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# Advancing the Rights of Women and Girls: Keys to a Better Future for Afghanistan

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The advancement of women's rights is critical to political and economic progress everywhere around the world. This is especially true in Afghanistan, where women's human rights have been ignored, attacked and eroded over decades, especially under Taliban rule.

As Secretary Clinton said recently, the vast majority of Afghans want to see their daughters educated, and women given access to economic livelihoods and to healthcare. **Women's empowerment is inextricably linked to security, economic opportunity, effective governance, and social development.** It is a simple fact that no country can prosper if half its citizens are left behind. All reliable development indices show that investments in women are the single most effective poverty alleviation mechanism contributing to a society's prosperity; similarly, lack of investment in women characterizes failed states.

**The President's strategy for Afghanistan includes the provision of assistance to women to build their capacity to participate fully in Afghan society thereby building their country's future.** Secretary Clinton has long been committed to improving the rights of Afghan women, both in her work as Senator and as Secretary of State. When Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues Melanne Verveer traveled to Afghanistan in June 2009, she noted that "the women in Afghanistan are critical to progress and stability...it is only by men and women working together can Afghanistan move forward." Ambassador Holbrooke has met with women Parliamentarians and other leaders both in Afghanistan and the United States since 2006, and has said that the sessions got to the heart of the cross-cutting issues of civil reconstruction that nation now faces. Senior USG officials have urged the appointment of effective leaders in key Afghan ministries who are committed to women's issues and to delivering results. We have also advocated for increased numbers of senior women officials who can ensure women's voices resonate throughout the Afghan government.

The promotion of women's rights is integrated into the overall U.S. strategy and all the key programs, including education/literacy, health care, security, rule of law, political participation and economic development, described in the State Department's Regional Stabilization Plan. The United States Government (USG) is committed to the Afghan leadership of programs that directly enhance development, particularly as it relates to women's issues, and as is laid out in both the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) and, more specifically, the ten-year National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA), which concerns itself with: 1) Security; 2) Government, Rule of Law, and Human Rights; and 3) Economic and Social Development. Women's issues are not confined to government-to-government ties; they enjoy the collaboration of the private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and individuals in the United States who have come together through the U.S.- Afghan Women's Council to work in tandem with USG to support Afghan women.

Our objectives are to:

- Initiate, and bolster existing, program initiatives to **improve women's and girls' access to education.**
- Initiate, and bolster existing, programs related to **women's security and the institutions that serve women.**
- Support **women's leadership development** in both the public and private sectors.
- Promote **women's access to formal and informal justice mechanisms** and enforce existing laws and the Constitutional guarantee of equality.
- Initiate, and bolster, existing program initiatives to **improve women's and girls' access to healthcare.**
- Strengthen existing activities to **support and expand economic development opportunities for women.**
- Increase **women's political empowerment and participation.**

## Key Initiatives

**Education:** Investing in girls' education is the single most effective development decision a country can make. Beyond doubling the skilled workforce, this investment results in healthier young women, delayed marriages, and healthier children in the families that these educated young women create.

Under the Taliban, fewer than 900,000 boys – and no girls – were enrolled in Afghanistan's schools. **Today, more than 6.2 million students are enrolled in Afghan schools, 35 percent of whom are girls.** Although educational indicators remain poor in Afghanistan – and are worse for women who have only a 21 percent literacy rate – USG initiatives are removing barriers and opening doors.

Since 2001, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) repaired or built more than 670 schools, printed 69 million textbooks, and improved the qualifications of 54,000 Afghan teachers in instructional methodologies, subject knowledge and professional attitudes. These programs have expanded and improved the quality of community-based education in areas where there are no government schools. **USG assistance has extended to 18 provinces, 1,565 communities, more than 43,000 children (60 percent of whom are girls), and 1,565 teachers. In the last fiscal year, we provided literacy training and instruction in productive skills to more than 100,000 people from over 1,500 communities in 20 provinces.** We are committed to working with the government of Afghanistan to further expand these programs, and to enhance the female literacy rate and women's and girls' access to formal and informal education at

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