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Senate

Statement of Senator Dianne Feinstein

“International Women’s Day”

MRS FEINSTEIN: Mr. President, gender equality is critical to peace and prosperity around the world. As we become more interconnected, it is crucial that the rights of women are recognized by all countries as fundamental human rights because countries which value women’s rights are more stable, freer, and more prosperous. Therefore, it is befitting that I rise today to commemorate, March 8, 2005, International Women’s Day.

The genesis of International Women’s Day comes from a number of provocative moments in history. On March 8, 1857, women working in the textile and clothing industry in New York City staged a protest demanding better working conditions and higher wages. More than 50 years later on March 8, 1908, 15,000 women marched through New York City in support of voting rights, shorter work hours, and an end to child labor.

It is because of these strong and courageous women that we recognize today as International Women’s Day. They lit the torch for gender equality and passed it down through the generations to us. We have a duty and a responsibility to continue their noble work and I am ready to do so by ensuring that the voices of women from around the world are heard loud and clear.

Mohandas K. Gandhi once said, “There is no occasion for women to consider themselves subordinate to men.” Yet, even today, there are places around the world where this is not the case. If the United States aims

to be a great champion of the rights of women and girls for the rest of the world, we must do more to promote respect for women as well as increase their participation in every aspect of a country’s civic, political, and economic life. Today, I would like to highlight several issues related to women that require decisive leadership: the role of women in Iraq and Afghanistan, international family planning programs, and the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Iraq

We all know that Iraq can only complete a peaceful transition to a country based on the rule of law, human rights, and democracy with the full participation of women. One year ago today, the United States sought to assist Iraq on this path when the Department of State established the Iraqi Women’s Democracy Initiative along with the U.S. Iraqi Women’s Network. Through these grants, the U.S. reached out to Iraqi women and informed them of the importance of their vote and role in the new Iraq.

On January 30, 2005, the world watched as 58 percent of Iraqi voters turned out for an election in which 25 percent of the candidates running were women. In the months following the elections, special training will focus on constitution drafting, legal reform, and the legislative process, so that women may ensure their rights are enshrined in the new constitution. While I am encouraged by recent positive events, we must remain vigilant and encourage our Iraqi friends to put the

active and meaningful participation of women in the new Iraq at the top of their agenda.

Last year, Women for Women International commissioned a survey of Iraqi women and found that despite ethnic, educational, religious, and economic differences, an overwhelming majority of women in Iraq support a strong role for themselves in the new Iraq. Of the women surveyed, 94 percent want to secure legal rights for women, 84 percent want the right to vote on the final Constitution, and 95 percent think there should be no restrictions on education. It is the duty of the United States to assist Iraqi women in realizing these goals and I encourage my colleagues to continue to support funding for women’s initiatives in Iraq.

Afghanistan

One of the great success stories of our campaign against terrorism is the liberation of the women and girls of Afghanistan from the brutal oppression of the Taliban regime. Under the Taliban, women in public were forced to cloak themselves in shroud-like burkas while being accompanied by a male relative or else risk being beaten mercilessly. Most Afghan women were restricted by the Taliban from working, receiving an education, from visiting doctors, and from receiving humanitarian aid.

Now, the women of Afghanistan have the opportunity to build a better life for themselves and their families. More and more women

in Afghanistan are getting an education, earning a living, receiving medical attention, and participating in public life.

In fact, I was pleased to hear that Hamid Karzai made history last week when he appointed Habiba Sarabi as Afghanistan's first female provincial governor.

During the Taliban regime, Ms Sarabi fled from Kabul to Pakistan. Following the removal of the Taliban from power in 2001, she was selected for Mr. Karzai's cabinet and instantly became a not just for women and girls, but for all Afghans. Her story is truly a testament to the remarkable turnaround taking place in Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, obstacles still remain that prevent women and girls from reaching their full potential.

A recent U.N. report from UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to the Economic and Social Council's Commission on the Status of Women states, "that while the status of women and girls has improved, overall progress has been uneven. The volatile security situation and traditional social and cultural norms continue to limit women's and girls' role in public life and deny them the full enjoyment of their rights. The massive needs in terms of reconstruction of infrastructure and strengthening of human capacity, including in the fields of education and health care, will require the sustained attention and support of national actors and the international community for many years to come."

Our victory in Afghanistan will be lost if women and girls are not afforded basic human rights and equal opportunity. The United States must not forget our commitment to provide a better future for Afghan women of all ages and I urge my colleagues to stay the course and support additional assistance for education, health care, and democracy training for women and girls in the years ahead.

CEDAW

Once again, as we commemorate International Women's Day, I regret to point out that the Senate has still not acted on the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The Convention, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979, has been ratified by 179 countries to date, including every other democracy in the world.

By ratifying the Convention, States commit themselves to take appropriate steps to eliminate discrimination against women in political and public life, law, education, employment, health care, commercial transactions, and domestic relations.

I am shocked and disappointed that the United States has failed to ratify this Convention. Every year we fail to ratify this important Convention, we compromise our ability to lead the world as the torchbearer for women's rights. Not only would signing the Convention reaffirm our nations' leadership role on these issues, it would bring us closer with our friends and allies who have already ratified the pact. I urge the Senate to act on the Convention this year.

International Family Planning

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) is the single largest global source for maternal health and family planning programs, working in over 140 countries.

Nevertheless, since 2002, the Bush Administration has withheld over \$90 million in vital U.S. contributions to UNFPA because of its perceived ties with China's family planning program and policies. The Administration has taken these actions despite a report from a State Department fact finding team that the UNFPA in no way supported or was involved in coercive abortions or involuntary sterilization. As a result of Administration actions, millions of poor women and families have been deprived of desperately needed care.

The work of UNFPA benefits women in need around the world. In the wake of the horrific tsunami that struck South Asia, UNFPA has been working to ensure that women and girls in this area are receiving the care they need. UNFPA's priorities are reproductive health, including safe childbirth, prevention of violence against women and girls, and psychosocial counseling for those affected by the 26 December tsunami.

In early January, UNFPA asked for \$28 million to support its tsunami-related work in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Maldives as part of the United Nations interagency Flash Appeal. A month later, over 70 per cent of the requested funding had been received or pledged from various donors, including Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, China, Norway, and New Zealand. The United States is absent from this list.

No woman should be prevented from receiving the assistance she deserves to plan and care for healthy families. We need to ensure that women have access to the educational and medical resources they need to control their reproductive destinies and their health so they will be able to better their own lives and the lives of their families.

Women are the backbone of our global society. They are our mothers, our sisters, our daughters, and our grandmothers. They nurture us and teach us the lessons of life and how to be a better person. As such, I am proud to commemorate March 8, 2005, as International Women's Day.

There are many great many issues facing women and the United States. However, I confident and optimistic we can address problems such as family planning, the burgeoning roles of women in Iraq and Afghanistan, and eliminating all forms of discrimination against women.

As a United States Senator, I truly believe it is our duty as the leader of the free world to address and

seek workable solutions to every
problem that women face around the
world. We can – and we must.