

# Civil-Military Cooperation: An Opportunity for Women?

**Recent developments present possibilities to improve participation by women.**

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**I**N HER TESTIMONY BEFORE THE Senate Foreign Relations Committee this April, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton presented an image of an egalitarian relationship between civilian and military actors: “First, civilians complement and build upon our military’s efforts in conflict areas like Iraq and Afghanistan. Second, they use diplomatic and development tools to build more stable and peaceful societies, hopefully to avert or end conflict that is far less costly in lives and dollars than military action.” We in the development community welcome the idea of an equal partnership after a period of time in which funding for defense assistance has exponentially trumped that of development assistance; we welcome the call for a “civilian surge.”

As the Obama administration looks to define itself in the world generally and in Iraq and Afghanistan in particular, a new opportunity is emerging to redefine civil-military cooperation as a true partnership in which both communities participate fully. The administration’s evident emphasis on women’s issues (President Obama signed the Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act into law his first day in office, created a White House Council on Women and Girls on International Women’s Day and has created the new position of Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women’s Issues in the State Department) coupled with recent developments in the mandate of civil-military mechanisms such as the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) indicate an opportunity for the engagement of women as leaders and partners in the quest for global security and development.

While this assertion may seem a bit of a stretch within the traditional

realm of civil-military cooperation, there is some evidence that this is not only possible but already an emerging reality. The PRTs provide an interesting case study.

Originally designed as a forum for equal partnership between civilian and military actors engaged in the reconstruction efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the PRTs quickly became military-dominated. Inability to fill civilian positions on the PRTs meant that the men and women of the armed services were increasingly called upon to perform development tasks for which they often lacked necessary expertise. Troops were tasked with such tradi- ▶

*Women are engaged in much of the reproductive work that rebuilds societies after conflict, and can be key partners in reconstruction efforts.*



Photo: Women for Women International

**In post-genocide Rwanda, a constitutional quota for women's parliamentary participation has paved the way for the country's current achievement of 56 percent, the world's greatest female representation in government.**

tionally civilian-run projects as constructing schools and hospitals, often with less-than-ideal results.

Women for Women International Afghanistan country director Sweeta Noori recalls one example: "[The PRTs] built a hospital in Jalalabad, a fine hospital, and were eager to see it put to use. But they forgot to communicate this to the Ministry of Health, which had no plans to support a hospital in that location, and the building stands empty to this day." Noori shakes her head as she recalls the confusion. "Any mother or caretaker in the community could have told them this was not the proper place to build a hospital. We know where our sick and our injured have need for medical facilities. It was unfortunate."

In this instance, consulting community stakeholders—especially women, who care for the sick and infirm—would have quickly made clear the actual needs surrounding the

proposed hospital-construction project.

The conflict/post-conflict context in which much of civil-military cooperation takes place has proven a unique opening for advancing the status, participation and rights of women. Quotas for women's political participation are possible in new constitutions, as we have seen in Iraq and Afghanistan. In post-genocide Rwanda, a constitutional quota for women's parliamentary participation has paved the way for the country's current achievement of 56 percent, the world's greatest female representation in government. (The country, one might add, is an island of socioeconomic stability amid a tide of insecurity and conflict throughout the Great Lakes region.) Also in Rwanda, women led the way forward in the country's reconstruction and recovery efforts, organizing to adopt children orphaned by conflict and participating fully in new structures for democratic governance at all levels. This is an encouraging body of evidence pointing to the critical role women have to play in the construction of stronger communities and nations.

Remarks by Secretary Clinton at an April 2009 town hall meeting of Iraqi PRT leaders demonstrate a renewed commitment to women's development, empowerment and full participation in civil-military efforts. She said, "I believe strongly that supporting and empowering women is good for countries ... I believe that Iraq will be much stronger if women are educated and empowered to participate on behalf of themselves and their families, particularly their children, as Iraq makes a new future."

There are heartening indications that these words will be translated into practice within the existing civil-military framework. Noori reports encouraging conversations with PRT representatives in Afghanistan who are newly interested in engaging women in their efforts to rebuild the fractured and poverty-stricken country. "I had a wonderful conversation with the PRTs, who are looking to support and learn from Afghan women moving forward. I'm very excited by the idea that women might access the opportunity to develop their own potential as leaders and participants in Afghanistan's social, political and economic realms, and, in so doing, contribute to a stronger, more stable Afghanistan."

Noori is hopeful that this and other developments signify a genuine indication that progress is being made toward a new era of balanced civil-military cooperation that leverages the distinct knowledge and capacities of women toward the twin goals of security and development. "I think that we can help each other to achieve our common goals. In a recent survey we conducted among 1,500 Afghan women, the women identified the inseparability of security and development: 66 percent identified security as the primary challenge facing the state, and 81 percent identified the need for commodities, job opportunities and services as primary challenges they faced on a daily basis. We need the military to provide a secure environment in which we can do our work. And the military needs us to sustain that stability and cement peace through the creation of opportunities for social, political and economic participation. I'm looking forward to working together for a more peaceful, stable Afghanistan, of which women are going to be an integral part. And in my conversations with the PRT representatives in Afghanistan, they're equally excited about us and ready to support our work with women." **MD**

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Page 32

**Developing Networks  
As Community Assets**

**Payment for  
Environmental Services**

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The Worst  
Possible  
Scenario**

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