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Lessons from Women's Programs in Afghanistan and Iraq

Contents

Summary

- As Afghanistan and Iraq enter a difficult transition period, women in these countries are increasingly vulnerable to having their rights and opportunities set back at least a generation. Deteriorating security in both countries also places women on the front lines again.
- In Iraq, the women's rights movement has stagnated, quotas protecting women's political inclusion risk being eliminated, and efforts have stalled to revise Article 41 of the Iraqi Constitution, the problematic article that relates to personal status laws.
- In Afghanistan, women continue to be largely excluded from the peace process, and reconciliation efforts with the Taliban could undermine the significant gains women have achieved since 2001.
- Advancing women's empowerment is an essential priority for the transition in each country as it can contribute directly to sustainable stability. The current transition period represents a critical time to assess lessons learned from U.S. engagement in both countries, particularly regarding women's programming.
- Undertaking such an assessment is timely and important given serious budget constraints facing the foreign affairs community, potential donor fatigue, and limited resources.
- By identifying common challenges and best practices, these lessons can carry over into future programming for women in conflict and postconflict zones, thus making such projects more effective.
- The lessons learned and best practices that emerge from this project will inform implementation of the U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security.

Women's Rights in Afghanistan and Iraq

Afghanistan and Iraq are now at critical turning points and face many challenges to achieving sustainable peace. Both countries face ghosts of the past, including struggles between religious and secular forces, resistance to power sharing, and tensions with regional neighbors. Women in both countries made initial strides forward but recently find themselves increasingly vulnerable to having their rights and opportunities rolled back.

Since 2001, Afghan women have made great strides. According to Amnesty UK, Afghan women currently constitute 27 percent of seats in the lower house of parliament. In the 2010 parliamentary elections, 40 percent of voters were women.[3] In the health sector, programming focused on maternal health has helped infant and child mortality rates decline by 22 percent and 26 percent respectively since 2002. The percentage of USAID-funded healthcare facilities that report at least one female healthcare worker has risen from 26 percent in 2002 to approximately 82 percent in 2010.[4] Education and vocational training programs for women have contributed to an increase in school attendance. Of the seven million children attending school in 2010, 37 percent were girls. This percentage was virtually zero under Taliban rule. Literacy and numeracy skills training have reached more than 94,000 women in twenty provinces. In the economic realm, women's programming emphasizing economic growth opportunities has supported 2,300 enterprises owned by women, helped establish 400 new businesses, and trained more than 5,000 women in local handicrafts, value chain, and fine arts businesses. Women comprise 60 percent of the country's agricultural workforce.[5] These statistics represent the remarkable progress Afghan women and the government of Afghanistan have made over the past ten years, including landmark advances such as the adoption of a 25 percent quota for women in Parliament in the national constitution, and the adoption of laws and policies to combat gender-based violence and advance gender equality.[6] However, the challenges that Afghan women still face are considerable. A recent study by the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs and women's groups reports that approximately 57 percent of girls in Afghanistan are married before the age of sixteen. The estimated literacy rate for women is 15.8 percent, and nearly 90 percent of women in the rural provinces are illiterate.[7] Women also remain significantly marginalized in peace and transition efforts.

Until the 1980s, Iraqi women appeared to fare better than their counterparts across the Middle East. Yet to date they have paid the highest price with regard to violent religious extremism, and dwindling educational and economic opportunities. With the increase in violence, many Iraqi women find themselves more isolated, as many have lost husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons. An estimated one million widows and female heads of household in Iraq are disenfranchised. Politically, women in Iraq hold 26 percent of seats in the national parliament. In the educational sector, the adult literacy rate for females between 2005 and 2008 was 80 percent.[8] According to UNESCO, women are particularly affected by illiteracy, especially in rural areas, where close to 50 percent of women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four are illiterate compared with 20 percent of women living in urban and metropolitan areas.[9] Following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, international organizations and governments had all-around good intentions to improve women's rights. A UN report noted that "women's rights and gender equality became symbolic issues for Iraq's new national agenda." However, as security continued to deteriorate, the focus on improving women's rights shifted to other pressing priorities, leaving the women's rights movement in Iraq stagnating. Many are concerned that the quotas protecting women's political inclusion are at risk of being eliminated, and the effort to revise the problematic Article 41 of the Iraqi Constitution is stalled. Article 41 addresses personal status laws, and allows religious groups to govern their own personal status matters. Critics of the provision are concerned that it may further infringe upon women's rights.

Methodology

With the troop withdrawal in Iraq complete and an international economic crisis resulting in budget cuts, politicians are keen to show a weary electorate progress for the funds that have been spent in Afghanistan to date. Along with these heightened challenges, the international community faces potential donor fatigue and limited resources. It is now more important than ever to work together across agencies and organizations to advance women's empowerment from the outset of the transition in each country and to maintain pressure on national and provincial governments on issues of concern to women. This programming calls for reinvigorating the agenda and broadening the base through focused media campaigns making the public case for the urgent need to support women in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Center for Gender and Peacebuilding of the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) has brought together a "community of practice" focused on examining key lessons learned from programs of support for women in Iraq and Afghanistan.[10] This community includes representatives of U.S. government (USG) agencies and departments as well as international and domestic NGOs and civil society organizations working in support of women in Afghanistan and Iraq. The community also includes congressional staff, members of the U.S. armed forces, and representatives of allied embassies. Advancing women's empowerment is an essential priority for transitions in conflict countries, as it can contribute directly to sustainable stability. By gleaning best practices and lessons learned, the working group aims to strengthen the effectiveness of programs that support and empower women in Afghanistan and Iraq and to carry these lessons learned into other conflict and postconflict settings.

After interviewing numerous USG officials and NGO representatives individually, USIP convened this community of practice in order to bring the expertise of each organization into a common framework and to seek a general consensus on best practices. Seven roundtable discussions have been held to date. In May 2011, participating USG offices and NGOs gathered at USIP to hold a preliminary discussion of lessons learned and best practices. In June, this community met in the Rayburn House Office Building, teaming up with key staff from the newly formed bipartisan Congressional Task Force on Afghan Women to strengthen cooperation and share preliminary conclusions with congressional staff. In July, the community held a roundtable discussion at Georgetown University with thirteen Afghan women entrepreneurs brought to the U.S. for training by the Institute for the Economic Empowerment of Women.

From October 2011 through January 2012, participating USG offices, members of the U.S. military, academia, and NGOs convened in several more roundtable discussions at USIP to further discuss and refine lessons learned and best practices. One of these meetings featured two NGO leaders from Iraq who lead projects supported by the USIP Iraq Priority Grant Program. Susan Arif Maroof, director of the Women's Empowerment Organization, and Zainab Sadiq Jaafar, director of the Al-Mustaqbal Center for Women, promote women's participation in Iraqi society as peacebuilders. Using means such as documentary film, they provide mechanisms and strategies to combat discrimination and violence against women in Iraq. These leaders emphasize the important role civil society organizations play regarding women's programming in conflict and postconflict zones. As Maroof notes, the mere existence of civil society organizations like hers can bring awareness of women's issues to the government's attention and create greater influence for these issues to be addressed, including through legislation or amendment to existing discriminatory laws. Exerting such pressure is often vitally important, as political will to improve the rights of women is currently lacking in Iraq.

Maroof and Jaafar's experiences implementing programs on the ground in Iraq exemplify and support several lessons that have been identified in working group discussions. Both

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women stress education and training for women as pivotal to raising self-reliance and awareness of rights. Equally important is to actively engage men at all levels in the struggle, whether in government, religious, or civil society sectors. Both women also recognize the value of networking with other organizations that work on similar causes, particularly in expediting service delivery and combining scarce resources to achieve common objectives.

Lessons Learned

A series of meetings among members of the working group yielded several key lessons learned from programs of support for women in Afghanistan and Iraq. These lessons identify not only major gaps and challenges to be improved in future programming but also key stakeholders who should be regularly engaged moving forward.

- In the economic arena, women in both countries must not be relegated to the lowest paying sectors. In general, there is a lack of outreach to the private sector to form strategically targeted public-private partnerships.

- Large gaps in educational and vocational training must be addressed. More focus is needed on nontraditional occupations for women such as engineering and business programs. Training in specialized skills is also important. Vocational programs can address the gap between nonspecialized skills training and aspirational programs, which may not be easily accessible to a broad cross-section of the population.

- In Iraq, sectarian-based political parties dominate the political sector. Women in the political arena, including members of parliament, have not been able to establish a political platform; they also have not been able to reach out across party lines to form coalitions with members of other parties on issues of common concern. As a result, the women's caucus in the Iraqi Council of Representatives has not reached the level of effectiveness to which they aspired, leaving Iraq with a lack of a formal platform such as a national action plan to implement UNSCR 1325 on women, peace, and security.

- Rule of law and access to justice programs for women often have met severe setbacks and will require increased attention and focus.

- More training is needed in both countries to educate police and judicial officials on issues of human rights and women's rights, particularly gender-based violence.

- In Iraq, women have been unable to adequately address the significant divide between secular and religious women activists. The religious divide is one of many areas of division among Iraqi women, making it difficult to persuade them to work together for a common cause, or even to gain consensus on key issues.

- Women in Afghanistan and Iraq face constraints in reaching out beyond urban elites to nonelite women, specifically women at the grassroots level in provinces and remote areas of both countries. Youth, particularly those under twenty-five years of age, also feel disenfranchised and disconnected due to a lack of sufficient outreach, limited jobs, and limited rights.

- Reaching out to men and engaging them in efforts to improve the status of women has been limited in both countries. While it remains essential to have empowerment programs that focus primarily on women, there is also convincing evidence that women can often make quicker strides forward when their male counterparts support them. Outreach to men is critical, emphasizing the need for inclusive postconflict engagement.

- Culture and religion have been used to either legitimize or delegitimize efforts to support women in their education, economic access, or political engagement. Programming must

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account for the nuances of customary and religious laws that affect women, including marriage, inheritance, and personal status laws.

- Corruption, organized criminal activities, and lack of governance are all serious detriments to effective implementation of programs in both countries. Further attention needs to focus on how international programs can help prevent corruption and identify possible partner organizations that are committed to working on transparency.

- Due to the constantly shifting environment in both countries, programs for women need to be adaptive, woven in with the local context, and maintained over an extended period to achieve a sustainable impact and outcome.[11]

- Although it appears that women's rights in both countries are suffering setbacks, it is still essential to continue preparing women, especially in basic skills development. All international programming must include short- and long-term exit strategies so that skills development and capacity building transfer to local ownership.

Recommendations

With the benefit of insights from the community of practice, the following recommendations are some widely embraced best practices for efforts to support women and to ensure inclusive peace processes in Afghanistan and Iraq.

- *Develop a holistic approach to programming and training*. Women in both countries have stressed the need for more training that brings together key areas such as political empowerment, negotiation, advocacy, leadership, as well as technical and vocational training.

- *Empower civil society*. Developing the capacity of the local population, including civil society organizations, to take ownership and hold other actors accountable in the post-transition period is critical.

- *Assist in linking provincial and national level women*. Building bridges and trust between women at the national and provincial levels is important to foster greater cooperation, find common ground, and build associations among them.

- *Bridge the divide between ethnic and sectarian groups*. Bringing women of different ethnic and sectarian groups together for training enhances their ability to understand one another and eventually work together and be agents of change and peacemakers in divided communities. This practice in turn helps reduce the ability of political parties and other entities to manipulate ethnic/sectarian differences.

- *Engage men in women's programming*. Programs geared toward empowering women have proven to be more successful when men are included as a part of the training. Engaging men in women's programming and employing men who champion human rights to provide training in more conservative communities where women have fewer rights and opportunities have yielded more productive program outcomes.

- *Make use of media to enhance women's role in peacebuilding*. Media continues to dominate as a powerful messaging tool in the postconflict environment. Engaging men and women in media (print, television, and radio) training on the important role women can play in peacebuilding is a vital innovative tool.

- *Ensure equitable geographic programming distribution*. Programming focus must be distributed consistently within each country. The greatest needs remain at the provincial and local levels. Seeking local community investment and working with the community to enhance the capacity of civil society organizations at the provincial level is pivotal for the future.

Programming must account for the nuances of customary and religious laws that affect women, including marriage, inheritance, and personal status laws.

- *Establish international networks between Afghan and Iraqi women*. While it is important to bring together individuals from different ethnic and sectarian groups within each country, it is also equally important to establish networks across both countries and between women in Afghanistan and Iraq for peer-to-peer capacity building, mentoring, and leadership development.

- *Pay it forward*. Women who have received training are encouraged to "pay it forward" in their communities by passing on the knowledge and skills provided to them through mentoring and supporting other women.

- *Monitoring and evaluation*. Establishing practical, concrete, and realistic goals at the onset of program implementation is a must. As budgets dwindle, it is more important than ever to measure the additive value of each program and its impact on the ground.

- *Mainstream women's issues*. Ensuring that men and women are able to contribute to building a peaceful society must be the basis of all international bilateral and multilateral policy agendas. Addressing only half the population in the postconflict environment will result in a nonsustainable peace process.

Conclusion

Though the United States might not be involved again in conflict situations exactly like Iraq or Afghanistan, the community of practitioners that developed and supported women's programming in these countries still remains engaged on these issues. This community is also looking ahead to projects in other conflict countries. Engaging in an ongoing critical assessment of women's programming will ensure that future programs do not repeat prior mistakes and instead build on lessons and successes of the past.

In support of the important role women play in peacebuilding, President Obama signed an executive order (EO) on December 19, 2011, that institutes a U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security. The EO requires that the U.S. seek to ensure women's participation in conflict prevention, management, and resolution as well as in postconflict relief and recovery, and advances peace, national security, economic and social development, and international cooperation. The EO also recognizes that sexual violence, when used as a tactic of war or as a part of a widespread or systematic attack against civilians, can exacerbate and prolong armed conflict and impede the restoration of peace and security. This EO emphasizes the centrality of women, peace, and security issues to the administration, and commits the U.S. government to promote these goals.

The working group on lessons learned and best practices remains active in 2012. From these meetings, USIP continues to glean best practices and lessons learned from women's programming in Afghanistan and Iraq that will enable international agencies and organizations to develop more effective programs. USIP is also engaged in setting the stage for a learning symposium with Afghan and Iraqi women that will take place in spring 2012 in Turkey. The symposium will bring together a diverse group of Afghan and Iraqi women leaders from national and provincial levels of civil society, government, education, and the private sector to share information and establish a concrete platform for considering lessons learned and best practices moving forward. In addition to these recognized leaders from Afghanistan and Iraq, several women leaders from Libya will also participate.

The objective of bringing together this diverse group of leaders will be to review the lessons learned and best practices that the community of practice has developed thus far, generate new lessons learned based on the contributions of the symposium participants, and prioritize these lessons and practices. Following the dialogue, a framework will also be established for an ongoing information-sharing forum among these women leaders in their work.

Notes

1. For a description of the U.S. National Action Plan, see http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/email-files/US_National_Action_Plan_on_Women_Peace_and_Security.pdf.

2. The executive order can be found at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/12/19/executive-order-instituting-national-action-plan-women-peace-and-security

3. Amnesty International, UK. *Campaign Theme: Women's Rights in Afghanistan*. Issue brief. London: Human Rights Action Centre, 2011. http://www.amnesty.org.uk/uploads/documents/doc_21770.pdf.

4. U.S. Agency for International Development/Afghanistan. Gender. Issue brief. December 2010. Print.

5. Ibid.

6. For more information about women's rights in Afghanistan, see Nina Sudhakar & Scott Worden, "Real Change for Afghan Women's Rights: Opportunities and Challenges in the Upcoming Parliamentary Elections," U.S. Institute of Peace, August 2010, http://www.usip.org/publications/real-change-afghan-womens-rights-opportunities-and-challenges-in-the-upcoming-parliamentar; and Palwasha Hassan, "The Afghan Peace Jirga: Ensuring that Women are at the Peace Table," U.S. Institute of Peace, May 2010, http://www.usip.org/publications/the-afghan-peace-jirga-ensuring-women-are-the-peace-table.

7. United Nations. UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *UN Women Urges Full Participation of Afghan Women in the Road Ahead from Bonn*. December 5, 2011. Web. January 10, 2012. http://www.unwSomen.org/2011/12/un-women-urges-full-participation-of-afghan-women-in-the-road-ahead-from-bonn/.

8. UNICEF. "Iraq–Statistics." *UNICEF–UNICEF Home*. March 2, 2010. Web. Jan. 26, 2012. http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/iraq_statistics.html.

9. UNESCO. "UIS Statistics in Brief- Iraq." *UNESCO Institute for Statistics*. 2011. Web. Jan. 26, 2012. http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=121.

10. For further information about the Center see: http://www.usip.org/programs/centers/gender-and-peacebuilding-initiative.

11. For further elaboration of an action-oriented agenda on women, peace and security, see *Women and War: Power and Protection in the 21st Century,* edited by K. Kuehnast, C. Oudraat, and H. Hernes, USIP Press, 2011.

Of Related Interest

- *Women and War: Power and Protection in the 21st Century* edited by Kathleen Kuehnast, Chantal de Jonge Oudraat, and Helga Hernes (USIP Press, 2011)
- *Gender, Conflict and Peacebuilding* by Kimberly Theidon and Kelly Phenice with Elizabeth Murray (Peaceworks, September 2011)
- *The Other Side of Gender: Including Masculinity Concerns in Conflict and Peacebuilding* by Kathleen Kuehnast and Nina Sudhakar (Peace Brief, January 2011)
- *The Role of Women in Global Security* by Valerie Norville (Special Report, December 2010)
- *Real Change for Afghan Women's Rights: Opportunities and Challenges in the Upcoming Parliamentary Elections* by Nina Sudhakar and Scott Worden (Peace Brief, August 2010)