

International Visitors' Leadership Program  
**Women's Political, Economic, and Social Empowerment**

October 20, 2011, 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.

U.S.-Afghan Women's Council  
3300 Whitehaven Street NW

On October 20, 2011, the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council hosted a delegation of leaders of non-governmental organizations from Afghanistan to discuss women's political, economic and social empowerment.

**Dr. Jim Savage**, UVA Professor at the Woodrow Wilson Department of Politics, briefed the group on the history of the civil rights and women's movements in the U.S. He explained how disempowered women with few social or legal rights and little legal recourse developed a narrative to fight slavery, demand the right to speak out, and eventually win the right to own property and to vote. The women grounded their narrative in religion to obtain the necessary legitimacy in the face of ministers who used biblical references to oppose them, and in expanding the Declaration of Independence's idea of equality for women as well as for men.

**Ms. Charlie Ponticelli** of the Grossman Burn Foundation addressed the group on combating violence against women, both in the U.S. and Afghan contexts, and moderated a discussion on how to develop a narrative to promote the legitimacy of women's rights in light of Afghan constitutional law, traditional practices, and Islam. Afghan participants said that violence against women was not consistent with Islam and called for greater education – including education in Islam -- to combat the problem. Messaging could be done through the media, including television and radio, as well as taught in schools.

**Ms. Jen Field**, a Vice President in the Office of Corporate Engagement at Goldman Sachs, presented on *10,000 Women*, an initiative of Goldman Sachs to provide business and management to 10,000 women entrepreneurs around the world, including in Afghanistan. She briefed the group on research conducted by The World Bank, Goldman Sachs and others that demonstrates how investing in women is one of the most effective ways to reduce inequality and facilitate inclusive economic growth, leading to more productive workers, healthier and better-educated families, and ultimately to more prosperous communities. Two of the Afghan participants, both graduates of Goldman Sachs *10,000 Women*, spoke briefly about how the program enabled them to advance in Afghan society as well as grow their businesses.

**Ambassador Steve Steiner**, Senior Expert at the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP), delivered an overview of women's political empowerment, underscoring the need for an independent and accessible judicial system as well as public awareness of individual constitutional rights. He emphasized the U.S. commitment to helping Afghans forge a stable democracy that respects the rights of all its citizens. Afghan participants called for raising public awareness about constitutional rights, opportunities for women, and the legal system. They explained that at times constitutional laws were perceived as "neither traditional Afghan nor Islamic law, but American law" and therefore disregarded in practice.

**Ms. Hodei Sultan**, Program Specialist at the U.S. Institute for Peace, pointed out that the formal justice sector in Afghanistan is expensive and often inaccessible; therefore, people tended to go to their tribal and religious elders to solve local disputes. There was some discussion about training tribal elders in constitutional law, human rights, and other key issues.

**Afghan Participants** emphasized the need for education as the foundation of progress, underscoring the need both to develop a strong school system and to use the media to reach the adult population. In the cities television was effective but in the rural areas radio had a much broader reach. How those messages should be fashioned also was discussed. Another option was using mobile theatre troops who could travel from village to village. Text messaging could be another helpful tool, with approximately 30% of women in cities and 5% of women in rural areas owning cell phones (compared to 80% and 30% of men, respectively). Education and social messaging needed to be disseminated throughout all levels of society, they said.