

**Ambassador Feinstein's Remarks for Afghan Women's Panel
September 13, 2012, 10:00am, U.K. Embassy**

Thank you, Jessica, for that kind introduction. I am grateful to you and Ambassador Barnett for your hospitality. I would also like to thank the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Polish Institute of International Affairs for their assistance in bringing this outstanding delegation of women from Afghanistan to Poland.

Their participation in the Women's Congress later this week and in fora like this one is invaluable. Polish audiences will hear first hand these women and their perspectives on Afghanistan and its future.

I would also like to welcome my colleague and friend, Ambassador of Afghanistan Ziauddin Mojaledi.

For over a decade, U.S., British, and Polish troops and civilians have stood shoulder to shoulder with their Afghan colleagues, not simply to defeat a terrorist foe, but also to assist the Afghan people to restore fundamental human rights that had been stripped away by the Taliban regime. In visiting with Polish and U.S. forces there I saw both their triumphs and the challenges they face firsthand.

I have the utmost respect for them and for all that they have accomplished together with the Afghan people, and the United States remains deeply grateful for the dedication of all our allies to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan.

Through our common engagement and shared sacrifices, we have seen remarkable progress in Afghanistan.

In 2001, life expectancy for women in Afghanistan was just 44 years. Now it is 62. At that time, almost no girls went to school. Today, 3 million do. Girls today constitute nearly 40 percent of all primary school enrollments. Nearly 120,000 have graduated from high school, 15,000 are enrolled in university, and nearly 500 women are on university faculties. Maternal mortality, infant mortality, and under-five mortality rates have all declined significantly.

These statistics are but one example of the progress that the Afghan government and people, working hand-in-hand with our governments, have made in the promotion of a more just and equal society.

But what we often forget – and what we are reminded of today by the presence of this distinguished panel – is that these statistics represent hundreds of thousands of individual success stories, the stories of brave and determined Afghan women who have rebuilt their communities and who have now assumed their rightful leadership positions – in government, business, civil society, and the health and education sectors.

Today we have the honor of hearing directly from some of these women. They, and the other six women in our joint delegation, are not just surviving but thriving in Afghanistan. These women are educated, hard working, and dedicated to a better Afghanistan. They are role models for their daughters, friends, relatives, and other Afghan women in their communities.

They will return to Afghanistan with ideas and lessons learned from their experiences here in Poland, where over two decades ago, brave men and women also stood up against oppression and their voices were heard around the world. Their actions still inspire human rights and democracy activists today. The Afghan women who have joined us today also have very powerful voices, and we look forward to hearing from them today and drawing inspiration from their successes and vision.

In the future, thanks to these women, when we hear statistics about Afghanistan, we will not hear abstract numbers about faceless people in a country far away. Rather, we will remember these women and think about how everyday lives and opportunities have been shaped by our joint efforts in Afghanistan. We should also remember that, when we talk about women's development, progress, and rights in Afghanistan, we are not talking only about women's issues.

We are talking about national issues affecting security, stability, and prosperity of all Afghan people. As Secretary Clinton said at the Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan this past June, “[T]he United States will continue to stand by the women of Afghanistan because no nation can achieve peace, reconciliation, stability and economic growth while leaving out half the population.”

We must continue our efforts in Afghanistan to ensure the hard fought gains of these, and countless other brave women in Afghanistan, are not lost. For this reason, our nations and others must continue to support Afghanistan's democratic development following the conclusion of ISAF combat operations in 2014.

Afghanistan's future cannot only be measured by the absence of war; it has to be measured by whether people have jobs and economic opportunity, whether they believe their government is serving their needs, whether political reconciliation proceeds and succeeds. Working together with the Afghan people, and especially women like those represented on the panel today, we can help them ensure that Afghanistan – by all these measures – succeeds.