

# What's Next for Democracy and Women's Rights in Afghanistan?

*A Bipartisan Congressional Dialogue with Rep. Susan Davis (D-CA) and Rep. Martha Roby (R-AL)*

United States Institute of Peace

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Transcript

## **Nancy Lindborg:**

Good morning everybody. Good morning, my name is Nancy Lindborg. I am the president and CEO here at the U.S. Institute of Peace and [I am] delighted to welcome everybody here for another of our Bipartisan Congressional Dialogue series. This is an important platform for members of Congress who are working from opposite sides of the political aisle to advance their shared interest and common priorities. I'm very pleased to welcome here today Congresswoman Davis, a Democrat representing California's fifty-third district, and Congresswoman Martha Roby, a Republican representing Alabama's second district, to discuss their shared interests in democracy and human rights in Afghanistan.

It's especially fitting that we're able to celebrate their bipartisan spirit, because this is the same spirit that led to USIP's founding 35 years ago this week. We're celebrating our anniversary of when Congress founded USIP to be a national, nonpartisan independent institute dedicated to preventing, mitigating and resolving violent conflict, which we do around the world by linking research and policy training and support for those on the front lines of seeking to prevent and resolve violent conflict.

Afghanistan has been one of our top priorities since 2002, and we've worked to build peace both from the top-down and the bottom-up, working with Afghan government, the U.S. government, civil society, women. Today, support to the Afghan peace process is a top priority for USIP. We have put considerable effort into supporting research, dialogues, skills building workshops and policy analysis, both here in Washington and in Afghanistan. We know from both research and conviction that for peace to be sustainable, it must be inclusive.

Even since the Congresswoman's visit, last visit in May, the situation in Afghanistan continues to be very fluid and very complicated. We've seen that the peace process is now suspended. Afghanistan just had elections. The Taliban in Afghan government are in a military stalemate, ISIS and Al Qaeda retain footholds in Afghanistan. Most of all it's the Afghans, and it's the Afghan women and children who continue to suffer tremendously. The need for peace is palpable, and whatever lies ahead we know that the way forward must provide both lasting security and preserve the hard-won gains. That's why this morning's conversation is so important.

Congresswoman Davis and Congresswoman Martha Roby have played critical roles in ensuring that American policy focuses on protecting the gains for women and democracy in Afghanistan. Throughout their time in public service, they have been steadfast supporters, both of U.S. service members in Afghanistan, particularly service women, as well as Afghan women. Together they have co-led annual bipartisan trips to Afghanistan every Mother's Day, where they visit U.S. service members. They meet

with Afghan women, including those serving in the Afghan security forces and Afghanistan's parliament. They were there again last Mother's Day.

Throughout her work on the Armed Services Committee, Congresswoman Davis has effectively led advancements for military families and service women, especially those stationed in Afghanistan. Congresswoman Roby, similarly, is a committed champion for U.S. service members, particularly those stationed in Afghanistan. We are really fortunate to have such committed members of Congress, and we're delighted to have them here with us today.

I want to quickly just note that we are very lucky to have three of our board members here with us. Joe Eldridge, Judy Ansley and Steve Krasner in from California, welcome. For those following the event online, especially those who are waking up early from the districts in California and in Alabama, I want you to invite you to join the conversation on Twitter @USIP, using the hashtag #BipartisanUSIP. With that, please welcome me in joining our two distinguished Congresswomen to the stage.

**Martha Roby:**

Davis start.

**Susan Davis:**

Good morning, good morning, it's so wonderful of you all to be here and join us. Martha and I love to talk about our experiences, and we're just delighted that USIP is bringing more attention to this. I know we have some wonderful folks in the audience, who have been engaged in issues around Afghanistan for years, particularly in women's empowerment. I'm delighted to see all of you.

I'm always honored to join Martha. We are from different political parties of course, and different parts of the country. I could never get elected in Alabama for sure.

**Martha Roby:**

I'm pretty sure I couldn't get elected in California.

**Susan Davis:**

I'm sure Martha would charm everybody in San Diego. I think that there would be some gaps there, but we certainly share common values of peace, women's empowerment and the democratization of Afghanistan. As you'll be able to tell, we really care a lot about each other, we really love each other. We've learned to just develop this very, very special friendship over the years.

Since 2007, on or around Mother's Day, as certainly you've heard from Nancy— and Nancy, thank you so much for that wonderful introduction— I've led a bipartisan group of women's members of Congress, to visit Afghanistan and specifically to visit with our deployed mothers. As you well know, there are many

women who have been serving in Afghanistan. The most amazing thing is to sit down with them and go through all the pictures of their very young children. There's not a dry eye at that time meeting with them.

While we were doing that, we also were very focused on attending *shuras* and really going beyond what we thought some members might have been thinking about. Of course, we started this relatively early. I actually got into the country earlier than seven, I think one of the first CODELS to go in. As mentioned in the questions, I happened to meet some women who had been part of the underground, really, with the Taliban. They were so inspiring.

We wanted to meet with everyday women who were doing incredible things. While we were seeing our deployed mothers, we were including more and more Afghan women. Going out to more remote areas, which is when we started going to Zabul Province, to being in Kulad where we had a provincial reconstruction team, which was the reason that we were able to go there of course. Without security, they wouldn't let us in.

[We] began then seeing these incredible stories of resilience and triumph over adversity that so many of the women had experienced. In recent years, we actually have not been able to travel outside of Kabul as much, although we had a little breakthrough our last visit, but we still have found ways appearing from women who are making a difference in serving their country in every imaginable way. In the government, in business, working very, very hard, again, despite barriers to their engagement. We certainly were able to appreciate firsthand how vital it is that we empower young girls of Afghanistan, to become leaders particularly in national security. That became a focus over the last number of years.

From my service, an experience on the Armed Services Committee I see that peace is always better served when women participate and make decisions. These trips, of course, inspired us. The women, again, were so inspiring that we began in the National Defense Authorization Act to put in some money, to have funds to train and employ more Afghan women in the security services. We've seen great progress in that, but it's not without issues, as you certainly know.

Facilities that were earmarked for women have been taken over by men. Initially, we saw that, and then even in our last trip, we were somewhat disappointed to see that they weren't able to quite have it work the way we had hoped. Recruitment is still not where it should be, and of course there's violence that many of the recruits face going back and forth, even from their work. We wanted to keep pushing on that as well.

What now? Last month as you know, the U.S. Taliban talks were suspended. Many feared that the U.S. might leave Afghanistan with or without a peace deal. I'm grateful to hear just recently from Ambassador Khalilzad that they continue to discuss ways to revive the peace process after talks had fallen apart. My hope is that the Afghan government and particularly Afghan women are included of course in the dialogue as avenues are explored to satisfy major stakeholders.

I wanted to share with you, because I just came from a NATO parliamentary session meeting. There's a draft resolution on recent developments in Afghanistan. Initially, they were speaking about meaningful contributions by women, that wasn't good enough. I wanted to be sure that they said something about how important they are at the peace negotiation table. There is language that now says, "To do

everything possible to ensure that Afghan women have seats at the table during peace negotiations and to support a final settlement that preserves a hard-won rights of Afghan women and girls."

**Martha Roby:**

Yay.

**Susan Davis:**

That is part of the NATO parliamentary session, and I was happy to be there at that time. The other thing just to share with you very, very quickly, I brought two little props here. One is a book called *A Seat at the Table: Congresswomen's Perspectives on Why Their Presence Matters*, and I just had to tell Martha that she's in the book as well. They actually highlight our trip in several different places. They talk about the fact that women have gone on these bipartisan trips, so that's exciting.

The other thing was that the, with Mrs. Ghani, there were a number of peace *shuras* throughout all of the provinces. I have that book with me and I have looked at this several times. When you think about these rural areas that women are living in, and that they came together during this time. In the most eloquent way talked about how important peace is to them, it's quite moving. I'm sure it's available somewhere, but I wanted to bring it with me today. I look forward to having the questions from all of you. Thank you.

**Martha Roby:**

Well good morning, thank you all for having me here this morning. My name is Martha Roby, and I proudly represent Alabama's second district. Throughout my time in Congress, I've had the privilege to serve on several committees that directly influence this country's foreign policy initiatives. Namely, my first three years on the House Armed Services Committee with my friend Susan and the House of Appropriations Committee for the last six years. Most recently, this Congress, I was asked to serve on the State and Foreign Operations subcommittee on Appropriations. In this role, I've been a part of many negotiations regarding funding levels for the countless assistance programs that we have overseas.

I've also used Congress's oversight, Congressional oversight power to question members of the executive branch about the U.S. strategy abroad. I believe that process is important, and we need to remain committed to upholding our own democratic principles of checks and balances when making foreign policy decisions. In addition to my official duties related to foreign policy for the past eight years, my good, good friend Susan— and I can't say enough about her— have led this all female Mother's Day CODEL to Afghanistan.

During these trips we have been given the opportunity to meet with our service women, as Susan has already discussed, who are away from their families on Mother's Day, and it is hard to talk about this

without getting emotional. When you look into these women's eyes as they are serving our country abroad, it's just amazing to hear their stories about their families.

It's so important for members of Congress to see up close our policy, how our policy decisions impact the lives of so many Americans at home and abroad. I've been able to use what I've learned during these trips, to make more informed decisions about military spending and defense policy.

These trips also have afforded me the opportunity to reaffirm my commitment to improving circumstances for Afghan women. While gains have undoubtedly been made since 2001, it's critical that American leaders remain engaged to ensure continued forward momentum for these women. It's my belief that a peace deal, a true lasting peace in the country, will not be reached unless all facets of the Afghan community have a seat at the negotiating table.

Before I come and sit down and answer your questions, I just want to take a moment to thank the Institute of Peace for hosting this important and very, very timely event at a time when the future in Afghanistan is uncertain. These conversations are so important, and I'm really honored to be a part of it. I do want to say to my friend Susan, thank you so much.

In this environment in which we currently live, I think it's important for you to see that there are true and real relationships across party lines in the House of Representatives and in the Congress. The relationship that I have with Susan is just that, it's real, it's sincere. When you travel with someone like Susan and I have, when you go to Kabul for the weekend together, on multiple occasions over Mother's Day or around Mother's Day, you not only learn a lot about each other in policy, but you learn a lot about our families and just really have formed a real friendship.

If anything, we have lots of important things to discuss today, but if anything, I would like for all of you to leave encouraged today knowing that these relationships exist in Congress. That they are very real and it's how we get things done. Again, thank you, I look forward to your questions and thank you Susan for including me today.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

Thank you both and thank you for both reminding us, and more importantly demonstrating, that spirit of bipartisanship. I want to start by, how many times have you traveled to Afghanistan?

**Susan Davis:**

Well, we started in '07 with the Mother's Day trip, but I believe I was there three times before that, quickly. As you know, we were never in country for that many days. The initial one was fairly soon after we had gone into Afghanistan when they were still gathering men who could be serving in the Afghan army. A lot of them were Taliban actually, they were bringing them from different areas. At that time, I did meet some women who were working in the education underground essentially and they were so inspiring.

The speaker actually had been, and they have started some trips. It just seemed to me that what we had to do was continue with those trips. I remember our first time when we were in Kulad, just very briefly, I

remarked and said, "Well, we'll come back." I remember the people who understood that well kind of looked at me like, "Oh sure." At that point I thought, "No, we're really coming back." It was important to do that, and to have a very strong statement that we often say, "We've got your back." I mean we want to continue this relationship, so you can add them up.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

It's been a while.

**Susan Davis:**

I know, yeah, it's been a while.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

When did you start the trip?

**Martha Roby:**

My first trip was in 2011, I was elected in 2010. Like I stated in my opening remarks, I was on the Armed Services Committee for my first three years in the house. I remember getting the invitation, I believe it's Kathy McMorris Rodgers, came to me and said, "I'm going on this trip and it's a bipartisan women's CODEL to Afghanistan. I really want you to go." I remember discussing it with my staff and we all agreed it was very important. I needed to go, and I think Team Roby was like, "Okay, well she needs to go we'll do this, but then we've been there," kind of thing. Now here we are nine years later, and I've been eight times with Susan every time. It's the thing I look forward to every year, because I know I'm going to get to go.

I think the reason, and you heard Susan say this too, the reason I look forward to it is because we now know these individuals and they know we're coming. I feel like I would be letting them down if we didn't show up to say again, "We have your back and we're here to support you." It really is the highlight of my year, every year because it is so humbling to be with our men and women who wear the uniform in theater to say, "We're for you and we appreciate you."

It's equally as humbling to be with particularly Afghan women who are on the front lines fighting for human rights in their country. It has just been one of the joys and blessings in my time in Congress. I don't think you'll find two people who feel more passionately than Susan and I about our time spent in Afghanistan.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

Eight years, somewhere between 10 and 12 years, that's a long span of time in a country that changes so quickly. Talk about some of the changes that you've noticed through that span. Have you been able to go back? You mentioned you went to Zabul Province, were you able to go year after year?

**Susan Davis:**

Initially we were, but after I believe five years, and I think there was a year in between there that we weren't able to go and then we got back. As you all know, I mean the security situation changed, primarily because the troops were no longer there and the numbers that were required to back up the provincial reconstruction teams.

The women or our troops had been part of that. Later of course, they trained to be part of the group that goes into villages and goes into houses. They played a very important role then in speaking with the Afghan women who were there. I'll never forget, one of our marines from Pendelton, who was very upset when the troops were pulled out that they felt they had such an important role because they could calm down the situation a whole lot faster than a lot of our male troops were able to do. They were there to knock doors down and the women went in to calm the family, and actually got the intel that was required to find out where the bad guys were essentially. They would come in, the story and talk with through their translators, "How did the kids do? How are the children? What happened? Where were you?" Ask all those sensitive questions that help people relax for a minute and be able to relate. That's why we thought they were so important.

I think in terms of... You know we could go on and on, but the stories, I do remember the headmaster of the school basically said— and this was from the first time we went and then maybe the third time we went, she was still there— she said, "Well for a long time there's the children stopped coming to school because acid was thrown in their faces," all these stories. She said, "My fear or my concern for those first few years was always can I get enough students?" Then her concerns started being, "Can I find enough desks?"

**Nancy Lindborg:**

That's a good problem.

**Susan Davis:**

That was a good problem to have, so we saw that. We also saw the development of the help and support through midwifery in the areas, because women were just dying literally on the road. They might come in there and maybe they weren't ready to deliver, they were sent back, and they died. They had no help and no support. There weren't enough clinics, and, in fact, I was just so dismayed when, actually, there was an attack recently in Kulad, and they destroyed one of the clinics. I mean, there are a lot of bad things happened, so that was purely recently. We were able to see some of that

transformation. Just the fact that we had all these women that would be around the table, and so proud of the fact that they've been given a small job, that enabled them to change their status in their family.

I remember this one woman who was picking peanuts, and she was heavily covered. It was just so surprising to have her speak up and tell us what had changed in her life for her kids. We would hear these stories.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

Were you able to meet the same women year after year?

**Martha Roby:**

We have relationships with women that, it depends on how we're able to move about through the country based on the current security situation. There are women that travel, in some cases, very long distances to come to us. That again is very humbling as well, but also demonstrates the importance of the relationships with these women that we've known from year, to year, to year. We see familiar faces. There's some women that we've seen consistently over the years. We also every year get to meet with new women that have emerged as leaders within their communities, which was really exciting in one of our visits.

I can't remember what year, but Mrs. Ghani hosted us at the palace and she had several women. Actually, they came back this last trip, but she had started the Women's Chamber of Commerce. These were women that had started businesses and they came to meet with us with Mrs. Ghani. It was really exciting to get to see particularly these very young women who had joined the fight for all women in Afghanistan.

Just to build off what Susan was talking about a minute ago, we've been there varying times surged, droll down. Whatever is shaping here with U.S. policy in Afghanistan has very clearly been demonstrated in the conversations that we've had with our Afghan friends when we're in country. I remember AFCOS was not on the first trip where they had the *shura* in Zabul Province, but on my first trip it was the returned. We were able to go and there were women that got there no matter what, they were going to be there.

I remember, and Susan you jump in here if my memory is not correct, but my impression that day was in this room with the women, there were no men in the room and it was just us. There was one female parliamentarian that was there. I mean we could barely get a word in. It's like, "We have stuff to tell you and we need you to listen." There was a real sense of urgency in that room, and I remember being really struck by that. I think it's one of the reasons that I came home and said, "I'm going back, and I'm going back every year." I felt it in that room that day.

Susan and I get together before every trip because clearly what we're going to be discussing while we're in country is very much dictated by what policies are shaping here at home. I can tell you, there's been some very stark differences in the conversation based on...



**Nancy Lindborg:**

Year to year?

**Martha Roby:**

Year to year, yeah.

**Susan Davis:**

Right, and I guess I would just say, too, we are meeting with our military leaders whenever we're there as well. We're just not spending all of our time doing that, because we try and break it up so that we get the information. We have the chance to really build that relationship. General Miller is there now, and we've been through a number of our generals who've been leading the effort. Our focuses try to be really connecting with the women.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

I wanted to note, 40% of registered Afghan voters are women. A quarter of the seats in the Afghan parliament are held by women, which is more than the U.S. Congress, we might note. Have you seen that making a difference? That has happened, evolved over the period that you visited.

**Susan Davis:**

Yeah, I think it will. I think it does. Martha mentioned, we had a roundtable with some of the newer parliamentarians the last time we were there. You couldn't help but feel really good about the caliber of the women who are electing, who are now choosing to be part of their country. They're founding mothers to us. I mean we feel that they are at that point for their country, and especially the women that we'd met even quite a bit prior to that. I remember the parliamentarian from Herat and others.

**Susan Davis:**

Yes, we definitely have seen that, but again, I think there are just some changes that have to occur-

**Nancy Lindborg:**

Still.

**Susan Davis:**

in Afghanistan, to be able for them to not only reach their full potential and contributing, but for them to feel that they are in all of this together. I think that we would certainly say it's not that because they are women necessarily, I mean they are so engaged in so many different areas. Clearly, our own American security is dependent on what happens there.

We hear from our colleagues, "Just get out of there." We have to remember how important it is that these women who have a great deal to offer, are able to really be part of this in a very, very substantial way. I think it's not there yet.

**Martha Roby:**

Yeah, can I just add on, too. I know one of the challenges that women face in being able to exercise their right to vote is security. It's why it's crucial that we are helping with the recruitment and training of women in the Afghan police force. I'll just make note, as of 2014 there were close to 1690 female officers in the ANP. As of June of 2019, there's approximately 3215 women in the ANP. The numbers are increasing, but as of right now, women only comprise of 3.2% of the total police force.

When we're talking about women going to the place where they're to cast their vote, it is crucial that we have these women in the security forces there in present so those women, so that women will be more inclined to go there. I think that is a very important piece as it relates to the number that you said, 40% of women are registered to vote.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

To exercise their votes.

**Martha Roby:**

They have to be in a secure way able to exercise their right to vote.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

You mentioned that the conversations that you have very much reflect the policy discussions we're having back here. You were there in May. Did you hear from the conversations that you had, ideas on how the peace negotiations might go forward in a way that preserves some of these hard-won gains? What did you hear from folks?

**Nancy Lindborg:**

We did a really interesting training just a few months ago for women negotiators who have been and hopefully will be at the table. This is a big concern. How do we not lose the gains?

**Martha Roby:**

What you just said is the most important thing, is that a woman has to be at the table. What Susan and I have discussed— and I'll let her jump in— but what we have discussed is, how important it is in any peace negotiation that all parties be present at every step of the negotiation. What we heard on our last trip was concerns that in fact was not happening.

**Martha Roby:**

I think if we want to ensure that these very, very fragile gains are not only maintained, but we can continue them and mentor them forward, then not only do women, Afghan women, need to be at the table, every person involved that will be affected needs to be at the table every step of the way. I think that's really important.

**Susan Davis:**

Yeah, and at this point as you all know, I mean really the Afghan government is not at the table. That's critical and we know that the hope is that they can reestablish the process. I think waiting till after the election is critical. Although I believe the ambassador is planning on some meetings relatively soon. Again, I mean the government is not really at the table, and so we need to be sure that there is a critical mass of the women in addition to the men. That the Afghanis really are there, and we know that there are reasons why that's just not true right now.

We'll continue to work to be sure that it is.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

Well hopefully if the presidential election results are announced soon, an opportunity to return to...

**Susan Davis:**

I think the sad thing that we experienced in seeing how difficult the last election was, that the numbers of women participating went down pretty dramatically from the first time. Whereas I recall I think it was about 35% of those women who could actually vote, actually did vote. Now, it's quite a bit less and I believe they had women who were there to go through the searches of the women that had been trained specifically for that. Not all part of the security that's trained for that. Clearly people stayed away, a lot of precincts were closed.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

Which goes to the security issue.

**Susan Davis:**

Yeah, it goes back to that.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

You mentioned in passing that both parties are starting to talk about the need to withdraw. How does that conversation go for you? You've seen the importance, the difference that our troops are making, the gains that we're safeguarding. How do you think that conversation will go?

**Susan Davis:**

Sometimes it feels like a voice in the wilderness, and we understand that a lot of our colleagues have not been involved in this. While they are supportive of the fact that women must be engaged and that they will be critical to the building of a strong peaceful civil society, nevertheless, I think that people want to bring troops home. What I don't know now is the results of what's just happened in Syria, whether that sort of takes a little of the pressure maybe off of the Afghans now.

**Martha Roby:**

I think it's vital that the U.S. remain engaged. I just absolutely do, and any opportunity to talk to my colleagues about why that's important, I'm happy to have that conversation. I also will take this opportunity to encourage our colleagues, both in the House and the Senate who have not been out to Afghanistan to go. It's a lot different talking about something at a 30,000 ft. view as opposed to actually being in theater with our troops, hearing directly from them about exactly what's going on and why it's important to protect the homeland to be engaged.

**Martha Roby:**

All of the sacrifice, both American lives and our allies and Afghan lives as well. I think it is vitally important that we remain committed to our presence in Afghanistan. Like I said, I'm happy to have that conversation with anybody, anytime. I think the only way that our colleagues can truly, whether they agree with me or not, go. Go visit, go be with our folks that are away from their families, sacrificing so much. Meet with Afghan, the Afghan people and I think that people would maybe have their eyes opened a little bit about how important this is.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

I want to open the floor to questions, and then we've got microphones. If we bring the microphone over here.

**Audience Member:**

Jack Pagano, COO of Shamshad Radio and Television, Kabul, Afghanistan. We're the number one Pashtun TV station, radio station. There are 20 million Pashtuns in Afghanistan, 30 million Pashtuns in Pakistan. Pashtunwali is a challenge. As you know what Pashtunwali is, it's all about the code, the fierce, the loyal of being a Pashtun. It's all about men. I've had heated discussions and arguments with men about giving women more rights, more opportunities. What's your challenge in trying to convince the narrative? It's all about the narrative at the end of the day.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

We're going to take a few questions and get a mic. There we go Amanda, right here.

**Audience Member:**

Good morning, I'm Phyllis Magrab from the U.S. Afghan Women's Council. The first thing I want to say is thank you to both of you. You have been an inspiration to those of us in the United States who are trying to partner with the women in Afghanistan. You've been a role model of bipartisan cooperation, and you've been a great source of support to the U.S. Afghan Women's Council, which is in itself quite bipartisan. The two honorary chairs are both Mrs. Bush and Mrs. Clinton and with Mrs. Ghani from Afghanistan.

For my first comment is just our deepest thanks for all your work. My second question is a little harder. The two of you have really been in the Congress, the chief champions for the women in Afghanistan. I know sadly your terms are both coming to an end shortly, which is very sad for us. I'm wondering if behind you, you see other members in the Congress who may champion this cause as times change? Thank you.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

We were just talking about that beforehand, we're all very sad. Let's take on more question over here.

**Audience Member:**

Hi, Mark Farmer with NAFSA: Association of International Educators. I want to first thank Ms. Davis for her support of international education throughout her career. She just gave me a co-sponsor to the

Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program Act. We really appreciate that, so thank you for everything that you've done there.

I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the role of education in preserving women's rights and democracy in Afghanistan, and potentially the role of international education broadly within that.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

Okay Pashtunwali, who's coming behind you, education. Either of you want to tackle?

**Martha Roby:**

I think probably the first question and the third question tie together a little bit in terms of the role of women. We've discussed on numerous occasions and again, this is our view, but the importance, we talk about educating young girls. There's an education component to educating young boys as well.

**Martha Roby:**

I think those two things maybe tie together in terms of this next generation of Afghan girls and boys, and the role that each will play in continuing the momentum of moving Afghanistan in the right direction. I just don't think we can leave out the component of not just educating young girls, which is vitally important. Also the education of the next generation of young boys and men in the country.

**Martha Roby:**

Then to your question, I will just say thank you, thank you for giving us the opportunity to be in this role together. Again, I can't emphasize enough how genuine my relationship, our relationship is with each other. I think there are some opportunities maybe in our last trip together to try to, as Susan was saying earlier, try to recruit some members. We have a lot of new members of Congress. A lot of new women. Unfortunately, not as many on my side of the aisle as Susan's, and we've got to work on that. That's a whole other conversation we could have. I do think it is important because again, one of the things that pulls at my heart is the consistency of being there. That with Susan in my departure from Congress that we don't want to leave a void there of not being there at the same time every year to continue with these relationships. I know Susan can talk a lot more about the education component.

**Susan Davis:**

One of the comments that a woman made in Kulad was, that she knew that times would change in Afghanistan because her son was starting to show true respect for his sister. She felt that was really different and different from her experience growing up, so that was one of those good moments when people on the ground. I think the amazing thing about Mrs. Ghani actually is that, her effort to bring

women together. I think it was 65 provinces is that right? That these peace shuras that they had to get people to talk about what peace means to them.

That she has been helping to train women to be conflict resolution champions. To learn how to do that at home, in their communities, in their villages, and that that's making a difference. They have those skills, but they don't, I know that was like a lot of women growing up. I mean I grew up quite a few years before Martha did. It was not as common for women to be called upon to do that. They are starting to do more of that, and one of the stories that I heard after all these meetings was that, men have actually elected in their group women to be the secretaries, to be the one who commented on the discussions that they had.

That they said something like, "Oh wow, they're really good. They really know what they're talking about." I think part of it is exposure. It's that ability for people to see how great they are. We've been through this in our country as well, I mean we're still going through this. I loved hearing about the two women walking on the moon together. They've been women walking in space or rather in space not on the moon. Walking in space for years, but it's only now, PBS have this story today. I think that they are moving a whole lot faster than we ever did in many ways.

We need to be sure that some people know that everybody needs to be exposed to this. They have to have the confidence to be able to stand up and speak out, and it's something that has to be learned. Often women hear just the opposite, "Shut up, don't be heard."

**Nancy Lindborg:**

Do you see people coming behind you? You started this tradition back in 2007.

**Susan Davis:**

Absolutely, and I wish in the last few years maybe that we've been having an easier time grooming a few of the women. There's been a lot of interest there, as you know members of Congress have busy lives, busy schedules. Sometimes even if people have an interest in going, I've often had people say to me, "Oh I just heard about your trip, put me on. Next year I want to go." I'll go back three months later, another three months, yeah, absolutely. Then something comes up in their district and they can't do it.

I think especially of the new group we had, one of the newer members, one of the new members freshman was with us on the last trip, she's on Armed Services Committee. I'm very hopeful and we've been talking to folks and I think that they'll be an interest. My hope is with Martha that maybe they'll allow us to take a few more women this time, and that we'll have a chance to expose more of them.

**Martha Roby:**

I've got to say this, so my kids say every year, "Mom, why do you always go to Afghanistan on Mother's Day?" I'm like, "Well it's my day, I can go wherever I want." I try to tell my, and it's not always, obviously we can't tell them we're there. It's always on or around, I'm like, "We can do the big lunch another day."

It's really important to send that message. Sure, colleagues too, it's your day, you can go where you want.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

I want to ask a last question for both of you, but this is submitted from students at Chelsea High School in Alabama. Where we have one of our USIP Peace Teachers, a wonderful teacher named Ryan Adams. These students asked, "Considering that we've had both Republican and Democratic presidents since 2001, how important has bipartisanship been as a factor for the improvement of women, of Afghan women up to this point?"

**Martha Roby:**

I don't know if they're watching, so greetings to my friends in Alabama if they are. Look, I mean, it's why I said what I said when I stood at the podium talking about my relationship with Susan. It's not just important for Afghanistan and for the role of women in improving the situation for women in Afghanistan. We've said so many times, the way women are treated and held in regard in Afghanistan demonstrates the strength of the country itself. I mean it's vitally important that women are given these opportunities. There are so many women that are sacrificing so much to continue to move the ball down the field.

Bipartisanship is not just important as it relates to U.S. Afghan policy. It is important, and I think our relationship in returning year after year together demonstrates how important that is. When it comes times to writing the National Defense Authorization Act, and needing to fence of fines or create more flexibility in how this money is used. Or even through the appropriations process, being able to have these conversations and shared experiences does in turn put us in a better position to get good policy on the books.

I'll just say in terms of bipartisanship overall, I mean look, it is an interesting time. There is a lot of divisiveness throughout our country right now. One of the things that I tell folks at home when I'm traveling through my district is what I said to you this morning. I want you to be encouraged because these relationships are real and they exist, and they're never going to be reported on, ever.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

Except for here today.

**Martha Roby:**

Right, except for here today. It's real and it's important, and it's not just important to our foreign policy, it's important to our domestic policy as well. That we know each other and are working together and hearing each other.



**Nancy Lindborg:**

Yeah. Congresswoman Davis, what about you?

**Susan Davis:**

I thought I would just quickly cite an example because Martha's much more involved in this now than I am. As you may know, there's a women's softball team. Rather than playing, Democratic women playing Republican women, they join together and play the press, which is...

**Martha Roby:**

Who are on average 25 years younger than us, okay?

**Susan Davis:**

Definitely the enemy, right. It's funny because even in this book, I mean as I was finding where Martha was in the book, I mean they're talking about it and that's significant. I mean it sends a strong message and again, we both have friends on both sides of the aisle. I know that the men are engaged in a very different way with one another, but I'm always impressed by what they're doing together as well. It is a shame that those stories don't come out, but I would agree with Martha, it is a struggle today to do things hand in hand from the beginning in a bipartisan way. It's really tough. Part of that has to do with sometimes there is a difference in perspective and a fear that somehow if we don't write the bill ourselves, that somehow it's going to be diminished. It is what it is.

I have to say, I mean I think there's some obvious reasons today why we're having some of these problems and I regret that. Sometimes it's hard to get around it, but I do think we all have to do our part. I think in conversations I remind my constituents all the time, whatever you can do at work, in your neighborhood to talk to somebody who doesn't necessarily see eye to eye with you. Take that time because in the end you'll probably discover that if you've got a bunch of note cards on different subjects, you probably could put a lot of them in the we agree pile. Then there's some that you don't agree on, and you've got to work through that. Everybody has to play a role in this, and if we all stay in our little huts, we're never going to breakthrough this and so it's important for all of us. It's great to have those examples and those friends who are willing to do that.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

Well, I want to thank both of you for joining us. We will continue to try to hold that bipartisan space through these Bipartisan Congressional Dialogues and shine a light on the extraordinary partnerships and important work that happens. I think on behalf of everyone in the room, we thank you for your

commitment to the issues in Afghanistan, particularly for being such important champions for the women of Afghanistan. It's made an extraordinary difference.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

I echo the sadness that you're both retiring. We will miss you greatly and let us know if we can help you recruit folks who will continue your Mother's Day tradition which is just really a...

**Susan Davis:**

Thank you and I will just say, there are lots of other ways to be involved with Afghanistan rather than being in the Congress.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

There you go, you heard it here. You heard it here. Please join me in thanking two exceptional members of congress.

**Susan Davis:**

Thank you.

**Nancy Lindborg:**

Thanks so much.

**Martha Roby:**

This was great.

**Susan Davis:**

Yeah.