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U.S. Assistance to Women in Afghanistan and Iraq: Challenges and Issues for Congress

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Summary

This report reviews U.S. funding for programs directed toward women in Afghanistan and Iraq. Women in these two countries have faced particularly difficult conditions under the Taliban and Baathist regimes. Although there have been notable improvements since the ouster of these regimes in 2001 and 2003, respectively, women still face real challenges in the areas of education, health care, political participation, and, in many cases, basic human rights. The national and international response to the plight of Afghan and Iraqi women may have an important impact not only on the women being directly assisted, but also on their countries as a whole, in terms of more widespread access to education, health care, and political and economic participation. This report will be updated as events warrant.

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U.S. Assistance to Women in Afghanistan and Iraq: Challenges and Issues for Congress

Background

The issue of women's rights in Afghanistan and Iraq has taken on new relevance following the U.S.-led military actions in Afghanistan in 2001, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and subsequent reconstruction efforts in both countries. One of the major questions facing the United States in the post-war reconstruction process is the extent to which it can help women participate — often for the first time in their lives or the recent history of their countries — in political, educational, and economic life after years of warfare, gender-based repression, and economic exclusion. Advancing the position of women and committing adequate resources to women's and girls' education have both been linked, on a global level, to the achievement of efficient and stable development, particularly in post-conflict regions.¹

Congressional initiatives focused on women in these countries have covered a range of political, economic, and social issues. Particular areas of emphasis include the incorporation of women in local and national governance, the inclusion of women's rights in a new constitution, participation by women in the workforce, universal access to education, provision of adequate health care, and supplying humanitarian assistance to needy families. This report focuses primarily on foreign aid appropriated by Congress to United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the State Department for humanitarian and reconstruction activities in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also touches upon Iraq programs funded through the Departments of Health and Human Services, Agriculture, Labor, and Defense.²

Afghanistan

Overall, conditions for women in Afghanistan have vastly improved since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, particularly in terms of education and job opportunities. Many refugees have returned, millions of Afghan girls now attend school, and it is no longer illegal for women to work. A great deal remains to be done, however, in improving the basic standard of living and means of livelihood for most Afghan

¹ For further discussion, see CRS Report RL32376, *Women in Iraq: Background and Issues for U.S. Policy*, by Aaron D. Pina.

² The State Department July 2002 and 2003 reports, *U.S. Support for Afghan Women, Children, and Refugees*, provide a good summary of the overall funding from the USG. The 2004 report is expected to be distributed in late June 2004.

women. Although women may legally work, for example, many still face serious challenges in finding culturally appropriate jobs (in most areas of Afghanistan women still find it difficult or impossible to work in open areas where they may come into contact with men), within easy commuting distance of home, at tolerable hours, with reasonable pay. Furthermore, most Afghan women (and, for that matter, most men) have had little or no education and lack employable skills. While women have gained substantial ground in political participation, especially since passage of the recent constitution guaranteeing them a minimum number of parliamentary seats, they nevertheless continue to face conservative attitudes in many rural areas of the country, particularly in the south and east.³ Among the breakthroughs, in 2005 a woman was appointed governor of a province (Bamiyan).⁴

Iraq

In marked contrast to the Taliban's repressive treatment, which was rooted in longstanding rural Afghan customs, Iraq's policies toward women have historically been more liberal. Even compared to other countries in the Middle East, Iraqi women fared reasonably well under the provisional 1970 Constitution, which granted them equal rights with men, including the rights to go to school, own property, work, and hold political office. The condition of women worsened somewhat under the regime of Saddam Hussein, however, particularly after the first Gulf War when Hussein turned more to Islamic and tribal traditions that held women in inferior positions. In addition, the economic conditions brought about by international sanctions after the Gulf War are said to have affected women disproportionately.⁵ Conditions appear to be improving for some women living in Iraq's cities, who are regaining greater civil rights and educational opportunities in the wake of the U.S.-led invasion of 2003. The political process in particular has opened up; the new constitution requires 25% female representation, and women are serving in the government as members of the cabinet and the Iraq governing council. There are no women governors in the provinces, however.

Although progress is being made on the political front, in other ways women are worse off under increasingly Islamist policies, especially in southern Iraq. Women in rural areas continue to face growing difficulties, particularly in places where religiously conservative local leaders have gained power.⁶ Gender discrimination,

³ Information is based largely on CRS staff personal experience and interviews in Afghanistan with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and women, January 2004, February 2005, and August-September 2005.

⁴ For more information on the overall situation in Afghanistan, see CRS Report RL30588 *Afghanistan: Post-War Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

⁵ "Background on Women's Status in Iraq Prior to the Fall of the Saddam Hussein Government," Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper, November 2003, available at [<http://www.hrw.org/backgrounder/wrd/iraq-women.htm>]. See also P.L. 108-45 for Congressional findings on the state of women in Iraq.

⁶ "Status of Women in Iraq," Parts I and II, National Public Radio, July 13-14, 2004, available at [<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=3375003>] and (continued...)

forced segregation, and austere dress requirements all bear the hallmarks of regression rather than progress in women's development and integration. Other problems women face are similar to those of the population as a whole: economic insecurity and the threat of political and sectarian violence. While women are being forced to cover up in southern Iraq, in other parts of the country it is reported that some women wear head scarves as a means of protection and anonymity. The fragile situation on the ground in many parts of the country is limiting the provision of humanitarian assistance and makes meeting basic needs, such as adequate food, shelter, and medical care, a daily struggle. Women in the Kurdish areas to the north are reported to have more opportunities and face better treatment than women in the central and southern portions of the country.

U.S. Assistance to Afghan Women

Identified below are specific legislative earmarks to support programs for Afghan women and children and general funds that identify women and children among the program beneficiaries. This is not meant to be an exhaustive inventory of all U.S.-funded projects that may address women's needs. Providing such a list would be both debatable and difficult, because many projects addressing overall societal issues — such as refugee care and resettlement, health, education, and job training — do not mention women but may implicitly benefit them disproportionately. The legislation and programs detailed below are those that expressly benefit women.⁷

Regular and Supplemental Appropriations. This section lists congressional funding of Afghan women's programs since 2001.

FY2006. The *Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2006* (H.R. 3057, P.L. 109-102), includes a \$50 million earmark for programs directly addressing the needs of Afghan women and girls. Of this amount, \$7.5 million is to be made available to support women-led non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In addition, the *Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2006* (H.R. 3010, P.L. 109-149), includes \$5,952,000 for the development of maternal child health clinics (consistent with section 103(a)(4)(H) of the *Afghanistan Freedom Support Act of 2002*).

FY2005. The *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2005* (H.R. 4818, P.L. 108-447) also included \$50 million for programs for women and girls, including \$7.5 million for women-led NGOs. In addition, Section 305 of the *Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004* (S. 2845, P.L. 108-458) required the President to formulate a five-year strategy for Afghanistan that included support for women's rights, including increased political participation, but no funding was appropriated.

⁶ (...continued)

[<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=3399005>].

⁷ The Department of State, Office of International Women's Issues provides useful information on assistance to Afghan women including a matrix with specific details on projects and sources of funding. See [<http://www.state.gov/g/wi>].

Two similar bills were introduced but not enacted in the last Congress (S. 2032 and H.R. 4117), each titled the *Afghan Women Security and Freedom Act of 2004*, authorizing appropriations of \$300 million for Afghan women in fiscal years 2005, 2006, and 2007. \$20 million was to be earmarked for the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs and \$10 million for the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission for each fiscal year. S. 2032 was referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations in January 2004 and H.R. 4117 was referred to the House International Relations Committee in April 2004. Neither bill was signed into law. The President's FY2005 budget request did not contain specified amounts for aid to women, although the Administration indicated that a significant amount of the funds for development programs would support activities benefitting women and girls. An early version of the *Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act for Defense, the Global War on Terror, and Tsunami Relief, 2005* (H.R. 1268), included \$5 million for Afghan women's organizations, but this provision was removed from the bill before its final passage as P.L. 109-13.

FY2004. In the FY2004 *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2004* (H.R. 2673, Division D of P.L. 108-199), \$5 million was earmarked from the Economic Support Fund to support programs to address the needs of Afghan women through training and equipment for women-led Afghan non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The FY2004 Supplemental Appropriations included a \$60 million ESF earmark for women's programs, including technical and vocational education, programs for women and girls against sexual abuse and trafficking, shelters for women and girls, humanitarian assistance for widows, support of women-led NGOs, and women's rights programs.

FY2003. In H.J.Res. 2 (P.L. 108-7), the FY2003 Consolidated Appropriations Resolution, \$5 million was earmarked in the Foreign Operations Appropriation from the ESF to support activities coordinated by the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs, including support for the establishment of women's centers in Afghanistan. A further \$60 million from the International Disaster Assistance Account specifically for humanitarian assistance also mentions the improvement of the status of women with priority placed on girls' and women's education, health, legal and social rights, economic opportunities, and political participation. Through the FY2003 State Department budget (*Consolidated Appropriations Resolution, 2003*, H.J.Res. 2, P.L. 108-7), about \$10.5 million was earmarked for the Asia Foundation and \$2 million for the National Endowment for Democracy for women's rights in Afghanistan. The FY2003 Supplemental (P.L. 108-11) contained no specific earmarks for women's programs in Afghanistan.

Earlier Congressional Action. *The Afghan Women and Children Relief Act of 2001* (P.L. 107-81), signed into law on December 12, 2001, authorized the provision of educational and health care assistance to the women and children of Afghanistan. No specific amount was authorized.⁸ *The Afghanistan Freedom Support Act of 2002* (P.L. 107-327) authorized \$15 million for the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs.

⁸ The State Department July 2002 and 2003 reports *U.S. Support for Afghan Women, Children, and Refugees* were mandated by this legislation.

Programs and Projects. Afghanistan receives the third-highest share of U.S. foreign aid in FY2006. It was the leading recipient in FY2005, and ranked fourth in FY2004. USAID supports Afghan women through a number of grants and programs throughout the country. Specific activities have included small grants to establish the Ministry of Women's Affairs, assistance for Afghan NGOs, opportunities for income generation in the private sector, and programs to support opportunities for women in agriculture and rural environments. Larger aid programs, such as humanitarian assistance, health, and education, have included support for women, and in some cases, have been integrated into other multi-year development programs. USAID reports that significant progress has been made in a number of key areas in economic growth, democracy and governance, election participation, and education and health. USAID partners have focused particularly on promoting women's participation in the political process at the local and national levels.⁹

The State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) provides support to Afghan refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees and other vulnerable members of the population through funds appropriated to the Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) account. Its implementing partners include the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), other U.N. agencies, and NGOs. Supporting vulnerable women is one of PRM's core goals, and PRM funds several programs for Afghan women refugees, IDPs, and returnees, including literacy training, income generation, gender-based violence prevention, and mother-child health care. The majority of PRM's assistance funding does not specifically target women, although many women are beneficiaries.

U.S. Assistance to Iraqi Women

Since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Bush Administration has stated its interest in ensuring that Iraqi women are involved in rebuilding and reconstruction efforts in Iraq.¹⁰ For the same reasons mentioned in the preceding section on Afghanistan, presenting an exhaustive list of programs and funding for Iraqi women is difficult. Several programs have been launched specifically focused on women and are detailed below. Because of increasing violence in Iraq, however, it is difficult to assess the extent to which these programs have been sustained.¹¹

⁹ For specific information on women's involvement in the political process in Afghanistan, see CRS Report RS21922 *Afghanistan: Presidential and Parliamentary Elections*, by Kenneth Katzman.

¹⁰ "U.S. Policy on Iraqi Women's Political, Economic, and Social Participation," August 7, 2003, [<http://www.state.gov/g/wi/rls/22492.htm>]. Also see CRS Report RL32376, *Women in Iraq: Background and Issues for U.S. Policy*, by Febe Armanios.

¹¹ Iraqi reconstruction funds, in general, have been managed by USAID, the Department of State, the Department of Defense, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Treasury. For more information on sector allocations see CRS Report RL31833, *Iraq: Recent Developments in Reconstruction Assistance*, by Curt Tarnoff.

Regular and Supplemental Appropriations. This section lists congressional funding of Iraqi women's programs since 2003. It should be noted that, while relatively little funding has been dedicated exclusively to Iraqi women, the overall level of spending in Iraq has been much higher than in Afghanistan, and much of this funding implicitly includes women.

FY2006. No specific earmarks for women's programs have been passed in the current Congress. The *Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2006* (H.R. 3057, P.L. 109-102), provides \$28 million each to the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute to fund governance and rule of law programs in Iraq. The earlier version of this bill as passed in the Senate had specified that the funding should be spent in the areas of "governance, elections, political parties, civil society, and women's rights," but the mention of women was not included in the final conference report.

In addition, two congressional resolutions emerged in this session encouraging the Iraqi Transitional National Assembly to adopt a constitution granting women equal rights (H.Res. 383 and S.Res. 231, both passed unanimously). A third resolution commended Iraqi women candidates in the January 2005 elections (H.Res. 143, referred to the Subcommittee on Middle East and Central Asia).

FY2005. No specific earmarks for women's programs were passed in this session. Two similar bills were introduced authorizing unspecified funds for assistance to Iraqi women in the areas of health care, education, economic empowerment, political participation, civil society, and personal security (H.R. 4671 and S. 2519, both entitled the *Iraqi Women and Children's Liberation Act of 2004*). Neither bill was reported out of committee.

FY2004. In conference report language (H.Rept. 108-337), accompanying the *Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act for Defense and for the Reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan, 2004* (H.R. 3289, P.L. 108-106, enacted in November 2003), which provided \$18.4 billion for Iraqi reconstruction, conferees included \$10 million "to support women's programs" in Iraq. In February 2004, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz announced that "the United States is giving special emphasis to helping Iraqi women achieve greater equality and has allocated \$27 million for women's programs." He added that "Education for women is one of the highest priorities, and the United States has committed more than \$86.8 million to education projects, with special emphasis on ensuring that girls are registered and attending school."¹²

Programs and Projects. In March 2004, Secretary of State Colin Powell announced a \$10 million Iraqi Women's Democracy Initiative (IWDI), intended to "train Iraqi women in the skills and practices of democratic public life." Programs have provided voter education to women, as well as training in political leadership, communications, and coalition-building skills to women in the National Assembly. The State Department reports that over 2000 Iraqi women already have been trained

¹² "Women in the New Iraq," February 1, 2004, [<http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/2004/sp20040201-depsecdef0844.html>].

in political, economic and media skills so far.¹³ The Secretary also announced the formation of a “U.S.-Iraq Women’s Network” (USIWN).

These programs represent a fairly small amount of overall U.S. funding in Iraq. Since 2003, Iraq has been the leading cumulative recipient of U.S. foreign aid, and Iraqi women’s issues and programs — in the sectors of education, health care, local governance, and civil society — have received an indeterminable amount of funding through other Iraqi reconstruction funds.¹⁴ Since April 2003, USAID has implemented a number of programs targeting women, especially in governance and the economic sphere. USAID reports that nearly 60 percent of its small business development grants in Iraq have been awarded to women. In addition, “a grant for nearly \$1.3 million is being finalized for a women-focused international Micro Finance Institute, combining loans with one-on-one technical assistance to develop business ideas.”¹⁵

USAID is also working to train women politicians and journalists, as well as NGOs promoting women’s interests. Some of these initiatives have been managed under the auspices of the Iraq Local Governance Program (LGP), an initiative intended to provide a foundation for Iraq’s transition to democracy, which has attempted to deal with the obstacles presented by Iraqi culture to women in government.¹⁶ The LGP has recruited and trained women to serve on various sub-national governing bodies and councils, as well as worked with city councils to meet the needs of women in their communities.¹⁷ USAID has held a number of workshops for women throughout Iraq, where “international and local participants discuss issues such as Islam, democracy, oppression of women, women’s rights and participation in future elections.”¹⁸ The Iraqi Women in Local Governance Group (IWLGG) was also established in order to “enhance the political participation of women through civic education and training and monitoring the progress of female participation in each local government.”¹⁹

USAID has supported accelerated learning programs that are specifically targeted toward girls’ education. These programs are intended to provide girls with life skills and the academic background necessary to return to formal schooling. USAID is also rehabilitating the water and sanitation facilities at 800 primary

¹³ “U.S. Commitment to Women in Iraq,” June 22, 2005 [<http://www.state.gov/g/wi/rls/48464.htm>], and “Secretary of State Colin L. Powell To Announce Iraqi Women’s Democracy Initiative and Creation of the U.S.-Iraq Women’s Network,” March 8, 2004, [<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2004/30223.htm>].

¹⁴ “U.S. Commitment to Women in Iraq,” *op. cit.*

¹⁵ “Support to Iraqi Women,” USAID, n.d., [<http://www.usaid.gov/iraq/accomplishments/women.html>].

¹⁶ For specific information on women’s involvement in the political process in Iraq, see CRS Report RS21968, *Iraq: Elections, Government, and Constitution* by Kenneth Katzman.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Information provided to CRS by the Research Triangle Institute, March 2004.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

schools, and providing training that it says will reach 75,000 female teachers and administrators by the end of the 2005-2006 school year.²⁰ A USAID fact sheet discussing reconstruction accomplishments indicates that USAID has rehabilitated over 2,800 schools, and constructed 45 new schools, and trained over 47,500 secondary school teachers and administrators through September 2005.²¹ An earlier report indicated that as a result of these efforts, “female attendance has surpassed male attendance.”²²

Issues for Congress

Challenges for Women in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the transition to a post-conflict environment, Afghan and Iraqi women face particular challenges, especially in a climate of uncertainty and insecurity. While conditions for women in Afghanistan have improved markedly since the fall of the Taliban, Afghan women are still among the most socioeconomically disadvantaged in the world. Female literacy is estimated at 20%. While girls’ school enrollment has skyrocketed in the last few years, there are still one-third fewer girls than boys in primary school.²³ Turning to health, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) Afghanistan has the world’s second worst maternal mortality rate and fifth worst neonatal mortality rate.²⁴ While Iraq is a good deal more industrialized than Afghanistan, its health indicators prior to the 2003 invasion were very poor; its neonatal mortality rate was in fact worse than that of Afghanistan. Iraq has historically had a much better — and more gender-balanced — educational system than Afghanistan, but girls’ school attendance, especially in rural areas, still lags behind that of boys.²⁵ While Congressional funding for democracy building, civil society development, and participation in the workforce will have an important affect on women’s lives in each country, the rehabilitation of the basic education and health care infrastructure for Afghan and Iraqi women is equally, if not more, vital.

²⁰ “Support to Iraqi Women,” *op. cit.*

²¹ “Education,” USAID, n.d., [<http://www.usaid.gov/iraq/accomplishments/education.html>].

²² “USAID accomplishments in Iraq Mar 2003 to Mar 2004,” March 18, 2004, [<http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/s/CEC16D9F9A47731085256E5C0056EE14>].

²³ Literacy data from United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) survey in 2003 (“Afghanistan: UN Helps to Improve Literacy,” IRIN News, September 9, 2004, [http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=43092&SelectRegion=Central_Asia&SelectCountry=AFGHANISTAN]). This nevertheless represents an improvement over 1995, when women’s literacy was estimated by the Asian Development Bank at 15% [<http://www.adb.org/Statistics/Poverty/AFG.asp>]. Male literacy has hovered around 50%. Enrollment data from UNICEF: [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/afghanistan_afghanistan_statistics.html].

²⁴ Afghanistan’s maternal mortality rate is 1,900 per 100,000 live births (second only to Sierra Leone); its neonatal mortality rate is 60 per 1,000 live births. Information gathered from WHO statistics for 2000, the most recent year, available at [<http://www.who.int/globalatlas/DataQuery/default.asp>].

²⁵ “Status of Women in Iraq,” *op. cit.*

Designating Funds for Women. One of the key ways Congress has had an impact on the situation for Afghan women has been through a series of legislative earmarks. To date, in Iraq, although some funds have been designated to include women, such as \$10 million for the Iraqi Women's Democracy Initiative, Congress has not used legislative earmarks extensively for women's programs.

Future Developments. In consideration of the funding appropriated in recent years, there are some similarities in the approach taken by the United States to improve the lives of Afghan and Iraqi women. However, not only are Afghanistan and Iraq starting from different economic and social points, but the timetables for reconstruction will differ as well based on events and challenges on the ground. Although it is too soon to draw specific lessons from either country, as Congress examines the progress of reconstruction programs for women, it may be important to consider the effect of religious versus secular forces, the variation in local traditions and cultures, and the differences between rural and urban communities to see if the assistance provided to Afghan and Iraqi women is effective and can be used as a model in future post-conflict regions.