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## NATO PROVINCIAL RECONSTRUCTION TEAMS NEED A GENDER POLICY, SAY AFGHAN ADVOCATES

September 6, 2007, Kabul and Washington DC: Advocates for women's rights in Afghanistan are urging NATO to develop a gender policy for NATO's 25 provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs), in an effort to better address the needs of women and bridge the gap between military and civilian reconstruction efforts.

The case is being made by the Afghan Women's Network (AWN), which comprises 57 Afghan women's organizations. It was presented last week at a PRT meeting in Kabul by Afifa Azim, the AWN Director and Audrey Roberts, a Peace Fellow of the Advocacy Project (AP) who volunteered with the AWN this summer.

PRTs include military and civilian personnel and have a mandate for security and reconstruction, but this mixed role has caused controversy since PRTs were first deployed in January 2003. Many civil society organizations are reluctant to work with PRTs out of concern that they will be associated with NATO's military effort and exposed to reprisals. The concern has increased after a summer of suicide attacks, hostage-taking, and attacks on aid workers.

The AWN argues that this split between security and relief has weakened reconstruction, and points out that PRTs are already key players in the rebuilding of Afghanistan. As of May, PRTs were administering over 7,500 development projects at a cost of over \$630 million, often in isolated areas where NGOs cannot work.

But, says the AWN, the quality of PRT aid would be greatly improved by a policy on gender, and it recommends that NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) recruits a gender advisor and hire gender "focal points" for all teams.

PRTs should promote the presence of women at regional and district meetings, and consult more with NGOs and Afghan women's civil society, says the AWN. PRTs should also identify "safe space" where women can meet them without compromising their security or affronting cultural sensitivities. The success of PRT projects should be measured by whether women are participating in "governance structures."

PRTs have reacted with caution to the proposal, and the AWN accepts that it might appear to dilute their military mission and threaten their autonomy. PRTs are led by individual governments, and can have widely differing priorities and budgets. But, says the AWN, a coordinated policy on gender would bring more uniformity and focus into the PRT's development work.

Furthermore, says the AWN, investing in women builds security and projects which fail to engage women are unlikely to succeed. In one case, women did not use a PRT-funded road because it led to a government center rather than clinics or schools. In Paktika province, 75 women were invited to a meeting on reconstruction, but none attended because the location – the governor’s office - was considered unsafe.

A strong PRT policy on gender would also be consistent with efforts to harmonize the multilateral aid effort. PRTs were brought under ISAF last October and ISAF itself is subject to the authority of the UN Security Council, which has called for gender to be mainstreamed into peace-building.

This August, humanitarian agencies and security forces in Afghanistan drafted new guidelines on civil-military co-operation (CIMIC) which call for the involvement of “greater numbers of women in all levels of decision-making and in field-based operations.” Gender was included at the insistence of the AWN and other NGOs.

Once a new PRT gender policy is developed, the AWN recommends that it be boiled down into key guidelines and printed on pocket checklists which can be distributed to all PRT personnel. In a welcome sign that the AWN’s advocacy is finally getting results, AWN learned today that gender checklists will be developed.

The AWN has recruited a new advocacy consultant, and plans to continue lobbying NATO in Afghanistan and with member governments. If and when the PRT heads agree on a policy, it would pass to a steering committee of ambassadors for approval.

- For the AWN recommendations, and background papers, visit [http://awn-af.net/cms/contact\\_layout](http://awn-af.net/cms/contact_layout)
- For Audrey Roberts’ blogs visit <http://advocacynet.org/author/audrey/>

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