

An Open Letter to Presidents Obama and Karzai

By Amnesty International

As champions of women's rights who are dedicated to protecting women's human rights, we are deeply concerned that the significant gains made by women and girls in Afghanistan may be threatened as U.S. and allied troops leave the country. We urge you to adopt a comprehensive action plan to guarantee that the clock is not turned back on a decade of strides in education, health, security and employment for women and girls. At stake is the future of Afghanistan, after billions of dollars and tens of thousands of lives have been sacrificed. We believe if women's progress cannot be sustained, then Afghan society will fail. When the United States and NATO entered Afghanistan in 2001, then-U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell stated: "The recovery of Afghanistan must entail a restoration of the rights of Afghan women; indeed, it will not be possible without them." At the time, Afghanistan was among the world's worst countries in terms of women's and girls' rights. The Taliban banned women from working, going to school or even leaving home without a male relative. They enforced these restrictions through beatings, whippings and other methods of torture. The United Nations concluded in 1999 that there was "official, widespread and systematic violations of the human rights of women." Women were "subject to grave indignities in the areas of physical security and the rights to education, health, freedom of movement and freedom of association."

Over the last ten years, the United States and Afghan governments and their allies have invested significantly to improve the lives of women and girls. The United States alone has spent more than \$15 billion dollars on development and military programs in Afghanistan. Today, three million girls go to school, compared to virtually none under the Taliban. Women make up 20 percent of university graduates and their numbers are growing. Maternal mortality and infant mortality have declined. Ten percent of all prosecutors and judges are women, when there were none under the Taliban. Despite these gains, there is still much more to be done to secure rights for women and girls. Violence against women is rampant, including torture, beatings and other brutal punishments in areas under Taliban control. Women candidates, politicians and human rights defenders increasingly are targeted, intimidated, threatened and attacked. In 2010, more than 74 schools, including 26 girls' schools and 35 mixed-gender schools, were destroyed or closed due to insurgent violence.

We are concerned that the U.S. and allied withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 may put women and girls at even greater risk of abuses. The latest statement by the Ulema Council of Afghanistan that women should "respect the right of men to polygamy" and "not travel without a close male relative," must be viewed as a threat to women's human rights. The Council has proclaimed that men are superior to women.

In this climate, we are alarmed that inadequate attention is being paid to women's rights and participation in peace talks with the Taliban. Women must be empowered in the educational, economic and political life of Afghanistan or the country will fail to achieve a stable and prosperous future after a decade of effort to secure and rebuild the country.

U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 clearly states the importance of including women in "the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building," and stresses "the importance of their equal participation and full involvement" at all decision-making levels; national, regional and international. Evidence shows that peace processes are considered more credible and more likely to succeed when they include women. U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon stated in 2011: "Where women are educated and empowered, economies are more productive and strong. Where women are fully represented, societies are more peaceful and stable."

The United States, Afghanistan, NATO and other participants in the transition process must unite behind a clear plan to protect women's human rights in the years to come. Their leaders must rededicate themselves to uphold the commitments made at the 2001 Bonn Conference and its agreed-upon goal of "the establishment of a broad-based, gender-sensitive, multi-ethnic and fully representative government." The United States, Afghanistan and other relevant parties must

commit to clear, measurable steps to ensure that women's and girls' rights are protected and that positive momentum is maintained. Without these safeguards, any peace agreement will represent false progress and doom Afghanistan to repeat its repressive past. The Afghan and the U.S. governments and others must take the following critical steps to protect women:

1. Ensure that any peace or reconciliation agreement text does the following:
 - affirms the constitutional guarantee of equality for women and men;
 - includes a commitment to full implementation the 2005 Action Plan for Peace, Justice, and Reconciliation within an agreed upon time-frame; and
 - contains robust monitoring mechanisms for women's rights with verifiable benchmarks tied to international human rights laws and standards.
2. Adhere to established red lines for Taliban reintegration that require renunciation of violence and a pledge of fealty to the Afghan Constitution.
3. Insist that peace talks are inclusive and reflective of Afghan civil society, including the participation of women at the national and provincial levels, and in both the planning stages and the talks themselves.
4. Develop and implement a plan and schedule for the convening of local consultations on how to best secure women's human rights gains.
5. Ensure that negotiating teams involved in peace talks include at least 30 percent women.
6. Create a protected, long-term and substantial trust fund to protect women's rights and support civil society. This trust fund must be set aside for women and administered by women, independent of government.
7. Strengthen the capacity and expertise of local justice and criminal justice institutions to protect and promote women's rights through training on the implementation of the 2009 Elimination of Violence Against Women law as well as reforms and systematic tracking of the women's rights-related work of provincial units of the Attorney General's office.
8. Fund the National Action Plan for the women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) to ensure gender mainstreaming in Afghanistan's government institutions.

Presidents Obama and Karzai, this is the defining moment to lead on women's human rights. Afghan women have never faced greater danger to the protection and advancement of their human rights; they need and deserve your support.

We urge you to affirm that the Afghan and U.S. governments will protect Afghan women. Their human rights, their safety, their very lives must not be sacrificed as U.S. Armed Forces withdraw from the country.

Sincerely,

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