



Associate Parliamentary Group on Women, Peace and Security  
and  
All Party Parliamentary Group on Afghanistan

## Taking forward the UK Government's commitment to women, peace and security in Afghanistan

On 25 November 2008 the APG on Women, Peace and Security and the APPG on Afghanistan held a meeting in the House of Commons to discuss the UK government's commitment to UNSCR 1325 in Afghanistan.

The panel consisted of Malcolm Bruce MP, chair of the House of Commons International Development Committee, Nicola Neuss, DFID Afghanistan and Ceri Haynes, Womankind International.

The meeting was chaired by Roberta Blackman-Wood MP, chair of the APPG on Afghanistan and was attended by various parliamentarians, civil servants and representatives of civil society organisations (attendance list available on request).

Malcolm Bruce MP – key presentation points

Sir Malcolm started by noting that Parliamentary committees are very limited in the scope of their activities and reports, as well as the action they are allowed to take once their thoughts have been published. However, they provide a useful tool in throwing light on areas of concern and also in highlighting issues to be tackled.

He made reference to areas where his committee had been impressed with progress in Afghanistan, including:

1. Education: six million children in school, of which two million of are girls;
2. Access to basic health provisions (including maternal health) which has drastically improved.

However, there remain areas of serious areas of concern, including:

1. The limited number of women in Afghan political life. There is only one woman in government, the minister for women's affairs - this is a reduction from five. (He noted also there were currently no women serving on his the IDC following the departure of Anne McKeelin MP to take a ministerial post.)
2. The lack of a secular justice system with sufficient provisions to make it accessible to women. He highlighted the importance for more women in both government and a secular justice system effectively addressing women's needs.

### 3. The pervasive nature of violence against women across society.

Sir Malcolm reported the committee had met with President Karzai and had spoken with him about gender issues, specifically about women in prison and that a reported 80% of women are subject to male violence. This is not only relevant to marginalised women but also for women in the Afghan parliament who are themselves subject to harassment and intimidation. He also noted that the women the committee had spoken with demanded that the government and others spoke out against abuses of women's rights.

He concluded with his view that Britain must have a long-run commitment to Afghanistan, noting that security is essential for sustainable development. Furthermore, in his view, Afghanistan must show fundamental respect for human rights or risk the support of the international community.

Nicola Neuss, DFID – key presentation points

Nicola began by recognising that gender inequality in Afghanistan is an embedded and long-term problem requiring a strategic, Afghan-led approach. Under the National Development Strategy, the Afghan government has approved a ten year plan for women's development, but DFID recognises the huge challenge. However, Karzai is committed to mainstreaming gender action across government; an example being the Ministry of Education's pledge to work towards gender equality.

DFID policy: DFID is currently in the process of developing a new Country Plan for Afghanistan (until 2013) in which they intend to mainstream gender issues across their state-building, growth and livelihood programmes. The plan will be published in 2009 and programme and funding commitments are yet to be finalised. <sup>1</sup>

Nicola gave some examples of DFID assistance:

1. DFID participates in the Afghan government's National Solidarity Programme providing £50m. Beneficiaries are required to ensure female representation either on a joint or separate Community Development Council.

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of DFID programming include work around: Political Participation: A voter registration process has begun and is expected to take four months to complete. Provisional figures show approximately 1.5million new registrants thus far, of which around 30% are women. This rate is expected to slow as the registration programme reaches the more insecure eastern and south eastern provinces like Helmand. Data Collection: DFID is sponsoring programmes to collect better data and information on the gender impact of large nationwide programmes such as rural enterprise and education quality improvement. Education sector: skills development to assist women and men improve their incomes and teacher managements, ensuring both female and male teachers meet required standards. Agricultural Programmes: DFID are building on the role played by women in the informal agriculture economy helping women to get better returns for their labour – to be done through building a better understanding of women's participation to know which skills and training are required.

2. £35m is committed to the Afghan government's micro-finance programme spurring entrepreneurship. 70% of the programme's clients are women, data shows female recipients are more likely to give back to their community.
3. Access to education and healthcare facilities – in 2006/7, £55m was provided to the Reconstruction Trust Fund increasing numbers of girls in schools and women receiving healthcare (particularly maternal health).
4. Governance: Policy level assistance is given to the Minister of Women's Affairs to monitor the country's progress against the Afghan constitution, Afghan Nations Development Strategy and CEDAW.
5. Access to justice: DFID are working with the Ministry of Justice and the Attorney General on development and legislation – how to merge state and traditional justice mechanisms.

She concluded by highlight that there have been real improvements in Afghanistan:

- the constitution guarantees equal rights to men and women;
- the cabinet has approved a 10 year National Action Plan for women's development, supported by donors at the Paris Conference in June;
- a third of children in schools are girls;
- Almost a third of women in rural areas have access to antenatal healthcare (less than 5% in 2003); and, Afghanistan has the highest percentage of women parliamentarians in South Asia at 27%.

Ceri Hayes

Womankind Worldwide have been working in Afghanistan since 2003. Working with three local partners they are undertaking a five year (2005-2010) project with DFID and FCO.

Ceri noted that although there has been progress made on paper (The Afghanistan Compact, Afghan National Development Strategy and NAPAW) and provisions are in place there are few resources for implementation, benchmarks are unclear and highly ambitious. The existing mechanisms for mainstreaming gender are under resourced and lack technical capacity. She also noted that Afghanistan currently does not have a National Action Plan for the implementation of UNSCR1325, despite being committed to the resolution as a UN member state. Afghanistan has ratified CEDAW.

She went on to highlight key findings of Womankind's Taking Stock report:

1. Women in decision making - increased number of women in parliament; women account for 25% of the civil service and provincial council seats. However, they are regularly subject to death threats and intimidation. There

are no women sitting in the Supreme Court, only one (of 35) Governor is a woman and one minister.

2. Violence against women – some progress has been made, but too little. More shelters are available and there are now 13 Family Response Units.
3. Legislation - the Marriage Contract law of 2007 by which the minimum age for marriage is 16 is not enforced, and the VAW law is still in draft form; a culture of serious impunity remains. With out addressing impunity and access to justice VAW will continue unabated.

Several key recommendations to the UK government going ahead in Afghanistan were identified:

1. A gender perspective be included in the reform of the security and justice sectors;
2. Supporting the Afghan government to strengthen accountability of UN SCR1325;
3. Increasing through development programmes direct resources to local and national women's NGOs;
4. Incorporating a gender perspective into the work of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams;
5. Further strengthening capacity and accessibility in education; and,
6. Promoting and supporting the rights of the most marginalised women, particularly widows.<sup>2</sup>

#### Q&A

Questions were asked about the division of HMG spending between military and development activities; research methodology of Womankind's 'Taking Stock' report; the empowerment of female parliamentarians, with reference to Malalai Joya; and, policy coordination through different agencies.

Nicola Neuss first responded that the development and military budgets are completely separate with military spending coming directly from the MoD – none of DFID's budget is allocated to military operations. There is £123m being spent this year which will be reduced to £115m for the next three years. She added that there is close cooperation with projects led by the FCO and DFID. Human rights work is led by the Embassy in Kabul. They lead on CEDAW related activities with a budget of £500,000 for 2006 and 2008. The DFID office in Kabul located in the embassy compound.

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<sup>2</sup> For more detailed recommendations please contact Chris Levick at GAPS [apg-wps@gaps-uk.org](mailto:apg-wps@gaps-uk.org) and ask for the GAPS DFID response for the Country Action Plan.

Malcolm Bruce added that DFID's assistance is spent far more efficiently than US aid, for example, much of which is spent in Washington. Although US provide higher assistance than HMG, it should be channelled much more effectively. He noted that military spending far exceeds development and this is a point we should address in the long-term.

Ceri Hayes responded that most research is carried out through interviews and desk research. There remains a lack of credible data and analysis.

Questions were raised around Afghan widows: firstly, how microfinance initiatives are specifically targeted at marginalised groups of women and, secondly, note that direct budgetary support does not always make finance available to marginalised individuals and groups in society.

Ceri began saying that it is important that there is a focus with the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), their gender sensitivity and how they engage with women and marginal groups. She highlighted the problems associated with Direct Budgetary Support as evidenced by a 2008 report by Gender and Development Network. (New Aid Environment and Civil Society Organisations [www.gadnetwork.org.uk/resources.html](http://www.gadnetwork.org.uk/resources.html)) Women's organisations and women's rights work is finding access to funding increasingly difficult as women's rights issues are not being prioritised for Government spending

Malcolm added that the majority of microfinance does go to women and that his committee visited some of the recipients during their visit. He continued saying in his very it is right that assistance is provided direct to the national budget – the most important factor in ensuring long-term success is to prioritise government capacity.

Finally, Nicola noted the need for firmer baselines upon which progress can be effectively measured and therefore more effectively target aid on marginalised groups like widows.

The gender consultant (Sarah Maguire) from the Stabilisation Unit highlighted her willingness to discuss further ideas of how to integrate gender perspectives into their work in the stabilisation and reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Parliamentary questions will be developed and tabled in both the House of Commons and House of Lords following the discussion at the meeting.