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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

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● (1305)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Order please, colleagues.

This is the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Today is June 10, 2014, and we are having our 33rd meeting.

[*English*]

We are televised.

We are continuing to look into the rights of women in Afghanistan. We have with us as a witness, from Traverse City, Michigan, Staci Haag.

Ms. Haag, we've already discussed off camera the way in which this committee operates, so I invite you to begin your testimony. Thank you.

Ms. Staci Haag (As an Individual): Thank you.

My name is Staci Haag. I am an independent consultant who has worked in both the NGO and the private sectors, specifically focusing on democracy, governance, and women's issues for the past nine years or so. I've just returned from 19 months in Afghanistan, where I served as the communication and outreach director for a large USAID-funded project that was focused pretty specifically on governance from a local level.

I would like to start by thanking the committee for offering me the chance to speak. I've been doing the fieldwork for, as I said, nine or ten years, and a lot of times the gap between the people who design the programs and the people who implement the programs is fairly large, so I really appreciate your taking the time to listen to me.

The general status of women in Afghanistan is not good right now. There have been a lot of studies and a lot of statistics. A recent education study showed that the literacy rate overall for the country is 34%, and for women it's 18%. In the rural areas, where 74% of the country lives, the literacy rate for women is as low as 10%, and it's only in the 30% range for men.

Other reports from organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International show that there has been very little practical progress in addressing basic human rights issues for women, including health care, maternal health, and protecting them from violence. But there are a lot of numbers out there, and I understand that you're just starting your work, so as opposed to giving you a lot of numbers that I'm sure you'll be bombarded with as you process those through, I'd like to give you a couple of caveats to keep in mind as you wade through different statistics.

On the first statistic, the first thing to remember is that a lot of the more rosy reports in Afghanistan tend to show progress at a statistical level: we've had a 100%, a 50%, or a 200% increase. That's great, and I don't want to diminish that, but it's important to keep in mind the starting point, which was very, very grim. When you're going from, say, one to two, and you have a 100% increase, the base is very low. When you're looking at that kind of thing, both in terms of progress recently and in terms of programs that are being implemented, just keep that in mind.

The other thing to remember, which is especially important when you're talking about women, is that a lot of numbers you'll hear will be nationwide; however, there is a lot of diversity, both regionally and ethnically, in terms of access for women to health care, jobs, and education. For anything you look at, it's important to keep in mind where they're coming from. Are they coming from the Pashtun community, the Tajik, or the Hazara? It does have an impact in terms of what the starting point is.

My experience personally in Afghanistan is in implementing programs in the primarily Pashtun areas of eastern Afghanistan. There are a lot of different things I've learned, those in Afghanistan and other things, that I think would be helpful in moving forward.

I've been told to keep this fairly short so we can have a lot of questions. I do have some specific ideas that I think would be helpful in terms of looking at programs that support women in Afghanistan going forward; however, I'd like to start with a story about one of the programs I worked on recently.

Here's the short version. A key component of my job was to oversee advocacy and outreach training for local District Development Assembly members in eastern Afghanistan. One of the areas we worked in was Wardak province in the Sayed Abad district. Sayed Abad is a dangerous district in a dangerous province. The education statistics show that schools are being reopened and girls are getting more access. The reality on the ground is that even when the schools are being reopened, parents feel pressured into not sending their girls, and the number of schools being reopened is much lower than the national average.

What we found in Sayed Abad is that one of the things that worked really well was that a group of local women gathered together and ran what was in essence a textbook advocacy campaign. They decided that they wanted their girls going to school in this area, the Tangi Valley, so they got together and created a group.

Then they negotiated with both the elders and the Taliban, and they got in essence permission to reopen schools. They did not have government support yet, so the schools were in people's homes. They had to raise money in the community to pay for teachers, to pay for books. They had to get volunteers so they could hold classes in people's spare rooms.

Over time, the community hopes to get these schools registered and formalized. These aren't the types of schools that are generally promoted or that you read about in the aid projects, because fancy schools and a lot of books often make better visuals and make people feel like they're making a difference. However, I'd argue that when you take this approach, when you go through the community, it gives these schools a much stronger foundation. The simple reason is that schools that have been deemed necessary by the community and that are then approved and maintained by the people have a much stronger foundation. The quality of education may not be the best. The schools won't look like much from the outside. But getting people used to supporting girls' education, and getting girls used to going to school, is a step rooted in community desire and involvement. That's where I think foreign aid should live, especially as it relates to engaging women in countries like Afghanistan.

The above story is so far a success. Girls are going to school. They're lobbying to get books and buildings and formal registration. Things are moving forward. I've had a lot of times when things didn't get that far and the bulk of my effort was spent finding women to participate. Then, once I did get a group, they would feel intimidated and threatened and would back off. I'd spend entire programs going through that cycle over and over and over again. It is a challenge, but the first challenge before you get to that is often finding the women who are willing to participate.

With that story and those thoughts in mind, I'd like close, before we go to questions, with a few things that I think would be most helpful in terms of supporting women in Afghanistan.

First, I think any program should be rooted in advocacy and governance skills. These are harder programs to implement. They are harder programs to monitor. When you spend money to build a building or a road, it's easy to track progress. Advocacy and governance skills are a lot harder to track. They wax and wane in popularity. But giving people the skills, as we did in Sayed Abad, provides a much more sustainable base on which to build these buildings in the future with the community.

Second, any follow-on activities would be rooted in very specific campaigns giving people the ability and support to advocate to Parliament, or to work within Parliament, to pass legislation.

The third point, however, is that complementary programming must exist and have a long-term focus. The status of women's rights in Afghanistan is a great example. It has shown us that passing good laws means nothing without extensive follow-up, especially in terms of implementation. It is especially important to work on how you're going to implement and enforce legislatively post-victory.

Fourth, although this depends on different programs, the content of any advocacy or legislative advocacy initiatives needs to be the design of the people working on it. They may not be things that outsiders think are important, but if you give people a start on what they choose, they'll have much more investment in this.

Finally, any program should be diverse in community. There can be a very isolationist tendency in aid work to view every country in a vacuum. I think there is a balance between this and the other extreme to treat all people exactly the same. The difference lies in giving local activists and leaders the opportunity to learn from others who have faced similar challenges. Creating a peer and trainer network for advice and feedback is critical to the long-term success of advocacy groups, especially in countries where the ability to self-govern is a recent development.

That is my general overview. I'd like to see who has any questions on that, or any follow-ups.

● (1310)

The Chair: Thank you very much for that. It was very informative.

Based on the time we have, we'll go to seven-minute question and answer rounds. We'll go first to a government member, then an opposition member, and then back to a government member.

We'll start with Nina Grewal, please.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Haag, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for agreeing to speak to our committee today and sharing your insights on this very important issue.

Do you believe that the Karzai government has made a genuine effort to rectify the inequality that women face in Afghanistan? In other words, has there been any kind of improvement in women's rights in the time that he has been president?

● (1315)

Ms. Staci Haag: I think that's a fairly complicated question. I mean, if you look at the time post-Taliban, there have been massive increases because women started at zero.

When I was in Afghanistan, I was less involved in the national piece. I was much more involved at the local district assembly level, so I can't speak as well to the specific activities of Karzai. I can say that since the fall of Taliban, and the new government, there have been obvious increases. However, there are obvious significant lags, especially in terms of enforcement.

I think the great example is the elimination of violence against women law. It was signed to much international fanfare and international support, yet we're still seeing dramatic instances of sustained and systemic violence against women at all levels of society. There are questions about whether the increase is an increase in reporting or an increase in activities. I think that's a valid question. However, in terms of things that specifically the government has done, I think they've been a little better at passing laws than enforcing them. Looking forward, it needs to take a bigger and more important step into looking at the laws that are good and how they can focus on enforcing them.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: What do you believe that Canada can do to improve the women's rights situation in Afghanistan? Which tactics of international pressure do you believe to be the most effective?

Ms. Staci Haag: In terms of international pressure, I think any country that is giving aid to a country has a certain ability to carry conditions of aid with that. If you're giving money to a ministry or a certain group, you can request that women be part of the decision-making process. If there is money going through the department of education—I'm not totally sure how those decisions are made at the micro level—you can say, “I want a woman as one of your four or five seniors if you're going to be implementing this”.

I think that's an area that a lot of aid lacks, in not saying that we want women to at least be sitting at the table when the decisions on distribution are made. That's an important thing that a country can do.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: In light of recent events, such as the tragic killing of a pregnant woman on the courthouse steps by her family, do you feel that the Afghanistan government is willing to fully punish those who commit crimes against women?

Ms. Staci Haag: I don't think there has been that at all. I also think that punishment is also very decentralized. When international pressure has risen, the government has occasionally stepped in to take people.

However, it's also important to remember that so many of these decisions happen at the local level. Any type of reform process has to either push the government to step in or look at reform from the local level up. You can have fancy judges sitting in Kabul making decisions, but when you're in Sayed Abad, or in Zurmat, or in these outlying provinces, those decisions don't reach you.

I think they have when international pressure has arisen, but they don't see those.... It's much more about figuring out how to address this at the local level.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: In your opinion, what is the main cause for the inequality that women are facing in Afghanistan? What is a solution to this problem?

Ms. Staci Haag: If I could answer that, my work would be done.

A lot of it is historical and it's been going on for a long time, but I think a lot of it is war. One of the things you see in times of war is that women are often pushed to the side, “Wait. We're going to fix things. We're going to make peace and then we're going to let you into the process.” That's where the international community has a role and an obligation to say, “No. We're going to make women part of the process. If we're going to have ten people sitting around making a peace decision, we want two of those to be women or this isn't going to move forward.”

Why women are marginalized is a longer question than I think anyone can answer. I think the solutions are about pressure and having the will to back up what you say. “No, I'm not going to give you this until you do these three things.”

● (1320)

Mrs. Nina Grewal: I'll let Mr. Sweet ask the next question, Mr. Chair.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you very much to my colleague.

Thank you very much, Ms. Haag, for being with us.

There are a number of things I want to ask you, but maybe I'll start with this one for all my colleagues to begin their questions with. Do you have an idea of the percentage right now of young girls in school in Afghanistan? I know the regional breakdown creates an issue with the different provinces, but do you have an idea about the percentage?

Ms. Staci Haag: You know, I don't. I have something here that shows that it's gone up fairly significantly since the time of the Taliban, and it's also much higher among younger girls. For instance, I recently read that in Bamyan province and in some of the Hazara provinces, up to 43% of the girls are in school.

In places where I worked, in eastern Afghanistan, in provinces like Paktia province, Wardak province, or Logar province, it changes a bit among districts, but the number can be as low as 10%, 20%, or 30%. It really is a fairly dramatic increase between the different provinces. I'd say that on average, it's probably somewhere between 20% and 40%.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We go now to Mr. Marston, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Staci, I just want to let you know that a number of years ago I spent two wonderful days in Lake Leelanau, not too far from where you are.

In terms of the original reasons we were at war in Afghanistan, they were unrelated to whether women went to school or not. It evolved into the discussion around putting more women in school, because it's a heart-rending issue when you realize the suffering that many of them have gone through as a result of trying to go to school.

Regarding the numbers and the disparity in the numbers you referenced when you started talking, you said that if you started at 3% and you go to 6% and it's a 100% increase, it's still nowhere near enough. Sometimes when we hear these reports I have to question whether those numbers are expressed in that fashion to augment why we were there in the first place.

I spent six months in Saudi Arabia 30 or 35 years ago. The company I was with was doing business with them, and we portrayed the Saudis as being at a certain place when they were quite backward compared to that.

I wonder what your thoughts are on the numbers and how they're being expressed back here.

Ms. Staci Haag: One of the things I did in my job in Afghanistan was to do profiles of the districts. One of the things we would do was to go to the Ministry of Education and ask how many schools were open and how many girls were in school. We would generally get very promising numbers, which is why I wavered so much on the earlier question about the percentage, because I don't think anyone can really give a good percentage. The Ministry of Education would say they had a certain number of schools open and a certain number of girls in school. Then I'd tell my staff to talk to the people in the community and ask if they were sending their girls to school. Depending on the district, sometimes the answer would be, "Yes, it's all good," and sometimes the answer would be, "No, we're not sending any of our girls to school". So it varies.

As I said, I have a fairly specific regional knowledge in terms of the eastern Pashto-speaking areas. But for most districts the government statistics are the best they can do. I don't know if they're purposely padding the numbers, but the bottom line is that if they build 12 schools, they report that they built 12 schools. Whether or not people are able to go to those schools is a completely separate question that often isn't asked.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Again, I'll go back to my experience in Saudi Arabia, and what I'm going to talk about is going to be a bit outrageous. In Saudi Arabia women's access to education was many times greater than what it is where you have been, but the violence against women, in both places, is social and cultural. When I said it's a little bit controversial...female circumcision and the damage done to women in Saudi Arabia, which is supposed to be a more modern country than Afghanistan. In looking at Afghanistan and what they're suffering through.... Even though they pass a law, I found that in that part of the world the laws don't mean a lot, because the culture overrides them and they're ignored in most cases, even by the judiciary.

Is that the case there?

● (1325)

Ms. Staci Haag: Yes. I think I mentioned earlier specifically the elimination of violence against women act, which has received quite a bit of attention for its very poor enforcement and implementation throughout the country.

There are steps that people can take in terms of educating the police and in terms of not only educating women about their rights but also enforcement, i.e., sending people to jail. If 10 men beat their wives and none of them go to jail, nobody will see anything wrong with that. Sometimes you make those shifts by creating consequences for actions. Right now there are not nearly enough consequences for those actions. If 10 men beat their wives and those 10 men go to jail for 10 years, the next 10 men will probably be less likely to beat their wives. It's just the way it works.

Enforcement is so critical, and right now it's really not happening enough.

Mr. Wayne Marston: This country has lived through generations of war, first with the Soviet Union and then with the latest group coming in there and fighting. That has to occupy the psyche of these people in a way that very few other places on earth really know. I think it is, comparatively speaking, part of why they were held so backward in some areas.

You talked about how the more resourceful people are setting up these schools in people's homes. There is obviously a thirst for learning there, and for perhaps at the grassroots level the cultural change that's necessary in the mindset of men. That mindset has to start valuing women in a different way, and valuing their intellect as well, because that's not done at this point in time.

I think that home-school may well be that opening you need.

Ms. Staci Haag: Right. The important thing about it—I don't know how quickly I skipped over it—is that before the schools were started, the first people they went to were the male elders. The male elders provided a conduit to the Taliban, who were ultimately running the village. For whoever was in charge, the bottom line was that in their day-to-day lives they were led by the Taliban. So the male elders provided a conduit. They negotiated, really, with the men, convinced them that this was not something that threatened them, and got these schools open.

So yes, engaging men in this process is absolutely critical. Sometimes you do it by appealing to a father who has a little daughter. Sometimes you do it, as I mentioned earlier, by saying what the consequences are of not doing that. People understand consequences. If someone wants a big new school, a big new refinery, or some other building to be built, and the cost is that they need a woman on their team, they'll do it.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I think that's very clear.

I have one last brief question.

Since some of the international attention has been diverted away from Afghanistan, have you seen a reverting to some of the previous views that were held there?

Ms. Staci Haag: The women I was able to talk to in Kabul were very different from the women out in the rural areas, where I was not really allowed to travel for security reasons. The women I know have a fear of what will happen after everybody pulls out, because they feel that a lot will be pulled back.

Over the last 18 months, I have seen more and more people willing to talk about what they want, which is a good thing. It's a really good thing, but it's baby steps. I can speak only to the previous 19 months, where I feel I've seen some small progress, but the progress started from zero. Going from no girls' schools in Tangi Valley or Sayed Abad to 20 is great; it's just a very small step in the right direction.

● (1330)

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll go now to Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Haag, once again, I appreciate your being here.

I'm going to tag along on my colleague's question. There is a societal, cultural mindset that you're battling along with everything else. I think you're correct that one of the ways is to make sure the laws are enforced. When people are prosecuted and people are jailed, it sends a very strong message.

I'm wondering, have you come across any cultural male champions on the ground who are promoting women's rights in some of these provinces?

Ms. Staci Haag: I cannot speak to any specific names. In a lot of the reports I had, the names were general, more positions, but I can tell you in Sayed Abad, the girls' school is open because the local elders okayed it. In Zurmat, which is in Paktia province, finding women and then losing them and finding them again happened over and over. The reason we were even able to take a baby step forward was that the men said they needed to have women.

Part of it is very calculating. They understand they'll get more aid if they have women who can apply for some of the specific women's programs. It's about getting them to understand the benefit to their community when women are able to apply for the tailoring courses, for the sewing courses. Most local elders are realizing this. They're not stupid; they're very practical people who understand the consequences of this. I don't have any specific names for you, but I can tell you that in a lot of these communities, over the time I was there, I started to see more and more men say they needed to do this because it would help them.

Mr. David Sweet: That's more practical than idealistic.

Ms. Staci Haag: Yes, it is. It is completely practical, which I think is more sustainable, quite frankly.

Mr. David Sweet: Yes.

You mentioned that whatever their percentage was—and you said you weren't able to get a handle on it obviously because of many different factors—it is primarily young girls who are in school.

I have conjecture about it, but I'd rather hear it from you. What happens as the girls get older? Why aren't they retained in school?

Ms. Staci Haag: They're forced to work. They're forced to get married. They're pulled out.

I think it's easier to send a little girl to school because there's nothing else you can really do with her. As a girl gets older, she becomes valuable in different ways to her family, and they start to pull her out. It's definitely about work, family. The same thing happens to boys in rural areas, just for different reasons. Boys might be pulled out to work on the farm. Girls might be pulled out to sew or to get married very young.

Mr. David Sweet: You mentioned that in Afghanistan, with the war mindset, the women were pushed to the side and men we're saying they'll handle this. We've done a number of different studies, or at least heard lots of evidence with regard to rape used as a weapon of war.

How prevalent was that in Afghanistan, the Taliban trying to make a point and demoralizing the men by using that tactic? Did that happen in Afghanistan?

Ms. Staci Haag: I haven't heard a whole lot about it. It doesn't mean it didn't happen; I just cannot speak to that because I have no idea, I'm sorry.

Mr. David Sweet: Okay.

Finally, you mentioned from a ground-zero aspect you can see a lot of progress, but when you compare it to the western world, then it's an entirely different story.

You said the past 18 months, so I assume you've been engaged very intimately in the past 18 months. Along with people talking about what they want, has there been a continuing increase in the conversation about women's rights as well?

Ms. Staci Haag: Yes. In my program very specifically, we actively hired women to work for us. We went from zero to quite a bit. The progress I saw might be, again, overemphasized because I saw zero activity, and then by the time I left 18 months later we had women engaging and advocating for education and smaller things too. In some of the more progressive districts, the women and the men were meeting together in joint advocacy efforts, which is a fairly big step forward, and one of the paths you want to take.

Yes, I've seen progress. You also see a huge number of people coming to Kabul because they feel that will give their kids a better chance at a better education. You also see a lot of girls who get an education want to leave because they don't feel they have a good future, which is damaging, I think, for a country in the long term, but you completely understand why they might want to leave.

● (1335)

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Do you have anything else, Mr. Sweet?

Mr. David Sweet: No, that's fine.

The Chair: Then maybe I can ask a question before we go to Professor Cotler, as Mr. Sweet has a little time left over.

He had raised a question about parents advocating proactively for their daughters to be involved in education. I can certainly understand why a parent would want it. Let me flip it around. I've never understood—and maybe you have some insight into this—what the Taliban has had against women's education. Surely there is no Koranic injunction against women having an education, knowing how to read, and so on. Is it some sort of tribal ideology? What drives this or what has driven it?

Ms. Staci Haag: I think that a lot of it is rooted in fear. My personal opinion is that a lot of the oppression of women, not just in Afghanistan but in a lot of places in the world, is rooted in fear of sharing power. When you keep 50% of your population down so far they can never challenge you, then that's 50% fewer potential opponents you're going to have for power in the future. It is a political decision.

It's also rooted in tradition, in the tribal pre-Islamic tradition. Islam is fairly good on women's rights in a lot of ways, but like everything else, it's open to interpretation, and the Taliban chose an interpretation that keeps people oppressed because the further down you oppress someone, the less likely they are to rise up and challenge you.

The Chair: Right. Do they have an Islamic overlay for explaining why they behave this way, or do they just assert this as a matter of power and it's, "We want women not to be educated. We are the law, and that's that"?

Ms. Staci Haag: I'm sure they've found verses that can support them. I can't think of any off the top of my head, but it's no different from any other religion. You find a verse that supports you and then you go forward and pretend that's the only one that exists.

The Chair: Right, fair enough.

I'll turn the questioning over to Professor Cotler. Thank you.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'd like as well to welcome you, Ms. Haag, and thank you for your presentation and your own experience and involvement in Afghanistan.

You mentioned in your presentation today that passing good laws will not really mean much unless the requisite implementation is there. This brings me to one particular law among others, and that is the elimination of violence against women law, which sought, as you know, to enhance the rights of women and to criminalize violence, in particular domestic violence. How well known is this law? What are the perceptions of it? What, in your view, would be the levels of support for this law among, let's say, the police, the judiciary, and the military?

Ms. Staci Haag: I would say that the law is very well known by the more educated activist women who live in the major cities, and very less well known by the women who it is supposed to help the most, the women who live in the rural areas without access to justice.

In terms of the police and the military, I can't speak specifically to the police in Afghanistan. I have done this in other similar countries, where in my experience the police tend to do what they think is best for the family. A lot of times that's sending the woman back home. I can't imagine it's a whole lot different in Afghanistan than in some of the other places I've worked.

Generally speaking, the law is seen as not really well enforced by anyone. If you were to do a survey outside the major population centres, I would guess that for most women it has had absolutely no impact on their life. A lot of times, in my experience, the women I've worked with, when I hear stories about people addressing domestic violence.... I just heard a story the other day that a woman was walking by a house and heard the woman crying and went in and talked to the husband and got some elders involved, and he agreed to stop beating her. That's how domestic violence, frankly, is being addressed right now, on that kind of personal level, but not at the legal or national level.

● (1340)

Hon. Irwin Cotler: You spoke about the importance of implementation. Given what you just said, do you think that the law at this point, the implementation, will come more in the way you just described rather than having the framework of implementation, mainly the judiciary, the police, both actively educated and involved in the implementation?

Ms. Staci Haag: I think it's both. I think that if there are no consequences for abusers, then they will continue to abuse. A key component of creating consequences is doing a better job of both educating, and quite frankly, forcing the police and the judiciary to play their role. Abusers are being let go, and they're being let out early. As long as that is happening at that kind of macro level, the smaller story I just told you is a finger in a dam. It really does need to happen more at the implementation level, and it's just not right now.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: You mentioned that over the last 18 months more women were prepared to talk about what they want and what may be needed. My question is, in the course of the election campaign itself, were women's issues, the rights of women and girls, part of the discourse in the election campaign?

Ms. Staci Haag: They were. I wasn't involved specifically in the political campaign, so I wasn't as entrenched in that. I know that the women I worked with all had their candidates, and they were all very engaged in talking. Some of the candidates did better. Candidates were more likely, I read, to bring out their wives and talk about it a little more. The general consensus, based on what I read, was that there was a little more conversation about that.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: With the combination of a new leadership on the one hand and American withdrawal on the other, how do people perceive the situation with respect to women's rights in that kind of configuration?

Ms. Staci Haag: My understanding is that women's rights activists are generally pretty scared. They feel, as I said before, that the gains.... There have been gains made, and there is a fear that there will be a rollback once the west basically pulls out, because right now a lot of what's holding some of these positions in place is western pressure. There's a real fear that there will be a rollback when the west pulls out.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Given that understandable fear of a rollback, is there a particular role that Canada could now play, given the prospect of a rollback?

Ms. Staci Haag: A rollback isn't a flat wall down and saying, "We're never going to talk to you again." As I said earlier, I think the role is about constant pressure and setting constant expectations. It's about saying what the consequences are in terms of whatever aid is going forward or whatever trade deals we do, or saying, "Whatever you want from us, this is what we want from you." A lot of the time, these conversations tend to be very one-way in terms of "This is what we're going to give you", but I think as it relates to women, there needs to be a lot more of saying, "These are the strings that come with it". I don't think it's wrong to say that these are strings, and they apply specifically to how women are treated and how they're part of the decision-making process.

I had a fairly short time, so I focused on education because that's the foundation for everything, but as you get into the higher levels, you move more toward the decision-making process. That's where there can be an impact. You can say, if you're going to meet with someone and three other decision-makers that you want one of them to be a woman. Those are the kinds of things that move it forward. They may do it grudgingly at first, but then you get the woman in the room and it goes from there.

● (1345)

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Canada has had experience elsewhere and also in Afghanistan in terms of training those who I would call, in the justice sector, the judiciary, the police, and the like. Would there be a particular role for us here in what I would call, generically speaking, the justice sector, both in involving women in that justice sector, whether it be in the judiciary and the like, and in that kind of implementation of both the legal framework and the situation on the ground?

Ms. Staci Haag: I think that would be a fantastic thing.

As I said, I didn't do this in Afghanistan, necessarily, but one of the things I did do was to work on a women's program in Iraq. One thing I did was that I actually brought police chiefs to groups of women to explain what they would do when the victims of domestic violence came to their station. That gave the women a better understanding.

I didn't have this done just in their community. I had them come to the cities, where women thought things were a little bit better, so that the women could understand exactly what happened and start to think about how they could craft better enforcement of this legislation.

Yes, I think that is an absolutely important thing.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Professor Cotler.

We're going to Mr. Benskin now.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Thank you, Ms. Haag, for your presentation. I've been scribbling notes and trying to figure out where I was going to start.

I'm a big fan of context. I think one of the issues I have—and you have spoken to this or touched on this—is that we, the west, are reshaping the context in which many of these communities are being expected to live. I think we're reshaping that context without the support in terms of....

You gave a wonderful example actually in the domestic violence issue where the woman was walking by and she went into the home and she spoke with the husband. In that moment she gave him a context in which he can see why at this moment it was not a good idea to be beating his wife.

I'm wondering how the west can help provide some of that context. You're speaking of the implementation aspect, but to many of these people, this is a cultural thing: “This is something that has been because it has been, so why should it change now? I'm going to go to jail for doing something that has been done for as long as I can remember, and why is that?”

That's the first part of my question. I guess it ties into the second part on the schools, about the women who went to the elders who then went to the Taliban to arrange for these schools to open.

Again, under what context were these schools allowed to open? On the curriculum in particular, what are they allowed to teach? Are there any restrictions on what they can teach these young women?

Ms. Staci Haag: I'll start with the second part first.

In terms of the context and what they are teaching, I don't know. To be very clear, I think one of the mistakes that sometimes happens in aid is we get too into those details. What I wanted was them to find something they wanted to happen and make it happen.

The quality of the education and what they are being taught probably isn't great. It might not be the best school, but what they are doing is they are setting a new standard where every day for six months of the year, girls get up and go to school. Right now they stop for the winter season, and they stop for the summer season, so it's really probably four, five, or six months. But they are starting a new tradition of girls going to school.

What they learn, and the structure they learn in, those are things we can continue to build on down the road. I don't actually think what they are learning is as important right now as the fact they are starting to learn things. The books are donated. The teachers are scraped from the community. My understanding is they are learning some basic math skills, reading and writing, and that's all.

The larger thing I don't know, but I also don't think we should know too much at this stage. That's a second, third, or fourth step down the line.

Your other question was in terms of the context for the domestic violence. Is that correct?

● (1350)

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Yes. The context in terms of I guess we're saying, “We will do this if you stop doing this”—all of which is good—“If you include women, if you stop domestic violence, we will give you this.”

You said earlier that there are very pragmatic reasons which at least stop it immediately, but in terms of the fear of the rollback and slipping back into old habits. there needs to be something that educates or puts a different spin or a different context in their minds in order to sustain those changes. I wonder if you agree.

Ms. Staci Haag: Kind of, I do, but I also think context changes over time with enforcement. In many western countries, in Canada, in the U.S., we've had some horrible beliefs and some horrible things that changed through legislation. People might grouse about it, but they don't want to suffer the consequences of breaking it. Long term down the line you get future generations who say, “Our country did that? My parents did that?”

I think the context is sometimes you have to implement. Sometimes you have to enforce, and give it time, because I think younger generations also are much more open to some of these changes.

The other thing is when you talk about cultural context, you're talking about the male culture may be to abuse his wife, but I have yet to meet a woman who thinks that's okay. It's also about respect.

My point is it's also about respecting the culture of the entire country, because there are many people who don't think it's okay. The people who do think it's okay sometimes get a little bit of a higher platform, and it's an important thing, I think, to remember that in some ways it's not about radically changing the culture or the context; it's about respecting a large group of people who haven't had a chance to have a voice in naming the context.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Thank you.

The Chair: Is that it?

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

We do have another item of business on an unrelated subject that we have to deal with, and I just want to make sure that we can fit it in. Are we at a stage where we can deal with that?

Mr. David Sweet: I just wanted to ask one question.

The Chair: In that case, Mr. Sweet, we can go back to you for a few minutes.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you, Chair.

I want to ask about this horrendous case regarding Sahar Gul, the 13-year-old who was imprisoned. They pulled out her fingernails. It was a horrific case. Her in-laws were tried, convicted, sentenced to 10 years, and then released after one year.

Ms. Staci Haag: Yes, after a year.

Mr. David Sweet: Has the government taken any action on this case yet?

Ms. Staci Haag: Not to my knowledge, but that doesn't mean they haven't. My last information was that they were released after a year and that people were complaining but nothing was happening. Again, it doesn't mean that nothing has happened. To my knowledge, nothing more has happened. That's my most recent information.

Mr. David Sweet: All right.

You mentioned the Taliban a number of times. That's of course extremely troubling for us.

You were talking about outlying villages and provinces, etc. Is that where you're talking about the elders going to see them, or is this happening right in Kabul?

Ms. Staci Haag: In outlying areas. I think Kabul is very strongly in the control of the government.

In other areas of Afghanistan, it changes. There are some areas of Afghanistan that are still completely controlled by the Taliban, where they are the people in charge. It is something that is a reality. It is a bad reality, but it is a reality, so it has to be at least acknowledged. These schools wouldn't have opened without their permission, because they're in charge there. We have to understand that for the people in these communities, that's the reality they live with every day.

Mr. David Sweet: I just want a little more information on that, Ms. Haag. You know that by testimony of the people in these villages, or have you witnessed these kinds of interactions yourself?

Ms. Staci Haag: No. It's just from the people in the villages who talk about it. All my staff is from the area. They have checkpoints.

Mr. David Sweet: All right.

One of your answers—and I concur with you—was that obviously creating initially a cultural habit, a tradition, of going to school is an important one, but there are mechanisms on the ground to make sure, or to at least begin the process of trying to improve the education on a progressive basis. Is my assumption correct?

● (1355)

Ms. Staci Haag: Yes. One of the challenges of how much aid is going into Afghanistan is that there are a lot of action plans. There are a lot of strategic plans. There is a beautifully written 87-page paper by the Afghan Ministry of Education, funded by UNESCO, on improving literacy. It's just that a lot of this stuff happens in Kabul, and it doesn't always feed well to the people who need it most.

Mr. David Sweet: How many international partners fund your programming?

Ms. Staci Haag: Well, I'm no longer there, but my old program was funded by USAID.

Mr. David Sweet: USAID exclusively?

Ms. Staci Haag: Yes.

Mr. David Sweet: So USAID and Canada are obviously there. Are there still other international partners that are on the ground and funding this kind of work?

Ms. Staci Haag: Yes. The Australians are still there. My understanding is that the larger NGOs that get this kind of work, like the IRC or the IRG, are all still working there.

Mr. David Sweet: Are they to a great degree exercising the accountability you were talking about in terms of pushing for results and pushing for women to be involved, or do you see a general malaise around that?

Ms. Staci Haag: I'm a little hesitant to speak to other programs.

I know that even I initially got a bit of pushback when hiring women in my own program. I think there is this tendency to be overly cautious in terms of this being against the culture, when instead there are plenty of women who want this. As I said earlier, we're respecting half of the culture when we exclude the women. There are a lot of educated, bright women in Afghanistan who want to participate but feel intimidated or threatened. I think one thing the international community can do is to do their best to seek out those women and ask for their participation in these programs.

Mr. David Sweet: I would concur with you that being overly cautious is usually epidemic in foreign affairs. In fairness, there are some good reasons for that. But sometimes we all understand that case all too intimately.

Thank you very much, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

What we should do at this point is thank you, Ms. Haag, for your testimony. We very much appreciate the fact that you were able to come before us and were able to provide as thorough a testimony as you did. It's appreciated by all of us, so thank you very much.

Ms. Staci Haag: Thank you very much for your time. I appreciated the opportunity.

The Chair: It was a real pleasure.

Colleagues, we are going to deal now with another item of business. Let's suspend, go in camera, and then return in camera.

Thank you.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]