

TRANSCRIPT

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Ambassador Verveer: Good afternoon, everybody.

It is a great personal pleasure for me to be back in Azerbaijan. I have not been here since I came with Secretary Clinton in 2010, so I'm pleased to have a chance to have a longer opportunity to meet with more people to discuss some of the issues not just of importance to women but to the country generally.

President Obama appointed me to my position which is the first time the United States has had an Ambassador for Global Women's Issues. You might say, "Why is this important?" Today we know that our world, our countries confront many challenges having to do with security, with economics, with governance, with the environment, with so many issues that they cannot be tackled or solved unless women are participating on every level of society.

We know that no country -- neither Azerbaijan nor the United States nor any other country -- can prosper if half of its people, if its women are left behind. We refer to these issues as women's issues because women are involved, but they really are about all of our people because when women prosper all of society prospers -- men and women, girls and boys.

I will just mention two very significant measures that all countries look at. One is the Millennium Development Goals in which we as a world are trying to end poverty. And we know that whether it's maternal mortality or it has to do with the environment or the goal to end hunger, that none of that can be achieved without the central goal, which is women's equality.

There is another important organization called The World Economic Forum which puts out an annual Gender Gap Report looking at how men and women are equal on four metrics -- education, political participation, economic participation and education. We know that in countries where the gap is not so great between men and women on these metrics, those countries are far more prosperous, far more economically competitive, far more successful.

I have been very grateful that since I arrived here I have had opportunities to meet with many people. I have had discussions with women who are involved in the peace process efforts. I have met with some of the important leaders both in civil society, in government, in academia. I have just concluded a meeting on women's health with some very important issues that were discussed. I will be going on to meet with Mrs. Huseynova, the head of the State Committee for Families, Women and Children. I will also be meeting later today with women who are running small and medium-sized businesses, because we know that they are critical to growing the economy and creating jobs. And many of them participated in a program that the United States sponsored for women in business in the Caucasus.

So I have been provided with an opportunity to have many discussions to help me better understand some of the challenges and successes and opportunities that are present here.

Let me just end by saying I've also had the opportunity to have an extraordinary cultural experience to go to the History Museum and see a new exhibition about the great poet philosopher Nizami Ganjavi. It was particularly interesting for me to learn that even though he lived and wrote his poetry hundreds of years ago, that he recognized the critical participation of women and the equality of women in the life of their society.

With that, I will take your questions.

Press: [Through Interpreter] This question is related with our revolutions, last development in our countries. Our reporter mentions that women's role was essential in doing these changes in our countries. He wants to know what kind of projects or programs U.S. State Department is going to implement to support women in East and in former Republics of former Soviet Union.

Ambassador Verveer: Thank you for your question. I think your point about the important role women have to play in society generally but particularly in the Arab world is an important one. We know from the Arab Development Report which was published a few years ago that what it showed in Arab countries, for example, is where women don't have access to education or are not participating significantly in the formal economy of their country or politically, that holds countries back. That holds progress back.

So the recommendation in those reports was these investments need to be made to grow opportunities for women so that societies as a whole can grow as well.

In terms of the work of USAID in this part of the world, its focus has been on education, girls' education for example, because we know that is the single best investment that can be made. It not only helps the girl, but when she becomes a mother it is an investment in her family, in nutrition. It helps her with her future income. So it is one of the best investments in development that can be made.

We've been involved in economic issues, in helping to support, to build women's capacity in training and skills development, for growing small and medium sized businesses, also for vocational training for future jobs. We've been involved in civic participation and democracy building programs. So the full array of development issues -- health, education, economic participation and civic participation, all of which are critical to women's progress, to societal progress.

Press: You have been here for two days and you have a chance to experience the atmosphere and the feel of gender inequality in Azerbaijan. How can Azerbaijan address gender inequality here?

Ambassador Verveer: I think that problems here are not unique to issues that I see in other places, but I would mention a few issues. Obviously the need to have more women participating in the political life of the country, certainly in the parliament but all the way down into village levels and beyond that. Regional levels of decision-making.

I think one of the significant challenges here is to women's health and that is documented in studies that have been done about the situation here. Particularly access to family planning and to good health care that would enable women to better take care of their health and to address the critical health needs that they have.

One of the problems of sex-selective abortions where decisions are made to abort a girl child because of the preference for boys. This is a serious health issue, but it's also an issue of future stability, future security if the demographics get skewed where you have far more males in a society than females. I think at base, this has to do with the value of a girl. She should have an equal value in every way. I think this is something that everyone needs to come together to address.

Let me just mention that in talking about health the importance of decreasing maternal mortality so that mothers in child birth are able not just to survive but to have good health and to be able to care for their children.

Finally the issue of the economy, so that more women have an opportunity like the female journalists here to participate in the formal economy of their country. Not only to grow their incomes, their families' incomes, but to grow the general prosperity. So I would point those out as a few areas based on the data and statistics and the conversations that I have had.

Thank you very much.

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