports of sexual and gender-based violence).
 - e. Accommodate participation of senior ANSF female personnel (O-5 and above) at international conferences, symposia, and workshops to hone nascent leadership skills and observe female army and police counterparts in other Muslim states.

These are just a few options for allocating resources. Both the Afghan Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Defense have Human Rights and Gender Integration Directorates with recently revised strategic plans. These funds can and should be guided by the objectives and actions outlined in each.

The bottom line is that Afghan women know what they need. Whether through consultation in the ministries, ANSF, or civil society, Afghan women should be our primary source of information in determining next steps.

Conclusion

Without question, Afghan women have experienced improvements in access to health care, education, economic opportunity, and political power since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. They weren't handed progress; they fought for it. They founded social service organizations, ran for political office, advocated to official actors, and did the impossible work of holding communities

together in the midst of war. As we question how to maintain gains post-2014, our answers must include positioning women themselves to protect what they've fought so hard to achieve. We must acknowledge Afghan women's interest in serving their communities and their country – and for those who want to serve in the armed forces, it's our obligation to ensure they can.