

**“Women as Agents of Change: Advancing the Role of Women in Politics and Civil Society”
Testimony to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights and Oversight**

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Rohrabacher and Members of the Committee. I am pleased to participate in this discussion on a topic near and dear to the [International Republican Institute](#)'s (IRI) heart. IRI, established in 1983, is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization committed to advancing freedom and democracy by developing political parties, civil society organizations, open elections and good governance. We have worked in more than 100 countries and currently are active in 61 countries.

The evolution of IRI's work over the last few decades in many ways mirrors my own. The conventional wisdom was that it made more sense to include women and men together in trainings and seminars, and not have specific programs for women. I came up in an era of Republican politics in which I felt strongly that being in a women's group would confine me to that niche, and I wanted a seat at the table with the men.

However, my view changed completely after spending 14 months in Baghdad as the Coalition Provisional Authority's point person for outreach to Iraqi women. Those Iraqi women taught me many things, but none as important as the need for programs that focus specifically on giving women the skills to level the playing field in politics and in other fields important to their countries' development. To be sure, women face far more obstacles to becoming fully participating partners due to cultural and traditional attitudes, but they also lack the training and experience.

In the international political realm, male party leaders control the political process, and often do not want to include women candidates on party lists because they do not believe that women are capable of winning. Even quota systems, which have done much to increase women's participation in politics, cannot guarantee that the elected women will be effective legislators. Without the proper training and mentorship, women themselves do not feel confident to take on political roles. But when women are given the tools to campaign for office, when they are taught how to be effective legislators, when they learn how to advocate for their rights and rights of others, in my experience, they become powerhouses for change.

There is little doubt that women have made significant progress in the areas of health, education, and business; there is also little doubt that women lag far behind men in politics. [The World Economic Forum's 2009 Global Gender Gap Index](#) reports that 134 countries, representing more than 90 percent of the world's population, have closed the health outcomes gap between women and men by 96 percent, the 'education attainment' outcomes gap by 93 percent, and the economic outcomes gap by 59 percent. Yet, only 17 percent of the political outcomes gap has been closed.

A 2010 study on women's economic growth by the [U.S. Agency for International Development](#) evidences that throughout the developing world, women are becoming "vital economic players, representing a larger percentage of the workforce than ever before. Over 800 million women are economically active worldwide, undertaking critical roles in industry, agriculture, manufacturing, and services, and as producers, traders, and owners and operators of micro- and small-enterprises." Yet, despite these gains, women are not adequately represented in the decision-making process at any level of government.

Still, with the ever growing recognition of the need for women's empowerment along with training and mentorship programs such as IRI's [Women's Democracy Network](#) (WDN), women are progressing and achieving much in the political field.

More women are being elected to public office. Women hold nearly 20 percent of seats in national assemblies worldwide and 22 countries now have women as their heads of state. More women are taking on leadership roles as members of municipal and provincial councils. For example, in Morocco's June 2009 elections, thanks to a new quota system, 3,406 women were elected to municipal councils – a dramatic increase from 127 women councilors in prior elections.

Many more women leaders and members of civil society organizations are becoming politically involved, lobbying their elected officials and governments on issues that affect families and their nations. In Serbia, for example, a multi-partisan group of women, called the Network for Political Accountability, has since the 2008 parliamentary elections documented and tracked politicians' campaign promises and their subsequent activity in government.

Other women's civil society organizations focus on constitutional changes to ensure women's rights. [The Kenya Women's Democracy Network country chapter](#), led by Professor Ruth Oniang'o and Dr. Josephine Ojiambo, took a leading role in reviewing the draft constitution, and recommended that Kenya's Human Rights and Gender Commission as contained in the Bill of Rights, be separated into two individual commissions to highlight the Gender Commission's role in advancing the empowerment of Kenyan women. The current draft of the constitution now includes a provision which, if passed in the August 2010 referendum, would give parliament the power to restructure the commission into two or more separate commissions through legislation.

Despite cultural and security impediments, women in post-conflict societies are fearless in their pursuit of a better life for their families and communities. When I was in Iraq, I witnessed an astonishing number of Iraqi women coming forward to take part in the reconstruction of their country despite death threats to themselves and their families. One such organization, the [Women's Leadership Institute](#) (WLI), during the terrible, violent period of 2006-2007, persisted in training women leadership skills, focusing on the day when women would have the opportunity to run for local office. In advance of the January 2009 provincial council elections, WLI held multiple workshops, training more than 400 women candidates, and as a result, out of the total of 110 women currently sitting on provincial councils throughout Iraq, 42 percent are WLI trainees.

Afghan women are models of courageous women making a remarkable difference. Since 2001, a growing number of Afghan businesswomen, educators, and activists have taken on more visible roles as advocates in support of the needs of their communities and have sought to leverage their social activism and business experience as a conduit to greater political participation. The Movement of Afghan Sisters (MAS), a 26,000 member, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization consisting of women from parliament and provincial councils, the business community and civil society, in the lead up to August 2009 presidential and provincial council elections, conducted numerous civic education events for women throughout the country and helped mobilize 25,000 women to vote on Election Day. MAS was the only women's organization to successfully field candidates for provincial council seats, and 27 of its supported candidates were elected filling 23 percent of the 117 female quota seats allocated nationwide. Sadly, one of these brave women, [Gul Maki Wakhali](#), a woman in her 20s, was recently slain by the Taliban.

Women are also demonstrating that once elected they can become effective legislators. [The Peruvian Women's Roundtable](#), a legislative women's caucus, is showing its 31 members are effective political leaders and members of Peru's National Congress. U.S. Congresswoman Kay Granger and IRI Board Member was just in Lima, Peru last week where she learned firsthand how women legislators in that country are taking charge on important legislative issues, such as pushing for a new domestic violence bill.

In Bolivia, women legislators partner with women political party leaders and local council members in the Multi-Party Women's Roundtable to create and introduce gender promotion legislation to enforce women's political rights by having the National Electoral Court intervene in cases in which women are forced to leave their elected positions. Although the bill was not passed in its entirety in 2008, the National Electoral Court and the nine Departmental Courts adopted key parts of this bill and included it in their official modifications to the electoral law.

We have countless other success stories of women, who with the help of nongovernmental organizations such as IRI, the [National Democratic Institute](#), and the [Institute for Inclusive Security](#), among others, have become effective agents of change in their societies. These examples should give us the hope and impetus to double our efforts to support women in democratic development.

The United States has taken an important lead in this effort; witness the work of women such as Secretary Hillary Clinton, [Ambassador Melanne Verveer](#), First Lady Laura Bush, former Under Secretary of State Paula Dobriansky and hundreds of other American women who are devoting their lives to advancing women globally.

Through our [Women's Democracy Network](#), and a new effort called the [Arab Women's Leadership Institute](#), we have seen an overwhelming demand for women's participation in all facets of the political process. The momentum for women's empowerment is clear and strong. IRI is fully committed as a partner in helping women reach their full potential in politics and civil society.