



Secretary Rice Convenes Women's Rights Roundtable at UNGA



State Department Photo

Secretary Rice (middle left) discusses key strategies for women's empowerment at a United Nations roundtable.

In September 2005, leaders from around the world gathered in New York to attend the 60th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, together with Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs Paula Dobriansky, convened a special roundtable on September 12 on women's rights with ministers and civil society leaders from Afghanistan, Benin, Colombia, Iraq, Kuwait, Morocco, Rwanda, South Africa, and Zambia.

The Secretary congratulated all these countries for the significant strides they have made, under very different circumstances, to advance the status of women. She emphasized the importance President Bush attaches to women's empowerment as a necessary criterion for advancing democracy and prosperity.

This was the first roundtable to bring together men and women, government and non-government representatives, and countries from all corners of the globe to share strategies and best practices for advancing women's empowerment.

Participants identified key elements to women's empowerment, including legislative reform, enforcement and implementation; the active role of nongovernmental organizations and support of women's rights at the grassroots; better education and health care for girls and women; and opportunities to strengthen economic independence. The Secretary urged them to build networks across regional, political, and ethnic/religious divides, and to lead by example in promoting these reforms. Judging by the flurry of photo-taking and exchanges of business cards and contact information after the discussion, participants were eager to lay the foundation for this network as soon as possible.

Celebrating the 5th Anniversary of UNSC Resolution 1325: Women, Peace and Security

October 31, 2005, marked the fifth anniversary of the landmark United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. It is the first resolution ever passed by the Security Council that specifically addresses the impact of war on women, and women's contributions to conflict resolution and sustainable peace. The resolution reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response, and in post-conflict reconstruction. It stresses the importance of women's equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. Resolution

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Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at the United Nations.

AP/Wide World Photo by David Karp

1325 urges all nations to increase the participation of women and incorporate gender perspectives in all United Nations peace and security efforts. It also calls on all parties to conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, in situations of armed conflict.

The United States places great emphasis on the role of women in resolving conflicts and building peace, and champions the goals of this important resolution. The Department of State's Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues, Charlotte Ponticelli, notes: "the U.S. is committed to

making the promises of 1325 a reality." The improved status of Afghan women, thanks in part to a concerted U.S. and coalition effort, is a vivid illustration. Afghan women, for example, Mrs. Ponticelli notes, "are running for public office and winning on a peace platform."

Afghan Women on the Winning Side

The U.S.-Afghan Women's Council convened in Washington D.C. October 17-18 for its seventh biannual meeting since its inception in 2002. Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs, Paula Dobriansky, the Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdullah Abdullah, and the Afghan Minister of Women's Affairs, Massouda Jalal – the three co-chairs – were pleased to meet again following their previous March 29 meeting in Kabul, Afghanistan. The Council was established to help ensure that Afghan women gain the skills and education necessary to participate fully in government, politics, and the economy.

In addition to the two ministers, the Afghan delegation included: Marzia Basell, of UNICEF and the Afghan Women Judges Association; Guljan Jalal, Director of the Department for Midwives and Nurses, Afghan Health Ministry; Shamim Jawad, Honorary Chair of the Aschiana Foundation and co-founder of the Afghan Children's Initiative; Mariam Nawabi, a Commercial, Investment and Trade Counsel at the Afghan

Embassy in D.C.; Maryam Qukrat, the Afghan Embassy's Women's Affairs and Social Affairs Officer; Zohra Rasekh, Director of Human Rights and Women's Affairs at the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and Mina Sherzoy, Director of the Afghan Women's Business Federation.

Minister Jalal exclaimed that: "the status of Afghan women is improving day by day." She added that the largest challenges for Afghan women are illiteracy, and the absence of a national system of justice to enforce women's rights that are enshrined in the Afghan Constitution.

At the meeting and in other public events that same week, Ministers Abdullah and Jalal, celebrated the gains Afghan women have made in electoral politics, especially in the September 18, 2005, parliamentary and provincial elections. For example, in the conservative city of Herat, Fauzia Gailani, a 32 year old areobics instructor and mother of six, won 16,885 votes, more than any other

candidate. Men and women talk about how she's better than any man. Sixty-eight of the 249 seats in the Lower House of the National Assembly are reserved for women under the Afghan Constitution, but results indicate that 17 women, like Gailani, won outright by virtue of votes.

On this September election day, 52% of registered voters, Afghan women and men, turned out to elect members of parliament and 34 provincial councils in the first such poll in almost 30 years. Women voters accounted for 43 % of voters. Of the 5,800 candidates, 582 women candidates competed.

At the meeting, Council participants stressed the importance of economic gains and reviewed several projects. The Arzu Carpet project, sponsored by the Council, for example, brings together previously isolated individual carpet weavers into an efficient "cottage industry" or collective with over 1,150 participants. Concurrently the program provides adult literacy classes and



State Department Photo

Under Secretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs Paula Dobriansky hosts the American participants of the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council October meeting for lunch at the Department of State. From right to left standing: Marin Strmecki, Vice President and Director of Programs, Smith Richardson Foundation; Charlotte Ponticelli, Senior Coordinator, International Women's Issues; Peter Saleh, Senior Advisor, Health Affairs, Afghanistan Reachback Office, U.S. Department of Defense; Cheryl Benard, Rand Corporation; Paula Dobriansky; Diana Rowan, Founder, Afghan Women Leaders Connect; Patricia de Stacy Harrison, President and Chief Executive Officer, Corporation for Public Broadcasting; Shirin Tabir-Kheli, Senior Adviser to the Secretary of State on United Nations Reform; Cindi Williams, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Communications and Outreach, Department of Education; Anne Heiligenstein, Deputy Executive Commissioner for Social Services, Texas Health and Human Services Commission.

Right to left seated: Pat Mitchell, President and CEO of Public Broadcasting Service (PBS); Karen Hughes, Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs; Caroline Firestone, Global Partnership for Afghanistan; Jim Kunder, Assistant Administrator for Asia and the Near East, USAID; Connie Duckworth, Founding Partner, 8 Wings Enterprises; Claude Allen, Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy and Chair of the Council's Health Committee; Barbara Barrett, Chairman of the U.S. Advisory Committee on Public Diplomacy; Kathleen Card, Associate Pastor, Trinity United Methodist Church; Maureen Quinn, Ambassador, Afghanistan Coordinator, U.S. Department of State.

health care to its weavers. Through Arzu, Afghan women are creating valuable rugs and new lives for themselves and their families.

Afghan official Mina Sherzoy spoke about her new "Afghan Women's Business Federation," which opened in October 2005. The Federation will host a network to support women's business development nationally. It will also serve as an umbrella consortium for 13 different women's associations. The Federation has created a program to provide access to market for goods, seminars on quality control, and financing.

Shamin Jawad announced the creation of the Afghan Children's Initiative, which will

promote the welfare, education, health, shelter, safety, artistic and athletic abilities of Afghan children, especially girls. Timothy McBride, a Council member and Senior Vice President of Government Relations at Freddie Mac, will assist in this project and contributed \$10,000 for the launch.

The Afghan officials requested support for a political training institute for the new parliamentarians, men and women, and a nursing and midwife institute. Minister Abdullah in his closing statements declared, Afghanistan is "determined to stand on its own two feet," and with the U.S. at its side, he remains encouraged.



Photo Courtesy of White House

First Lady Laura Bush with Massouda Jalal, Afghan Minister of Women's Affairs at the White House on October 17, 2005.

No Honor In 'Honor Crimes'

Honor crimes are egregious acts of violence committed by family members, primarily against females who are perceived to have brought dishonor or shame upon the family. Women and girls around the world are stabbed, shot, beaten, burned, or maimed

every year by male relatives for not abiding by tribal or cultural traditions, alleged unfaithfulness, seeking a divorce, refusing an arranged marriage, or eloping. Tarnishing family honor can occur from actual misconduct or simply rumors or suspicions of misconduct.

crimes are prevalent, the U.S. funds training and technical assistance for judges, lawyers, and police, and supports non-government organizations that build shelters and provide services for victims.

Although honor killings may be outlawed and denounced by international declarations, those who "kill in the name of honor" often go unpunished or receive the most minimal prison sentences because of government indifference and discrimination against women in the justice and law enforcement systems. The practice is most prevalent in the Broader Middle East and South Asia, but honor-related crimes have no geographic boundaries; they transcend religion, socio-economic status, and culture.

According to Ms. Birkle, "when women do report these crimes, they are confronted by police who are reluctant to file charges and a legal system that is stacked against them." Senior Coordinator Ponticelli stressed the importance the Bush Administration places on promoting and defending global respect for women as a key foreign policy priority. Empowering women economically and politically is inextricably linked to advancing women's human rights and freeing women from living as victims. Women's lack of economic status only exacerbates gender-based violence and honor killings. "In the broadest sense," Ms. Ponticelli stated, "everything we do to help empower women makes them less vulnerable to honor crimes and other kinds of abuse." The day after the briefing, on November 10, Representative Nadler introduced a resolution expressing the sense of Congress that "there is no honor in honor killings." The briefing was the first in a new series of Congressional Human Rights Caucus briefings devoted to the topic of gender-based violence.

The United States recently took action on behalf of Mukhtar Mai of Pakistan, who was brutally gang



AP/Wide World Photo by Anjum Naveed

raped in February 2002 in Punjab province. Ms. Mukhtar Mai refused to accept the fate of being a victim of an honor crime, and instead is using the legal system to seek justice. She has become a symbol for all oppressed women and a women's rights leader in Pakistan. In November, Mukhtar visited the United States to share her story and speak out against oppression, violence, and honor crimes against women. In her own tribute to Mukhtar Mai, First Lady Laura Bush stated: "Please don't assume that it's only a tale of heartbreak. Mukhtar...proves that one woman really can change the world."

In cases of rape, the woman victim rather than the rapist is often presumed guilty of an offense punishable by death. In some societies the ancient customs of honor continue to trump contemporary legal norms and codes of justice established by law in those same societies. It is not uncommon for the youngest male in the family, such as a sister's younger brother, to be given the task to kill in the name of family honor because his age will likely grant him leniency or shield him from any serious prosecution.

The United States regards honor-related crimes and violence against women as serious human rights violations. The Congressional Human Rights Caucus brought attention to this horrific practice at a November 9 members briefing sponsored by Representatives Jerrold Nadler (D-NY) and Trent Franks (R-AZ). Department of State officials Gretchen Birkle, Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, and Charlotte Ponticelli, Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues, spoke about honor-killings and U.S. programs to curb these practices.

The State Department monitors and reports on the prevalence of honor crimes and violence against women and children through the annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices. The report also describes U.S. government funded programs to address the problem and holds foreign governments accountable. In countries where honor

Hope over Despair: A Forum on Child Marriage in Developing Countries

Child marriage, also defined as forced marriage or early marriage, is usually devastating for girls and young women, robbing them of their childhood and adversely affecting their health, education, and economic future. This was the general conclusion of representatives from non-governmental organizations, international organizations, and the U.S. government who attended a September 14 forum at the Department of State.

Presenters Charlotte Ponticelli, Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues at the State Department; Geeta Rao Gupta, President of the International Center for Research on Women; Karin Landgren of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and Winifred Mwebesa of Save

can lead to physical trauma, psychological and emotional disturbances, and even domestic abuse and violence. Child brides are at greater risk of maternal mortality and infection from HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, and often suffer from fistula. Women or girls with fistula can be cruelly stigmatized by the community and abandoned by their husbands, and are less likely to seek medical attention.

Because poverty, illiteracy, and lack of education are at the root of child marriage, U.S. efforts to eliminate the practice center on increasing education, economic opportunities, and legal awareness for women and girls to give them and their families hope and resources to choose an alternative path. The



State Department Photo

Left to right: Geeta Rao Gupta, President of the International Center for Research on Women; Charlotte Ponticelli, Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues at the State Department; Kakenya Ntaiya, the special guest speaker from Maasai tribe in West Kenya; Winifred Mwebesa of Save the Children; Karin Landgren of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and Cherreka Montgomery from the International Center for Women's Research.

the Children highlighted the multiple facets of a complex, sensitive topic that is both a development and human rights challenge.

All the speakers agreed that lack of education, and deeply held traditional beliefs contribute to societal acceptance of this practice, even in countries where it is prohibited by law. Ms. Ponticelli also reported on the results of a global survey her office had conducted, which found that child marriage was a concern in 64 out of 182 countries surveyed. Though it occurs globally, the practice is especially acute in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where girls as young as 7 or 8 years-of-age are married to men decades older. Early marriage, too often, subjects girls to pregnancy and childbirth before they have reached physical maturity, which

United States Government in partnership with non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, the private sector, and the international community seeks to create programs, opportunities, and raise awareness at the grassroots level to reduce and eliminate the acceptance of child marriage.

OFFICE OF THE SENIOR COORDINATOR FOR INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S ISSUES
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Outspoken and Prepared: Iraqi Women Diplomats

The Office of the Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues, through the Department of State's Iraqi Women's Democracy Initiative, sponsored a training program in late October for nine newly appointed Iraqi women diplomats. The two-week program included seminars in New York at the United Nations and in Washington D.C. at Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, and an Oval Office meeting with President Bush, where the women thanked him for the U.S. commitment to Iraq's democracy and Iraqi women.

The diplomats are looking forward to serving overseas, as Iraq reestablishes its embassies and strengthens diplomatic ties following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. The women were outspoken participants and had many questions about how to improve their effectiveness as diplomats.

The training stressed basic "nuts and bolts" diplomacy. Georgetown University offered sessions on multilateral diplomacy, the role of the legislature in foreign policy, and the operation of a mid-size embassy.

In New York, the group held training sessions at the United Nations and met with U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton. Mrs. Gretchen Bolton also hosted a roundtable for the women where she facilitated a discussion with three female U.S. ambassadors: Margaret Scobey, most recently Chief of Mission in Syria; Jackie Wolcott Sanders, Special Representative of the President for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and to the Conference on Disarmament; and Anne Patterson, Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations.

The diplomats know the road ahead is challenging, but that they have the full support of the United States. The December 15, 2005 parliamentary elections marked another critical step in the development of Iraqi democracy and present another opportunity for women to elect leaders who are genuinely supportive of women's rights.



Iraqi women voting in Suleimaniya, January 30, 2005.

AP/Wide World Photo Courtesy of Patrick Baz