

On October 20th, Moscow will host a meeting to discuss the political future of Afghanistan. This dialogue represents critical opportunity for Russian leadership: were it to contribute to the stability and prosperity of Afghanistan, its impact would be felt far beyond the Afghan borders.

Plenty of evidence suggests that societies where women and girls have the same opportunities as men fare much better. The status of women in a country is closely linked to the security and success of that country. Afghanistan, sadly, has a horrible track record in this regard.

The Russian Constitution guarantees equality between women and men, and Russia is a party to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (in both cases unlike the US). In keeping with the spirit of these commitments, Russia has an extraordinary opportunity in organizing the October 20th meeting to have a powerful impact on the future of girls and women in Afghanistan, which will help the country survive and thrive.

The situation is dire for all Afghans. The country is on the brink of starvation, and in recognition of this urgent need, more than one billion dollars has been pledged to provide humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people. Putting Afghan women front and center in this process will help ensure that these funds get where they are most needed and best used. Evidence increasingly shows that women increase efficiency in the allocation of resources. The World Bank has documented the important role of women in the economy, finding that economic growth is stronger and more sustainable when women and men alike fully participate in the labor market. And when women control more income, families benefit with more funds spent on child nutrition, health and education.

The human rights of Afghan women and girls are not only a matter of principle, they are intrinsically strategic to the future of the country,

which benefits all Afghans and will help promote political stability as well as economic development. Peace agreements that have women's participation increases the probability of a peace agreement lasting at least two years by 20 percent, increases the probability of a peace agreement lasting 15 years by 35 percent. Again, the inclusion of women is not only the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do.

I recently chaired a Women's Forum on Afghanistan bringing together global women leaders and Afghan women leaders, who are all committed to the protection and promotion of women's rights in Afghanistan. All agree that humanitarian aid is an urgent priority, and that recognition of fundamental human rights is not incompatible with this priority but will rather advance its effective delivery. All agree that what happens in Afghanistan will affect the rest of the world, that we are all in this together.

We hope Russia will be with us in this effort and champion the inclusion of Afghan women and girls, as well as recognition by all of the fundamental and universal principles that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.