

Transitioning to Afghan Security Lead: Protecting Afghan Women  
Testimony to House Armed Services Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations  
April 25 2013  
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify before this subcommittee.

The factors and conditions that will protect Afghan women are to a large degree the same as those which will protect any Afghan citizen – man, woman or child – in the post 2014 era. The key to the protection of women lies in the establishment of a legitimate state – with functioning and robust institutions across both security and non-security factors – that can secure the trust of and afford protection to its own citizens. I will thus consider the measures that can and should be taken across the spheres of security, the political process, economics, and social/civic development, in full recognition that any attempt at categorization of a complex situation is bound to be problematic, and that the future for Afghan women will lie in the interplay between these factors. It is also in recognition that some of the most critical factors are difficult to specify or measure and lie instead in more intangible concepts such as confidence – confidence of the Afghan people in their own future – and commitment – commitment of the international community in general and US in particular – to the future peace and stability of the South Asia region.

Security for Afghan women to exercise their fundamental rights and protect their hard-won gains will rest first and foremost on the fundamental pillar of security: can the Afghan state defend its citizens from threats to state survival and to its citizens? The risks to the Afghan population and state can be characterized as internal threats from insurgency, criminality, and forms of terrorism and extremism; external threats from neighbors; and political instability related to the upcoming political transition, and to the ability of the body politic to cohere and agree to the rules of the game for governing – as expressed by the Constitution.

The capability of the Afghan forces is fundamental to meeting these threats. Order within any nation state is based on the premise of the monopoly on the legitimate use of force. The Afghan National Security Forces are moving in the direction of this goal in encouraging ways. The ANA has demonstrated its ability to maintain the trust of the Afghan citizenry, consistently polling at the level of 80% trust by citizens. Transition is on track with forces able to secure an increasing proportion of the population and the territory. Continuing a commitment to support these forces with appropriate equipment, training and the right institutional framework will be critical to securing the state and the population, through maintaining this capability and allowing it to take root. While the Afghan forces are moving towards acquiring sufficient capability to meet the internal and external threats, a clear commitment to reinforce or guarantee the fundamental security of the Afghan state and people through resources that can be held in reserve for use in contingencies will be essential for providing the security bridge to a time when Afghanistan can secure itself.

Security for women must be seen not only in the context of state security, but human security. Women as individuals and in the household and community face threats, from a variety of sources, including from security forces, and from criminalized militias, networks and gangs, and the insurgency.

Great attention must be paid to continued professionalization of the security forces, so as to minimize any risk to women. Here focus is needed not only on numbers and capabilities, but ethos, spirit and standards of ethics and integrity.

Perhaps the greatest threat to women and girls comes from the criminalization of state and society. The last decade has coincided with the increase in power, wealth and autonomy of “moneylords” or strong men, many of whom operate as if they live outside the framework of rule of law. Decriminalization of state and society cannot be tackled unless it is recognized as a shared interest and shared burden by both external actors and national actors.

While commitment to the security of Afghanistan is the foundation for security of its women, as is widely acknowledged, security itself will be determined to a considerable degree by the political process. Key risks to the country’s stability are first, whether the succession from the Karzai government to a successor has both a process that is sufficiently trusted and does not catalyze an outbreak of insecurity, and whether the outcome is one that produces a regime capable of governing. Second: the extent to which individuals and groups within the country can overcome their differences and past and current grievances to agree on a formula for co-existing within the same political entity and governing in a way accountable to the expectations of the citizenry. For the first, attention to the election process is imperative. For the second, allowing sufficient space for initiatives along the lines of a national dialogue, whether formal or informal, where political and civic leaders can address the impediments to national unity should be a priority. Lastly, to the extent that compromises are made to achieve peace, it will be vital for the future of women that fundamental rights of women and girls and the hard won gains of the last decade are not whittled away. Women’s rights are not a tradable good.

Security is a necessary platform for the empowerment of women through economic growth, political and civic leadership, and improving social development programs across health, education and creating space for civic engagement. The role and status of women within the economic, civic and political spheres will be vital for the future success and sustainability of Afghanistan as a society.

Women have made enormous strides in their role and status over the last decade. As 25% of the seats in Parliament were reserved for women, and many have emerged in positions of leadership in civic, government and business roles, women’s role in leadership positions is now a part of the social fabric of the country. This applies across the country including in rural areas: over 100,000 women have held positions as elected members of Community Development Councils. Women play a significant role in staffing the education and health service across the countryside, as well as consumers and beneficiaries of these programs.

Continuing to support the type of programs that underpin these opportunities will be essential to preserving gains for women. On the other hand, it is widely acknowledged that much aid expenditure has been badly designed and delivered. The imperative is thus to parse out carefully those programs that work and merit and require ongoing support, from those that do not, as well as identifying lacuna that could be addressed.

Some programs to require significant funding to be maintained, but many of the most successful programs cost very little to design and sustain, relative to their impact. Going forward, this raises significant questions for the way that development programs are designed, managed and financed, not only in Afghanistan, but across the developing world. Programs that rely on a model of multiple layers of sub-contracting where every contractor takes a cut, or those that build parallel systems that leach capacity away from frontline delivery services in the name of capacity building, do not deliver value to either Afghan or US taxpayers. Conversely, there is now a set of programs in Afghanistan that do work, at relatively little cost, and operate at scale. The National Priority Program system, financed through the World Bank Trust Fund, that include the National Solidarity Program, and national programs directed towards health, education and agriculture, are all programs that are delivering at scale and are financed through a burden sharing model where several nations contribute.

Going forward, the initiatives of this House to question the aid delivery model relied upon by USAID to a large degree over the last decade through a small number of large contractors, and find better ways to support institution building, civic spaces and economic activity, in partnership with a broader spectrum of US universities, companies and NGOs are very welcome.

Over the long term, women have traditionally gained empowerment in the economic space, in businesses, through employment in public and private service, and through opportunities in small scale economic activity. In general, focusing on how Afghanistan is to enhance and grow its legitimate economy so as to provide an increasing proportion of the revenue base to sustain its own costs and opportunities for legitimate livelihoods for its citizens is a strategic question that merits great attention in the coming months. Within this, how women can share in the economic dividends across sectors should not be marginalized.

Finally, in the ordinary course of engagement by US Government representatives, across the spectrum of defense, diplomacy, cultural engagement, economic assistance as well as Congressional delegations there are many opportunities to ensure that we open, rather than inadvertently close the space for women's voice and representation. Seeing meetings with, and hearing from, women across the spectrum of society rather than relying only on a limited set of interlocutors will be important to ensure that we continue to hear from a range of voices and perspectives.