

**NDI MKA Luncheon  
Washington, DC  
Tuesday, May 12, 2015**

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**Introduction of Senator Barbara Mikulski**

Thank you, Shari, and good afternoon to you all.

Let me begin by saying something I hope is obvious: this lunch is one of my favorite events of the year – and that’s not because of its name, which for the record I did not pick.

Instead, it is because this lunch brings together my dearest friends, supports my favorite cause, and honors organizations and people who are at the forefront of advancing women’s political participation around the world.

It also gives us a chance to say “Thank You” to a few special people in the NDI family – first and foremost the members of our board and our host committee.

That includes NDI’s Vice Chair, Ambassador Hattie Babbitt, who is a fixture at this lunch and an important force in shaping NDI’s priorities – particularly in this hemisphere.

We are also extremely grateful to our tireless President, Ken Wollack, and to our Vice President, Shari Bryan.

At a time of dizzying global change, Ken and Shari have kept NDI laser focused on its mission of supporting democratic institutions and values.

They and their outstanding team are a big reason why NDI remains so respected by freedom’s friends across the globe – and so disliked by its enemies.

Like any institution, NDI has had good days and bad days; but the very worst was in January 2007, when NDI’s own Andi Parhamovich was killed in Iraq by terrorists.

Shortly after that tragedy, we established a fellowship in Andi’s name to help carry on her work.

That fellowship is given annually to an NDI partner or staff member who is engaged in strengthening democracy in her own country.

I am happy to recognize the recipient for 2015 – Maka Meshveliani, a senior program officer in Tblisi, Georgia.

Maka will be using her time in NDI’s Washington office to design a project to help women’s rights advocates in Georgia hone their communication skills.

So I hope you will join me in saluting Maka . . . and in recognizing, as well, the representatives of the Parhamovich family who are with us today – including her mother Vicki, and her sister Marci.

Now I always look forward to this lunch, but I must tell you that I have been particularly excited about today – and that’s because of our special guest, Senator Barbara Mikulski.

Senator Mikulski is well-known in Maryland and across the country as a leader who not only speaks forcefully, but acts decisively.

In other words, she is a doer – and during her decades of public service, she has done as much as anyone to improve the lives of Marylanders and ordinary citizens around the country.

Senator Mikulski has also become one of our nation's most passionate and effective advocates for the advancement of women and girls – which makes her an especially appropriate speaker today.

Her perspective on these issues is shaped by her own trailblazing career.

She has worn many different hats – social worker, community activist, Baltimore city council member, member of Congress – and made history in 1986 when she became the first Democratic woman Senator to be elected in her own right.

She has amassed a great deal of power in the Senate through her seniority, but even more crucial to her influence has been her willingness to be a friend and mentor to other women.

Indeed, if you ask the men who serve in the Senate who their leader is, Republicans will say Mitch McConnell and the Democrats will say Harry Reid. But if you ask the women, Republicans and Democrats alike will answer in unison: Barbara Mikulski.

As the “Dean of the Women,” Barbara has been a teacher and an inspiration to others because she knows how hard it is to find and keep your seat at the table.

As she likes to say, it only took her twenty-five years to become an overnight success.

I can personally attest to her impact, because I am among the scores of people that have benefited from her advice and her mentorship.

When my name was being floated as a possible nominee for Secretary of State, I will never forget how Barbara stood up and vouched for my ability to work well with Capitol Hill.

And after I was nominated and confirmed, I was proud that she was among those who came to the Oval Office to watch President Clinton administer the oath of office.

We have shared a great deal of history together – from being a part of winning and losing presidential campaigns, to traveling together to Poland in 1997 to celebrate NATO's membership invitation.

It was through that experience that I learned her name is not “Mikulski,” but “Mikulska.”

Given our personal history and heritage, the accession of Poland and the Czech Republic to NATO was doubly important to Barbara and me. So it was truly meaningful to be able to stand together with her at the Truman Presidential Library for the ceremony marking the completion of the accession process in 1999.

I will never forget her gracious remarks at that ceremony, and our shared sense of fulfillment that we could both be a part of that moment in history.

As you all know, earlier this year Barbara announced her decision to retire from the Senate after the 2016 elections.

She did so in classic Mikulski fashion, saying she reached the decision after asking herself “do I want to spend my time raising money or raising hell?”

Barbara, we are delighted that you have come here today not only to raise hell, but to raise us up.

Thank you for being a great friend of mine and a staunch supporter of NDI. We are truly grateful to have you with us.

Ladies and gentlemen, Senator Barbara Mikulski.

### **Introduction of MKA Grant Awardee**

Hello again.

One of the main purposes of today's lunch is to remind us in Washington that liberty, justice and peace are not just words that we use to decorate our speeches; they are hard-to-achieve goals that must be pursued every day so that families can live normal lives and children may grow up without fear.

This is an important theme every year, but it is vital that we reaffirm this principle today – because we come together at a time when the mission of NDI is being challenged worldwide.

In the Middle East, a resurgence of instability, conflict, and extremism has set the region back and further dimmed the hopes sparked by the Arab Spring.

Throughout Europe, the financial crisis continues to cause stress within democratic institutions.

And here in the United States, we face both political paralysis and a growing concerns over issues of income disparity, racial inequality, and class mobility.

Almost everywhere, new technology has made it simpler for the public to express their demands, but it has not made governments any faster to respond.

This has caused some to proclaim that democracy is on the decline – to which I can only respond with my favorite diplomatic term of art: balderdash.

Governing in a digital world is hard, but popular discontent is as much an issue in centralized China – as we have seen recently in Hong Kong – as it is in Greece.

And if democracy is dying, what is it that initially gave life to the Arab revolutions?

What caused the voters of Nigeria to turn out in force to turn out an incumbent president for the first time?

What, if not the idea democracy, sustained Aung San Suu Kyi and her followers for more than 20 years and is now helping them navigate the choppy waters of that country's opening?

And what, if not the desire to shape their own destinies, has caused women on every continent to become a dynamic force for democratic growth?

Whether locally or globally, forward movement most often takes place on a step-by-step basis and, in building democracy, the involvement of women is indispensable.

That's why NDI's priority, in countries from Central America to Central Asia, has been to help democratic women organize, advocate reforms, amend constitutions, run for public office, and hold leaders accountable.

Month by month, week by week, we are making a difference and so each day more women are moving into positions of authority.

In fact, a report released earlier this year by the UN to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Beijing declaration showed that the share of women in parliaments worldwide has nearly doubled in the past two decades.

But there is, without a doubt, a long way yet to go – because women still make up less than a quarter of legislators worldwide, even though they represent more than half of the planet's population.

This matters because we have learned that when women are empowered to make their own political and economic choices, the chains of poverty can be broken; families are strengthened; the spread of sexually-transmitted disease slows; environmental stress is reduced; socially-constructive values are more likely to be passed down to the young; and the political institutions in which they serve are considered more legitimate.

It is for these reasons that, several years ago, NDI created an annual grant to help women who are striving under difficult circumstances to build democracy.

The idea behind this grant is to identify people who may not be well-known in Western capitals, and who are far from the stages of international conferences.

They operate in relative obscurity, but through sheer determination they are achieving tangible gains on democracy's frontlines.

They deserve our recognition and support.

Last year, many of you may remember that we honored Aswat Nisaa, or Women's Voices, a Tunisian organization established after the revolution to advance the role of women in Tunisia's public life.

I had the chance to visit with Ikram Ben Said, the founder of women's voices, earlier this year when I was in Tunis for an investment conference hosted by Partners for a New Beginning.

It was heartening to see how much progress has been made just in the past year – including in last October's elections, which saw some 68 women elected to the Tunisian parliament.

That means, by the way, that there are now a higher percentage of women serving in Tunisia's legislative body than in the United States Congress.

Tunisia still faces many challenges, but giving birth to democracy has always depended on a combination of dreamers and doers – and the unique and visionary leaders who can display both of these qualities at once.

Ikram Ben Said is one such person, and so is Ms. Khalida Noori, the founder of this year's grantee organization – the Worker Women Social Organization in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

WWSO is a remarkable group that works at the grassroots level in difficult, even life-threatening, circumstances to ensure women and youth receive critical social services and can participate meaningfully in their local communities.

It provides vocational training, leadership development and civic education to women who have been deprived of any opportunities for far too long – with disastrous consequences for not just for Afghanistan, but for the world.

Indeed, whenever I run across many self-proclaimed experts who consider women's rights to be a marginal concern, I simply point to Afghanistan and its history over the past three decades.

There, we have seen that the mistreatment of women is not a side issue, but a symptom of something much larger.

For in the 1990s, Afghan women were deprived of every right except the right to remain silent and invisible, illiterate and unemployed.

A generation of girls were deprived of the priceless gift of education.

Huge numbers of women were driven into mental breakdowns, suicide and beggary.

And Afghanistan played host to a sleep-away camp for terrorists that triggered a global confrontation.

Almost 20 years ago, I visited a group of female Afghan refugees.

This was in the mountains of Pakistan not far from the Khyber Pass.

The refugees told me how they were prevented from holding jobs, attending school, or even leaving their homes unless accompanied by an adult male.

A girl described the death of her sister, who had jumped from a sixth floor window to avoid being raped.

All of the refugees spoke of their longing to return home and lead normal lives.

I told them that we would do everything we could to help them, and that I would never forget them.

In the years since, I have recounted that story often, but it has never been in my head more than today, and it explains why I am so thrilled to be able to support the efforts of WWSO.

NDI is proud to work with the WWSO, with the 97 women who serve in Afghanistan's 34 provincial councils, and with the many other women who sought office in the most recent elections – many of whom did so at great personal risk.

NDI will continue its support for progress in Afghanistan, working also with women in the national assembly along with their counterparts in government ministries.

And over the next year, WWSO will use the grant we are awarding them today to conduct seminars for a core group of young women on women's democratic leadership and political participation.

They will help these women to build their leadership skills, encourage them to work with or volunteer for governmental and nongovernmental organizations, and facilitate their entry into the job market.

That they will be doing this in Kandahar – where just 15 years ago women were banned from working outside the home and attending school – is just one more sign of progress in what remains a difficult road for the Afghan people.

It is a road that they must not travel alone, which is why it is so important for us to know about and support the efforts of organizations like WWSO.

To that end, we have prepared a short film that shows how WWSO is making a difference by engage women and youth in public life and peace building. Please join me in watching it.

**Introduction of Rula Ghani**

My last responsibility for today is to introduce another very special guest, who is a renowned champion for women's rights in Afghanistan and throughout the world.

In the months since her husband, President Ashraf Ghani, took office in Afghanistan, she has redefined the role of first lady and emerged as one of the country's leading voices and most dynamic figures.

A brilliant thinker, accomplished activist, and inspirational leader – I could think of no one better to follow our awardee and speak to the challenges facing Afghanistan today.

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome our honored guest, Ms. Rula Ghani.

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