

Promoting Women's Empowerment

The Office of the Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues



© AP Images/Evan Vucci
 President Bush smiles during the signing of the Violence Against Women and Department of Justice Reauthorization Act of 2005 in the Oval Office of the White House in January 2006. From the left are Representative Mark Green (Republican, Wisconsin), First Lady Laura Bush, Senator Orrin Hatch (Republican, Utah), Representative James Sensenbrenner (Republican, Wisconsin), President Bush, Representative Richard Larsen (Democrat, Washington), and Representative Hilda Solis (Democrat, California)

policy community on these common concerns. We report directly to Under Secretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs Dr. Paula Dobriansky.

In the past few years, and for the foreseeable future, our top priorities have included the large region offering the most urgent challenges (and also opportunities) for U.S. transformational diplomacy: the Broader Middle East. This, of course, includes Afghanistan and Iraq, but also extends to many other countries in this vast and diverse region. At the same time, we have placed considerable focus as well on other important challenges, from Africa to Latin America to South Asia and beyond.

Here is a brief look at some of our activities.

Iraqi Women's Democracy Initiative

In December 2006, we hosted in Washington, D.C., a delegation of staff members, mostly female, from two Iraqi government ministries for a week of intensive training in project management and budgeting, women's legal rights, leadership and advocacy strategies, and related subjects. The training was provided by a variety of leading institutions with a proven track record of success in these areas, including the International Republican Institute, the National Women's Business Center, the U.S. Institute of Peace, the World Bank, the International Finance Corporation, and others. In addition, we hosted meetings and roundtable discussions with U.S. officials at both

The Office of the Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues is the focal point in the State Department for U.S. policies and programs to promote women's empowerment around the globe. We stand for women's equal political, social, and economic rights and opportunities, and their full participation in every society. This objective is an integral part of the overall U.S. strategy of transformational diplomacy, which seeks to advance reform and promote freedom around the world in the interest of national security.

Our office offers policy direction, serves as a clearinghouse for ideas and information, and brokers partnerships on key projects with other players inside and outside government. As a result, sometimes we are informally described as the "conscience" of the foreign



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Pakistani women stage a rally for their rights before the tomb of Pakistan's founder, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, in Karachi, Pakistan, in March 2006. Thousands of women demonstrated in nationwide rallies on International Women's Day, demanding freedom, equal rights, and an end to discriminatory laws in this Muslim nation. The banner in the center reads "March 8 Is International Women's Day."

the working and senior levels. Our visitors were able to return to Iraq with the enhanced skills, confidence, and professional contacts that will help them to assume their rightful role in their fledgling democracy.

This program is just one example of the ongoing efforts that make up our Iraqi Women's Democracy Initiative, which has provided around \$15 million over three years for training and practical programs of this kind—almost all of it on the ground inside Iraq. We are in the process of expanding our coverage to include support from the private sector, with a new gift fund to assist Iraqi women and a new framework for mobilizing other types of professional support. For example, we will soon activate a network of virtual mentoring relationships between American businesswomen and their aspiring Iraqi counterparts, and a series of long-distance e-learning

connections to help them with the skills they need to put their enormous talents to the most productive uses. Such programs will offer a way to help overcome some of the security problems that many Iraqi women unfortunately face today.

In December 2006, staff from this office and from the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor traveled to Iraq to take a fresh, first-hand look at some of these issues and programs on the ground, and report back so that we could brainstorm effectively about how to fine-tune and improve upon our programs.

U.S.-Afghan Women's Council

For Afghanistan, looking ahead, we continue to focus on the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council, a significant public-private partnership supporting practical projects to benefit Afghan women by linking them with each other



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In August 2006, a woman in traditional tribal dress attends a gathering in Pretoria, South Africa, as thousands of people marched to government headquarters in a festive re-enactment of a famed anti-apartheid protest by women against the old regime's racial segregation policies 50 years ago.

and with U.S. resources and expertise. The council was set up by President Bush and Afghan President Hamid Karzai at their very first meeting in January 2002, right after Afghanistan was liberated from the tyranny of the Taliban and their ruthless oppression of women. It brings together leading government officials, private companies, NGOs, and others from both countries, under the chairmanship of Under Secretary Dobriansky and the Afghan ministers of foreign affairs and of women's affairs. Over the past four years, council programs have helped many deserving Afghan women gain the literacy, education, and access to health care and small loans they need to become more fully productive and independent members of their society. In the months immediately ahead, we look forward to activating more such programs with grants we provide through a special gift fund created for this specific purpose.

Mideast Women Leaders

Another exciting project in which we took part is the Mideast Women Leaders in Science and Technology Conference, held in Kuwait from January 8 to 10, 2007. This was yet another collaborative effort, a public-private partnership in the best sense of the term. Inside the State Department, our office worked hand in hand with the Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs (OES). This project brought together regional governments, universities, NGOs, and high-tech firms, all focused on promoting greater progress for women from that region in the crucial fields of science, technology, and engineering. In addition to 100 Kuwaiti women students and scientists, another hundred or so delegates from all around the region took part. On the U.S. side, Under Secretary Dobriansky addressed the conference, along with other senior officials, leading scholars, corporate and foundation executives, and a female astronaut. This unique event provided unprecedented hands-on workshops on proposal writing, publishing, scholarships, marketing, and exchanges of best practices and ideas for aspiring women scientists and engineers.



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Ela Bhatt, microcredit expert and president of Sewa Bank in India, speaks to reporters at a press conference organized by Women Together on the issue of "Women, Development, and Microcredit" held at the United Nations headquarters in New York in April 2006.

Follow-up professional networks and other activities will further empower these women to pursue useful research and rewarding careers and to lead a broad effort to promoting greater modernization in their societies. We were genuinely impressed with the enthusiasm and expertise of the local hosts, the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research.

Other Regions

Looking at other regions of the world, we hosted a special forum in December 2006 on a critical issue for many women in Africa and South Asia: their lack of property rights and the impact this has for poverty, domestic violence, and the incidence of HIV/AIDS. This

forum, modeled after a conference we hosted on the issue of child marriage in July 2006, featured presentations by leading NGOs, such as the International Center for Research on Women, Human Rights Watch, and the Centre for the Rehabilitation and Education of Abused Women in Nairobi, Kenya. This event not only raised awareness of these issues among our colleagues, both inside and outside the State Department, but also stimulated a valuable discussion about new methods that are being used on the ground to address these conditions affecting women.

Finally, turning to the Western Hemisphere, a member of our office recently took part in a major annual multilateral meeting, the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) of the Organization of American States (OAS). Through this commission, we are involved in formulating a common hemispheric approach to broad issues affecting women, with an emphasis at this time on domestic violence and HIV/AIDS. This multilateral dialogue will help to pave the way for the next high-level effort to come to grips with these problems at the OAS General Assembly, scheduled to take place in June 2007. ■

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