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WOMEN'S ISSUES
AND
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ASIAN AFFAIRS
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SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE
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Senator Boxer, Senator Casey and Members of the Foreign Relations Committee,

Thank you for inviting me to testify before you today.

Without a doubt, Afghanistan would not even be at this stage of security or development without the support and assistance of the International Community, and especially the United States. What has been achieved so far is vital for the transition of Afghanistan from a malfunctioning administration to a semi-operational government with functional state institutions. However, it is not enough. Much more needs to be achieved to gain the hearts and minds of the public.

The U.S. intervention and continued mission in Afghanistan has had several justifications -- to fight terrorism, to reduce on poppy production, to protect human rights, particularly women rights, to promote democracy, and, finally, to protect your country and your own people.

Today, I will mainly focus on the situation of human rights and women's rights in Afghanistan.

The protection and promotion of human rights, women's rights and gender equality has improved a great deal since the Taliban rule in Afghanistan. For example:

- Access to education for women and girls is much better. At least, there are no official bans on female education, which was the case during Taliban. However, still only about 40 % of girls have access to education. Also, the quality of education is not as good as it should be. In rural areas of the country, restrictions on girls' access to education continue because of the lack of facilities, school buildings, and trained teachers, especially female teachers. Moreover, in some parts of the country, girls who attend schools have been subject to various forms of reprisal such as the acid attack in Qandahar.
- Access to basic health services has improved in Afghanistan. But, we still face the same problems. In many parts of Afghanistan, women have not seen a medical doctor in their entire lives. Women have no means to control the number of the children that they have. Maternal and infant mortality rates are among the highest in the world.
- The political participation of women is very limited. At the recent conference on Afghanistan in London, no women or human rights activists were included in our government's delegation. After the recent elections in the country, only one woman was approved as a minister despite the lobbying efforts of women rights activists. Nominations of three women cabinet members were proposed to the parliament. However, only one of them received the vote of confidence. No women are included in the National Security Council. Twenty-five percent of the parliament is comprised of women because of the constitutional quota system. However, these women are not independent of most of the powerful men in the parliament.
- The electoral process must guarantee the fairness, legitimacy and credibility of the whole process, including the full and equal participation of women voters. The new election law does not provide these assurances.
- Women's access to justice is also very limited. One of the reasons is the low number of women in the judiciary system. No women are in the Supreme Court Council.

- Women's rights remain unprotected under the laws of the country. An example is the Shia personal status law, which violates the international and constitutional obligation of the Afghan government to abide by the international treaties the government signed and joined. The introduction of legislation to eliminate violence against women is a positive step, but it is stuck in the parliament.
- Most women lack economic empowerment and live in poverty. The absolute majority of women are not independent economically. Although some women have their own business, there are few of them.
- A culture of impunity exists for sexual violence in the country. It is always seen as private matter of the family. State institutions refuse to intervene in some cases. In other cases, they promote the ownership of females in the family by men.
- Finally, forced marriage, child marriage, and exchange marriage in which girls are given to disputes in the family or tribe are prevalent in the country. The sale of girls is still very common practice. Supporting for the tribal system will only accelerate these practices and will continue the denial of the rights of women and girls.
- The lack of security is another problem that reduces the freedom of women and freedom of expression in general. Security must be defined to include human rights, women's rights, and economic well-being, along with the absence of fighting. The absence of security undermines women's rights and human rights. Accountability and justice for violation of human rights and women's rights is a pre-requisite for security.

I appreciate the opportunity to share some of my recommendations.

First, the recognition that women exist in Afghanistan is important. The lack of mention and recognition by the United States and the international community of women's rights allow Afghan men in different state institution to continue to ignore women's rights.

Second, women must be included in decision-making, peace talks, and peace building. The strong military and political presence of the international community and important United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820 are

made meaningless when a new policy of reintegration and reconciliation with the so-called good Taliban is considered without any discussion of the consequences for women. Women were the primary victims of the Taliban in the past and will be in the future unless attention to women's rights is paid and upheld by both the Afghan government and the international community, particularly the United States.

Third, emphasis on political solutions should not be interpreted solely as negotiations with Taliban and opposition groups. These efforts should not be allowed to overshadow desperately needed work to enhance the capacity and capability of the existing institutions based on good governance, rule of law and human rights. Any political negotiations with the anti-government elements must address accountability and justice. Rather than being marginalized, the principles of human rights and women's rights should be fundamental. Victims of human rights violations should not be victimized for political gains again and again.

Fourth, without full participation of women, who are the half of the population who are supportive of peace, freedom and democracy, the problems in Afghanistan can not be solved. Respect for culture and religion should not be used as an excuse to ignore women's rights in Afghanistan. This excuse over the past three decades of war has been disastrous for women.

Fifth, support for the education for women at all levels is the main tool to empower women. Little attention has been paid in this sector. For example, with all the talks about women's empowerment, there are no institutions to teach and train people, especially young generation on human rights, democracy and gender to enable the people to understand and structurally mainstream gender and human rights in their advocacy efforts.

Sixth, women's access to health care, especially to reproductive health care is vital. Women must be given the choice to control their own body and the number of the children that they have. If women have 10 children they will not be healthy and cannot take an active part in political and social activities.

Seventh, women's participation at the decision making level is crucial to the situation. Women's issues are political issues. Without women's full participation in politics, not single decision will be in their favor and friendly to women's rights.

Eighth, the chronic problems of a country like Afghanistan require long-term commitment and comprehensive strategies from the international community to

enable the Afghan Government to overcome the challenges and troubles facing peace and stability in the country.

Of course, any possible progress in the country requires the Afghan Government to enhance its capacity to absorb international aid and development assistance and to increase its commitment to good governance, rule of law, human rights and justice. Strong political will is needed by the Afghan government and international community as partner to the Afghans for promotion and protection human rights and women's rights in Afghanistan.

Nineth, human rights and women's rights should be at the center of every policy if we really want to achieve peace in Afghanistan. Neither peace and stability, nor development and security can be achieved unless human rights and women's rights are sustained and promoted. Accountability must replace impunity. One of the most important ingredients of peace is justice. Without justice, the peace building will not be complete or sustainable. As Kofi Anan rightly emphasized -- development without security is not possible, and security is not possible without development. But both are not possible without respect for human rights and, I would add, the full participation of women. In order to promote democracy and human rights in a society the people who believe in democracy and human rights defenders should be supported politically and morally. Without democratic people and human rights defenders in the ground the goal will not be achievable.

Finally, I would conclude that the only solution for the problem in Afghanistan would be the promotion of democracy and values of human rights and women's rights. The job in Afghanistan is not done. Short term fixes are not going to solve the problem. By joining our hands together, we will be able to complete the job must faster.

Thank you very much.