

Special Inspector General for



Afghanistan Reconstruction

SUPPORT FOR GENDER EQUALITY: LESSONS FROM THE U.S. EXPERIENCE IN AFGHANISTAN

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Cover photo credit:

Afghan women gather in front of the Hazrat-i Ali shrine for Nowruz festivities, which marks the Afghan new year in Mazar-i Sharif on March 21, 2015. (AFP photo by Farshad Usyan)



Special Inspector General
for Afghanistan Reconstruction

Support for Gender Equality: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan is the ninth lessons learned report to be issued by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. This report examines U.S. efforts since 2002 to support Afghan women and girls and advance gender equality. Today, policymakers face a critical question: How can the United States best continue to support Afghan women and girls, preserving and expanding on the gains they have made—in the midst of conflict, poverty, a global pandemic, and the prospect of an Afghan government in which the Taliban exerts considerable influence? This report seeks to answer this core question, one which is vitally important in the context of peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

To do so, the report investigates the historical and cultural context of U.S. efforts to advance gender equality in Afghanistan, U.S. strategies for doing so, and how agencies implemented those strategies. The report examines the evidence for gains made by women and girls, and ongoing barriers to progress. Further, the report assesses 24 U.S. programs focused on women and girls, to better understand what worked and did not work, and what assumptions and theories of change drove U.S. activities. And finally, the report looks at future threats to and opportunities for advancing Afghan women and girls.

SIGAR's analysis found that the U.S. government has disbursed more than \$787.4 million for activities primarily intended to support Afghan women and girls. However, because hundreds of other U.S. programs and projects included an unquantified gender component, this amount significantly understates the actual level of U.S. support for women, girls, and gender equality.

The report identifies findings and lessons to inform U.S. policies and actions on these issues. These lessons are relevant for Afghanistan, where the United States will likely remain engaged in the coming years, and for efforts to empower and advance women and girls in other conflict-affected countries. The report provides recommendations to the Congress and executive branch agencies for improving such efforts.

Between 2002 and 2020, U.S. efforts to support women, girls, and gender equality in Afghanistan yielded mixed results. Considerable investment across a range of sectors contributed to indisputable gains—especially in education and maternal health. There is broad demand within the Afghan population for these services, and U.S. agencies have responded with well-designed and effective programs. Yet our examination of 24 U.S. gender-related programs also revealed serious shortcomings. Some programs were designed based on assumptions that proved to be ill-suited to the Afghan context and the challenges that women and girls faced. We found that establishing a correlation between program activities and related outcomes was not always possible, and in many cases, insufficient monitoring and evaluation of program activities made it impossible to assess the programs' actual impacts.

Nonetheless, the importance of U.S. backing for Afghan women's rights should not be underestimated. Afghan women themselves point to the vocal support by the United States and other international actors as a key factor in advancing their rights and participation in the public sphere. At this critical moment for Afghan women and girls—as Afghans determine what their country's future political structure will look like—it is as important as ever that the United States continues to support women's rights and gender equality.

SIGAR felt it necessary that this lessons learned report include the voices of Afghans themselves. This was difficult to accomplish during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as part of our research, SIGAR commissioned field interviews with 65 Afghans—both women and men—from 14 provinces. These individuals represent diverse perspectives: they are members of civil society organizations, parliamentarians, provincial and district council members, members of community development councils, beneficiaries of U.S.-funded programs, and internally displaced persons. Their responses on a range of topics—the protection of women's rights in peace negotiations, the Taliban and security issues, the COVID-19 pandemic, and everyday challenges that women and girls face—form one of the most important contributions of this report.

SIGAR began its Lessons Learned Program in late 2014. These lessons learned reports comply with SIGAR's legislative mandate to provide recommendations to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of U.S.-funded reconstruction programs and operations; to prevent and detect waste, fraud, and abuse; and to inform the Congress and the Secretaries of State and Defense about reconstruction-related problems and the need for corrective action.

The Congress created SIGAR as an independent agency focused solely on the Afghanistan mission and its reconstruction issues. Unlike most inspectors general offices, which have jurisdiction only over the programs and operations of their respective departments or agencies, SIGAR has jurisdiction over all programs and operations supported with U.S. reconstruction dollars, regardless of the agency involved. Because SIGAR has the authority to look across the entire U.S. reconstruction effort, it is uniquely positioned to identify and address whole-of-government lessons.

Our lessons learned reports are unique among products by inspectors general offices. The reports synthesize not only the body of work and expertise of SIGAR, but also that of other oversight agencies, government entities, current and former officials with on-the-ground experience, academic institutions, and independent scholars. The reports document what the U.S. government sought to accomplish, assess what it achieved, and evaluate the degree to which these efforts helped the United States reach its reconstruction goals in Afghanistan. They also provide recommendations to address the challenges stakeholders face in ensuring effective and sustainable reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, as well as in future contingency operations.

SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program comprises subject matter experts with considerable experience working and living in Afghanistan, aided by a team of seasoned research analysts. I want to express my deepest appreciation to the team members who produced this report: Kate Bateman, project lead; Samantha Hay, Mariam Jalalzada, Matthew Rubin, and Sarah Rababy, senior analysts; and Hayley Rose, student trainee. I also thank Nikolai Condee-Padunov,

program manager; Tracy Content, editor; Jason Davis, visual information specialist; Vong Lim, senior visual information specialist; and Joseph Windrem, Lessons Learned program director. In producing its reports, the program also uses the significant skills and experience found in SIGAR's Audits and Inspections, Investigations, and Research and Analysis directorates, and the Office of Special Projects. I thank all of the individuals who contributed their time and effort to this report.

I am particularly grateful to the 65 Afghan individuals who shared their views and experiences with the field research team, as well as to the 36 experts and officials interviewed directly by SIGAR. In many ways, these in-depth interviews form the core of SIGAR's lessons learned reports. I thank SIGAR's Afghan civil society partners who conducted the field research for this report, and determined how to do so safely in the challenging environment of the pandemic.

In addition, I am grateful to the many U.S. government officials at the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the U.S. Agency for International Development who provided valuable insights and feedback. This report is truly a collaborative effort meant to not only identify problems, but also to learn from them and propose reasonable solutions to improve future reconstruction efforts.

I believe lessons learned reports such as this will be a key legacy of SIGAR. Through these reports, we hope to reach a diverse audience in the legislative and executive branches, at the strategic and programmatic levels, both in Washington and in the field. Using our unique interagency mandate, we intend to do everything we can to make sure the lessons from the most ambitious reconstruction effort in U.S. history are identified and applied—not just in Afghanistan, but in future conflicts and reconstruction efforts elsewhere in the world.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John F. Sopko', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

John F. Sopko,

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Advancing the status and rights of women and girls has been an important goal of the U.S. reconstruction effort in Afghanistan since 2002. Three U.S. administrations and the Congress have shown significant commitment to this goal, both as a means of achieving broader U.S. strategic objectives in the country, and as a goal worthy in its own right. SIGAR found that from 2002 to 2020, the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Department of Defense (DOD) disbursed at least \$787.4 million for programs that specifically and primarily supported Afghan women and girls in the areas of health, education, political participation, access to justice, and economic participation. This understates the total U.S. investment in women and girls, however, since hundreds of additional U.S. programs and projects included an unquantifiable gender component.

Afghan women and girls have made substantial gains over the past nearly two decades. They have greater access to life-saving health care, and work as legislators, judges, teachers, health workers, civil servants, journalists, and business and civil society leaders. As many as 3.5 million girls are enrolled in school, out of roughly 9 million students. Afghanistan's legal framework—at least on paper—offers women many protections, including equal rights for women and men.

Yet across these measures, data are often poor, the gains are fragile, and significant barriers to progress persist. Moreover, civilian casualties in Afghanistan are nearly double what they were in 2009. According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, in 2019, 12 percent of civilian casualties were women, and 30 percent were children. The poverty rate was at 55 percent as of 2016–2017, higher than in 2003—and in danger of spiking during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, despite real improvements, Afghanistan remains one of the most challenging places in the world to be a woman—with high maternal mortality ratios, endemic gender-based violence, and limited access to education and health care.

Today, U.S. policymakers face a critical question: After nearly two decades of substantial support for gender equality in Afghanistan, how can the United States best support Afghan women and girls in the future, preserving and expanding on the gains they have made—in the midst of conflict, poverty, a global pandemic, and the prospect of an Afghan government in which the Taliban exerts considerable influence?

This report, the ninth Lessons Learned Program report to be issued by SIGAR, seeks to answer this core question. To do so, the report asks the following questions: What is the historical and cultural context in which the United States and other donors have aimed to support Afghan women? What was the U.S. strategy for doing so, and how did agencies implement that strategy? What does available evidence say about the gains for Afghan women and girls, the durability of those gains, and ongoing barriers to progress?

What U.S. activities since 2002 have worked or not worked to improve women’s lives, and what assumptions and theories of change drove U.S. activities? What are the future threats to and opportunities for advancing women and girls in Afghanistan? And finally, what lessons can we draw to ensure future efforts are not in vain? The report acknowledges that U.S. programs and initiatives occurred within a constellation of other donors’ reconstruction efforts targeting women and girls, which are outside the scope of this report.

Woven throughout the report are themes and quotes from a body of 65 interviews conducted with Afghans in 2020, commissioned by SIGAR. The interviews highlight a range of perspectives on the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, U.S. efforts to support women and girls, the challenges women face, negotiations with the Taliban, and other issues. Many interviewees voiced praise for U.S. efforts to expand gender equality, with increased access to education often seen as the greatest post-2001 gain for women and girls. However, interviewees cited insecurity, restrictive social norms, and harassment as key constraints to women’s participation in society.

The report is laid out in 12 chapters:

- **Chapter 1** discusses historical and cultural context, including Afghanistan’s history of reform efforts regarding gender equality, the legacy of Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001, and the disparities between urban and rural women. It also discusses the challenge of changing social norms, and defines key terms.
- **Chapter 2** explores the effects of the last 19 years of war on women and children.
- **Chapter 3** assesses U.S. strategies related to support for Afghan women and girls and gender equality, and how those strategies evolved over time.
- **Chapter 4** provides an overview of State, USAID, and DOD programming to support women and girls across key sectors, and assesses the U.S. government’s gender mainstreaming approach.

The report then examines five key areas of women’s and girls’ advancement: health, education, political participation, access to justice, and economic participation. Each chapter first assesses the gains made since 2001 and ongoing barriers to progress; it then closely examines several U.S. programs that are representative of U.S. gender-related efforts in that sector, assessing program effectiveness and identifying common themes.

- **Chapter 5** discusses access to health care, with a focus on maternal health.
- **Chapter 6** discusses education at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, including community-based education.
- **Chapter 7** discusses women’s political participation, at the national level in parliament, in sub-national governance, as voters, and in civil society organizations. This chapter also highlights the importance of women’s participation and gender issues in the media.
- **Chapter 8** discusses access to justice, explores the legal framework for women’s rights and combating gender-based violence, and examines women’s employment in the justice sector.
- **Chapter 9** discusses women’s economic participation, including employment in

different sectors and women-owned businesses.

- **Chapter 10** discusses efforts to increase women's participation in the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces and the significant challenges facing women serving in these forces.
- **Chapter 11** discusses current political, security, and economic challenges that threaten to undermine or undo women's gains of the past 19 years—including peace negotiations, the drawdown of U.S. troops, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also explores women's participation in peace negotiations, opportunities for preserving and building on post-2001 gains, as well as Taliban practices toward women today, and what these indicate about how the Taliban might govern if they are integrated into the Afghan government.
- **Chapter 12** concludes with the report's findings, lessons, and recommendations for U.S. agencies and policymakers.

FINDINGS

We identify 12 major findings from our analysis of the gains Afghan women and girls have made since 2001, barriers to progress, and U.S. efforts to improve women's lives and protect their rights:

1. Afghan women and girls have achieved significant gains since 2001:
 - **Health:** The maternal mortality ratio—the number of women who die due to birth- or pregnancy-related complications—has declined, with estimates of the decline ranging from 19 to 50 percent. This reflects a number of healthcare improvements. Between 2002 and 2015, the percentage of pregnant women receiving prenatal care by skilled health personnel rose from 16 to 61 percent; between 2002 and 2018, the number of trained midwives grew from an estimated 467 to 4,000, and the share of births attended by skilled health personnel went from 14 to nearly 60 percent. Between 2002 and 2017, the proportion of health facilities staffed with at least one female health worker rose from 25 to 92 percent. (A caveat is that the methodologies used to generate maternal mortality data have varied over time, and the reliability of some data has been questioned. Thus, while a decline in maternal deaths has likely occurred, a precise measurement of the reduction remains elusive.)
 - **Education:** As many as 3.5 million girls (roughly 40 percent of about 9 million students overall) are enrolled in school, though the number of girls actually attending school is almost certainly lower. Still, even a low estimate reflects a marked improvement over the few, if any, girls who attended public school under the Taliban. By 2018, there were approximately 70,000 women in teaching jobs, representing about one-third of the country's teachers. There has been an expansion of community-based education, helping to close the enrollment gap between girls and boys. Literacy rates among girls have risen from 20 percent in 2005 to 39 percent in 2017. Overall support among the Afghan population for women's and girls' access to education has remained high since at least 2006.
 - **Political participation:** Unprecedented numbers of women now hold public office. Thanks to a constitutional amendment strongly supported by the

United States and other donors, 27 percent of all parliament seats are reserved for women. By law, 25 percent of seats in provincial and district councils are now reserved for women. Nearly half of the 9,708 elected community development council members across the country are women. Women serve as ministers, deputy ministers, and ambassadors, and comprise about 28 percent of employees in civil society organizations. These figures represent the efforts of thousands of women, from the village to the national level. Women's presence in the media also increased significantly since 2001.

- **Access to justice:** Afghanistan has a legal framework for advancing access to justice for women and girls, including constitutional protections for equal rights for men and women, and the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law, promulgated by presidential decree in 2009. The number of women serving in the police rose from 180 in 2005 to 3,650 in 2019. Specialized Family Response Units enable more women to file complaints with the police. From 2007 to 2018, the proportion of judges who are women grew from 5 to 13 percent (from 73 to 261 women).
 - **Economic participation:** There are more women-run businesses and more women employed in urban areas than there were 20 years ago. Women's share of secure jobs in urban areas increased from 27 to 42 percent between 2007 and 2017—one of the few labor force indicators where women had greater gains than men. From 2007 to 2019, the share of women in civil service jobs, excluding the army and police, rose from 18 to 25 percent. Women held 15 percent of government decision-making positions in 2018, up from 10 percent in 2013.
2. The positive story of gains across these sectors is tempered by the reality that significant barriers—including restrictive sociocultural norms and insecurity—continue to impede progress for Afghan women and girls.
 - Girls' access to education is constrained by the lack of female teachers and infrastructure, and pressures on girls to withdraw from school at puberty.
 - A lack of female healthcare providers, restrictive sociocultural practices, lack of education, and prohibitive costs pose barriers to women seeking health care.
 - The quality of health care and education remains a problem, and education gains have been largely at the primary school level.
 - Gains across sectors have been geographically uneven, with rural women and girls experiencing significantly less improvement overall.
 - Women who have ventured into non-traditional and historically male-dominated areas—such as the media, security forces, and politics—are at higher risk of retaliation by the Taliban and anti-government elements.
 - Gender disparity is still a persistent characteristic of the Afghan labor force.
 3. Although advancing women's status and rights was not a reason for the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan, improving the lives of Afghan women and girls was one important goal of the U.S. reconstruction effort.

4. The high-level U.S. political focus on gender issues in Afghanistan translated into congressional and executive branch agency support for significant funding for efforts targeting women and girls. At the same time, that political focus may also have reduced the scrutiny accorded to the design of some gender programs.
5. The United States has disbursed at least \$787.4 million for programs specifically and primarily to support Afghan women and girls from 2002 to 2020, but the total amount of U.S. investments to improve the lives of women and girls is not quantifiable because hundreds of other programs and projects included an unquantifiable gender component.
6. USAID was unable to field the resources and expertise needed to effectively integrate gender-related objectives across programming in Afghanistan.
7. Community-based education has proven effective as a reliable, culturally accepted model for delivering primary education in areas where the formal education system does not operate, and especially in closing the enrollment and achievement gap between girls and boys.
8. The U.S. government's funding to civil society organizations contributed to an increase in the number of women advocates and organizations focusing on women's rights. However, many of these organizations are unsustainable without continued assistance.
9. The United States has provided significant support to recruitment and retention targets set by the Afghan government for women's participation in the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, but these targets have been highly unrealistic and unachievable. Although there has been a modest increase in the number of women police officers, women in all parts of the security forces face threats to their personal safety and pervasive harassment and discrimination.
10. Afghan women have assumed leadership roles at the national, provincial, district, and community levels. At the same time, they face a troika of threats: continued or intensified violence, the risk of Afghan peace negotiations leading to erosions of women's rights, and a dire economic and humanitarian situation exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.
11. The kind of life Afghan women will face under any government in which the Taliban exert an influence will be a product of the Taliban's ability—or inability—to negotiate their differences with the Afghan government and local communities, and the varying beliefs and practices within their own ranks.
12. The effort to promote women's rights may be hampered by a growing narrative in Afghanistan that the country can either have women's rights at the cost of peace, or peace at the cost of women's rights.

LESSONS

This report identifies eight lessons to inform future U.S. efforts to support women, girls, and gender equality in Afghanistan:

1. U.S. and international diplomatic pressure can be instrumental in advancing women's legal rights and participation in public life—in politics, government, media, and civil society.
2. It is critical that U.S. officials working on or in Afghanistan develop a more nuanced understanding of gender roles and relations in the Afghan cultural context—and work to ensure that U.S. policies and programs are responsive to this context. U.S. agencies also need to assess how to support women and girls without provoking backlash that might endanger them or stall progress.
3. Educating Afghan men and boys about gender equality issues and working with them as partners and advocates are critical to advancing women's status and rights in Afghanistan.
4. Key factors in improving the access of Afghan women and girls to health care and education were existing expertise and capacity within aid organizations, popular demand for these services, consistent funding, and rigorous impact evaluations of programs.
5. It is crucial that more women assume leadership positions in a wider range of Afghan government ministries, including at the cabinet level.
6. U.S. efforts to improve the lives of women and girls will continue to be constrained by significant barriers, especially insecurity and harmful sociocultural norms.
7. A further reduction in foreign aid and subsequent economic contraction could have disproportionate impact on women, especially urban women who benefited from economic expansion and donors' support in the last two decades.
8. The United States can continue to advance gender equality in Afghanistan by advocating, along with other international partners, that women participate in the Afghan peace negotiations and that the negotiations preserve critical post-2001 gains for women and girls.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are intended to help the Congress and executive branch agencies determine how best to preserve and build on the gains that Afghan women and girls have made since 2001.

Recommendations for the Congress

The Congress may wish to consider:

1. Ensuring that current funding levels for improving Afghan women's and girls' access to health care and education are preserved because these programs have demonstrated the most measurable success, there remains significant need, and the Afghan population widely supports these efforts
2. Conditioning U.S. assistance to any future Afghan government on that government's demonstrated commitment to protect the rights of women and girls
3. Ensuring that the Secretary of State submits the strategy as called for in section 7044(a) of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, including the component to promote the welfare and rights of Afghan women and girls. As the Congress considers fiscal year 2022 foreign assistance levels for Afghanistan, it may wish to take into account what resources may be needed to implement the women's rights component of that strategy.
4. Reassessing the requirement for the Department of Defense to spend not less than \$10 million to \$20 million annually on the recruitment and retention of women in the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), and rather, prioritizing the appropriation of funds to improve working conditions and protections for women in the ANDSF
5. Increasingly raising women's rights and gender equality issues in engagements related to Afghanistan—during visits to the country and hearings on Afghanistan, and with international partners

Recommendations for Executive Branch Agencies

6. The Secretary of State should continue to work with our Afghan and other international partners to support women's rights protections in any agreement emerging from Afghan peace negotiations.
7. The Secretary of State, the USAID Administrator, and the Secretary of Defense should ensure that gender-related programs and initiatives in Afghanistan include activities that educate and engage Afghan men and boys to challenge stereotypes and reduce hostility to women's rights and their participation in public life.

8. The Secretary of State, the USAID Administrator, and the Secretary of Defense should ensure that monitoring and evaluation systems are in place for programs and initiatives to support Afghan women and girls so that outcomes are assessed and agencies better understand the impact of programming.
9. The Secretary of State should continue to support protective shelters for women and girls fleeing abuse, and increase mentorship and support to the Afghan National Police's Family Response Units.
10. The USAID Administrator should develop and retain staff with expertise in gender mainstreaming, to better integrate gender into the agency's programming.
11. The USAID Administrator should prioritize expanding midwifery education programs, including community midwifery schools, in rural areas where there is a shortage of female healthcare providers and access to maternal care is restricted.
12. The USAID Administrator should support the Ministry of Education in training more female teachers, providing for more gender-appropriate facilities, and adequately funding and monitoring community-based education in order to meet the demand for girls' education, especially in rural areas.
13. In the absence of sufficient Ministry of Education support for the community-based education system, the USAID Administrator should continue to prioritize the agency's community-based education programming across the country.
14. The USAID Administrator should ensure that female members of community development councils in Afghanistan—particularly those in rural areas—are consulted on the design and implementation of USAID programs, in order for programs to better address the concerns and priorities of women in rural communities.
15. The USAID Administrator should provide financial support to Afghan grassroots civil society organizations that advocate for women's rights, particularly those that operate in rural areas.
16. The USAID Administrator should ensure that job skills trainings for Afghan women are designed to be practical and responsive to market needs, and that the agency assesses the degree to which trainings expand participants' knowledge and skills.
17. The Secretary of Defense should continue to focus DOD efforts on improving the working conditions and protections for women serving in the ANDSF, rather than focusing solely on increasing recruitment numbers.



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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The story of women in Afghanistan is more complex than the simplistic portrait often painted by Western media: passive victims forced to wear *burqas* and subjugated to the will of Islamic fundamentalists. Such a one-dimensional narrative, when adopted by the international donor community, can undermine even the most well-intentioned efforts to ensure women and girls are afforded basic human rights.¹ To effectively support Afghan women and girls and advance gender equality, donors must understand the diverse experiences of Afghan women and girls, in the context of the culture and history that shape gender roles and relations in the country.

A thorough treatment of this vast topic is outside the scope of this report, which is limited to examining the scope and effectiveness of U.S. efforts to advance gender equality in Afghanistan since 2002. This chapter defines key terms, provides a thumbnail description of Afghanistan’s history of gender equality efforts and the diversity of the Afghan female population, and presents related findings from SIGAR-commissioned interviews in Afghanistan.

WHAT IS “GENDER EQUALITY”?

This report adopts the definition of gender used in the U.S. Agency for International Development’s (USAID) 2012 Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy, which describes it as “the socially defined set of roles, rights, responsibilities, entitlements,



A young Afghan girl points out a word to her teacher at the Aliabad School near Mazar-e Sharif, Balkh Province. (Ohio National Guard photo by Sgt. Kimberly Lamb)

and obligations of females and males in societies.” Further, the policy states that gender equality “involves working with men and boys, women and girls to bring about changes in attitudes, behaviors, roles and responsibilities at home, in the workplace, and in the community. Gender equality means . . . expanding freedoms and improving overall quality of life so that equality is achieved without sacrificing gains for males or females.”²

The scope of this report is U.S. programs and policies in Afghanistan that sought to advance gender equality. While the above definitions apply to these programs and policies in theory, any analysis of how these efforts played out on the ground immediately confronts complexity and ambiguity. There is no Dari or Pashto word for the terms “gender” and “gender equality.” In the development field, Afghans often simply use the English word without any translation. Moreover, in practice, the vast majority of “gender” efforts focus on support to females, the marginalized group—contributing to the conflation of “gender” and “women.” For these reasons, in Afghanistan the term “gender” has frequently been understood as “relating to women and girls.”

“Gender equality means . . . expanding freedoms and improving overall quality of life so that equality is achieved without sacrificing gains for males or females.”

— USAID’s Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy

To align with the way in which agencies commonly use “gender”—almost interchangeably with “women-related”—this report often does the same. However, where possible, we refer to “gender equality” and to “gender” as a term applicable to both women and men. We consider “gender-related programs” to be those which encompass objectives related to women, girls, and gender equality issues.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Within Afghanistan, the status and rights of women have been politicized for more than a century.³ The debate about women's role in society has often occurred along a continuum between an urban-based movement which sought to modernize Islam and address social inequalities, and a rural-based "traditionalist" movement which sought to preserve Islam as practiced in daily life, with an emphasis on lifestyle and notions of virtue.⁴ Both currents persist in Afghanistan today.

Restrictive, Patriarchal Norms Predate and Transcend the Taliban

In Afghanistan, as everywhere, gender norms are influenced by myriad social, economic, political, and cultural forces, and these norms vary by region and community. Individual identities and experiences are shaped by even more factors: extended family network, ethnicity, religion or sect, language, class, urban or rural background, education, and political affiliation.⁵ But some generalizations can be made about Afghanistan—starting with the fact that it remains a largely agrarian and impoverished country whose traditional, patriarchal society has historically accorded women subordinate status. In industrial societies, the increased demand for labor spawned by industrial development and urbanization has drawn women out of the home and into the workforce, with greater gender equality as a byproduct of that fundamental change.⁶ Afghanistan has not undergone this momentous economic transformation, and underlying economic factors are not conducive to swift or far-reaching changes. This poses a formidable barrier to donor efforts to transform the status of women.

Portraying the Taliban as the sole agents of Afghan women's oppression "fails to confront the deeper social forces that produce and reinforce patriarchal norms that predate the Taliban movement."

—International Center for Transitional Justice

A common misperception about women in Afghanistan is that the Taliban are the prime instigators of their oppression. However, as noted in a report by the International Center for Transitional Justice, portraying the Taliban as the sole agents of Afghan women's oppression "fails to confront the deeper social forces that produce and reinforce patriarchal norms that predate the Taliban movement."⁷ Alongside varying interpretations of Islam, the mores and customs of Afghanistan's dominant ethnicity, the Pashtun, have heavily influenced Afghan gender roles and relations. This tribal code values "family honor and its protection as a true measure of a man's worth and status in society."⁸ As historian Nancy Dupree wrote:

In Afghanistan, women symbolize honor—of the nation and of the family. Any deviation on the part of women from honorable behavior as it is defined by any given family or group is seen to besmirch the honor of those in authority and cannot therefore be tolerated. It is this attitude which has perpetuated overly protective institutions and customs such as the veil and seclusion.⁹

To Western eyes, such customs might seem like a form of house arrest. In traditional Pashtun society, they are “indissolubly linked to rural notions of the virtue and the maintenance of an ethical order”—concepts which long predate the rise of Taliban oppression.¹⁰

Reform Efforts Date Back to Late 19th Century, and Have Met Greatest Resistance in Rural Areas

Efforts to overturn the repressive treatment of women did not begin in 2001. From the late 19th century onward, several reform-minded male rulers pressed for changes in women’s status and rights. Though such reforms barely reached beyond the major cities, they threatened entrenched social norms and met severe resistance, particularly in rural areas. In the 1920s, King Amanullah Khan pursued a controversial modernization agenda that included improving women’s status. He encouraged the removal of the veil, education for girls, and an end to child marriages and forced marriages. In what would become a pattern for the next century, reformers invoked Islamic precepts—such as those that provided certain protections for women in marriage, divorce, inheritance, veiling, and seclusion—to defend more liberal policies regarding women. But the king’s social reforms and reductions in tribal subsidies ultimately incited violent rebellion, and in 1929 Amanullah fled into exile.¹¹

King Zahir Shah (1933–1973) took a more cautious approach to social reform.¹² The 1964 constitution granted women the right to vote—without prompting from any grassroots women’s suffrage movement—and the right to run for office.¹³ The period was one of relative peace, which enabled development and better living conditions. Starting in the 1950s, Afghanistan benefitted from both U.S. and Soviet aid. Both powers linked the funding to improvements in women’s status, and both funded girls’ schools.¹⁴

In the 1980s, Afghanistan’s communist government aggressively pursued female emancipation, in line with Marxist ideology. The regime forcibly compelled rural women and girls to enroll in literacy classes with Marxist curricula. Rural communities resisted, sometimes violently. The government backtracked and focused on implementing such policies in its urban strongholds.¹⁵ There, more women entered the workforce, mostly as government-employed healthcare workers and teachers. In these urban centers, particularly in Kabul, women participated in public and political life, serving in government positions and within the leadership of the Afghan communist party. In 1989, seven women served in parliament. Women also joined the police, army, and airlines, and worked in factories.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the Soviet-Afghan war devastated the countryside, and for most of the population, traditional gender norms persisted.¹⁷

The period of *mujahedin* rule and civil war in the 1990s is particularly important to note in relation to U.S. goals for women’s rights in the post-2001 period. The mujahedin had fought the Soviets and been backed by the United States. When they gained power in 1992, conditions for women rapidly deteriorated, especially for those who had seen liberalization in the cities. Seeking to impose a form of government based on their interpretation of Islam, the mujahedin began a systematic removal of women from public life, banning them from working in offices and radio and television stations. The government called for the veiling of

women and the shutdown of female schools, which it described as “the hub of debauchery and adulterous practices.”¹⁸ As mujahedin factions split and Afghanistan descended into social chaos, women suffered rape, kidnappings, and killings. During this time, the United States did not come to Afghan women’s aid; once its goal of a Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan had been accomplished, the United States ended assistance programs and withdrew from involvement in Afghanistan.¹⁹

The pendulum-like history of social reforms in Afghanistan reflects “a struggle between traditionalists and modernists”—and at the center of the debate is women’s role in society.²⁰ Scholar Shireen Khan Burki posited a critical lesson from this pattern of reform and backlash: that social policies related to Afghan female empowerment should be executed only with “the agreement of a broad social base,” as these will be ultimately most effective.²¹

Taliban Rule, 1996–2001: Reform via Repression

The Taliban emerged as a group of clerics and religious students seeking to impose much-needed order—as well as their interpretation of Islamic belief and practice—in a society devastated by nearly two decades of war. When they ousted the mujahedin-led government in 1996, the Taliban’s cure for chaos was an interpretation of Islam “rooted in the world of the pre-1979, southern Pashtun village,” with all the social control of women that implied—but with exceptionally rigid enforcement and extreme punishments for violators.²² Women who ventured outside their homes without a male guardian were publicly flogged; women accused of adultery were stoned to death in public exhibitions.²³ In public, they were required to wear the burqa.

The Taliban’s cure for chaos was an interpretation of Islam with exceptionally rigid enforcement and extreme punishments for violators.

In one respect, Taliban ideology made little practical difference: its ban on girls’ education had little impact in rural villages that had never had secondary schools for girls to begin with. (Even today, girls’ education in many rural areas ends once girls reach puberty.²⁴) In others, though, the Taliban actually upset tribal customs—for example, by prohibiting the practice of *baad*—on the grounds that it was contrary to their strict interpretation of Islam.²⁵

Baad is the customary practice of settling feuds where one family gives a woman to the other family in marriage.

It was in cities, where women had been accustomed to greater freedom of movement, dress, and employment, that the Taliban encountered strongest resistance to their edicts; the religious police arrested and beat locals in urban centers and in northern parts of the country. Though human rights abuses were not limited to cities, the Taliban enforced their edicts most strictly and notoriously in the urban centers.²⁶

There was internal debate within the Taliban about whether public floggings and stoning of women were necessary. Whether those debates reflected genuine differences in interpretations of Sharia law or simply an awareness of international censure, they do

indicate that ideological and strategic schisms have long existed within the movement—schisms that continue today (see pp. XX–XX for discussion of the post-2001 Taliban).²⁷

Afghan Women: Demographically Diverse and Resilient

Like Afghan men, Afghan women represent multiple ethnicities, tribes, geographies, languages, levels of education and socioeconomic status, and varied concerns and priorities.²⁸

Some of the most striking differences in the experiences of Afghan women are between those living in urban areas and those living in more remote and insecure rural areas with limited access to education, jobs, and public services.²⁹ For instance, a 2014 study found that more than four times as many women died of pregnancy- and childbirth-related causes in rural areas than in urban areas.³⁰ Twenty-four percent of primary school-aged girls in urban areas were out of school as of 2013–2014; in rural areas, that number was 59 percent.³¹ Women in urban centers have long had greater access to education, health care, and employment, and have enjoyed a political climate more conducive to the protection of women’s rights (with the exception of during mujahedin rule and the Taliban period).

A 2014 study found that more than four times as many women died of pregnancy- and childbirth-related causes in rural areas than in urban areas.

The degree of Taliban influence or control is another factor affecting women today, which this report later discusses in greater detail (see chapter 11). Taliban practices reportedly vary from region to region. And “even when [women] expressed positive sentiments about the sense of security and justice that the Taliban were able to provide, they voiced strong objections to the restrictions that Taliban control placed on women,” researcher Ashley Jackson wrote. “Even women married to Taliban men believed that women should have greater freedoms than the Taliban in their area allowed.”³²

Afghan women and girls endure some of the gravest hardship and disenfranchisement in the world, a fact that has contributed to one-dimensional perceptions of them. In fact, it is critical that international donors see Afghan women as partners and agents for change. “Something I have witnessed over and over is that perspectives regarding women in Afghanistan have not changed much with[in] the international donor community. . . . Afghan women have always been seen as victims,” Ghizaal Haress, assistant professor at the American University of Afghanistan, told SIGAR.³³ As scholar Anne Brodsky wrote, “Afghan women’s resilience has resulted from their ability . . . to take some control of their lives, work within their cultural framework and skills, and act as change agents for themselves and others. It is crucial that any outside aid respect Afghan women’s expertise and autonomy.”³⁴

AFGHAN VOICES: SOCIAL NORMS ARE AMONG GREATEST BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT, ESPECIALLY IN RURAL AREAS

Based on SIGAR-commissioned interviews in Afghanistan.

For this report, SIGAR commissioned 65 interviews with Afghans in 14 provinces. Many interviewees—male and female—said that social and cultural norms are one of the biggest barriers to Afghan women's advancement, particularly in rural areas. "Men in our community think the role of women is to sit at home and cook. If their mothers tell them to behave well with their wives, so they do, and if their mothers order them to beat their wives and misbehave, so they also do," said a woman from Nangarhar Province. She added, "There are many trainings for women [related to women's rights]. I believe there have to be more trainings for men instead of women."³⁵ A female member of a civil society organization in Balkh Province said, "In most families in these areas, they prefer boys to girls, and they don't allow their daughter an education. They force them to marry the person that their family wants; when she isn't ready to marry that person they forcibly make her marry that person, and to the end of her life she keeps these things in her mind."³⁶

"I think we [women] have two big challenges—first, security which creates problems, and second, other people's opinions," said a female member of a civil society organization in Kunduz Province. "In the cities, people's opinions have changed, but in rural areas they are still the same. Even in the center of most provinces, there are these kinds of problems; our biggest fight is against people's minds (about our jobs, our liberty, our efforts). From all aspects they have restricted our lives."³⁷

Many respondents cited traditional values as the reason some families do not allow their female members to go outside the home for an education or job. But interviewees also cited common concerns for women's safety due to the risks posed by the war, sexual harassment and assault, and other types of crime.³⁸

Several respondents drew a distinction between Islam and the tribal value system, noting that more restrictive

tribal codes can take precedence over Islamic law when it comes to what may be permitted for women. "Sometimes we prefer customs over Islam. Islam may permit something but we Pashtuns could think differently than Islam," observed a male member of a civil society organization in Kunar.³⁹ Another male civil society representative from Bamyan said, "Islam doesn't prevent women from studying and working, but sometimes the poor culture and tradition are some of the biggest challenges in Afghanistan. . . . People still prefer the patriarchy."⁴⁰

"The difference in challenges between women in urban areas and women in rural areas are as long as the gap between the earth and sky."

—Male civil society representative, Bamyan Province

Interviewees consistently highlighted sharp differences in social norms and living conditions between the lives of rural and urban women. "In rural areas, when women wear good clothes and go to school, people laugh at them and term them as foreigners. But . . . in urban areas, people value education and that's why they value and respect educated women," said a female member of the provincial council in Khost.⁴¹ A male member of the provincial council in Bamyan explained, "The difference in challenges between women in urban areas and women in rural areas are as long as the gap between the earth and sky. In urban areas, women . . . know about their rights. However, in rural areas, women work very hard, they carry water on their heads, they harvest the wheat, they take care of livestock and do all the physical tasks. They have less value in their homes, they have no rights in decision-making."⁴²



Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute, assistant to the president and deputy national security advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan, meets with Habiba Sarabi, then-governor of Bamyan Province on May 9, 2008. At the time, Sarabi was Afghanistan's only female governor. (DVIDS photo by Spec. Mary Gonzalez)

DONOR EFFORTS ARE JUST ONE OF MANY FORCES CHANGING AFGHAN GENDER NORMS

In the field of gender and development, the evidence for what works to change embedded social norms is still emerging, and seems to vary depending on the context.⁴³ The efficacy of interventions that challenge norms can be difficult to measure—and, as gender scholars Rachel Marcus and Caroline Harper point out, “old norms [exist] alongside new ones as they take hold.” Drawing on fieldwork in Ethiopia, Nepal, Uganda, and Vietnam, their 2015 Overseas Development Institute paper concluded that gender norms can change as a result of “broad drivers of change,” such as economic development or communications technology; purposeful efforts to encourage change, including new laws, policies, or programs, or activism; and “exposure to new ideas and practices.”⁴⁴

These findings suggest that Afghanistan's gender norms have been buffeted by many drivers of change since 2001: economic growth, exposure to new ideas and practices through a boom in media and mobile phone use, the presence of tens of thousands of foreigners, and targeted efforts to push for change through legal reforms, donor-supported programs, and social and political activism. The sheer number of outside forces affecting Afghanistan over the last two decades adds another layer of difficulty to any attempt to assess how much aid programs have moved the needle on gender norms. As this report's examination of 24 U.S. gender-related programs reveals, some programs were designed based on assumptions and theories of change that proved to be ill-suited to the Afghan context and the challenges that women and girls faced. Yet others—for instance, programs to support community-based education and to work with Afghan men to improve women's access to health care—reflected substantial efforts to understand and effectively work within the Afghan context.

Both donors and Afghans alike are rightly motivated to address the grave human rights abuses and daily discrimination that women and girls endure in Afghanistan. This cannot be overstated. But even where there are moral and humanitarian imperatives to intervene, such as in combating gender-based violence, U.S. agencies must assess how they can best support women and girls without provoking backlash that might endanger them or stall progress—as illustrated by the country’s turbulent history of social reforms.⁴⁵

The sheer number of outside forces affecting Afghanistan over the last two decades adds another layer of difficulty to any attempt to assess how much aid programs have moved the needle on gender norms.

U.S. development policy in Afghanistan at times emphasized the importance of local context and engagement.⁴⁶ Yet a frequent critique of international aid programs in Afghanistan has been the failure to take local context, including cultural norms, into consideration. In field research for this report, some interviewees described resistance to the United States’ and other donors’ efforts to shift Afghan social norms around gender (see pp. 33–34). Further, a meta-review of development assistance in Afghanistan found that donors were keenly aware of the need for localized interventions, but rarely “made strategic adaptations to their aid portfolios, to the way they delivered aid, or indeed to their expectations of what could reasonably be achieved.”⁴⁷

KEY FINDINGS

- Afghanistan’s restrictive social and cultural norms toward women—who symbolize honor of the family and the nation—predate and transcend the Taliban. The country also remains largely agrarian and has not undergone the development and urbanization that have historically led to greater gender equality in many other countries.
- Historically, Afghan leaders’ efforts to advance women’s rights have spurred backlash, especially in rural areas, and have been most successful when based on a broad social consensus.
- In interviews commissioned by SIGAR, many male and female interviewees cited social and cultural norms and insecurity as the biggest barriers to Afghan women’s advancement, particularly in rural areas.
- Afghanistan’s gender norms have been buffeted by many drivers of change since 2001: economic growth, exposure to new ideas and practices through a boom in media and mobile phone use, the presence of tens of thousands of foreigners, and targeted efforts to push for change through legal reforms, donor-supported programs, and social and political activism.
- U.S. agencies must assess how they can best support women and girls, advance gender equality, and uphold international norms and human rights without provoking backlash that might endanger women and girls or stall progress.



U.S. Marines photo

CHAPTER 2
THE WAR'S IMPACT ON WOMEN

One outcome of the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan was supposed to have been a steady improvement in the lives of Afghan women—and, to be sure, improvements have happened. But these gains have occurred alongside, and in many cases in spite of, the misery wrought by the last two decades of war.

Violence continues to be one of the biggest challenges facing Afghan women, both directly and indirectly.⁴⁸ In a country with one of the highest maternal mortality ratios in the world, insecurity has made routine medical care difficult or impossible to get. The same insecurity has made it impossible for large numbers of Afghan children—especially girls—to attend school.⁴⁹ And while civilian casualties have declined modestly since hitting a peak in 2016, and declined more in the first half of 2020, overall they are still nearly double what they were in 2009.⁵⁰ Those numbers drive a strong desire among ordinary Afghans—especially women—for an end to the conflict.

“Everyone wants to have peace,” Fawzia Koofi, a 45-year-old women’s rights activist, former member of the Afghan parliament, and current delegate on the Afghan government’s negotiating team, told a *BBC* interviewer in early 2020. “We were born during war and grew up during war. Neither my generation nor my children know what peace means.”⁵¹

No assessment of how the lives of Afghan women have changed for better or worse since 2001 would be complete without examining their lived experience of the conflict,

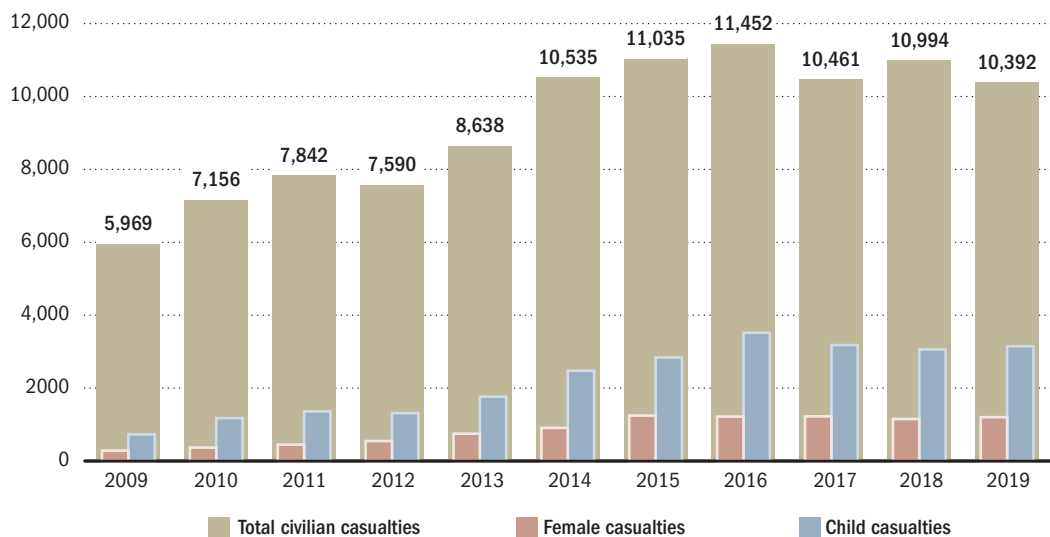
and the ways in which development efforts to improve their lives have been undermined by war.

Civilian casualties occur amid various types of warfare: ground engagements between anti-government elements and pro-government forces, suicide and non-suicide improvised explosive device attacks by anti-government elements, and airstrikes and search operations by pro-government forces. And many casualties, such as those caused by land mines or targeted killings, can happen far removed in time and place from actual combat.⁵²

Still, every civilian casualty brings with it a series of potential ripple effects: increasingly desperate poverty, mental trauma, and the social stigma and discrimination that accompany permanent disability and widowhood. Overall, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has recorded 35,518 civilian deaths and another 66,546 civilian injuries between 2009 and 2019.⁵³ The two entities that keep civilian casualty records—UNAMA and the Resolute Support (RS) Civilian Casualty Mitigation Team—use different counting methods, which means there are some discrepancies in their numbers.⁵⁴ However, UNAMA’s figures show that 9,354 women and 23,839 children have been killed or injured between 2009 and 2019. According to SIGAR analysis of UNAMA data, women accounted for between 5 and 8 percent of all civilian casualties between 2009 and 2014, with the proportion increasing to 10 to 12 percent from 2015 to 2019. Children accounted for roughly 12 to 23 percent of civilian casualties between 2009 and 2014, with the proportion similarly spiking to roughly 25 to 30 percent from 2015 to 2019 (see Figure 1).⁵⁵

FIGURE 1

CIVILIAN CASUALTIES, 2009-2019



Note: According to UNAMA, reports using a consistent methodology have been maintained since 2009.

Source: SIGAR analysis of UNAMA civilian casualty data from 2009 to 2019. UNAMA, “Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict Annual Report 2018,” February 2019, pp. 11–12; UNAMA, “Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict 2019,” February 2020, pp. 5, 9.



Girls at a local returnee and refugee village in Farah Province. Provincial Reconstruction Team Farah visited the village on the outskirts of Farah City to conduct a site survey and deliver humanitarian assistance. (U.S. Navy photo by Hcm. Josh Ives)

There are many ways to get killed or maimed in Afghanistan—and in a country littered with the detritus of war, this is especially true for children. “Children have been killed, blinded, crippled—or inadvertently caused the death of their friends—while playing with unexploded ordnance that is negligently left behind by parties to the conflict,” Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said in a 2016 report.⁵⁶ There is no breakdown on the precise cause of death and injury for women and children, but the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) estimates that nine children are killed or injured every day in Afghanistan, many by land mines, unexploded ordnance or pressure-plate Improvised Explosive Devices, used exclusively by the Taliban and other anti-government groups.⁵⁷

While civilian casualties have declined modestly since hitting a peak in 2016, and declined more in the first half of 2020, overall they are still nearly double what they were in 2009.

UNAMA and RS agree that Taliban and other anti-government forces are responsible for most civilian casualties, but disagree on how much. Depending on the year, UNAMA puts the percentage of civilian casualties caused by the Taliban and other anti-government groups at anywhere from 61 to 82 percent; Resolute Support figures put it upwards of 90 percent.⁵⁸ U.S., Afghan, and international forces, through their use of air raids which miss their intended target or hit civilians whom Taliban fighters are using as human shields, have been responsible for one source of civilian casualties which disproportionately affect women and children.⁵⁹



An Afghan girl waits with other refugees living in the Farah City District V Refugee Camp to receive donated items sent from the United States. (Resolute Support photo)

Air strikes killed or injured 622 civilians in 2009, according to UNAMA—a number that declined until it hit a low of 162 in 2014. Since then, it has climbed back to well past 2009 levels. Between 2009 and 2019, UNAMA reported 5,470 civilian casualties were due to air strikes by U.S., international, or Afghan forces.⁶⁰ Sixty-five percent of the total happened between 2015 and 2019, as the United States stepped up its air war in an attempt to drive the Taliban to the negotiating table.⁶¹ In 2020, UNAMA remained concerned about the increasing number of civilian casualties caused by airstrikes by the Afghan Air Force. However, UNAMA noted that “the total number of civilian casualties from all airstrikes decreased by 46 percent in the first nine months of 2020 in comparison to the same period in 2019,” and “this was mainly due to fewer civilian casualties caused by airstrikes conducted by international military forces.”⁶²

Nighttime search and seizure operations are not a major source of civilian casualties, but they have cost U.S. and international forces in terms of public goodwill, partly because of their effects on women and children. UNAMA, other international organizations, and the Afghan people themselves have continued to raise concerns about the impact of these operations, with early complaints including “allegations of ill-treatment, aggressive behavior and cultural insensitivity, particularly towards women” on the part of U.S., Afghan, and international forces.⁶³ In early 2010, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) began issuing tactical directives aimed at reducing the risk of civilian casualties and improving respect for women in nighttime operations, in addition to other objectives. These reforms appeared to lessen some of the negative civilian impacts of nighttime operations carried out by international forces.⁶⁴ Still, nighttime search and seizure operations conducted by Afghan Special



A displaced woman and children in Sar-e Pul Province, northern Afghanistan. (UNAMA photo by Eric Kanalstein)

Forces and other pro-government forces continue to inflict “high levels of civilian harm,” according to UNAMA in February 2020.⁶⁵

Dyan Mazurana, a research professor at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University who has done extensive research in Afghanistan, told SIGAR that night raids “always come up as a top complaint in the studies and a top motivator for people to resent the U.S. presence.” U.S. forces “go in looking for suspects, and the [female U.S. service members] will be assigned to go into women’s spaces and hold women and children in certain rooms while the men search for the suspect,” Mazurana said. “This terrifies the women and children. You get rooms of women and children who are screaming and screaming, screaming out the names of their fathers and brothers.”⁶⁶ The sense of violation is even more acute in the Afghan context than an American might understand; the Afghan home is an extremely private space, and even extended family members do not enter women’s rooms.⁶⁷

Men far outnumber women and children as civilian casualties. But each male casualty represents the start of a chain of catastrophes for women and children, since in Afghanistan’s conservative culture, men are the breadwinners. “I am an illiterate woman and cultural sensitivity means that women are not allowed to work outside and support their families, so I am not able to provide economically. My three children who were at school before my husband was killed have now dropped out and work as shepherds to support our family,” one widow told UNAMA.⁶⁸ The same goes for women whose husbands become too disabled to work. Even property damage can be ruinous.⁶⁹

Women lucky enough to find jobs work for a fraction of what their husbands made, and many are forced to take children out of school so they can contribute to the family

income. Others are forced to give their daughters in marriage to pay off debts—the practice known as *baad*—which often puts young girls in families where they are subject to verbal or physical abuse.⁷⁰ Widows are also vulnerable to domestic abuse, since they are seen as an economic burden on already-stressed families.⁷¹ Women and children are both targets for rape and sexual exploitation, something UNAMA has called “a serious and yet underreported problem.”⁷²

Women who suffer permanent injuries face a three-fold blow: the injury itself, the social stigma of disability, and sexual harassment. Women with disabilities are generally seen as unfit for marriage, and “face intersecting forms of discrimination in a society where gender bias and violence against women are endemic,” said a 2020 report by Human Rights Watch. The Afghan government does offer minimal financial assistance to war casualties. However, both disabled women themselves and Afghan organizations that advocate on their behalf told Human Rights Watch that disabled women applying for benefits frequently encounter government officials who demand sexual favors in exchange for processing the paperwork. One woman said, “The administrative employee who was working [at the ministry] told me that he will process my certificate if I sleep with him. He asked me to sleep with him for a night while standing in front of his colleagues, and they just started laughing at me, louder and louder. . . . One of them told me . . . ‘How do you want to get your disability card when you don’t want to sleep with us?’ I started crying and left.” Another woman recounted, “They asked me whether I am married and when I said no, they told me that they can find me a husband. When I refused, the ministry employee told me that I can get this [disability] certificate only if I agree to be his girlfriend.” This abuse often goes unreported, thus giving impunity for the perpetrator and leaving the women feeling helpless.⁷³

There are no reliable recent statistics on mental health in Afghanistan, but a randomized 2004 survey of 750 Afghan households published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* showed that nearly 68 percent of those surveyed showed signs of depression and 72 percent showed symptoms of anxiety. It also showed that “women had significantly poorer mental health status than did men.”⁷⁴

U.S. gender efforts may well not be the primary lens through which many Afghan women and girls see the United States.

A 2011 World Bank report found that “one can hardly find an Afghan family that has not lost one or more members in the course of the last 30 years due to conflict.”⁷⁵ The impact of war on women and girls does not detract from the real ways in which the United States has helped to improve their lives. But it does explain how U.S. gender efforts may well *not* be the primary lens through which many Afghan women and girls see the United States.

AFGHAN VOICES: LACK OF SECURITY CONSTRAINS WOMEN'S MOBILITY; SOME FAULT TALIBAN AND AFGHAN FORCES, BUT OTHERS SAY UNITED STATES SHARES THE BLAME

Based on SIGAR-commissioned interviews in Afghanistan.

Overwhelmingly, women said that insecurity is one of the issues that most affects their daily lives. “Security is the biggest challenge women face in our community because due to insecurity women cannot move around, or work outside of their homes,” said a woman from Jawzjan Province.⁷⁶ Her thoughts were echoed by a woman from Kunar Province. “[Women] are not secure and do not feel safe when they go outside for education or for work. [The] fear is that they will be threatened either by militants or by other community members, like men who tell them they should be at home and call them names and harass them.”⁷⁷ A female participant in a U.S.-funded program in Kandahar Province agreed. “Women do not have security when they leave the house for schooling, shopping, or health purposes. They might be sexually harassed, targeted by militants and many other issues which make them feel unsafe.”⁷⁸ A female member of parliament from Nangarhar Province said, “It is the biggest challenge for Afghan women to get out of the house and work with peace of mind. . . . Every day when I get out of the house, I am afraid to be kidnapped or killed, as it happens daily here.”⁷⁹

Insecurity also impedes progress for Afghan society as a whole, as it hampers the delivery of government services and non-governmental organization (NGO) projects.⁸⁰ A male member of the provincial council in Uruzgan Province said, “The main thing required for further improvement and positive change is security. Financial support is also mostly linked with security. If the security is good, then donors will provide their financial support but if not, then they cannot work.”⁸¹ A male community development council member in Nangarhar

Province concurred. “It is clear that those areas that are secured get more projects compared to insecure areas because no donor is willing to work in insecure areas,” he said. “So women in secure areas get more projects and more benefits than women who are deprived of good security. Life in insecure areas is full of challenges as women cannot access public awareness and other training being given about women’s rights. . . . They are deprived of educational rights and mostly work in crop fields in mountainous areas.”⁸²

“Both sides are dumb; they don’t know with their war what problems they create for people, and poor people are involved for nothing.”

—Woman from Badakhshan Province

Some interviewees saw the Taliban, and clashes between the Taliban and Afghan security forces, as main sources of insecurity. “When we are traveling by road, we are worried every time about Taliban check points on the way. Security within Bamyān City is all right, but the Taliban are all over the place on roads and highways,” said a man in Bamyān.⁸³ A woman in Badakhshan Province described fighting between local police and Taliban forces in her area, and expressed disdain for both sides: “Both sides are dumb; they don’t know with their war what problems they create for people, and poor people are involved for nothing.”⁸⁴ These comments parallel The Asia Foundation’s 2019 *Survey of the Afghan People*, which found that 36 percent of respondents said that a group poses a threat to the security of their local area. In



A member of a female engagement team out of Forward Operating Base Bostick searches an Afghan woman entering a health clinic in Naray District in 2010. U.S. soldiers were conducting classes for Afghan women on pregnancy and feminine hygiene. (DOD photo by Sgt. Jennifer Cohen)

an open-ended follow-up question, 69 percent identified the Taliban as the group posing the threat.⁸⁵

However, the Taliban are not the only drivers of insecurity in the eyes of Afghans; as a party to the conflict, the United States is also viewed by some as partly responsible for the violence. A male community development council member from Kunar Province said, “When the Americans arrived here, there [were] security incidents on a daily basis on the highways. We could not travel to Jalalabad at that time without fear, but now one can travel to Jalalabad even at 1 a.m. without feeling any security concerns, because the

Americans are not here anymore.”⁸⁶ A female member of a community development council in Kunduz Province said, “When the U.S. was here there was war, they were like the Soviet Union. . . . There was firing, bomb attacks, rockets, and no one has good memories of that. It was all negative.”⁸⁷ A woman from Jawzjan said, “I believe if the U.S. leaves Afghanistan, the situation can become better. I think most of the terrors that happen are due to them or by them. And I believe the lives of women will also become better, because they [the United States] are the biggest reason our security here is so bad.”⁸⁸

KEY FINDINGS

- While civilian casualties have declined modestly since hitting a peak in 2016, and declined more in the first half of 2020, overall they are still nearly double what they were in 2009. According to UNAMA, in 2019, 12 percent of civilian casualties were women, and children represented 30 percent.
- Violence associated with the war continues to be one of the biggest challenges facing Afghan women. Direct impacts, such as loss of life, injury, disability, and mental trauma, spawn a range of indirect impacts: the loss of a male breadwinner, increasingly desperate poverty, the social stigma and discrimination that accompany widowhood and permanent disability, and reduced mobility and access to basic services.
- In interviews commissioned by SIGAR, Afghans cited insecurity and harassment as key barriers to women's mobility and work. Some saw the Taliban and clashes with Afghan security forces as sources of insecurity—consistent with recent survey data by The Asia Foundation. Some interviewees also expressed resentment toward U.S. military forces and saw them as partly responsible for the violence.



DVIDS photo

CHAPTER 3

U.S. STRATEGY AND POLICY

This chapter assesses the United States’ strategic approach to gender equality goals in Afghanistan, how it planned to advance the status and rights of Afghan women and girls, and how this strategy evolved over time.

U.S. PRESENCE WAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO ADVANCE WOMEN’S RIGHTS

U.S. military forces went into Afghanistan in 2001 to defeat al Qaeda and deny it the chance to regroup, punish its Taliban allies for providing safe haven, and prevent another attack on the United States.⁸⁹ Liberating Afghan women from Taliban abuse and oppression was not the purpose of the U.S. military intervention. And yet, in the weeks and months following 9/11, the Bush administration and the Congress repeatedly raised the issue of Afghan women’s rights, closely associating it with U.S. objectives in the country. “In Afghanistan, America not only fights for our security, but we fight for values we hold dear,” said former President George W. Bush in December 2001. He explicitly linked those American values to women’s rights: “The central goal of the terrorists is the brutal oppression of women.”⁹⁰ A month earlier, First Lady Laura Bush had delivered the President’s weekly radio address and said the fight against the Taliban was a “fight for the rights and dignity of women.”⁹¹ Also in December, the Congress passed the Afghan Women and Children Relief Act of 2001, authorizing educational and healthcare assistance for Afghan women and children.⁹²

Some observers have noted that the Bush administration’s focus on the long-standing struggles of Afghan women helped it garner domestic political support for U.S. military intervention.⁹³ John R. Allen, former commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, and scholar Vanda Felbab-Brown wrote in 2020, “The George W. Bush administration embraced women’s rights and empowerment of women as a justification for its war on the Taliban.”⁹⁴ According to Patricia Gossman, associate director for the Asia Division at Human Rights Watch, “That doesn’t mean that efforts [for women] were not made. But the rhetoric was used for a political purpose.”⁹⁵ At the same time, though, associating the fight for Afghan women’s rights with the U.S. military intervention occurred alongside what seemed to be genuine concern for their situation. “My perception was that we would do the best we could. Everyone was highly conscious of the cultural constraints and that the best we could do would be incremental. We just knew we had to try,” said Kimberly C. Field, a retired U.S. Army brigadier general and professor of practice at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University, who served as strategic advisor to the commander of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan.⁹⁶

In fact, the Bush administration’s focus on Afghan women’s rights can be seen as a continuation of U.S. policy in the 1990s. During Taliban rule in the late 1990s, the Clinton administration elevated women’s rights as a U.S. priority in Afghanistan. In 1997, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright declared, “Advancing the status of Afghan women is not only a moral imperative; it is being actively integrated into the foreign policy of the United States.”⁹⁷ As public awareness and advocacy efforts increased, U.S. policy became that of non-recognition toward the Taliban. In addition, the United States directed close to \$200 million in humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, a large portion of which targeted women and girls.⁹⁸

Associating the fight for Afghan women’s rights with the U.S. military intervention occurred alongside what seemed to be genuine concern for their situation.

WOMEN’S RIGHTS: BOTH A MEANS TO AN END AND A MORAL IMPERATIVE

Since 2001, the U.S. government has maintained a commitment to improving the lives of Afghan women and girls. The Congress and executive branch agencies have framed this commitment in two ways: first, as a means of achieving broader U.S. strategic goals, namely greater security, stability, and prosperity in Afghanistan, and, second, as a goal worthy in its own right, rooted in a moral imperative to protect basic human rights.

Strategy documents have primarily invoked the first rationale, basing the importance of investing in women and girls on the correlation between gender equality, on one hand, and political stability, security, and economic and social development on the other. This logic was laid out in the U.S. Department of State’s 2010 Women’s Action Plan for Afghanistan: “All reliable development indices,” the plan emphasized, “show that investments in women

are the single most effective poverty alleviation mechanism contributing to a society's prosperity."⁹⁹ A 2015 report by the World Economic Forum found that gender equality in a given country was correlated with higher per capita GDP, as well as an increased level of economic competitiveness and opportunities for human development. The report noted that correlation does not prove causality, but "it is consistent with the theory and mounting evidence that empowering women means a more efficient use of a nation's human capital endowment and that reducing gender inequality enhances productivity and economic growth."¹⁰⁰ The most recent U.S. gender strategy for Afghanistan emphasizes the security argument, referring to studies that "indicate higher levels of gender equality are associated with a lower propensity for conflict."¹⁰¹

U.S. strategies have also made clear that investing in women and girls is a worthwhile endeavor regardless of plausible second- and third-order effects. As the 2010 *Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review* stated, the U.S. government would commit to advancing the status of women and girls abroad not only because of the dividends it pays for societies and U.S. national security, but because "it is important in its own right."¹⁰²

EARLY GENDER EFFORTS ALIGNED AROUND BROAD GOALS; NO COMPREHENSIVE GENDER STRATEGY UNTIL 2012

In the first decade of the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, the key agencies responsible for assistance efforts—State, USAID, and the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD)—developed multiple strategies (for a full list, see Appendix C). Many of these addressed how U.S. assistance would protect and promote Afghan women's rights, but U.S. agencies did not appear to have a comprehensive, interagency gender strategy for Afghanistan. However, most strategy documents coalesced around similar goals for U.S. support to Afghan women and girls:

- increasing access to education
- increasing access to health care
- increasing access to justice
- promoting political participation
- promoting economic participation
- improving security and safety for women¹⁰³

Many documents presented gender equity and the rights of women and girls as cross-cutting issues, meant to be integrated or "mainstreamed" into the design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs (see pp. 42–47 for analysis of mainstreaming).¹⁰⁴

In several instances, however, specific reference to women and girls was notably absent from U.S. strategies.¹⁰⁵ State's January 2010 Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy made little mention of women. After Senator Barbara Boxer criticized the omission, the strategy was re-released one month later with a new section, "Advancing the Rights of Afghan Women." It echoed the broad goals of previous



Khojesta Ebrahimkhel, then-director general of the Office of Human Rights and Women's International Affairs in the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, addresses the U.S. delegation at the second meeting of the Afghanistan-U.S. Bilateral Commission, established by the Afghanistan-U.S. Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement. (State photo)

strategies, with added emphases on expanding economic opportunities for women in the agriculture sector and women's participation in the security sector.¹⁰⁶

Similarly, the first Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Afghanistan was released in 2009 and contained few references to women.¹⁰⁷ The 2011 revision of the U.S. plan added a section on a new campaign objective—that “Afghan women have improved access to health care, education, economic opportunity, the political system, and justice.” Goals across these sectors were broadly stated, and mirrored other U.S. and Afghan strategies.¹⁰⁸

During this first decade of U.S. involvement, the Congress helped maintain a focus on Afghan women and girls. From fiscal years 2003 to 2010, the Congress designated \$627 million in appropriated funds to USAID and State to address the needs of Afghan women and girls. Support was directed to women's programs generally, as well as to certain Afghan organizations, such as the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, and women-led NGOs and civil society organizations.¹⁰⁹ Although the Congress did not designate specific amounts for women and girls from fiscal years 2010 to 2012, the Congress directed that appropriated funds be made available “to the maximum extent practicable” to support programs aimed at improving the lives of Afghan women and girls (see Appendix B).¹¹⁰

In these earlier years of the reconstruction effort, two factors seemed to limit the pool of people who secured contracts for donor assistance for women: patronage networks and the ability to speak English. “Many of the new faces were connected to people in power, and they got recommendations from influential political figures to embassies—for their cousin, their sister’s NGO, and so on,” said Helena Malikyar, an Afghan political analyst. “The other factor has always been knowing English. Those who can communicate in English can easily communicate with the donor community. Those who don’t are at a disadvantage and cannot easily reach donors and convince them that they deserve funding.”¹¹¹ Ben Acheson, former director of the Office of NATO’s Senior Civilian Representative, strongly agreed with this observation.¹¹²

In the earlier years of the reconstruction effort, two factors seemed to limit the pool of people who secured contracts for donor assistance for women: patronage networks and the ability to speak English.

Aiming for Incremental Progress, but Little Acknowledgement of Barriers or Insecurity

A review of strategy documents from this period reveals two characteristics: the breadth and consistency of goals and activities—and minimal discussion of the barriers to progress for women and girls, including insecurity.

Over the course of a decade, the strategies often called for similar activities, such as supporting women’s leadership development, training female teachers and building schools, investing in literacy centers, training female community health workers and midwives, providing women greater access to micro-finance, and supporting civil society organizations working for greater gender equity. Goals were often expressed in terms of “increasing,” “strengthening,” or “improving” a given service, opportunity, or protection for women and girls—suggesting that U.S. agencies were striving for progress along a continuum, and were aware that progress would be achieved incrementally. The sheer breadth of goals and intended activities makes it difficult to determine whether significant shifts in emphasis occurred over time (with the exception of a growing focus on women in the security sector; see chapter 10). Yet the expansiveness testifies to the enormous needs among the Afghan population and the scale of U.S. ambitions to help Afghan women and girls.¹¹³

Second, the strategies of this period made little to no mention of the formidable cultural, social, political, and security barriers to advancing women’s rights and improving their access to services.¹¹⁴ In contrast, the Afghan government’s 2007 National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan extensively discussed the barriers to progress—including the country’s decades of conflict, “harmful traditional practices that have shaped the current position of women in the family and society,” “the lack of an institutional culture [within the security sector] that is sensitive to women,” “prevailing male dominance in many Afghan institutions [contributing] to negative perceptions of women’s abilities as

workers and leaders,” and familial pressures that deny women self-determination.¹¹⁵ The omission from these earlier U.S. strategies does not necessarily mean U.S. officials were unaware of such obstacles, but it does indicate that agencies may not have adequately accounted for constraints and challenges. Further, though the U.S. strategies were devised over a period when security sharply deteriorated, none of the documents SIGAR examined addressed how growing insecurity and violence could undermine gender-related goals and activities.¹¹⁶

U.S. POLICIES STRESSED WOMEN’S RIGHTS, BUT CRITICS FOUND ACTION LACKING

Two significant developments influenced U.S. gender efforts in Afghanistan: the 2010 decision by the Obama administration and its NATO partners to transition security responsibilities to the Afghan government by 2014, and the 2011 adoption of the first U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security.

In 2010, a plan was approved to begin shifting security responsibilities from the NATO-led ISAF to the Afghan military, starting in 2011.¹¹⁷ The security transition would reduce U.S. troop levels from over 100,000 in 2011 to a targeted 9,800 by the start of 2015.¹¹⁸ Subsequent U.S. strategies tried to account for the transition’s likely impact on efforts to advance women’s rights (see p. 30).

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, adopted on October 31, 2000, acknowledges the disproportionate impact of war on women and girls, and calls for their equal participation “in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.” It defined the latter as having four pillars—participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery—and called for member states to integrate women and girls into each.

The White House’s 2011 National Action Plan demonstrated U.S. support for **UN Security Council Resolution 1325** on women, peace, and security. The U.S. goal, the plan said, was “to advance women’s inclusion in peace negotiations, peacebuilding activities, and conflict prevention; to protect women from sexual and gender-based violence; and to ensure equal access to relief and recovery assistance in areas of conflict and insecurity.”¹¹⁹ Though the National Action Plan was not specific to Afghanistan, it included a section highlighting the U.S. commitment to ensuring Afghan women’s participation “at all levels of decision making and governance.” It also stressed that in supporting reintegration and reconciliation, which were high-profile efforts at the time, the United States was insisting that women be involved, and that the Taliban agree to respect women’s constitutional rights.¹²⁰ Secretary of State Hillary Clinton emphasized this point. For instance, in 2011 she testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee: “Insurgents must renounce violence, abandon al-Qaeda, and abide by the laws and constitution of Afghanistan, including its protections for women and minorities. If insurgents cannot or will not meet those redlines, they will face continued and unrelenting assault. . . . The hard-won rights of women and all Afghans cannot be rolled back, and the growth of civil society must not be quashed.”¹²¹

Source: UN Security Council, *Resolution 1325, S/Res/1325*, 2000; U.S. Institute of Peace, “What is UNSCR 1325? An Explanation of the Landmark Resolution on Women, Peace, and Security,” accessed October 18, 2019.

In 2012, in response to an executive order, DOD, State, and USAID created implementation plans to incorporate the National Action Plan objectives into their own strategies and operations. Agencies were required to report annually to the National Security Council on what progress they had made in executing those implementation plans. A 2014 SIGAR audit noted that these annual reports included examples of how



Then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton delivers remarks while hosting female Afghan ministers in the Treaty Room at the U.S. Department of State. (State photo)

U.S. agencies had supported Afghan women, but because the reports covered global efforts to meet the National Action Plan goals, they did “not provide a comprehensive view of U.S. efforts for Afghan women.”¹²²

One of the more noticeable effects of the National Action Plan was a shift in congressional directives regarding Afghan women. The Congress began directing that DOD use Afghanistan Security Forces Fund appropriations to integrate women into the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF)—a goal that closely aligned with the participation objective established by UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the United States Women, Peace and Security Act of 2017.¹²³ From fiscal years 2014 to 2021, the Congress appropriated a total of \$110 million—with a stated goal of \$240.6 million—for this purpose (see Appendix B).¹²⁴ (See chapter 10 for a discussion of women in the ANDSF.)

To some rights advocates, however, the U.S. government was failing to use its leverage to forcefully promote and protect the rights of Afghan women and girls. In late 2012, as plans for the security transition to Afghan forces were well underway and many feared that gains for women and girls were under threat, Human Rights Watch criticized U.S. policy in Afghanistan for inadequate and inconsistent support for gender equality. Human Rights Watch noted several instances when the Afghan government had issued policies harmful to women, and the U.S. government had remained largely silent. The organization asserted that “vocal and public international pressure, especially by the [United States],” had played a key role in persuading the Afghan government

“to take women’s rights seriously,” but that, at times, U.S. silence on important issues emboldened actors in Afghanistan who opposed women’s rights.¹²⁵

On the other hand, U.S. diplomatic pressure on the Afghan government to protect women’s rights extended, by its very nature, beyond the public realm. As Ambassador Franz-Michael S. Mellbin, former European Union special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, told SIGAR, “During an already difficult transition, open critique of the [Afghan] government was often avoided, to not weaken an already fragile government. Meanwhile, very direct and candid talks with the government on gender issues continued. Also, the Afghan government often felt they could better handle such attacks and setbacks themselves—as donor assistance and involvement in the gender space was often attacked by [the government’s] opponents. . . . In a wider international context, the Afghan government in fact remained relatively open towards discussion on and critique of its many serious human rights issues.”¹²⁶

EMBASSY CRAFTED ITS FIRST STAND-ALONE GENDER STRATEGY IN 2012

The planned drawdown of U.S. forces and the 2011 adoption of the National Action Plan influenced the crafting of the “U.S. Embassy Kabul Gender Strategy.” Written by the Kabul-based Interagency Gender Working Group, the strategy was an attempt to develop a common understanding of gender priorities for the entire U.S. mission in Afghanistan.¹²⁷ The working group coordinated with State’s Office of Global Women’s Issues on the development of the strategy.¹²⁸

The strategy was also meant to align with key Afghan government plans, such as its own 2007 National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan.¹²⁹ The strategy’s five key objectives—access to justice and security, leadership and civic engagement, economic development, education, and health—were consistent with previous U.S. goals for support to women and girls.¹³⁰

Importantly, the strategy recognized the difficulty of determining any simple cause-and-effect relationships between U.S. government efforts and outcomes for women. “The *collective* efforts of the international community, the [U.S. government], civil society, and the Afghan government” contribute to change in Afghanistan, it said (emphasis added). It went on to say that “while the strategic-level indicators cannot attribute change to specific interventions, they should reflect [U.S. government] political engagement” and program interventions. In sum, what mattered most were “trends and outcomes” for women and girls, not just “input and output measurements.”¹³¹

U.S. Agencies Sought to Coordinate Gender Efforts

In response to SIGAR's 2010 audit on U.S. support to Afghan women, U.S. agencies took steps to improve coordination by forming the Interagency Gender Working Group and the Afghanistan Gender Task Force to share information and better coordinate activities.¹³²

While an informal gender working group existed before 2010, the Interagency Gender Working Group was formally established in November 2010.¹³³ Typically co-chaired by the human rights chief in the political section of U.S. Embassy Kabul and USAID's senior gender advisor, the working group (now known as the Embassy Kabul Gender Working Group) is the formal coordinating body for addressing gender issues and coordinating related programming across the agencies and sections at U.S. Embassy Kabul. Members of the working group often include representatives from multiple State sections; USAID/Afghanistan; the Departments of Justice, Commerce, and Treasury; and Resolute Support.¹³⁴

At a higher policy level, and managed from Washington in coordination with the U.S. embassy in Kabul, is the Afghanistan Gender Task Force, created in late 2010 to improve interagency coordination and the flow of information between Washington and the U.S. embassy. The task force is co-led by the U.S. ambassador-at-large for global women's issues at State and the deputy chief of mission at the U.S. embassy. These meetings are held via teleconference and include representatives from multiple offices and bureaus at State and USAID, as well as representatives across State's sections and USAID's senior gender advisor at the U.S. embassy.¹³⁵

The Afghanistan Gender Task Force usually meets quarterly, and the Gender Working Group now meets monthly. Topics include key developments and trends in Afghanistan (such as planning for elections); U.S. policies and strategies related to women (such as the implementation of the gender strategy); and agency and embassy assistance programs and events related to women. Generally, discussions within the working group feed into the task force meetings. According to a State official, the Gender Working Group focuses on working-level coordination in Kabul, shares information across sectors, and meets about engagements affecting Afghan women and girls. The task force, on the other hand, "focuses on the most pertinent, top-line issues at both high and working level that need to be discussed between the agencies and between Kabul and [Washington]."¹³⁶

The same official noted that "the effectiveness of these types of platforms ultimately depends on commitment from senior leadership, bandwidth, and sometimes personalities at the working level." The official recalled 2012 to 2016 as a time when there was strong senior-level leadership and coordination at the working level between Washington and the embassy in Kabul, noting some decline in communication since then.¹³⁷ One example of less intensive coordination in recent years is that the U.S. mission in Afghanistan developed the 2019 gender strategy with apparently little or no formal involvement from Washington.¹³⁸

Each of the strategy's five pillars included an overarching goal, several objectives, and strategic-level indicators (such as the number of women-led businesses in transitioned areas, or positive public perception of girls receiving basic education) to help monitor progress. According to the strategy, the Interagency Gender Working Group would be responsible for monitoring progress and producing regular assessments on that progress.¹³⁹

The strategy also identified several transition-related threats. These included “diminishing international leverage” over the Afghan government; a potential “resurgence of recidivist gender politics” if the Taliban or other highly conservative actors gained power; less public visibility for women leaders; less support from donor nations and NGOs; and greater “fracturing of women’s coalitions.” The document then laid out 10 proposed actions to mitigate those threats. The last action listed was “focus on sustainability so that successes last into the future” and “foster community-based support for women’s participation.”¹⁴⁰ This was a positive departure from earlier strategies, which did not much consider barriers and risks. On the other hand, the recommended actions were not well incorporated into the rest of the strategy. Some, such as “support Afghan efforts to engage and educate men and boys,” did not receive further mention.

The 2014 SIGAR audit found that DOD, State, and USAID had not “assessed the overall impact of their efforts to support Afghan women.” While the 2012 gender strategy called for the Interagency Gender Working Group to produce regular assessments of outcomes for women, the group was not doing so as of 2014. A former co-chair told SIGAR that the requirement for an assessment was more of an “optimistic, aspirational statement.”¹⁴¹ Another former co-chair told SIGAR that the working group received reports on individual programs, but did not have the capacity to compile these or produce an overall assessment. According to the former co-chairs, the working group did not take into account such constraints as the lack of reliable census data in Afghanistan, and “experiencing less cooperation than expected from Afghan partners.”¹⁴²

LATEST GENDER STRATEGY FOCUSES ON OUTPUTS, NOT OUTCOMES

In 2017, the Congress passed and President Trump signed into law the Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017.¹⁴³ The legislation aimed to preserve the U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security by codifying into law a policy framework that had existed up to then only as an executive order. The act provided authorizing language on the basis of which more appropriations could be made to achieve the National Action Plan’s goals.¹⁴⁴ In response, the Trump administration released the interagency United States Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security to replace the Obama-era National Action Plan. Among recommended actions, the strategy called for applying gender analyses to U.S. programs (which was also part of USAID’s 2012 Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy; see pp. 44–47); supporting research into best practices for ensuring women’s participation in preventing, managing, and resolving conflict; and assisting partner governments in integrating women into the security forces. The



At an event in Kabul on October 8, 2014, to commemorate the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, Afghan women civil society representatives identified major obstacles hindering their meaningful participation in political and peace processes. (UNAMA photo by Sayed Muhammad Shah)

strategy also called for engaging men and boys as allies, and collecting and analyzing sex-disaggregated data (also part of existing USAID policies and guidance).¹⁴⁵

The U.S. embassy in Kabul issued a revised gender strategy in 2019.¹⁴⁶ It began, “The United States prioritizes the advancement of women and girls’ rights in Afghanistan to foster peace, stability, and security in the country.” Reflecting the primary U.S. goal of a peace agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban, the strategy underscored the need for the “meaningful participation of women in the peace process” and the need to secure the gains achieved since 2001.¹⁴⁷

Reflecting the primary U.S. goal of an Afghan peace agreement, the strategy underscored the need for the “meaningful participation of women in the peace process” and the need to secure the gains achieved since 2001.

The strategy then laid out a familiar series of goals, activities, and indicators across sectors: political participation, access to justice and the reduction of gender-based violence, access to education, health care, and participation in the economy. Nearly all indicators were defined as quantitative outputs—for instance, the number of U.S.-organized peace-focused engagements with girls and women, the number of civil society organizations receiving U.S. assistance and engaged in advocacy, and the number of students in schools receiving U.S. assistance.¹⁴⁸ According to USAID, most of these

indicators reflect the U.S. Standard Foreign Assistance Master Indicator List, which is comprised largely of output indicators and is used to communicate accomplishments to the Congress.¹⁴⁹ While such metrics are important to track the degree to which U.S. assistance reaches women and girls or tries to address gender equity issues, they do little to help policymakers determine the actual outcomes of U.S. assistance—for example, whether girls and women have a meaningful voice in the peace process, or whether civil society organizations are successful in their advocacy efforts.

The 2019 strategy includes some indicators, however, that better reflect actual outcomes for women and girls. For example, one indicator for facilitating women’s entry into the workforce is the “number of full-time equivalent jobs created with U.S. [government] assistance, disaggregated by gender.” Health indicators include the “number of births attended by skilled doctor, nurse, or midwife,” and the “number of pregnant women reached by nutrition-specific interventions through USG-supported programs.”¹⁵⁰ In comments on this report, USAID/Afghanistan observed that some indicators in the Standard Foreign Assistance Master Indicator List reflect attitudinal change and would be useful in Afghanistan—such as the “percentage of participants reporting increased agreement with the concept that males and females should have equal access to social, economic, and political resources and opportunities.” USAID/Afghanistan commented that the U.S. mission could consider developing more indicators unique to the gender equality outcomes that U.S. agencies want to track in Afghanistan.¹⁵¹

According to State, another key component of U.S. engagement on gender equality issues in Afghanistan is State’s partnership with the U.S.-Afghan Women’s Council, a nonpartisan public-private partnership that convenes governments, civil society, and the private sector around the goal of supporting Afghan women and girls’ education, health care, economic empowerment, and leadership. Founded in 2002, the council is co-chaired by the president of Georgetown University and the U.S. ambassador-at-large for global women’s issues, alongside the Afghan minister of foreign affairs and the Afghan minister for women’s affairs. In comments on this report, State emphasized that the council’s more than 80 members—including individuals, organizations, and corporations—have helped improve the lives of Afghan women and children. The council focuses on networking, education, and developing partnerships between organizations. As co-chair, the U.S. ambassador-at-large for global women’s issues works with the council to elevate Afghan women’s issues, updates members on relevant U.S. policies, and connects the council with key figures in the public and private sectors. State also clarified that the council itself does not fund programming nor have a programming budget. The council itself is not funded by the U.S. government, aside from the salary of the executive director, who is detailed from State.¹⁵²

AFGHAN VOICES: PRAISE FOR U.S. CIVILIAN PRESENCE AND GENDER-RELATED EFFORTS, MIXED VIEWS OF U.S. MILITARY, AND PERCEPTIONS OF CORRUPTION IN AID DELIVERY

Based on SIGAR-commissioned interviews in Afghanistan.

Many respondents applauded U.S. efforts to support women and girls. They often cited progress in education and awareness of women's rights among both women and men, and the U.S. role in achieving such progress.

"By [the U.S.] presence, we dare to get out of the house and work. If they are not here, we don't know what will happen to women," said a female parliamentarian from Nangarhar Province.¹⁵³ A female civil society representative in Kunduz Province said, "The biggest impact we've seen during these past 20 years is the result of help from civil society and the U.S."¹⁵⁴ Some pointed to specific projects. A female provincial council member in Khost acknowledged U.S. support for midwives, female graduates from high school and universities, and the National Solidarity Program.¹⁵⁵ A male provincial council member in Bamyan listed other achievements. "The U.S. presence is positive, especially related to women," he said. "I can give you examples of honeybee keeping, [poultry farming], and bazaars for women's handicrafts in all districts . . . [and] many awareness programs and workshops."¹⁵⁶

Some interviewees, however, described opposition to efforts by the United States in particular and foreigners in general to change Afghan social norms around gender. "It is not in people's interests to apply something from outside onto our society," said a male parliamentarian from Kunar Province. He noted the positive impacts of U.S. efforts to advance

women, but believed that the United States "should have worked on people's mentalities before beginning to implement activities."¹⁵⁷ A female civil society representative in Farah Province said that many conservative families "believe that the West tries to change Afghan women and make them as modern as their own women." In response, she said, "they implement more strictness on girls and women."¹⁵⁸

*"By [the U.S.] presence,
we dare to get out of the
house and work. If they
are not here, we don't know
what will happen to women."*

—Female parliamentarian
from Nangarhar Province

More common than critiques of U.S. gender efforts, however, were perceptions that the United States was contributing to insecurity. "I believe if the U.S. leaves Afghanistan, it will be better for people as a whole, as the only reason for war is the presence of the U.S. in Afghanistan. They are the reason people keep fighting and the reason men are always suspicious and worried about women," said a young female beneficiary of a U.S.-funded project in Kandahar. She went on, "I also believe only we can solve our problems ourselves; we can't ask the U.S. to solve the issues of Afghans."¹⁵⁹ (Also see pp. 17–18.)

Other interviewees, however, spoke of the U.S. military as contributing to security in the country. “They have been here with their troops for our people’s security. They have provided help and have had positive effects,” said a male community development council member from Balkh Province.¹⁶⁰ A female provincial council member in Balkh summarized the mixed views among Afghans: “Some of our people believe the presence of U.S. is important for us. Some others believe the U.S. should leave Afghanistan because it is Taliban’s demand that the U.S. leave Afghanistan to have peace. I believe Taliban and [the Afghan National Army] are all our brothers and if they are killed, so both are our brothers and a loss for us.”¹⁶¹

Several respondents critiqued the corruption and layers of subcontracting within U.S. assistance efforts, though they mostly blamed fellow Afghans for their role in corruption. Interviewees expressed frustration at the lack of assistance for ordinary Afghans who do not have political connections or influential relatives. “Influential people like

parliament members would be awarded projects, who would in turn award it elsewhere, and in the end, it would be ineffective. But maybe the U.S. was not aware of this,” said a male community development council member from Nangarhar Province.¹⁶² A male provincial council member from Uruzgan lamented that the U.S. military had “destroyed our villages.” Even so, he added, “There is no doubt that [the U.S. civilian presence has] carried out many development projects that had positive effects on Afghan men and women. But those effects and benefits were not enjoyed by everyone due to the corruption of our own Afghans on those projects.”¹⁶³ The U.S. government “has done its best to support women, but due to the lack of transparency from the contractors, the result of U.S. support is not visible,” said a male member of a civil society organization in Kandahar.¹⁶⁴



Civilian and military members of Provincial Reconstruction Team Farah attend a gender strategy working group meeting with the director of women's affairs in Farah City to discuss literacy program initiatives for women in various districts in Farah Province. (DVIDS photo by CPO Joshua Ives)

SIGNIFICANT U.S. POLITICAL ATTENTION ON AFGHAN WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The foregoing discussion underscores that since 2001, the Congress and three administrations have brought significant political attention to bear on Afghan women's status and rights.¹⁶⁵ This attention, a reflection of both genuine concern and U.S. political agendas, has influenced U.S. assistance to support Afghan women and girls. Moreover, the success or failure of efforts to advance and protect women's rights has become an important measure by which policymakers judge the reconstruction effort.¹⁶⁶

The high-level focus on gender issues in Afghanistan translated into congressional and executive branch agency support for significant funding for these efforts. Although the \$787.4 million disbursed for programs specifically and primarily to support Afghan women and girls pales in comparison to the \$141.24 billion spent on Afghanistan reconstruction assistance overall since 2002, the \$787.4 million for women and girls spent over two decades is still significant. "Afghanistan is the only country in the world where this level of resources has been exclusively and explicitly dedicated to elevating the status of women and girls," a former senior USAID official told SIGAR. The official added, "The focus did galvanize attention and resources in an area that is typically under-resourced globally."¹⁶⁷

On the other hand, the political attention toward gender-related aid may also have reduced the scrutiny accorded to the design of some gender programs. Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, an international consultant and gender specialist with over 20 years of



ISAF Commander U.S. Marine General John R. Allen speaks to the attendees at a discussion of women's issues in Afghanistan at ISAF headquarters in 2012. (DVIDS photo by M. Sgt. Kap Kim)

programmatic experience in Afghanistan, told SIGAR, “The vast amount of interest in women’s issues after the fall of the Taliban highlighted to people that this was an important point; it was a sellable commodity. . . . Anything that had to do with Afghan women could be sold at a high price.”¹⁶⁸ Scholar and journalist Jennifer Heath recounted that in the early years, “funding was more likely when a project was for women.”¹⁶⁹ Echoing these concerns, Ashley Jackson, an independent academic researcher on Afghanistan, criticized the degree to which the United States relied on programming to try to improve women’s status: “Rather than just pumping money into programs, the U.S. government should have come up with diplomatic strategies.”¹⁷⁰

Reduced scrutiny of gender-related programming may have also affected other donors. Christoph Zürcher, a professor at the University of Ottawa who specializes in methods of conflict research and has worked on Afghanistan for 15 years, conducted a meta-review of 148 evaluations of development aid to Afghanistan. The review looked at the experiences of bilateral and multilateral donors and NGOs across many sectors. Zürcher found that rigorous impact evaluations were relatively few, and only two were found to have been published in the gender sector.¹⁷¹ He also found that the methodological standards for evaluations of gender projects were consistently lower than those for evaluations in other sectors.¹⁷²

KEY FINDINGS

- Although advancing women's status and rights was not a reason for the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan, improving the lives of Afghan women and girls was one important goal of the U.S. reconstruction effort.
- The U.S. government has framed its commitment to Afghan women and girls as both a means of achieving broader U.S. strategic goals in Afghanistan, and as a goal worthy in its own right.
- U.S. strategies for support to Afghan women and girls set out consistent and expansive goals, but earlier strategies made little to no mention of the formidable cultural, social, political, and security barriers to those goals—indicating that agencies may not have adequately accounted for constraints and challenges.
- The indicators for the current (2019) U.S. gender strategy for Afghanistan may be overly quantitative and of little help to policymakers trying to determine the actual outcomes of U.S. assistance.
- The high-level political focus on gender issues in Afghanistan translated into congressional and executive branch agency support for significant funding for U.S. efforts targeting women and girls. At the same time, that political focus may also have reduced the scrutiny accorded to the design of some gender programs.



CHAPTER 4

OVERVIEW OF U.S. PROGRAMMING AND MAINSTREAMING EFFORTS

State photo

This chapter offers an overview of State, USAID, and DOD programming intended to improve the lives of Afghan women and girls from 2002 to 2020, as well as an assessment of USAID’s and State’s gender mainstreaming approach.

U.S. ASSISTANCE FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS IS ULTIMATELY UNQUANTIFIABLE

SIGAR found that the full extent of State, USAID, and DOD efforts to support Afghan women and girls is not quantifiable. This finding is consistent with previous SIGAR work that identified issues regarding how agencies track and report funding for gender-related programs.¹⁷³ Agencies’ inability to identify the portion of the programs and related funding that supported Afghan women and girls—or more abstractly, gender equality objectives—prevents a comprehensive assessment of the agencies’ funding for gender-related efforts in Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, this chapter provides a picture of estimated levels of State and USAID resources supporting Afghan women and girls across five key sectors: health, education, political participation, access to justice, and economic participation. In addition, we present figures for the two main ways in which DOD has funded women-related efforts: the Commander’s Emergency Response Program projects, and infrastructure projects to support women in the ANDSF, funded via the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund. All

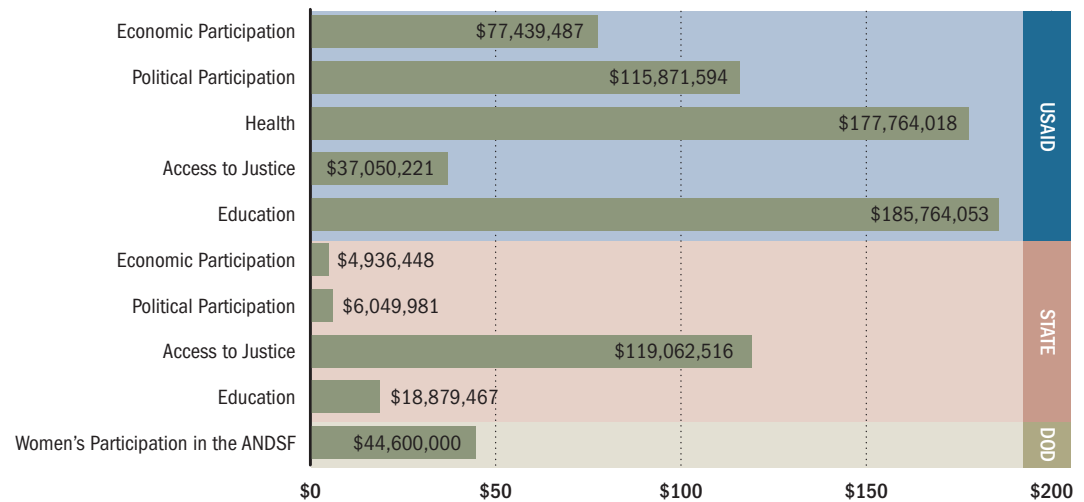
these U.S. programs and initiatives occurred within a constellation of other donors’ reconstruction efforts targeting women and girls, which are outside the scope of this report.

Following this chapter, we examine 24 gender-focused U.S. programs in greater detail, in the context of assessing the gains women and girls have made in each sector.

SIGAR determined that from 2002 to 2020, State, USAID, and DOD disbursed at least \$787.4 million for programs that specifically and primarily supported Afghan women and girls in the areas of health, education, political participation, access to justice, and economic participation (see Figure 2).¹⁷⁴ SIGAR identified these programs based on a review of available program documents and information received from agencies.¹⁷⁵ By comparison, approximately \$141.25 billion has been spent on reconstruction assistance since 2002—\$86.38 billion for security, \$35.95 billion for governance and development, \$4.13 billion for humanitarian aid, and \$14.79 billion for agency operations.¹⁷⁶

FIGURE 2

DISBURSEMENTS BY SECTOR AND AGENCY FOR U.S. PROGRAMS THAT SPECIFICALLY AND PRIMARILY SUPPORTED AFGHAN WOMEN AND GIRLS, 2002-2020 (\$ MILLIONS)



Note: SIGAR categorized U.S. programs based on these sectors, for purposes of analyzing gender-related programs. However, for “economic participation,” “political participation,” and “access to justice,” individual agencies do not use these terms to categorize programming; sector categorizations vary by agency.

Source: SIGAR analysis of USAID program documentation; SIGAR analysis of USAID response to SIGAR data call, July 6, 2020; SIGAR analysis of State response to SIGAR data call, July 2, 2020; SIGAR, *Women in the Afghan Security Forces: Better Planning and Program Oversight Could Have Helped DOD Ensure Funds Contributed to Recruitment, Retention, and Integration*, Audit 20-04, 2020, electronic p. 2.

In addition to those programs specifically and primarily targeting women and girls, hundreds of other U.S. projects and programs included a gender component. Given the approach of mainstreaming gender across all programming in Afghanistan, in theory, every USAID and State program incorporates a gender perspective and should benefit women and girls in some way. Yet agencies have not consistently tracked or quantified



Ken Yamashita, then-mission director for USAID/Afghanistan, speaking at an event for the USAID-sponsored Women in Government Internship Program. (USAID photo)

the amounts disbursed for these gender components. (In comments on this report, USAID/Afghanistan noted that this is a problem globally, not only in Afghanistan.¹⁷⁷) For this reason, \$787.4 million significantly *understates* the total amount that the U.S. government spent from 2002 to 2020 to support Afghan women and girls—an amount that ultimately cannot be determined.

In addition to those programs specifically and primarily targeting women and girls, hundreds of other U.S. projects and programs included a gender component.

This analysis is based in part on a 2014 SIGAR audit that evaluated the extent to which DOD, State, and USAID could identify and track U.S. funding and efforts to support Afghan women implemented from fiscal years 2011 through 2013. That audit found that the full extent of the agencies' efforts to support Afghan women was unclear; none of the three agencies was found to have effective mechanisms for tracking the funding associated with those projects directly benefitting women. Though State's bureaus and offices were generally able to provide percentages of programs and funding specifically supporting women—even for multi-faceted programs that did not exclusively benefit women—the bureaus and offices used different methods to track and report on their efforts.¹⁷⁸

Starting in fiscal year 2012, however, USAID began to allocate and track funding for its Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GE/WE) programs by whether they were primary or secondary programs. GE/WE primary programs included projects or activities in which advancing gender equality was the explicit or primary goal and

fundamental in the design, results framework, and impact. GE/WE secondary programs are programs in which gender equality and women and girls' empowerment, though important, were not among the primary reasons for implementing the programs.¹⁷⁹ For example, the Rural Expansion of Afghanistan's Community-based Healthcare (REACH) program included goals related to improving maternal health. However, these were just a subset of many program objectives, not all of which were specifically related to women and girls.¹⁸⁰

For these reasons, SIGAR compiled two sets of figures for USAID and State programming in the five main sectors examined in this report:¹⁸¹

- Funding for USAID and State programs which SIGAR identified as specifically and primarily supporting women and girls or gender equality goals, or which USAID identified as GE/WE primary, and
- Funding for USAID and State programs that had objectives and/or activities specifically targeting women and girls or gender equality goals, but which were not primarily focused on women and girls (similar to USAID's GE/WE secondary categorization)

In addition, we identified disbursement figures for DOD Commander's Emergency Response Program projects from fiscal year 2004 through the second quarter of fiscal year 2017, which included some form of support for Afghan women and girls, and figures for DOD infrastructure support for women in the ANDSF from fiscal years 2014 through 2020.¹⁸²

To estimate the total amount of DOD, State, and USAID programming that specifically and primarily supported Afghan women and girls, we then added the disbursement figures for State and USAID programs identified in the first bullet above, together with the identified DOD infrastructure support programs. This amount came to \$787.4 million.

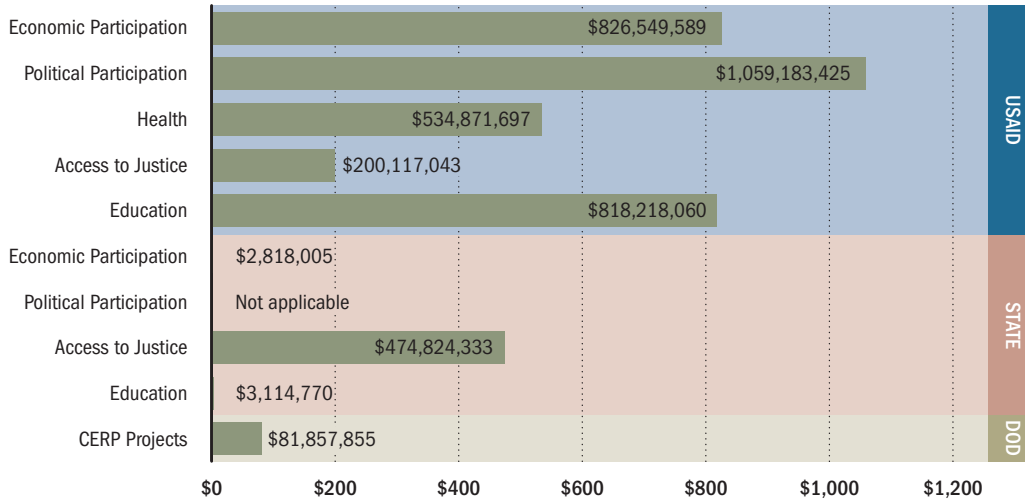
Since 2002, State and USAID have also implemented more than 100 programs that *included* activities to support Afghan women and girls (see Figure 3 on the following page). We added the total disbursement figures for those activities with the total for identified DOD Commander's Emergency Response Program projects (which we could not confirm were specifically and primarily supporting Afghan women and girls). The total amount of these programs is approximately \$4 billion.¹⁸³ Because gender efforts were just one component within these programs, it would be inaccurate to say the agencies disbursed that amount to support Afghan women and girls.

GENDER MAINSTREAMING

In pursuit of greater gender equality in Afghanistan, the U.S. and Afghan governments adopted an approach known as gender mainstreaming, in which the design and implementation of development programs are required to be sensitive to gender norms and disparities.¹⁸⁴ In theory, mainstreaming encourages donors to evaluate the potential

FIGURE 3

DISBURSEMENTS BY SECTOR AND AGENCY FOR U.S. PROGRAMS WITH A COMPONENT TARGETING WOMEN AND GIRLS, BUT WHICH DID NOT PRIMARILY FOCUS ON WOMEN AND GIRLS, 2002–2020
(\$ MILLIONS)



Note: SIGAR categorized U.S. programs based on these sectors, for purposes of analyzing gender-related programs. However, for “economic participation,” “political participation,” and “access to justice,” individual agencies do not use these terms to categorize programming; sector categorizations vary by agency. SIGAR was not able to identify any State programs falling within the political participation sector, which included gender as a secondary objective.

Source: SIGAR analysis of USAID program documentation; SIGAR analysis of USAID response to SIGAR data call, July 6, 2020; SIGAR analysis of State response to SIGAR data call, July 2, 2020; SIGAR analysis of Commander’s Emergency Response Program data from DOD, in response to SIGAR data call, October 2017.

effects of any development policy or program to make sure that those efforts do not inadvertently exacerbate existing inequalities.¹⁸⁵

Mainstreaming Integrates Gender Across All Programs and Policies

The impetus for this concept was the growing recognition of the ineffectiveness of stand-alone gender programs. Instead of relying solely on separate projects for women, gender mainstreaming advocated bringing women’s issues and perspectives into *all* programs or policies, with special attention being paid to how an intervention might impact men and women differently.¹⁸⁶

Gender mainstreaming was introduced as a leading global strategy for the promotion of gender equality at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Conference participants, including the United States, unanimously approved the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which mandated that all UN member states adopt mainstreaming as a new strategic approach to advancing gender equality.¹⁸⁷ In the 25 years since, gender mainstreaming has become a widely adopted strategy among international donors. Yet critics question its efficacy, and its impact is difficult to measure.

U.S. Adoption of Gender Mainstreaming in Afghanistan

Generally, gender mainstreaming consists of a number of components: gender analysis, gender-sensitive indicators for monitoring and evaluation, and resources such as implementation guidelines and gender specialists.¹⁸⁸ The U.S. government, specifically USAID, integrated these components into agency-wide and Afghanistan-specific strategies and policies.¹⁸⁹

A 2008 USAID mission order identified gender as a crosscutting issue to “be addressed in all USAID/Afghanistan project designs,” and mainstreaming as a key tool in carrying out these projects. The mission order identified gender analysis and the inclusion of gender advisors as two key features of gender integration.¹⁹⁰ Gender analysis gathers qualitative and quantitative information, including differences in how men and women use resources and how gender norms may affect women’s access to program benefits.¹⁹¹

According to the 2008 order, the gender team at the U.S. embassy in Kabul would “provide guidance, coordination and support on gender issues throughout the programming, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation cycles.” The advisor who led the team would be responsible for providing technical assistance to staff and ensuring that gender issues were adequately addressed.¹⁹²

The 2012 U.S. Embassy Kabul Gender Strategy reaffirmed a commitment to mainstreaming as a means to integrate gender across all policies and programs.¹⁹³ In 2013, USAID published implementation guidance for the agency’s 2012 Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy.¹⁹⁴ Though it did not specifically use the term “gender mainstreaming,” the agency guidance set out an array of requirements designed to do just that.¹⁹⁵

The October 2020 Foreign Assistance Directive published by State encourages State personnel “to take concrete steps to advance the status of women and girls in U.S. foreign assistance programs, including through conducting gender analysis during program or project design.” According to State, the Secretary’s Office of Global Women’s Issues “launched a free gender analysis in practice training that is available to department bureaus, offices, and posts, upon request. The training can be tailored to the requesting office’s priorities and applied to strategic planning, programs, policy, or public diplomacy. In addition to the training, the Office of Global Women’s Issues offers multiple resources for department entities seeking to integrate gender considerations into assistance and other efforts, including gender analysis templates, samples, and language for integration into notice of funding opportunities.”¹⁹⁶ However, State informed SIGAR that the use of gender analysis and training to support gender integration is voluntary.¹⁹⁷

Mainstreaming Approach Did Not Meet Expectations

Even after 25 years, efforts to adopt a gender mainstreaming approach do not appear to have advanced gender equality at the scale and rate initially envisioned. Several reports

assessing the efficacy of gender mainstreaming programs around the world have found that the strategy has failed to move gender to the fore of development programs.¹⁹⁸

While gender mainstreaming policies have been widely adopted on paper, their implementation remains fraught with conceptual misunderstanding, unclear or unfeasible implementation guidelines, and uneven commitment from senior leaders and development organizations.¹⁹⁹ As one report authored by several international experts said, “Mainstreaming often means that gender experts run after already running trains to at least get a minimum of attention to [women].”²⁰⁰

Several reports assessing the efficacy of gender mainstreaming programs around the world have found that the strategy has failed to move gender to the fore of development programs.

U.S. efforts to implement gender mainstreaming in Afghanistan face similar problems. USAID/Afghanistan’s institutional structure to support gender mainstreaming evolved over time. A 2010 USAID assessment recognized the need for specialized personnel with the “requisite education/training and experience to ensure that gender is mainstreamed meaningfully into all USAID programs.”²⁰¹ However, USAID/Afghanistan was not always capable of fielding the resources and expertise needed to effectively carry out the mainstreaming approach.

In 2009, for example, a year after the 2008 mission order mandated that gender “be addressed in all USAID/Afghanistan project designs,” the mission had only one gender advisor on staff.²⁰² This advisor was also tasked with overseeing “anything that didn’t have a home in a technical office,” including gender, corruption, and returning refugees.²⁰³ USAID brought in a second gender advisor in 2010, and by 2014 had a gender point of contact within each technical office and a gender unit that sat within the program office.²⁰⁴ Finally, in 2015—seven years after the 2008 mission order and three years after the publication of the agency’s Operational Policy: Automated Directives System 205—USAID/Afghanistan established a stand-alone Office of Gender.²⁰⁵

Given the breadth of development programs being designed and implemented, it is no surprise that gender advisors struggled to provide adequate support. For example, in 2010, when USAID/Afghanistan had only two gender advisors on staff, nearly \$3.5 billion was appropriated for Economic Support Fund programs in Afghanistan.²⁰⁶

Gender analysis, which the 2008 mission order, the 2012 agency-wide policy on gender equality, and existing agency guidance considered an essential component of the mainstreaming strategy, was often delayed or ineffective.²⁰⁷ According to Mary Fontaine, a former senior gender advisor at USAID/Afghanistan, “Gender analyses were supposed to be undertaken before or during program designs so that the recommendations could be incorporated into final program documents. But that rarely happened. Due to long and onerous development, review, and approval processes, gender analyses

were typically undertaken after programs were designed so as not to slow down new programming even more. This meant that inputs for women were added later. The incorporation of gender analysis recommendations was ad hoc, not strategic, and often superficial, sometimes merely included in a paragraph stating that ‘gender considerations will be considered.’”²⁰⁸

The purpose of requiring a gender analysis, as noted by one senior gender advisor at USAID, “is not just to do it, but to use it to shape the documents you are working on.”²⁰⁹ For example, a gender analysis might reveal that income-generating activities for women can provoke a rise in domestic violence. Taking this into account, USAID officials designing a project might then include activities that encourage men to be more receptive to a shift in power dynamics within a relationship.²¹⁰

“The incorporation of gender analysis recommendations was ad hoc, not strategic, and often superficial, sometimes merely included in a paragraph stating that ‘gender considerations will be considered.’”

—Mary Fontaine, former gender advisor at USAID

An agriculture program looking to support women might encompass activities that women are regularly involved in, like subsistence production of livestock and household-level, post-harvest processing. This approach, however, requires that USAID and its implementing partners account for the needs of specific communities, such as female-headed households, as well as geographic variation in women’s roles and responsibilities throughout the country.²¹¹

“[In Afghanistan,] where everything is running at warp speed, time is something you don’t always have. So you oftentimes end up with mediocre analyses or results.”

—Alexandria Huerta, Laos country director, USAID

Short rotations of staff and limited expertise within technical offices lessened the impact that a gender analysis might have had. As noted by Alexandria Huerta, the current Laos country director at USAID and former gender point of contact in the agriculture office at USAID/Afghanistan, “To be able to have a good analysis and use that data, you have to have a good understanding of the gender components in addition to the technical components.” According to Huerta, this required technical specialists and gender experts sitting down and “taking the time to get it right.” However, in Afghanistan, “where everything is running at warp speed, time is something you don’t always have. So you oftentimes end up with mediocre analyses or results.”²¹²

Such problems raise questions about the efficacy of gender mainstreaming, at least in Afghanistan. Yet its failure to yield transformative results does not necessarily mean that it should be discounted as a viable means to raise the profile of gender equality. Perhaps, as noted by one report, “gender mainstreaming is not the problem, but it may also be that continuing reliance on it as a lead strategy is not the solution.”²¹³

KEY FINDINGS

- State and USAID have not consistently tracked or quantified the amount of money disbursed for projects which directly or indirectly support Afghan women, girls, or gender equality goals. Therefore, the full extent of U.S. programming to support Afghan women and girls is not quantifiable.
- From 2002 to 2020, State, USAID, and DOD disbursed at least \$787.4 million for programs that primarily supported Afghan women and girls in the areas of health, education, political participation, access to justice, and economic participation. Yet that figure significantly *understates* the total U.S. effort in these areas, because hundreds of other U.S. programs and projects included an unquantifiable gender component.
- While gender mainstreaming policies for Afghanistan have been widely adopted on paper, their implementation has been undercut by conceptual misunderstanding, unclear or unfeasible implementation guidelines, short rotations of staff, and limited expertise.
- Gender analysis, which USAID considered an essential component of the mainstreaming strategy, was often delayed or ineffective.
- USAID was unable to field the resources and expertise needed to effectively integrate gender-related objectives across programming in Afghanistan.



World Bank photo

CHAPTER 5 HEALTH CARE

Senior U.S. government leaders, practitioners, and researchers alike frequently cite improvements in women’s access to health care as one of the most significant accomplishments of post-2001 efforts to improve the lives of Afghan women and girls.²¹⁴ According to the World Bank, the life expectancy of Afghan women has risen from 58 years in 2002 to 66 years in 2018.²¹⁵ Maternal health in particular has been a primary focus of the United States and international donors throughout the reconstruction. This chapter provides an overview of post-2001 gains in women’s health, as well as a summary of barriers that continue to impede progress. The chapter then more closely examines four programs representative of U.S. efforts to improve maternal health.

MATERNAL HEALTH WAS A PRIORITY FROM THE START

In 2002, the Afghan healthcare system was barely functional, the victim of decades of conflict and years of mismanagement under Taliban rule.²¹⁶ The medical care, equipment, and facilities that were available were managed by a scattered group of poorly coordinated NGOs.²¹⁷ A senior maternal health expert at USAID who was in Afghanistan in 2003 recalled a “truly daunting” situation, where the Ministry of Public Health offices “lacked basic things like pencils and paper.”²¹⁸

With no functioning healthcare system, in 2003, the U.S. and international donors, including the World Health Organization and UNICEF, worked with the Afghan Ministry



Students in a community midwifery education program receive educational training in childbirth. (Aga Khan Foundation photo by Sandra Calligaro)

of Public Health in a large-scale effort to expand access to care across the country.²¹⁹ The program, called the Basic Package of Health Services, was designed to deliver essential health care, including maternal health services, to most of the population, via NGOs.²²⁰ While it was not a women-specific program, it established a foundation for subsequent gains in maternal healthcare services.

The Congress prioritized Afghan women's health care from the start. As early as December 2001, the Congress authorized the use of funds for women's health in Afghanistan; by 2003, the United States had already initiated several projects to improve maternal health.²²¹ These included efforts to train midwives and skilled birth attendants, reconstruct hospitals for maternal health, and fund programs to improve nutrition for pregnant women.²²²

According to Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, an international consultant and gender specialist, several factors enabled this rapid expansion of health services. International organizations had been working on this issue before the U.S. military intervention, and had programs in place that could be scaled up. Many health experts already in Afghanistan were familiar with the country and could assist in program design. These preexisting resources, coupled with a high demand for health care and an influx of money and attention from the international community, all worked to achieve swift advancements for women's health.²²³

LACK OF RELIABLE DATA MADE IT HARD TO ASSESS TRENDS IN MATERNAL MORTALITY

One often-cited gain is a reduction of the maternal mortality ratio—the number of women who die due to birth- or pregnancy-related complications. Maternal mortality ratios are a critical indicator, because they capture the end result of many different health inputs—for example, the mother’s overall pre-pregnancy health, nutrition, and access to prenatal health care. Surveys and reports indicate a drop in the maternal mortality ratio since 2002. However, a lack of reliable data makes the extent of the reduction hard to measure.²²⁴

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and UNICEF conducted a survey in 2002 that found that complications in pregnancy and childbirth were the leading cause of death among Afghan women of reproductive age. At that time, for every 100,000 births, 1,600 to 2,200 women would die. The survey, which gathered data from four districts spread across four provinces, also underscored an enormous rural-urban divide: in Kabul, the proportion of women of childbearing age dying from maternal causes was 16 percent, while in Badakhshan it was 65 percent.²²⁵

Surveys and reports indicate a drop in the maternal mortality ratio since 2002. However, a lack of reliable data makes the extent of the reduction hard to measure.

These alarming findings were the basis of USAID’s decision to focus on the maternal health of rural women, according to a senior maternal health expert at the agency.²²⁶ One of the first U.S.-funded women-specific health programs was USAID’s Rural Expansion of Afghanistan’s Community-based Healthcare (REACH). The program, which started in 2003, extended the delivery of the Basic Package of Health Services to women of reproductive age in rural areas.²²⁷

In later years, the 2002 survey was frequently used as a baseline to measure progress in reducing the maternal mortality ratio.²²⁸ However, as detailed in a 2017 SIGAR audit and an analytical study in 2015 by the British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group, the 2002 survey collected data from so few districts that its findings may not have been nationally representative.²²⁹ Nonetheless, its estimate tracked closely to the UN’s estimate of maternal mortality ratios in Afghanistan at the time, as well as in other comparable countries.²³⁰

A 2010 survey supported by USAID and several other international donors found that, compared to the 2002 survey, the maternal mortality ratio had dropped significantly. The 2010 survey showed a dramatically lower maternal mortality ratio of 327 deaths for every 100,000 births—a decline of 80 percent from 2002. Based on those figures, USAID concluded that major gains had been made.²³¹ However, according to Dr. Linda Bartlett, a senior associate at The Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health who administered the 2002 survey, the 2010 maternal mortality ratio was a “substantial

underestimation” of the actual ratio. According to Bartlett, this could have been caused by “cultural restrictions on asking about females, and also by insecurity restricting survey implementation in some areas.” The reasons that the underestimated maternal mortality ratio was accepted, added Bartlett, “are complex, but included the need to show impact of the stakeholders’ investments in the Afghan health system.”²³²

UN agencies were reportedly concerned with the reliability of the findings of the 2010 survey and were reluctant to see the results published, sparking a yearlong negotiation between Afghan public health officials, the UN, and other donors before all the parties agreed to release the survey.²³³ In the end, the 2010 survey may have had the unintended consequence of shifting attention away from maternal health. Bartlett recalled Suraya Dalil, the former minister of public health, telling her that donor interest and funding decreased as a result of the survey.²³⁴ Exaggerated claims of success, based on flawed data, undermine researchers’ ability to track key outcomes related to maternal health, and may have prompted a premature reduction in resources dedicated to the health of Afghan women and babies.

In 2015, the Afghanistan Demographic and Health Survey, considered by some experts to be more methodologically sound and nationally representative, estimated a maternal mortality ratio of 1,291 for the seven years before 2015.²³⁵ If the 2002 estimate of 1,600 to 2,200 was approximately correct, then the decrease in maternal deaths between 2002 and 2015 was somewhere between 19 and 40 percent.

More recently, maternal mortality ratio data compiled by the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the United Nations Population Fund, the World Bank Group, and the United Nations Population Division shows a slightly different trend.²³⁶ Compared to the U.S.-supported surveys carried out in 2002, 2010, and 2015, the data compiled by these organizations shows a drop from 1,300 maternal deaths per 100,000 births in 2002 to 638 in 2017—a decline of about 50 percent.²³⁷

These variations in data illustrate the challenge of trying to quantify general trends over time. Ashley Jackson, an independent academic researcher on Afghanistan, summed it up: “Of course, there have been improvements . . . but we do not know the true extent of the progress made and the evidence is often unreliable.”²³⁸ Nonetheless, despite the variation in the data, all existing measures indicate an appreciable decline in the maternal mortality ratio—a decline that translates to many thousands of lives saved.

OTHER DATA SHOW CLEAR GAINS FOR WOMEN’S HEALTH

While the numbers on maternal deaths may be fallible, there are evident gains in a number of other indicators related to maternal health. Skilled prenatal care coverage has risen from 16 percent of pregnant women in 2002 to 61 percent in 2015.²³⁹ According to the World Health Organization, prenatal care reduces maternal morbidity by detecting and treating pregnancy-related complications.²⁴⁰ Similar gains have been reported in

postnatal care coverage, which has risen from an average of 28 percent between 2005 and 2010 to 40 percent in 2015.²⁴¹

Training female healthcare providers is essential for expanding women's access to care. There is still a strong prevailing cultural preference for women to be seen and treated only by other women.²⁴² The number of female healthcare providers, especially midwives, has steadily increased. In 2002, there were an estimated 467 trained midwives in Afghanistan; in 2018, there were an estimated 4,000.²⁴³

Despite the variation in the data, all existing measures indicate an appreciable decline in the maternal mortality ratio—a decline that translates to many thousands of lives saved.

The positive effect of midwifery training is reflected in the growing number of Afghan women giving birth with assistance from a skilled birth attendant, and the number of health facilities that are staffed with at least one female health worker. In 2002, only 14 percent of births were attended by skilled health personnel; in 2018, that number was nearly 60 percent.²⁴⁴ The number of health facilities that were staffed with at least one female health worker rose from 25 percent in 2002 to 92 percent in 2017.²⁴⁵

The impact of midwifery training also had “multiple indirect, second-order effects,” Palwasha Kakar, an expert on Afghanistan at the U.S. Institute of Peace, told SIGAR. “The communities played a role, as they had to nominate or select certain women to receive the training. The women who went to receive the training became, over time, trusted decision-makers within their communities.”²⁴⁶ Aside from its intrinsic medical value, midwifery training gave women a degree of economic independence and the opportunity to serve as role models.²⁴⁷ A 2011 Council on Foreign Relations report quoted a director of a community midwifery program who noted that “educating and deploying midwives is not just that they return to their communities with life-saving skill sets, but also that they return with a sense of empowerment and status.”²⁴⁸

There has also been progress in efforts to improve family planning, including the provision and use of modern contraceptives.²⁴⁹ As noted by USAID, “Women cannot control their own lives unless they can plan if and when they have children and how many children they have. Access to and use of contraception is critical to women's self-determination and empowerment.”²⁵⁰ According to one survey, in 2003, only 10 percent of the population used modern methods of contraception.²⁵¹ Between 2010 and 2018, the number of married women using modern contraceptives leveled off at around 17 to 20 percent.²⁵² This limited growth is likely due to several reasons, including the social and economic benefits of maintaining a large family and concerns over irregular supply.²⁵³



Male family members or a woman's mother-in-law often have more decision-making power when it comes to matters such as family planning. (USAID photo)

BARRIERS TO ACCESSING MATERNAL CARE PERSIST, ESPECIALLY IN RURAL AREAS

Notwithstanding these gains, there remains a vast disparity between urban and rural reproductive health indicators, suggesting that progress has been uneven and that many women still lack access to essential services. A 2014 study found that more than four times as many women died of pregnancy- and childbirth-related causes in rural areas than in urban areas.²⁵⁴ Patricia Gossman, associate director for Human Rights Watch's Asia division, observed that rural communities had not received the same benefits as more urban areas: "We are not seeing improving access to health care in rural parts of the country . . . and as [insecurity] worsened, less went to the countryside. I hear it a lot from people that health care is so hard for women to access in rural areas."²⁵⁵

There remains a vast disparity between urban and rural reproductive health indicators, suggesting that progress has been uneven and that many women still lack access to essential services.

Several barriers compound the geographic gap and limit women's access to care, including a lack of female healthcare providers, restrictive sociocultural practices, lack of education, and a level of poverty that makes medical care a luxury.

The number of women working in health care since 2003 has risen dramatically, yet a lack of female health professionals remains a significant roadblock for further advances in women's health.²⁵⁶ While most Afghan women and girls live in rural areas, fielding

female health professionals to these areas has proven challenging.²⁵⁷ According to Save the Children, in 2013, there were an average of “4.5 health workers per 10,000 people in remote and rural provinces, compared with 16 per 10,000 in the more urban provinces.”²⁵⁸ The World Health Organization maintains that 23 midwives, nurses, and doctors are needed per 10,000 people to deliver essential maternal care.²⁵⁹

Community healthcare workers have been able to fill some of the gaps in coverage in rural areas.²⁶⁰ The Community Midwifery Education program, for example, was effective in training women near their communities and deploying them back to their home village or district. That program adopted “less stringent entry requirements than previous midwifery programmes” and prioritized training women from parts of the country where there were shortages in skilled female health personnel.²⁶¹

Pervasive sociocultural practices that limit women’s access to health care contribute to poor maternal health. For example, many Afghan women—especially in rural areas—lack autonomy and cannot make decisions about their health care.²⁶² Male family members or a woman’s mother-in-law often have more decision-making power when it comes to matters such as family planning. Mothers-in-law can oppose younger women in their family seeking care in hospitals, which is sometimes viewed as “expensive, unnecessary, and potentially unsafe if travel is involved.”²⁶³

For Afghan women and girls, restricted access to education has also harmed their reproductive health, as higher levels of education correlate with greater use of maternal health services. Greater spacing between births and an increase in the age of marriage appear to increase with higher levels of education. One survey found “93 percent of [Afghan] women who died due to maternity-related causes were illiterate.”²⁶⁴

Article 52 of the Afghan constitution states that the government “shall provide free preventative healthcare and treatment” to all citizens, yet the cost of care continues to deter people from seeking it.²⁶⁵ Since they often have little to no financial independence, women are disproportionately affected by the high cost of care.²⁶⁶ The cultural practice requiring women to be escorted in public by a male increases the costs that a single family may have to bear.²⁶⁷

In sum, even though the last 19 years have seen real improvements in women’s access to health care and increasing numbers of women working in the health sector, significant challenges remain. The difficulty of getting reliable data is one; the urban-rural gap in access to health care is another. And though access to health services has expanded, there are rising concerns that the quality of care is not keeping pace.²⁶⁸ As one senior maternal health expert at USAID noted, even with infrastructure, medicine, nurses, doctors, and midwives in place, “the quality of care can still be poor. Improving quality will be the focus for quite some time.”²⁶⁹

AFGHAN VOICES: WOMEN AND MEN CITE INSECURITY, DISTANCE TO FACILITIES, AND COST AS PERSISTENT BARRIERS TO ACCESSING HEALTH CARE

Based on SIGAR-commissioned interviews in Afghanistan.

Female and male interviewees indicated that even where access to health care is available, barriers such as insecurity, too few female healthcare workers, and the expense of care discourage them from seeking it. This lends nuance to the prevailing narrative from the U.S. government and other donors, who cite an increase in access to health care for women as a major achievement of the reconstruction effort.

According to USAID, 95 percent of Afghans now live within one hour's walk to a health facility—a vast improvement over the past 20 years.²⁷⁰ But it was unclear how much the mere presence of a health clinic translated into actual access to health care. “An area will have only one clinic which is not enough—or there will be no clinic at all,” said a male community development council member from Kandahar Province.²⁷¹ Even if there is a clinic, women face the possibility of not being able to access care due to a shortage of female healthcare workers. “They want their girls to visit a female doctor instead of male doctors, but when they fall sick they do not have any female doctor to treat them,” observed one woman from Kandahar Province.²⁷² A male community development council member, also from Kandahar Province, noted the impact that insecurity can have on retaining female staff. “There is war in the area and female doctors cannot go there. Also, health

workers do not want to go there due to insecurity,” he said.²⁷³ “If we get sick or when it's time to give birth, if there are not any women health staff, this is a problem,” said a woman from Kunduz Province.²⁷⁴ One man from Farah Province summed it up this way: “We can say that they [health centers] exist, but there are no services, and still there are maternal deaths of mothers and babies.”²⁷⁵

“They want their girls to visit a female doctor instead of male doctors, but when they fall sick they do not have any female doctor to treat them.”

—Woman from Kandahar Province

The costs of treatment and travel also preclude women from getting care. “When [women] visit clinics they cannot afford even one or two tablets,” said a woman from Helmand Province.²⁷⁶ “We don't have health centers and because of their bad economic problems, a lot of families can't travel to far clinics to get the help they need,” said another woman from Kabul. “If [donors] cannot do anything else, at least they can help with maternity care for women.”²⁷⁷

U.S. HEALTH PROGRAMS SUPPORTING WOMEN AND GIRLS

This section provides an overview of four programs representative of U.S. efforts to improve maternal health (see [Table 1](#)), summarizing their commonalities, barriers to implementation, and effectiveness.²⁷⁸ While the scope and activities of each program varied, the objectives were largely consistent: increasing demand for, access to, and use of health services by women of reproductive age, especially in rural areas. The underlying assumptions for each program, while not explicitly stated in most program documents, appear to be relatively straightforward: In order for women to increase their use of health services, they need to know what services are available and to be able to use them.

TABLE 1

SELECTED USAID HEALTH PROGRAMS			
Name of Program	Initiated	Completed	Amount Disbursed
Rural Expansion of Afghanistan's Community-based Healthcare (REACH)	2003	2006	\$136.3 million
Communication for Behavior Change: Expanding Access to Private Sector Health Products and Services in Afghanistan (COMPRI-A)	2006	2012	\$36.9 million
Better Health for Afghan Mothers and Children (BHAMCP)	2008	2012	\$700 thousand
Helping Mothers and Children Thrive (HEMAYAT)	2015	2020	\$58.6 million

Source: USAID, *Summary Pipeline Activities, FY 2020 Q4, 2020*; USAID, correspondence with SIGAR, December 7, 2020.

Engaging Men to Facilitate Women's Use of Maternal Health Care

Various tools were employed by each program to determine the best way to educate men about maternal and reproductive health, and to measure any attitudinal shifts brought about by the program. In 2003, a survey connected with the REACH program spoke with 7,000 individuals (half of them men) across seven provinces to help shape the program's strategy for educating people about reproductive health and birth spacing.²⁷⁹ In the final report, REACH recognized that in a male-dominated culture, "addressing the needs of women requires addressing the concerns of men."²⁸⁰ COMPRI-A—the acronym for Communication for Behavior Change: Expanding Access to Private Sector Health Products and Services in Afghanistan—implemented baseline and end-line knowledge surveys of 2,000 men to determine "changes in the level of knowledge, attitudes and practices around birth spacing." The final report found that COMPRI-A met its objectives of increasing men's knowledge of program-supported contraceptives.²⁸¹

A final evaluation for the Better Health for Afghan Mothers and Children program found "significant changes in men's attitudes toward maternal services," although it is unclear how the evaluation came to this conclusion. The evaluation reported that community health workers collaborated with local health *shuras* to engage men who objected to their wives seeking care. According to the evaluation, some men were reluctant to allow their wives to seek medical care due to concerns about them being seen outside the home.²⁸² Another program, Helping Mothers and Children Thrive, also implemented a study to determine how best to engage men on the subject of maternal health. The results showed persistent gaps in men's knowledge of family planning and maternal health, and prompted the program to increase educational efforts and counseling for men.²⁸³

Shuras (Arabic) and **jirgas** (Pashto) are gatherings of informal leaders to confer, make decisions on behalf of constituents, and resolve disputes. As evolving institutions with varying purposes, formats, and structures across the country, the terms are sometimes used interchangeably.



The number of women working in health care since 2003 has risen dramatically, yet a lack of female health professionals remains a significant roadblock for further advances in women's health. (USAID photo)

Creative Use of Media and Mobile Technology Helps Reach a Largely Illiterate Population

Several programs used media and mobile technology to expand messaging, training, and referral services into rural areas where it would otherwise be difficult to directly contact women. COMPRI-A developed a large-scale communication campaign using television, radio, and cassettes to increase knowledge of birth spacing and various contraceptives offered by the program.²⁸⁴ A final evaluation found these efforts were largely effective in reaching users already inclined to practice family planning, but the program needed to develop better mechanisms to track the effect of communication campaigns on generating new users.²⁸⁵

Better Health for Afghan Mothers and Children and Helping Mothers and Children Thrive both used mobile phones as a means to strengthen community health workers' ability to gather information on program beneficiaries and convey educational material related to maternal health to families.²⁸⁶ The Better Health mobile service included an app that was loaded onto the phones of community health workers which included audio and visual trainings on prenatal and postnatal care, and also helped workers refer women to a skilled healthcare provider. A study cited in the final evaluation for Better Health found that the mobile application developed by the program increased use of maternal care services.²⁸⁷ Helping Mothers and Children Thrive developed two mobile-phone based services. One sent text messages to women or their partners twice a week about maternal health; the other provided a number that women or their partners could call to listen to educational messages on family planning. As of 2019, the program's two mobile-based services had more than 115,000 users.²⁸⁸

REACH developed innovative approaches to accommodate community health workers and program beneficiaries who could not read or write. For example, given the high rate of illiteracy among community health workers, REACH developed educational resources using visual aids, including flip charts, posters, and other graphic materials.²⁸⁹

Working with the Public and Private Sector

Starting with REACH, USAID prioritized the delivery of maternal health services under the Basic Package of Health Services, a publicly administered effort to expand no-cost or low-cost health care to a majority of the population. Despite this push to expand the capacity of the public health sector, by 2008 the private sector still accounted for 72 percent of all health expenditures in Afghanistan.²⁹⁰ By 2011, private healthcare providers provided 45 percent of all outpatient visits.²⁹¹ Despite its widespread use, the private sector was largely unregulated.²⁹²

COMPRI-A focused on building the capacity of the private sector “to provide affordable health and family planning products to low-income groups.”²⁹³ The program also worked with the Ministry of Public Health to strengthen the regulations for the private sector and to increase coordination between the public and private sectors. These efforts helped to establish a national policy for the private health sector, as well as a public-private partnership task force that was ultimately absorbed into the Ministry of Public Health.²⁹⁴

Helping Mothers and Children Thrive focused on expanding maternal and reproductive health services through the Basic Package of Health Services, as well as the private sector.²⁹⁵ According to a survey cited in the cooperative agreement between USAID and the implementing partner for the program, “Three out of four households surveyed prefer to receive family planning information from private providers. However, only 26 percent of private sector providers offer information on family planning, [and only] 24 percent of private health providers have female health workers on staff . . . which suggest that there is a huge gap in family planning service provision.”²⁹⁶ Helping Mothers and Children Thrive tried to fill this gap with working sessions in 12 private hospitals between public and private healthcare providers, designed to increase information about family planning and offer training on modern contraceptives. Among other things, those dialogues resulted in a commitment from the Afghanistan Private Hospital Association to distribute standardized obstetrics patient files to all private hospitals.²⁹⁷

Training Community Health Workers and Midwives

All four programs included efforts to improve the ability of community healthcare workers and midwives to provide reproductive health services, especially in rural areas. A final report submitted to USAID by an implementing partner for REACH reported that the program “trained nearly 6,300 community health workers—more than half of whom were women—and more than 800 midwives.” REACH also established the National Midwifery Education Accreditation Board, which “serves as a technical and regulatory authority for midwifery education,” and prioritized community midwife education for students committed to working in the areas where they lived.²⁹⁸

The Better Health for Afghan Mothers and Children program established a partnership with the Herat Maternity Hospital, which helped to train midwives who then staffed health facilities in project locations and filled gaps where skilled birth attendants were needed.²⁹⁹ COMPRI-A trained 6,827 private doctors and midwives, as well as 2,850



Midwives graduate from the Herat Institute of Health. (USAID photo)

community health workers, in birth spacing and other issues related to maternal and child health. No additional information is provided in the program’s final report or evaluation on the impact or outcome of these trainings. COMPRI-A also helped develop sustainability plans for the Afghan Midwives Association and the Organization of Afghan Midwives, although a final evaluation of the program does not include any assessment of whether this support helped either organization achieve self-sufficiency.³⁰⁰ Helping Mothers and Children Thrive supported the expansion of 24 Khana-e-Qabilas (a trained midwife’s home which can be used as a clinic) in Balkh, Herat, Nangarhar, and Kandahar Provinces—just six short of the program target of 30. The 24 midwives conducted 735 deliveries, 1,795 prenatal care visits, 789 postnatal care visits, and distributed contraceptives to 1,580 individuals.³⁰¹

Persistent Barriers to Providing Services in Rural Areas

Several of the programs reviewed by SIGAR reported challenges in accomplishing program activities in rural areas and in recruiting female staff. REACH-supported NGOs struggled to recruit female health workers willing to live and work in rural areas. To fill this gap, REACH recruited midwives from Tajikistan to work in remote health clinics until Afghan midwives could be trained in REACH-sponsored community midwifery schools to take their places.³⁰²

Several of the programs reviewed by SIGAR reported challenges in accomplishing program activities in rural areas and in recruiting female staff.

In its effort to work with the private sector to expand access to contraceptives in rural areas, COMPRI-A found that commercial organizations were slow to invest resources in places with a limited market and few providers.³⁰³ Helping Mothers and Children Thrive, which initially sought to expand services to rural and difficult-to-reach populations,

ended up reducing its geographic coverage from 23 provinces to five deemed by USAID to be more secure and accessible.³⁰⁴

Despite Programmatic Successes, Major Roadblocks to Progress Remain

The four programs examined by SIGAR all reported meeting program objectives and making improvements in areas critical to maternal health.³⁰⁵ Nonetheless, as noted earlier in this chapter, health outcomes for women and girls remain discouraging. Women are still dying due to complications from pregnancy at an alarming rate, access to maternal care is limited in rural areas, and contraceptive use has leveled off. This suggests that even though programs may be effective in reaching their objectives, significant barriers—many of which are outside of any one program’s control—hamper continued improvement.

KEY FINDINGS

- There are evident gains in a number of indicators related to maternal health:
 - Prenatal care coverage rose from 16 percent of pregnant women in 2002 to 61 percent in 2015.
 - Postnatal care coverage increased from an average of 28 percent between 2005 and 2010 to 40 percent in 2015.
 - The number of trained midwives rose from 467 in 2002 to roughly 4,000 in 2018.
 - The number of health facilities staffed with at least one female health worker rose from 25 percent in 2002 to 92 percent in 2017.
- Despite the uncertainty around some maternal mortality ratio data and figures that remain troublingly high, it is possible that the maternal mortality ratio in Afghanistan has declined between 19 and 50 percent since 2002.
- Aside from its intrinsic medical value, midwifery training gave women a degree of economic independence and the opportunity to serve as role models in their communities.
- Fielding female health professionals to rural areas has proven challenging. Further, there remains a vast disparity between urban and rural reproductive health indicators, indicating that progress has been uneven and that many women still lack access to essential services.
- USAID health programs examined by SIGAR engaged men to facilitate women’s use of maternal health care; made creative use of media and mobile technology to expand messaging, training, and referral services into rural areas; and worked to improve access to maternal health in both the private and public sector.
- In interviews with Afghans commissioned by SIGAR, women and men indicated that even where access to health care is available, barriers such as insecurity, too few female healthcare workers, and the expense of care discourage them from seeking it—suggesting that these barriers to access are challenges that U.S. agencies must continue to address.



CHAPTER 6

EDUCATION

DOD photo

The Afghan government and its international partners have made significant progress in getting more children, especially more girls, into school. Over the last two decades, there have been increases in the number of schools, the number of girls in attendance, the number of female teachers, and literacy rates for female youth. Yet serious obstacles remain, and they are often worse in rural areas. These include traditional gender norms which discourage girls' education past primary school, poor school infrastructure, a lack of female teachers, and insecurity—all of which keep large numbers of girls from attending school. Community-based education, an alternative learning program based on the idea of bringing teachers to students instead of bringing students to a school building, is a promising alternative that has opened up opportunities for girls' education.

SUBSTANTIAL GAINS IN EDUCATION AND YOUTH LITERACY RATES

While reliable baseline data is scarce, overall trends clearly show that Afghan women and girls have made considerable gains in education since 2001.³⁰⁶ It is generally accepted that around 900,000 students were in school under the Taliban. Very few, if any, were girls.³⁰⁷ Today, as many as 3.5 million girls (roughly 40 percent of about 9.2 million students) are enrolled in school.³⁰⁸ By 2018, the Afghan government estimated there were between 65,000 and 75,000 women in government-paid teaching jobs, representing roughly one-third of the nation's 203,000 teachers.³⁰⁹ This represents a significant gain

In Afghanistan, **community-based education** provides education services to underserved communities. Community-based schools recruit local teachers to conduct primary-grade classes in private homes or other spaces donated by the community.

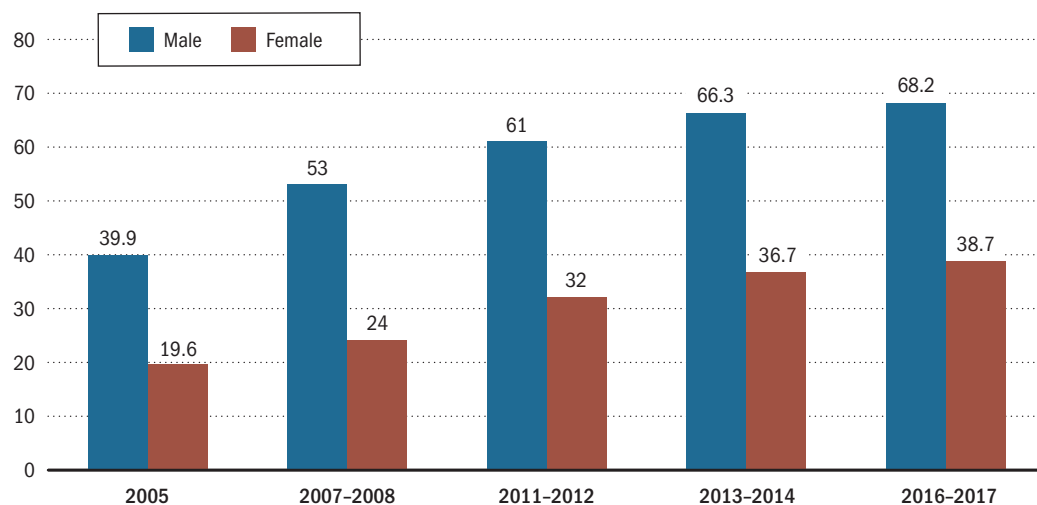
Off-budget support is defined as assistance executed through contracts, grants, and cooperative agreements that remain outside the Afghan budget and beyond the reach of Afghan officials, theoretically providing more control to donors. This is in contrast to on-budget assistance, defined as development assistance (either from bilateral contributions or multilateral trust funds) that is channeled through the Afghan government's core budget.

from 2001, when under the Taliban women were barred from working as teachers in government schools, though some taught in secret “underground” schools for girls.³¹⁰ The proportion of female teachers as one-third of the overall teaching force may be lower, however, than existed before the Taliban era; according to one source, women then made up roughly 70 percent of the teaching workforce.³¹¹

Another sign of progress is the expansion of **community-based education** throughout Afghanistan, which extends basic education services to children and young women in remote, insecure, or underserved communities.³¹² Community-based schools recruit local teachers, who may not meet official Ministry of Education teaching qualifications but who are able to conduct primary-grade classes in private homes or other spaces donated by the community.³¹³ In 2019, USAID reported that it helped to enroll more than 3 million Afghan girls in community-based education classes.³¹⁴ Such programs, however, are almost exclusively operated by NGOs and rely almost entirely on funding support from international donors.³¹⁵ The Afghan Ministry of Education heavily relies on **off-budget support** for community-based education and has not integrated data for such schools into the national education database.³¹⁶ Despite questions of sustainability, the community-based education initiative has brought education to millions of girls who would otherwise be out of school.

Support among the Afghan population for women’s access to education remains high. Since 2006, percentages of survey respondents who strongly or somewhat agreed that women should have the same educational opportunities as men has ranged from 78 to 91 percent.³¹⁷ Literacy rates among girls have nearly doubled, from 20 percent in 2005 to 39 percent in 2017 (see Figure 4). Among adult women, however, literacy rates in the same period rose by just one-tenth, from 18 to 20 percent (see Figure 5).³¹⁸

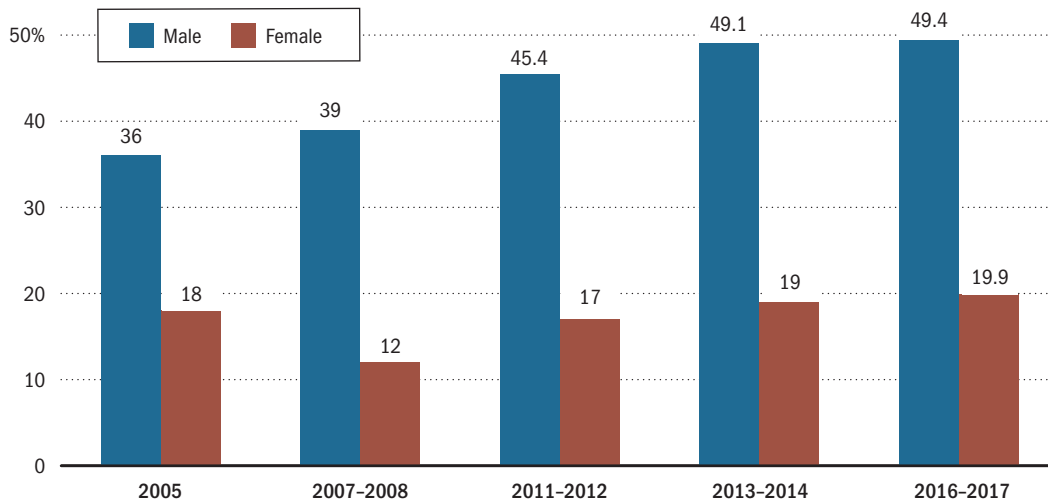
FIGURE 4
YOUTH LITERACY RATES (AGES 15-24)



Source: Government of Afghanistan, Central Statistics Organization, *National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment: 2005, 2007*, p. 13; Government of Afghanistan, Central Statistics Organization, *National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment: 2007-2008, 2009*, p. 66; Government of Afghanistan, Central Statistics Organization, *National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment: 2011-2012, 2013*, p. iii; Government of Afghanistan, Central Statistics Organization, *Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey: 2013-2014, 2016*, p. iv; Government of Afghanistan, Central Statistics Organization, *Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey: 2016-2017, 2018*, p. 164.

FIGURE 5

ADULT LITERACY RATES (AGES 15+)



Source: Government of Afghanistan, Central Statistics Organization, *National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment: 2005, 2007*, p. 11; Government of Afghanistan, Central Statistics Organization, *National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment: 2007-2008, 2009*, p. 66; Government of Afghanistan, Central Statistics Organization, *National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment: 2011-2012, 2013*, p. iii; Government of Afghanistan, Central Statistics Organization, *Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey: 2013-2014, 2016*, p. iv; Government of Afghanistan, Central Statistics Organization, *Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey: 2016-2017, 2018*, p. 164.

Likely Inflation of Student Enrollment Figures

In Afghanistan, reliable statistics of all kinds are difficult to obtain, and statistics on the number of children in and out of school are no different.³¹⁹ In a four-year period, the government's figures for total student enrollment fluctuated from 11.5 to 8 million, to 6 million, to 9.2 million.³²⁰ SIGAR has raised concerns about the reliability of the database that produces these figures—the Education Management Information System (EMIS), maintained by the Afghan Ministry of Education.³²¹

For years, U.S. agencies such as USAID have reported EMIS-generated data, despite concerns regarding reliability.³²² EMIS data is self-reported and, as an independent oversight body noted in 2017, “there are natural incentives for school principals and district officials to overstate numbers to garner more resources.”³²³ Further, school officials often lack training to accurately report data.³²⁴

Insecurity, remoteness, limited resources, and other factors have prevented the Ministry of Education, USAID, and third-party contractors from being able to verify the data reported. As of 2017, data collection was verified in only 5 percent of schools in government-controlled districts.³²⁵ In addition, EMIS does not account for community-based education statistics, which omits a significant population of girls and boys in school.³²⁶

Another factor inflating enrollment figures is the fact that the Ministry of Education counts “permanently absent” students as enrolled, even though such students have been absent for up to three years.³²⁷ (After three years of non-attendance, students’ names are dropped from enrollment lists.) In 2017, a ministry spokesman reported that of 9.2 million students, around 2 million—or more than 20 percent—were considered permanently absent. Thus the actual number of children in school was likely closer to 7.2 million.³²⁸ The same problems indicate that figures on girls’ enrollment are also probably lower than the official numbers indicate.

Flawed as it is, the EMIS system is the best tracking tool available; indeed, it is the only database that tracks annual statistics on students, teachers, and schools, and is a vast improvement on the paper-based data collection method used before its inception.³²⁹ Since 2008, the Ministry of Education’s School Management System has collected data on student enrollment by program, grade, province, and district; numbers and types of schools; number of teachers; school infrastructure; and more.³³⁰ In addition, EMIS has sought to prevent the insertion of “ghost” students into the database, by creating the Certificate Distribution System, which allows the Ministry of Education to identify authentic students registered in the system.³³¹

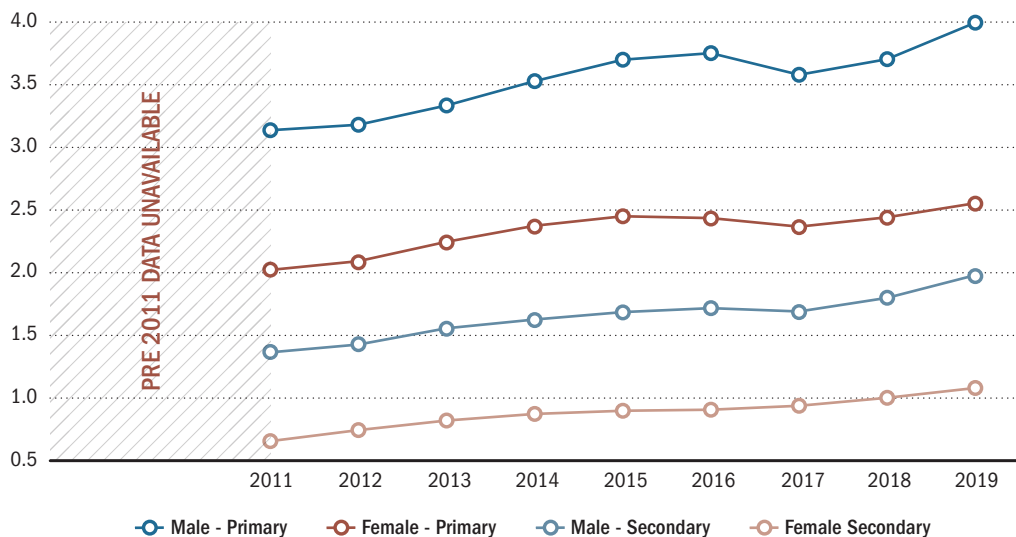
LIMITS TO GAINS BEYOND PRIMARY SCHOOL AND IN RURAL AREAS

In the Afghan education system, primary school is defined as grades 1–6 (ages 7–12), and secondary school is defined as grades 7–12 (ages 13–18).

Gains for school enrollment for girls were most significant in the decade following the Taliban’s removal, but the rate of improvement has not been maintained.³³² Afghan government statistics show that the rate of increase in the total number of enrolled students began to slow in 2011, especially for secondary school-aged girls. Around 2015, enrollment numbers began to fall, but this could be due to adjustments made from more accurate reporting (see Figure 6).³³³ The 2016–2017 *Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey* (ALCS) reported that “improvements for most education indicators—net and gross attendance rates/ratios, adult and youth literacy rates, gender-equity indicators—have come to a complete halt.”³³⁴

FIGURE 6

SCHOOL ENROLLMENT BY GENDER (MILLIONS)



Note: Primary school is defined as grades 1–6, and secondary school is defined as grades 7–12.

Source: Government of Afghanistan Ministry of Education EMIS database (1389-1397).

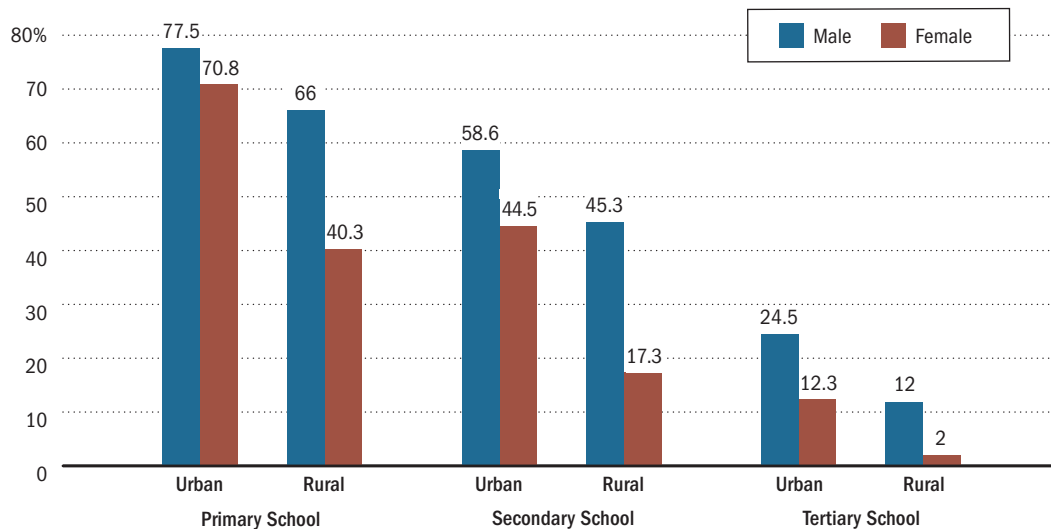
What’s more, gains for girls beyond the primary level have been limited. At the secondary and tertiary levels of education, there remains a wide gap between girls’ and boys’ attendance, indicating continued early drop-out rates for girls (see Figure 7).³³⁵

According to the 2016–2017 ALCS, there are as many as 4.27 million primary- and secondary-aged children still unable to attend school, including roughly 2.6 million girls.³³⁶ A 2017 Human Rights Watch report noted that “according to even the most optimistic statistics, the proportion of Afghan girls who are in school has never gone much above 50 percent.”³³⁷

However, barriers to accurate data collection, as well as mismanagement of data, have resulted in imprecise and inaccurate figures. In 2017, the Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee released a report which addressed “ghost” figures—

FIGURE 7

2017 SCHOOL NET ATTENDANCE RATES BY EDUCATION LEVEL, RESIDENCE, AND SEX



Note: The net attendance rate is calculated as the number of pupils of the theoretical school-age group for a given level of education, expressed as a percentage of the total population in that age group. The age range of 7 to 12 is used for primary education, 13 to 18 for secondary education, and 19 to 24 for tertiary education.

Source: Government of Afghanistan, Central Statistics Organization, *Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey: 2016–2017*, 2017, pp. 142–143.

referring to teachers, students, and schools that are registered with the Afghan Ministry of Education, but that do not actually exist (see p. 65 for more detail on ghost figures).³³⁸

As with so many things in Afghanistan, there is also a significant rural-urban divide. Most of the gains in girls' education have been in the cities. According to a 2018 UNICEF report, girls living in rural areas make up the biggest group of out-of-school children: across Afghanistan, some 1.45 million girls at the primary and lower secondary levels are out of school.³³⁹ (These numbers, however, do not count girls who are enrolled in community-based education programs.)³⁴⁰

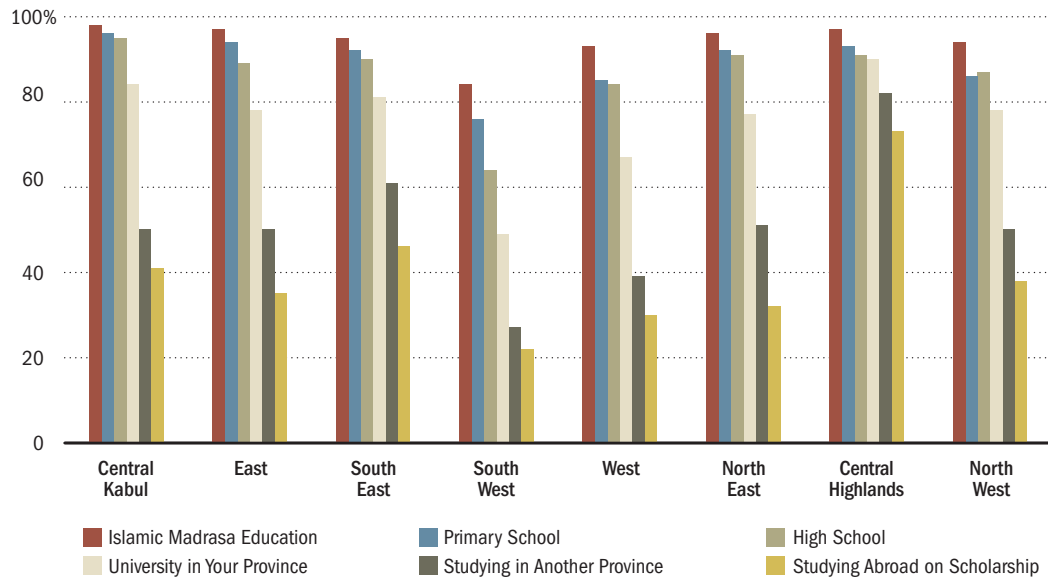
Even in rural areas, there are also significant regional disparities. In provinces in the central and southern parts of the country—particularly Paktika, Wardak, Khost, Kunar, Logar, Parwan, Paktia, and Helmand—the gap between boys' and girls' school attendance was 35 percentage points or more.³⁴¹ In southeastern Paktika Province, for example, roughly 94 percent of girls between the ages of seven and 17 were out of school, according to 2014 data.³⁴² As of 2017, more than 85 percent of girls between the ages of seven and 17 were not in school in Helmand, Wardak, Kandahar, Zabul, and Uruzgan Provinces.³⁴³

CULTURAL BELIEFS, LACK OF INFRASTRUCTURE AND FEMALE TEACHERS, AND INSECURITY HINDER FURTHER PROGRESS

Traditional cultural beliefs that women's primary role is to be at-home caregivers continue to keep many girls out of school.³⁴⁴ For girls permitted to attend primary

FIGURE 8

SUPPORT FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN EDUCATION, BY REGION



Note: The question was, “And for each of the following levels of education, do you agree or disagree with the opinion that men and women should have equal opportunities for education? Is that strongly or somewhat? (a) Islamic madrasa education. (b) Primary school. (c) High school. (d) University in your province. (e) Studying in another province. (f) Studying abroad on scholarship. (Percent who strongly or somewhat agree.)

Source: The Asia Foundation, *A Survey of the Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2019*, 2019, p. 221.

school, family pressure to drop out increases as they approach the secondary grades, when girls are entering puberty and families expect them to take on increased household responsibilities or get married.³⁴⁵ As 15-year-old Zahra told Human Rights Watch in 2017, “When [my younger sisters] reach the moment they become a woman, my father won’t let them go [to school]. [They] become a woman at maybe 12 or 13.”³⁴⁶

But these gender norms may be changing. Figure 8 depicts a recent Asia Foundation survey showing support for gender equality in various types of schooling, by region. While Islamic madrasa education garners the most support, primary and high school closely follow.³⁴⁷

Despite growing support for girls’ education even in conservative rural areas, there is still a dearth of female teachers. Many families strongly oppose their daughters studying with a male teacher, especially as girls grow older.³⁴⁸ Yet according to Afghan government statistics from 2018–2019, only 34 percent of all teachers are female.³⁴⁹ Since most female teachers are located in Kabul or big cities, the shortage is particularly acute in rural areas, where most Afghans live and where there is likely to be greater resistance to men teaching girls.³⁵⁰ The percentage of female teachers also varies considerably from province to province: 67 percent of Kabul’s teachers are women, but in rural Zabul, only 1 percent are.³⁵¹ Female teachers make up less than 10 percent of the total teacher population in several provinces.³⁵² The shortage of female teachers becomes more acute at higher educational levels: Only 13 percent of university teachers are women.³⁵³



An Afghan girl reads aloud for the other female students in her classroom. (USAID photo)

Afghanistan also suffers from a shortage of schools. Between 2001 and 2018, the number of schools rose from 1,600 to more than 17,500, but even this impressive increase has been unable to meet demand.³⁵⁴ This is particularly true for girls living in rural areas, where girls often have to walk hours to school or where schools are simply too far away to reach by foot.³⁵⁵ According to Afghan government data for 2017, only 2,712 of 17,859 schools were for girls (compared to 6,381 boys-only schools and 8,766 schools for both girls and boys).³⁵⁶

The percentage of female teachers varies considerably from province to province: 67 percent of Kabul's teachers are women, but in rural Zabul, only 1 percent are.

Even where schools exist, many buildings have structural deficiencies or lack boundary walls, safe drinking water, or separate girls' bathrooms.³⁵⁷ Without gender-segregated bathrooms, girls are likely to stay at home during menstruation, leading to attendance gaps and an increased risk of dropping out.³⁵⁸ As one Ministry of Education official told Human Rights Watch, "Not having a washroom is not a problem for boys, but girls can't go to school without one."³⁵⁹

Insecurity also disproportionately affects girls. As violence increases, schools once considered within walking distance become off-limits, especially for girls who may face unchecked crime and abuse, including kidnapping and sexual harassment.³⁶⁰ Insecurity also leads to school closures. In 2017, the acting minister of education told the parliament that 1,000 of 16,000 schools were closed due to insecurity, which was probably a conservative estimate.³⁶¹ In mid-2016, an estimated 130 of 435 schools in Kandahar had been closed.³⁶²

AFGHAN VOICES: ACCESS TO EDUCATION IS OFTEN SEEN AS THE GREATEST POST-2001 GAIN FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

Based on SIGAR-commissioned interviews in Afghanistan.

Of the 65 total interviews conducted, 26 interviewees, men as well as women, said that greater access to education has been one of the most significant gains for Afghan women and girls.³⁶³

“Most of the changes [for women and girls] have happened in the education sector,” said a female member of a community development council in Farah Province. “Fifteen years ago we saw families that were not allowing their daughters to continue their education beyond seventh or eighth grade. But with some awareness . . . families got better and they let their daughters [stay in school] till 12th grade.”³⁶⁴ A male member of a civil society organization in Bamyan Province agreed. “In the past, girls were deprived of education,” he said. “Now that they can study, they are taking advantage of the opportunity.”³⁶⁵

“Due to decades of war, people would think that a woman cannot go to school, but people have realized that education is the right of women.”

—Woman from Kunar Province

“The factors that influenced change, I think, is the increased awareness . . . and the education level of people. In the past, when there was little or no education . . . due to decades of war, people would think that a woman cannot go to school, but people have realized that education is the right of women . . . and that women are much more capable than



Afghan girls hold class outdoors under a tree at the Kabul Sardar Kabuli Girls School. (USAID photo)

they used to think we were,” said a woman from Kunar Province.³⁶⁶

For women and girls, education has a multiplier effect, some interviewees said. “If . . . more families allow their girls to go to school, then more women will have greater awareness of their rights and more motivation to do things that are not just in the household, like being a wife and mother,” said a woman from Kandahar Province. “When they are educated, they can reach any place they want.”³⁶⁷ A female provincial council member from Balkh Province noted that “women who are educated . . . have more benefits because they can be engaged in social activities and get jobs.”³⁶⁸ The multiplier effect extends to health, said one woman from Kabul: “Because of . . . education we have [fewer] maternal and newborn deaths.”³⁶⁹

Some interviewees expressed concerns about Taliban restrictions on girls’ education and gaps in access to education



Basira Basiratkhya, principal of the Female Experimental High School in Herat, with her students. (World Bank photo by Graham Crouch)

in rural areas. “If the Taliban comes into power, I see no difference between urban and rural women; we will both have the same challenges. For example, if they don’t allow a woman to walk outside of the house without a *mahram* [male escort], or education for [girls], or women to go alone to the health clinic, then it means the problems are the same for urban and rural women,” warned a female member of the Kunduz Provincial Council.³⁷⁰

One persistent theme was the urban-rural gap in attitudes and educational access. “Overall, the main challenges are a lack of access to sufficient facilities and unfair distribution of facilities in rural areas,” noted a male member of a civil society organization in Bamyan Province.³⁷¹ Rural areas are also where there is a greater

cultural resistance to the idea of girls being in school. “Most families in remote areas do not let their girls go to school or university to get an education. They consider women’s education against their culture,” said a woman from Kandahar.³⁷² A woman from Kunar Province agreed. “There are some bright-minded men in Afghanistan who want to see women educated, but on the other hand a majority of men are influenced by the propaganda of others,” she said. “They want to see women work in houses and not go outside.”³⁷³

U.S. EDUCATION PROGRAMS SUPPORTING WOMEN AND GIRLS

Between 2002 and 2020, USAID and State spent an estimated \$1 billion on programs that aimed to improve education outcomes for Afghan men and women, boys and girls. Of these efforts, SIGAR determined that approximately \$205 million in USAID and State programming targeted women and girls' education as a primary objective. Interventions ranged from scholarships, to school construction, to teacher training, and capacity building of the Ministry of Education.³⁷⁴

Broadly, SIGAR's analysis of U.S. programs supporting women and girls' education indicates consistent funding over at least 14 years, strengthened by rigorous impact evaluations—and aligned with strong demand among Afghans for girls' education, as discussed above. One education expert with several years' experience in Afghanistan observed that another key factor in assistance contributing to education gains for women and girls has been “sustained efforts to develop relationships of trust between communities and [education] providers, whether government or international or non-governmental organizations.”³⁷⁵

SIGAR selected the following programs for closer analysis because they included a significant gender equality component and were representative of U.S. efforts to improve education opportunities for girls and women, specifically (see Table 2).

TABLE 2

SELECTED USAID EDUCATION PROGRAMS			
Name of Program	Initiated	Completed	Amount Disbursed
Partnership for Advancing Community Based Education in Afghanistan (PACE-A)	2006	2011	\$31 million
Education Quality Improvement Program (EQUIP II)	2008	2017	\$116 million
Support to the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF)	2008	2013	\$41.9 million
Support to the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF)	2013	2020	\$77.8 million
Increasing Access to Basic Education and Gender Equality	2015	2019	\$77.4 million

Source: USAID, responses to SIGAR data calls, July 11, 2020.

Community-based Education Emerges as an Effective Way to Expand Girls' Access to Education

Girls in rural and insecure areas of Afghanistan face daunting obstacles when it comes to getting an education: long distances to schools (assuming there are schools to begin with), the threat of violence or crime, and a lack of female teachers. Community-based education has emerged as an effective model for educating girls, especially in areas where access to government-run hub schools is limited or nonexistent.³⁷⁶ For more than a decade, USAID has supported community-based education across Afghanistan by partnering with various NGOs and the Afghan Ministry of Education to expand the number of such schools, providing educational materials, and training community-based education teachers. Programs also sought to strengthen both community and Ministry of Education support for and management of such schools.³⁷⁷

SIGAR examined two USAID flagship community-based education programs: the Partnership for Advancing Community Based Education in Afghanistan, which ran from 2006 to 2011, and Increasing Access to Basic Education and Gender Equality, which ran from 2015 to 2019.³⁷⁸ Both programs built on previous successes of implementing partners in providing community-based schooling throughout Afghanistan and boosting girls' enrollment in rural and conservative communities.³⁷⁹ The Partnership for Advancing Community Based Education in Afghanistan, USAID's first large-scale effort, began with rigorous efforts to find communities which had a demonstrated interest in primary education for girls and boys, had potential teachers available, and showed a willingness to put some of its own resources into a community-based school.³⁸⁰ The subsequent Increasing Access to Basic Education and Gender Equality program focused its intervention efforts on provinces and districts that demonstrated the most need in terms of number and proportion of out-of-school children, as well as on USAID's priority geographic areas.³⁸¹

The theory behind community-based education is simple: there is unmet community demand for girls' education, and girls will attend school if safety and cultural concerns are addressed.³⁸² More recent programming has evolved to address concerns about the quality of education community-based schools provide, community management of these schools, and the Ministry of Education's ability to expand and maintain them.³⁸³

Community-based education has emerged as an effective model for educating girls, especially in areas where access to government-run hub schools is limited or nonexistent.

Early versions of the community-based education model did not prioritize female students. But donors found that such schools removed some of the major barriers affecting girls' access to education.³⁸⁴ A midterm evaluation of the Increasing Access to Basic Education and Gender Equality program noted that parents and community decision-makers who value education may still have "overriding concerns with protection and safety issues" that prevent them from sending children to faraway schools.³⁸⁵ These protection and safety issues are not gender-neutral. As Dyan Mazurana, research professor at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy told SIGAR, "A school that boys can get to might be one where the distance is considered too far for girls."³⁸⁶ Community-based education is, by definition, local. That factor, as well as community approval of education spaces and increasing the number of trained female teachers, has meant drastically increased enrollment, particularly for girls.³⁸⁷ Over time, community-based education became a model for expanding and improving girls' education.³⁸⁸

The U.S. government has made significant investments in rigorously assessing the effectiveness of the community-based education model. With funding from the National Science Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, and the Welker Foundation, researchers used the 2006 rollout of the Partnership for Advancing Community Based Education in Afghanistan to conduct a randomized controlled trial of its impact on girls' enrollment

and academic performance.³⁸⁹ The study found that the placement of a community-based school in a village virtually eliminated the enrollment gap between girls and boys, and reduced the gender gap in test scores by more than a third.³⁹⁰ USAID subsequently funded the Assessing Learning and Social Outcomes in Community-Based Education program—a five-year effort to assess how to maximize and sustain primary school learning and educational access in 195 villages across Afghanistan.³⁹¹

Both programs examined by SIGAR reported significant success in meeting educational access targets, such as the total number of community-based education classes established and female students served.³⁹² In fact, evaluations of both programs found that demand for community-based education outstripped program capacity, in terms of learning spaces and available teachers.³⁹³ A midterm evaluation of the Increasing Access to Basic Education and Gender Equality program found that there were approximately 40 percent more children attending classes than those reflected in official registration numbers.³⁹⁴

Evaluators of both programs commonly attributed their success to the highly relevant nature of their program design, in terms of both community needs and national education priorities.³⁹⁵ Strong community support and engagement also likely bolstered the success of local activities, such as the organization of classes, teacher training, and setting up and training community management shuras.³⁹⁶ The implementing partners selected for both programs had strong track records of similar programming in target areas, as well as existing relationships with target communities and the Ministry of Education.³⁹⁷

Yet despite U.S. support and increasing enrollment numbers and test scores, questions remain about how sustainable the gains made through the community-based education model can be without continued funding. Such programs in Afghanistan rely heavily on international donor support, since the Ministry of Education devotes most of its resources to formal schooling and regards community-based programs as “a temporary measure.”³⁹⁸ Early community-based education implementers expressed concern about the ministry’s capacity and commitment to sustaining the schools and community structures established under the Partnership for Advancing Community Based Education in Afghanistan program.³⁹⁹ A 2015 study found that only 42 percent of the community-based schools handed over to the Ministry of Education after that program ended were incorporated into the ministry’s system and continued to operate as government-managed schools.⁴⁰⁰

Questions remain about how sustainable the gains made through the community-based education model can be without continued funding.

As one provincial education official put it in 2016, “There is no government plan to fund [community-based education schools]. The foreigners pay for them.”⁴⁰¹ Ian Kaplan, a

senior education specialist for the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee, explained to SIGAR, “The challenge is working with the government system. It is much harder and much slower [than working with community schools] but is something we have to do. Generally, when an NGO leaves or loses funding, then those community schools will cease to exist. . . . There has never been enough focus, support, or accountability measures put in place to enable meaningful [government] support.”⁴⁰² Despite U.S. efforts to improve the Ministry of Education’s management of community-based schools, NGO implementers, independent evaluators, and Afghan government officials express significant concerns about whether the ministry has the capacity, interest, or funding to sustain the substantial gains that girls have achieved within the community-based education system.⁴⁰³

Expanding Access to Formal Education for Women and Girls

U.S. agencies have also made significant efforts to expand access to formal education at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, to improve its quality, and to build the capacity of the Ministry of Education to manage education services.

Increasing Girls’ Enrollment in Primary Education: EQUIP II

U.S. support to girls’ primary education has generally consisted of training teachers, providing textbooks and materials, strengthening Ministry of Education administrative capacity, and building or maintaining school structures.⁴⁰⁴

The theory behind one such program—the second Education Quality Improvement Program (EQUIP II), the successor to a similar program called EQUIP I—echoed the underlying assumptions of community-based education programs: girls’ primary school enrollment will increase if they have safe, gender-segregated schools within a reasonable distance of their homes.⁴⁰⁵ EQUIP II paid for new school construction, community grants to support children’s attendance, and large-scale teacher training programs.⁴⁰⁶ As with much of USAID’s community-based education work, evaluators found these objectives to be “highly relevant” to nationwide education needs and well aligned to the Afghan government’s educational strategy.⁴⁰⁷

The final evaluation of EQUIP-II found that girls’ enrollment targets were met or exceeded, except in 2015 to 2017, when deteriorating security slowed enrollment.⁴⁰⁸ Even with that challenge, the project nearly achieved its 2017 targets, increasing girls’ overall enrollment from 1.9 million to 3.4 million.⁴⁰⁹ Evaluators pointed to the project’s “simple, realistic, and candid” results framework and continuous reassessment of conditions as key contributors to project success, in addition to the globally recognized models for effective schooling that had characterized EQUIP I.⁴¹⁰

Yet, as with community-based education, project evaluators expressed concerns about the sustainability of improvements in access and quality, though for different reasons.⁴¹¹ According to the final evaluation, substantial risks included “poor governance and accountability throughout the [Ministry of Education’s] administrative chain” and “politicization and deeply entrenched corruption in teacher recruitment

and management.”⁴¹² Kaplan pointed to the tensions between Afghanistan’s de facto decentralization as a country, due to access and security issues, and the centralized approach to formal education that the United States has supported. “The connection between the [Ministry of Education] and the provinces is really a broken chain,” Kaplan said. “It is one of the reasons there has been a lot of corruption. From [the ministry’s computerized tracking system], to textbooks and training, things fall through the cracks.”⁴¹³ Worsening insecurity has also disrupted school operations and hampered monitoring efforts, particularly in remote areas where resources are spread thinly or access is limited.⁴¹⁴

Poor Management at the American University of Afghanistan Threatens Gains in Women’s Higher Education

Afghan women’s participation in the higher education sector has historically lagged behind their participation at lower levels. The United States has lent its support to higher education for Afghan women in the form of university and vocational schooling, women-specific scholarships, facility construction, and partnerships with U.S. institutions to expand and improve university offerings.⁴¹⁵ Of these efforts, one of the most prominent is USAID’s Support to the American University of Afghanistan program, which has provided operational funding to the university since 2008. A core goal of the program has been to expand higher educational opportunities for women through both admission and targeted support for women’s academic and professional development during their time at the university.⁴¹⁶

The American University of Afghanistan has provided higher education opportunities to Afghan women since its first academic year in 2007, supported broadly by U.S.-funded scholarships that are exclusively for female students.⁴¹⁷ Since 2014, women have made up roughly a third of all enrolled students.⁴¹⁸ A 2016 midterm evaluation found that the program successfully established mentorship and career placement programs for women, and a 2020 report by USAID/Afghanistan found that the program improved the female-to-male staff and faculty ratio.⁴¹⁹ SIGAR interviewees frequently cited the visibility of the American University of Afghanistan and the impact of its graduates as a valuable contribution of the United States in support of women and girls.⁴²⁰

Since 2014, women have made up roughly a third of all enrolled students at the American University of Afghanistan.

Despite the contributions the university has made to women’s higher education in Afghanistan, it suffers from sustainability issues similar to those of other U.S. education programs. A 2020 SIGAR audit noted that the university showed persistent deficiencies in administrative processes, financial controls, staffing, and overall management, the net effect of which have left it unable to function on its own.⁴²¹ While scholarships funded by other U.S. sources—such as the U.S. embassy in Kabul and USAID’s Promote program—complement the university’s gender parity efforts, nearly half of the women at the university rely on U.S. scholarships to complete their education.⁴²²

In a sense, the university's highly visible, political role as a symbol of U.S. commitment to the Afghan people has actually impeded efforts to address the university's management deficiencies.⁴²³ After a 2018 joint investigation by SIGAR and the USAID Office of the Inspector General, additional oversight and financial controls have been applied in an effort to manage the university's financial sustainability.⁴²⁴

KEY FINDINGS

- There were few, if any, girls in school or female teachers under the Taliban regime. Today, as many as 3.5 million girls (out of about 9 million students) are enrolled in school, though this number is likely a high estimate. As of 2018, approximately 70,000 women were in teaching jobs, representing roughly one-third of the nation's teachers.
- Literacy rates among girls nearly doubled, from 20 percent in 2005 to 39 percent in 2017. Among adult women, literacy rates in the same period rose by just one-tenth, from 18 to roughly 20 percent.
- These improvements in women's and girls' access to education have been achieved in part due to significant U.S. investments. Between 2002 and 2020, USAID and State disbursed an estimated \$1 billion on education programs in Afghanistan. Of these efforts, approximately \$205 million in programming targeted women and girls' education as a primary objective.
- Community-based education has proven effective as a reliable, culturally accepted model for delivering primary education in areas where the formal education system does not operate, and especially in closing the enrollment and achievement gap between girls and boys.
- An important caveat is that education gains for women and girls have been concentrated in urban areas and largely at the primary school level, and the quality of education remains problematic.
- Some of the gains made for girls in access to education may not be sustainable, since a large portion of the education sector in Afghanistan is dependent on international donor funding for maintaining and expanding those gains.
- The formal education system cannot meet the high demand for girls' education across the country, due to its limited financial and human resources capacity.
- Factors that contribute to keeping many girls out of school include insecurity, lack of female teachers, not enough schools with boundary walls and separate girls' bathrooms, and lack of safe drinking water. In addition, family pressure and traditional cultural beliefs, especially in rural areas, that women's primary roles are as at-home caregivers, often discourage girls from attending school past puberty.



CHAPTER 7

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

USAID/Afghanistan photo

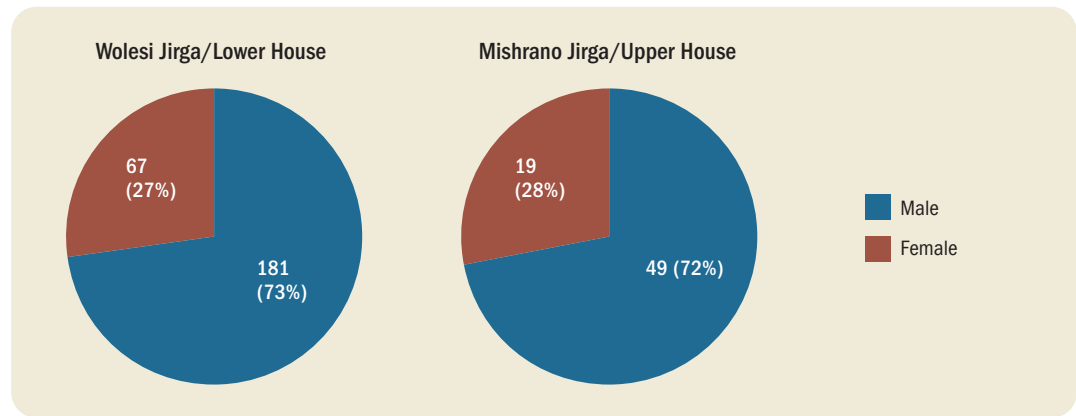
Women’s participation in the parliament and civil society has significantly increased since 2001. With support from international donors, Afghan women have pushed for and won seats in the parliament. They have also consistently voted in significant numbers in national elections and have aggressively advocated for women’s protection individually or as part of civil society organizations and coalitions. However, women politicians and civil society leaders continue to have limited influence on policy, and face disproportionate intimidation and violence on a daily basis.

WOMEN GAIN SEATS IN PARLIAMENT, BUT FACE BACKLASH

In 2001, the fall of the Taliban regime and the new political order created by the Bonn Agreement gave Afghan women unprecedented opportunities for political participation—this time, with the strong backing of the international community. In the 2002 Emergency Loya Jirga that appointed an interim government, women made up 180 of 1,500 delegates.⁴²⁵ At the 2003 Constitutional Loya Jirga, 114 of the 504 delegates were women.⁴²⁶ The next year, women won a major political victory with the adoption of a constitution that reserved at least 68 of 249 seats in the parliament’s lower house and 17 out of 102 seats in the upper house for women.⁴²⁷ After the 2018 parliamentary election, of the total 316 seats, women currently hold 86 seats, 19 seats in the upper house and 67 seats in the lower house (see Figure 9 on the following page).⁴²⁸ The proportion of lower house seats held by women (27 percent) is higher than in the United States (23 percent),

FIGURE 9

PROPORTION OF WOMEN AND MEN IN AFGHAN PARLIAMENT, AS OF 2020



Note: This figure represents the results of the 2018 parliamentary election. The statutory number of members in the upper house is 102. However, because 34 seats remain vacant (due to district council elections not yet being held), the total number of current members in the upper house is 68. Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Afghanistan," accessed November 28, 2020.

and in the legislatures of Afghanistan's neighbors: Pakistan (20 percent), Iran (6 percent), Tajikistan (24 percent), and India (14 percent).⁴²⁹

Support from international donors was crucial in encouraging the Afghan government and various political groups to respond to women's demands.⁴³⁰ Wazhma Frogh, an Afghan activist, recalled:

When the constitution was being drafted, we were in constant fights with the warlords and conservative men who had managed to come back into power. . . . While many terms such as "gender," "constitution," and "equality" were foreign and new to us, we knew we were advocating for women's rights, freedoms, and equality. We were able to mobilize huge numbers of women at that time. Article 22 [of the constitution], which mandates gender equality before the law, came as a result of the advocacy work that we did. It was done with a lot of help from the international community.⁴³¹

Partly due to the quota system, more women have run for office. In the 2018 parliamentary election, for example, the number of women candidates increased by 24 percent, from 335 in 2005 to 415 candidates, the highest in the country's history.⁴³² According to Orzala Ashraf Nemat, who leads the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, "a new class of women leaders . . . who have become active in the provision of social services" has emerged. These women are from both urban and rural areas, Nemat says, and some have gone into politics as independent candidates, running their own election campaigns.⁴³³ During President Ashraf Ghani's first term, he appointed three female ministers, 11 female deputy ministers, and five female ambassadors, including the country's first ambassador to the United Nations.⁴³⁴ In his second term, the President has so far nominated two women as ministers out of 14 ministers, and has appointed nine women to the 46-member High Council for National Reconciliation.⁴³⁵

Numbers, however, do not automatically translate into influence on policy and legislation. While quotas help address historic imbalances in many legislative bodies



Women currently hold 86 seats in the Afghan Parliament—19 seats in the upper house and 67 seats in the lower house. (UNAMA photo by Ali Omid)

around the world, other barriers to meaningful participation persist.⁴³⁶ In Afghanistan, women candidates, officeholders, and their families face disproportionate violence, threats, and intimidation by the Taliban. In August 2013, for example, the Taliban kidnapped a female parliamentarian from Kandahar. An ambush of another female parliamentarian's car in Ghazni killed her eight-year-old daughter.⁴³⁷ A 2019 report highlighted the pervasive sexual harassment against female candidates, where male election staff and other stakeholders ask female candidates for sexual favors in return for support.⁴³⁸ Women politicians, especially the more outspoken, also face frequent intimidation from male peers and religious figures.⁴³⁹ Many women parliamentarians rely on support from local powerbrokers and patronage networks. Like their male colleagues, female politicians must navigate a socially conservative political milieu, in which advocacy for pro-women's legislation might mean risking some degree of support from their own constituency.⁴⁴⁰

While quotas help address historic imbalances in many legislative bodies around the world, other barriers to meaningful participation persist.

Lack of mobility is another problem: Women parliamentarians have limited connection with their constituencies, and some have never even been to the provinces they represent.⁴⁴¹ Underlying everything else is the reality of ethnic affiliations. According to scholar Anna Larson, “ethnic and *quam*-based identities are prioritized over and above gender identities, undercutting any sense of unity between women over issues that otherwise might invoke solidarity.”⁴⁴²

Quam (also spelled qawm) is a “term that can refer to affinity with almost any kind of social group. . . . It helps distinguish members of one large ethnic or tribal group, or one clan or village, from another. Particular responsibilities and advantages go with membership, and the stability of social and political institutions may vary with their quam composition.”

Source: “Qawm, Significance in Afghanistan,” Britannica, accessed January, 2021.

AFGHAN VOICES: WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO PARLIAMENT ARE ACKNOWLEDGED, BUT DISRESPECT AND DISCRIMINATION PERSIST

Based on SIGAR-commissioned interviews in Afghanistan.

The four parliamentarians who were interviewed—two men and two women—had generally positive perceptions of women in the parliament. A female member representing Nangarhar Province said, “Women who are in parliament, they always raise their voice for women and people and for justice and rights. They are better than men because they are not involved in corruption or bribes. They work hard for women.”⁴⁴³ Another woman member representing Kandahar said that “there are 69 women in the parliament and they are strong.” She also said that “there should be more roles for women . . . in the cabinet of Afghanistan and in peace talks . . . Women shouldn't just be members of parliament.”⁴⁴⁴

A male parliamentarian representing Kunar Province stated, “In democratic systems, the contribution of women is necessary and important, especially on behalf of those areas where there are many vulnerable women. The female members of parliament can make vulnerable women bold enough to make an effort towards their development and improvement of their lives.”⁴⁴⁵ A male parliamentarian from Nangarhar Province said that “there are uneducated people who may have negative views about women becoming members of the parliament, but those people may be shrinking in numbers. . . . Most female members have secured more votes than male members. It means that people trust them.”⁴⁴⁶

Another issue raised by the woman parliamentarian from Nangarhar Province was a perception that some members of

the Women's Affairs Commission were influenced by the West. “Parliament members don't vote for them [members of the commission when they propose laws] as they think they receive money from embassies,” she said. “I believe if another member asked for votes, [the parliament] would vote for him or her.”⁴⁴⁷ In fact, the female parliamentarian from Kandahar said, members of the commission actually avoid consulting the embassies “because that might be insensitive to the religious leaders and elders.”⁴⁴⁸

Male and female parliamentarians had divergent accounts about how women members are treated within parliament. One male parliamentarian gave a glowing account of unity among male and female members; the other male member said there was no discrimination based on gender.⁴⁴⁹ But one female parliamentarian spoke at length about the dominance of men in the parliament and their disrespect towards women. “When we have meetings and both men and women raise their hands and show their cards, the respect that is given to men is not given to women. The time which is given to men is not given to women. When a woman speaks, she is not allowed to speak more than three minutes, but a man is allowed to speak more than 15 minutes.” She also reported not being shown the same respect in government ministries as her male peers: “If we go to a ministry for our clients' cases, when ministers and their directors see women, they just nod their heads, but when they see a man, they stand up for them in sign of respect.”⁴⁵⁰

WOMEN PARTICIPATE MORE IN PROVINCIAL AND COMMUNITY COUNCILS, BUT CONTINUE TO FACE RESISTANCE

The 2016 electoral law required provincial councils to reserve at least 25 percent of their seats for women. Provincial councils were set up to oversee provincial budget expenditures and implementation of development projects. There are 34 provincial councils, each composed of 9 to 29 members, depending on the population of the province. Each provincial council elects one among them to the upper house of parliament, where provincial council representatives make up one-third of the seats.⁴⁵¹

The reserved seats for women were crucial in increasing the number of women participating in these councils.⁴⁵² The electoral law also added a 25 percent quota for the district and village councils, a significant achievement for women in rural areas.⁴⁵³ Though Afghanistan has yet to hold district or village council elections, these bodies are designed to play important political roles.⁴⁵⁴

Another impressive achievement for women in rural areas was their increased numbers in community development councils, formed under the National Solidary Program to deliver services and infrastructure projects to rural populations.⁴⁵⁵ Women's involvement in the community development councils was partly due to the National Solidary Program's requirement that councils be gender balanced and that at least 60 percent of the adult population of a village must participate in the councils' elections for it to be valid. These requirements, according to a 2013 evaluation of the program, led to women's participation in council elections and project selection processes.⁴⁵⁶

As of 2019, almost 50 percent of the 9,708 elected community development council members were women.⁴⁵⁷ Around 87 percent of community development plans included at least one priority project requested by women.⁴⁵⁸ A 2015 World Bank evaluation found that women members of community development councils have higher rates of community participation and socialization outside the household than women who do not participate. For example, women's participation in dispute mediation and involvement in aid allocation had increased by 21 and 14 percent, respectively. Further, the evaluation found that men's acceptance of women's participation in the councils had increased by 22 percent.⁴⁵⁹ This was consistent with findings from an earlier nationally representative opinion survey conducted by State in 2012, noting that about two-thirds of Afghans were comfortable with women's membership in district councils.⁴⁶⁰

Despite this progress, women council members at the subnational level continued to face resistance from their male peers. A 2010 analysis of the quality of women's participation in community development councils found that men regularly interfere in women's meaningful participation by blocking information, controlling project funds, and ignoring their input.⁴⁶¹ Wazhma Frogh observed, "Provincial-level governments are still very conservative and are dominated by local warlords or power holders. We have been unable to take the national progress to the local level."⁴⁶²

DESPITE BARRIERS, WOMEN ARE VOTING

Starting with Afghanistan's first presidential election in 2004, millions of Afghan women have cast their ballots, many for the first time.⁴⁶³ Figure 10 on the following page shows number of women voters between 2004 and 2019. Though women's share of total votes has held fairly steady, the total number of voters—to include women—significantly declined between 2004 and 2019, except for a spike during the 2014 presidential election.

For a country in which women have been historically marginalized in public life, these percentages seem impressive. However, extensive fraud in Afghan elections has called into question the reliability of overall votes, particularly those cast by women—so much so that the percentage of votes from a given jurisdiction cast by women has historically been used as a proxy for the rate of fraud.⁴⁶⁴ For example, shortages of female poll workers have prevented female polling stations from opening, leaving them vulnerable to capture by powerbrokers who stuffed ballot boxes. When too few women were found to fill various roles at female polling stations—including poll workers and body searchers for female voters passing through security checkpoints—men have filled in. This has depressed turnout due to social constraints in conservative areas against women interacting with men.⁴⁶⁵

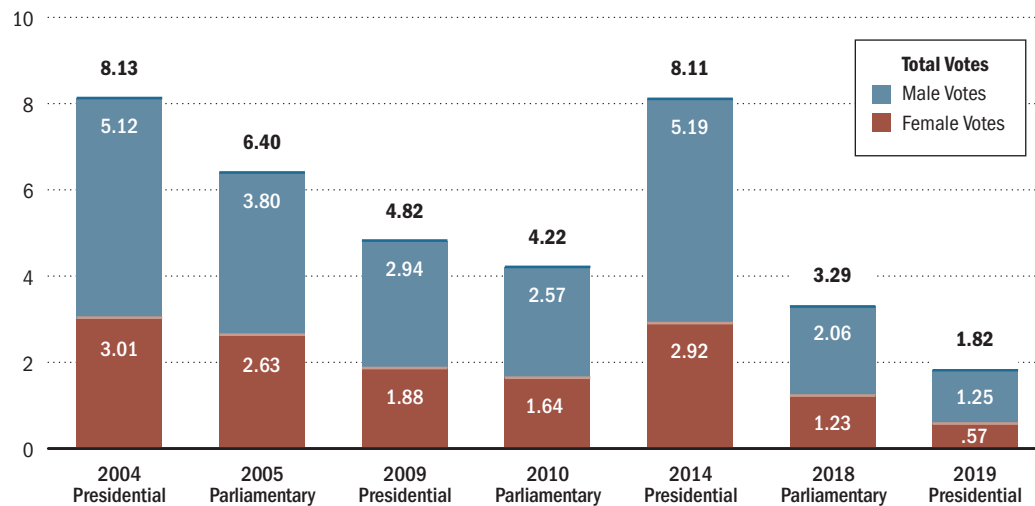
Before 2018, fraud in female polling centers was facilitated by the common practice of exempting women from having photographs on their voting ID cards, a step which also facilitated proxy voting—men voting for women—or outright fraud.⁴⁶⁶ Proxy voting was historically common in some regions of the country. The introduction of biometric voter verification before the 2018 election cut down on that practice.⁴⁶⁷ But the Independent Election Commission's 2019 decision requiring photographs of voters on election day forced poll workers in some provinces to turn away women who were unwilling to comply.⁴⁶⁸



Two Afghan women talk after casting ballots in Ghor Province, 2014. (USAID/Afghanistan photo)

FIGURE 10

FEMALE VOTE COMPARED TO TOTAL VOTES IN ELECTIONS SINCE 2004 (MILLIONS)



Source: Oliver Lough, Farokhloqa Amini, Farid Ahmad Bayat et al., *Equal Rights, Unequal Opportunities: Women's Participation in Afghanistan Parliamentary and Provincial Council Elections*, AREU Synthesis Paper, March 2012, p. 11; Catherine Powell, *Women and Girls in the Afghanistan Transition*, Working Paper, Council on Foreign Relations, June 2014, p. 6; UN Development Program website, "UN Electoral Support Project (UNESP)," accessed on July 14, 2020; Colin Cookman, *Assessing Afghanistan's 2019 Presidential Election*, U.S. Institute of Peace, Peaceworks No. 166, August 2020, p. 43; SIGAR, *Elections: Lessons from U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR 21-16-LL, February 2021, p. 24.

Still, even though the data may overstate actual women's turnout, a substantial minority of Afghan women stubbornly insist on their right to vote—despite cultural, security, and political barriers.

CIVIL SOCIETY: AFTER GREAT STRIDES, FEAR THAT AID CUTOFF WILL CLOSE THE DOORS

Women have also made strides in civil society, advocating for women's participation in electoral processes, decision-making, and holding the Afghan government accountable. Overall, the civil society sector is a significant source of employment for Afghans. In 2018, the sector employed about 17 percent of the total formal workforce. There has been an increase in women's participation both as beneficiaries and as service providers. Women now make up about 28 percent of employees in civil society organizations.⁴⁶⁹ A member of civil society from Kunduz told SIGAR, "We are thankful for the support and help that the U.S. has given us during the past 19 or 20 years. Especially for women's progress, we have achieved a lot with support from USAID." One tangible measure of the impact of U.S. support, she said, was "greater involvement of women in NGOs. In their programs they were working on skill building for women and involving them a lot. They were hiring them [women] as staff or beneficiaries."⁴⁷⁰

According to civil society organizations, more than half of their activities related to promoting gender equality, followed by education, civic education, rights of minorities, media, policy influence, and conflict resolution.⁴⁷¹ Despite these promising numbers, these groups have limitations. A majority (63 percent) operate in urban areas, with more



An Afghan journalist signs an attendance roster during photojournalism training in Farah Province on February 10, 2013. (U.S. Navy photo by Hmc. Josh Ives)

than half of those active in Kabul. Lack of funding, inaccessibility, poor infrastructure, and insecurity are the main factors that limit their expansion to rural areas.⁴⁷²

“Every time a project is implemented, it is executed according to the will of donors and not according to the will of people.”

—Female member of the provincial council in Khost Province

Some have complained that civil society organizations tend to focus on donor-funded, short-term projects. A female member of the provincial council in Khost told SIGAR, “Unfortunately, every time a project is implemented, it is executed according to the will of donors and not according to the will of people. For example, it is likely that people of an area needed a road but [donors] dug a water well for them. Some people may have needed a school but a clinic was constructed for them without considering their need.” She added, “For women we cannot ignore the work done so far but mostly those were for short term.”⁴⁷³ This sentiment was echoed by Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, an international consultant and gender specialist, who said, “The donor goes to [civil society organizations] and says we want to work on X. Then the organization says, ‘We have the capacity to do this, how much should we write the proposal for?’ The project is a product they are selling back to the donor. . . . Donors determine the issues . . . and issues important to Afghan communities are not always dealt with.”⁴⁷⁴ That, combined with a lack of strategic vision, a lack of coordination, and intense competition for funding, has undermined attempts at a unified message on issues that Afghan women, as opposed to donors, think are most important.⁴⁷⁵

CRITICAL GAINS AND CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN IN THE MEDIA

Under the Taliban, the Afghan media sector consisted of one government radio station, a few dozen state-run newspaper outlets—and zero women.⁴⁷⁶ Freedom of expression was severely repressed; the growth of independent media and the expanding presence of women in the media that had been achieved under previous governments were wiped out.⁴⁷⁷ War, displacement, and restrictions on women’s education severely hampered the ability of Afghan women to even read the news, much less write or produce it.⁴⁷⁸

But the rapid growth and diversification of media since 2001 has created roles for women as both consumers and producers of media content.⁴⁷⁹ The proliferation of hundreds of independent media outlets—television, print, and radio—has included an increasing amount of content produced by and for women.⁴⁸⁰ The television talk show *Banu*, for instance, features women calling in to solicit advice on common life issues.⁴⁸¹ Radio Rabia Balkhi in Balkh Province, where roughly 60 percent of the staff are women, produces women-focused broadcasts ranging from music and call-in shows to in-depth coverage of health, law, the economy, and politics.⁴⁸²

Expanded internet access, mobile phone usage, and the birth of social media have also provided women with new platforms through which to engage on sensitive topics, build community, and push for social change on women’s issues.⁴⁸³ In fact, many credit the increased presence of female voices in the media landscape, in combination with increased access to media, with shifting public attitudes regarding women’s rights and status.⁴⁸⁴ Polling data shows that Afghans who rely on newer forms of media (such as television and the internet) for their news are more likely than Afghans who rely on more traditional mediums (such as radio or community councils) to have favorable views of women working outside the home and having the same educational opportunities as men.⁴⁸⁵

The United States and other international donors have directed significant funding and effort to developing the Afghan media sector, with the United States being by far the biggest player, according to a 2012 British Broadcasting Corporation report.⁴⁸⁶ USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives, for example, provided seed money for the founding of Tolo TV, now Afghanistan’s leading television station in terms of both market share and women’s programming.⁴⁸⁷ From the beginning, part of the U.S. effort focused on increasing the number of women working in the media and supporting their professional development. Independent journalism was considered an essential component of Afghanistan’s developing democracy, and women were deemed critical stakeholders.⁴⁸⁸ As one USAID officer who oversaw U.S. media programming told SIGAR, “There was definitely an effort to mainstream—to get women involved in journalism, media outlet management . . . with that lens toward women as an underrepresented population that needs a voice in media.”⁴⁸⁹

The United States and other international donors have directed significant funding and effort to developing the Afghan media sector, with the United States being by far the biggest player.

U.S. programming in other sectors—such as health, justice, and the political sphere—also engaged with Afghan media as a means of disseminating information that could influence public attitudes on women’s issues.⁴⁹⁰ For example, USAID’s Afghan Civic Engagement Program paired local civil society organizations with local female journalists to report stories on education and health, as well as on such topics as violence against women.⁴⁹¹ Patricia Gossman, associate director for the Asia division of Human Rights Watch, told SIGAR that her research has uncovered “changes in the acceptance of girls’ education because of the changes in and exposure to telecommunication and media since 2001.”⁴⁹² She observed

cases of media exposure driving attitudinal change within families, such as older boys convincing their fathers to allow daughters to attend school after learning of such opportunities through radio, social media, or other mediums.⁴⁹³

U.S. programming has also pursued its goals to increase women-run media initiatives and content that highlights women's issues at the local level.⁴⁹⁴ One example of that is Salam Watander—an independent network of radio stations begun with funding from USAID that encompasses several women-led stations. These outlets broadcast pieces produced by women in urban and rural areas, on topics such as the role of women in presidential elections, how women can access the informal justice system, and meetings of local women's rights activists.⁴⁹⁵ When Radio Sahar, a women-run radio station in Herat Province, burned down in 2011, USAID's Afghanistan Media Development and Empowerment Program funded its reconstruction and technical assistance to get its programs back on the air.⁴⁹⁶

A second major facet of U.S. programming has been its support for training women media professionals.⁴⁹⁷ Many such efforts, such as the Building Independent Media in Afghanistan program, focused broadly on the media sector while dedicating significant funding and activities to target female media professionals. Through such programs, thousands of female journalists have been able to get training in skills such as investigative methods and the use of multimedia.⁴⁹⁸ Other efforts have focused more narrowly on training and mentoring female journalists in critical skills, such as conflict-sensitive reporting, interviewing techniques, and journalistic ethics.⁴⁹⁹ One such USAID program—Rasana—focuses heavily on the unique protection and safety needs of female journalists, from training them on physical safety to advocating for more active protections at the national level.⁵⁰⁰

Afghanistan consistently ranks as one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a journalist.⁵⁰¹ Being a female journalist is especially dangerous: Female journalists have been targeted—and, in some cases, killed—“not only for coverage that angers powerful people, but also simply for being women.”⁵⁰² The Islamic State and the Taliban have repeatedly targeted female journalists for work they view as un-Islamic—such as Maharram Durrani, killed in 2018 by an Islamic State suicide bombing on her way to training at the U.S.-funded Radio Azadi.⁵⁰³ At the same time, local leaders and government officials have also targeted female journalists for negative coverage—such as Zakia Zaki, murdered by gunmen in her own home in 2007 after reporting critically on prominent local leaders.⁵⁰⁴

Aside from the physical danger, women journalists face special challenges, such as limited physical mobility, sexual harassment, and limited access to male sources. A 2014 USAID Guide to Gender Practice in Afghanistan noted that the “prevailing sentiment in Afghanistan is that women working in media are considered un-Islamic by their families and society,” resulting in familial pushback, harassment by male colleagues, and retribution by men for controversial stories.⁵⁰⁵ One USAID advisor told SIGAR that safety concerns hampered progress even within media outlets that wanted to support their female journalists: “A certain amount of paternal protectionism” limits the work of ambitious female journalists looking to do more than “puff pieces.”⁵⁰⁶

Despite these challenges, Afghan women continue to make important strides in print, radio, and television media. “If we are to bring about a change in the situation of women, then we women will have to go out and get the stories, find the problem as well as the solutions to them,” said Humaira Habib, founder of the women-run Radio Sahar in a 2012 interview with an independent researcher. “If we are to get the voices of women on air, then women themselves must go get those stories.”⁵⁰⁷

U.S. PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

This section provides an overview of six USAID flagship programs that included significant components supporting the political participation of Afghan women in the parliament and civil society. These programs represent U.S. efforts to increase women's leadership and civic engagement in the public, private, and civil society sectors. The first part of the section describes the two support programs for women representatives in parliament. The second part describes four USAID programs supporting a broader set of civil society organizations, with an emphasis on organizations run by or focused on women (see Table 3). At least one of these programs emphasized women's inclusion with money explicitly appropriated by the Congress for that purpose.⁵⁰⁸

TABLE 3

SELECTED USAID PROGRAMS SUPPORTING PARLIAMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY			
Name of Program	Initiated	Completed	Amount Disbursed
Afghanistan Parliamentary Assistance Program (APAP)	2004	2012	\$38.9 million
Afghanistan Legislative Body Assistance (ALBA)	2013	2018	\$24.6 million
Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (IPACS) I	2005	2010	\$27.2 million
Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (IPACS) II	2010	2014	\$44.7 million
Afghan Civic Engagement Program (ACEP)	2013	2020	\$78.9 million
Musharikat (Women's Rights Groups and Coalitions)	2015	2021	\$25.9 million

Source: USAID, responses to SIGAR data calls, October 2020.

Programs Supporting Female Parliamentarians Did Not Sufficiently Assess Impact

USAID supported the Afghan parliament through its two largest and longest-running parliamentary support programs in Afghanistan: the Afghanistan Parliamentary Assistance Program, an eight-year, \$38.9 million program that started in 2004, and its successor, the Assistance to Legislative Bodies of Afghanistan, a five-year, \$24.6 million program completed in 2018. The main goal of both programs was improving the parliament's overall capacity to legislate, plan and implement policies, and to monitor government affairs.⁵⁰⁹

These programs also supported each chamber's Women's Affairs Commission, which monitored women's issues across the country. The programs provided training and mentorship to commission members and staff in the drafting of legislation, researching pending legislation, preparing briefing materials, assessing the impact of legislation on women, organizing public hearings, and reaching out to civil society organizations.⁵¹⁰ With support from the Afghanistan Parliamentary Assistance Program and Afghanistan Legislative Body Assistance, each chamber's Women's Affairs Commission organized public forums and contributed to drafting and reviewing legislation.⁵¹¹ A significant success reported by USAID came in late 2016, when the Anti-Harassment law to Protect Women and Children, drafted by the Women's Affairs Commissions and supported by the U.S.-funded program *Musharikat*, was approved by the parliament.⁵¹²

A 2012 evaluation of the Afghanistan Parliamentary Assistance Program cited interviews with 19 female members of the parliament, noting that program support helped the women's commissions to engage with civil society organizations and other parts of the Afghan government, and improved female parliamentarians' understanding of how budget decisions affect women. Women parliamentarians also told evaluators that the program's trainings and assistance in organizing public forums were useful. But the evaluation did not provide details about how these trainings benefited the women parliamentarians' legislative and oversight responsibilities.⁵¹³

Beyond this limited analysis, the evaluations for the Afghanistan Parliamentary Assistance Program and Afghanistan Legislative Body Assistance made no assessment of the overall impact of either programs on building the institutional capacity of women parliamentarians.⁵¹⁴ The ambiguity of the evaluations was partly because neither of the two programs was created with specific objectives related to women parliamentarians or legislation regarding gender equality.⁵¹⁵

Both programs faced budget limitations, which led to a shortage of qualified staff at the commissions.⁵¹⁶ Other problems included irregular attendance at the women's commissions' meetings and poor coordination between members and commission staff.⁵¹⁷ Some civil society organizations told evaluators that the Afghanistan Parliamentary Assistance Program focused on a few high-profile powerful English-speakers "at the expense of the backbench women who really needed more assistance."⁵¹⁸

Consistent Support to Civil Society, with an Emphasis on Women

Since 2005, USAID has implemented a series of programs with the overall aim of strengthening civil society organizations, especially those led by women or focused on women's issues, so they can "effectively participate in the political process, solve community problems, and demand good governance from their leaders."⁵¹⁹ The assumption was that USAID would give technical and financial support to civil society groups and media activists, who would then advocate for the protection of human rights, deliver services, and raise awareness about government's roles and responsibilities.

USAID's efforts to increase women's political and civic participation began with a \$71.8 million program called the Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society, which ran from 2005 to 2014. It was succeeded by a \$78.9 million program known as the Afghan Civic Engagement Program, which ran from 2013 to 2020. USAID also implemented a \$25.9 million program called Musharikat, a component of Promote, which began in 2015 and was extended to 2021. (For more details on the Promote program, see the Highlight Box on page 94.)⁵²⁰ These programs supported building organizational capacity of civil society organizations led by or focused on women, increasing their engagement with communities and the Afghan government and parliament, and helping them conduct trainings and community dialogues on topics such as elections, good governance, human rights, and violence against women. The programs have helped individual organizations and coalitions organize campaigns related to violence against women and

the inclusion of women in peace processes.⁵²¹ The first two programs were designed to support Afghan civil society broadly, but with a special focus on organizations led by or supporting women. Musharikat was entirely directed toward civil society organizations run by women or working on gender equality issues.⁵²²

As a result of these programs, especially the Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society, the number of women clients and service providers in civil society organizations increased. According to a 2013 assessment of the Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society, 80 percent of organizations' activities benefited women, a significant increase from 18 percent since the program began in 2005.⁵²³ About 37 percent of the organizations reported that they had female full-time employees, with 40 percent in managerial positions.⁵²⁴

U.S. Programs Increased Women's Participation in Elections

Many civil society organizations devoted much of their effort to raising awareness about presidential and parliamentary elections. According to one assessment, more than half of the organizations supported by the Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society implemented activities encouraging women to vote in the 2014 presidential election.⁵²⁵ An evaluation team for its follow-on program, the Afghan Civic Engagement Program, later conducted a perception survey to assess how such voter education activities affected actual voter turnout.⁵²⁶ It found that they were associated with an overall increase in voting among the program beneficiaries, with a bigger increase among women voters.⁵²⁷ The evaluation also found that women were less likely to be dropouts—voters who participated in a previous election but did not vote in the 2018 parliamentary and 2019 presidential elections—and were more likely than men to be first-time voters.⁵²⁸

U.S. Programs Helped Some Civil Society Organizations to Influence Policy

Civil society organizations also sought to influence government policy. According to the midterm evaluation of Musharikat, women's coalitions were perceived as effective in influencing gender-related policies at the provincial government level, though not so much at the national level.⁵²⁹ According to the final evaluations of the Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society and the Afghan Civic Engagement Program, these organizations interacted frequently with members of parliament, but their influence over the executive branch—which wielded significantly more authority over government budget and policies—remained limited.⁵³⁰

U.S. Programs Rallied Men to Support Women

Some civil society organizations also attempted to enlist men in the cause of promoting women's rights. In 2017, for example, the Afghan Civic Engagement Program decided to broaden its funding from women-led civil society organizations to include any organization engaging men for the purpose of promoting women's rights.⁵³¹ It also supported the formation of a working group of both men and women which advocated for changes to elections laws and cybercrime laws to benefit women—including hiring more provincial female election workers and conducting trainings for female staff



Member of Parliament Fawzia Koofi speaks at the launch of a new civil society certification process in 2015. (UNAMA photo by Rafiullah Alkozai)

of a cybersecurity team.⁵³² Moreover, Promote’s Musharikat component supported organizations in conducting trainings to 1,105 Afghan men in which they could discuss their own gender roles and examine male attitudes that are harmful to women.⁵³³ Musharikat’s evaluation recommended that the program should work more closely with other initiatives, such as the National Masculinity Alliance and the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, both of which also work on engaging men to support women.⁵³⁴

Funding Reductions Mean Some Groups May Close Their Doors

Civil society organizations say that increasing insecurity and funding cuts are their biggest challenges. Despite decades of efforts, the organizations supported by USAID and other donors remain heavily dependent on foreign funding.⁵³⁵ Some programs, such as the Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society, delivered trainings and mentorship to partner organizations in applying for funding from various donors, but with international aid drying up, some of those organizations may have to close their doors.⁵³⁶

Civil society organizations say that increasing insecurity and funding cuts are their biggest challenges. Despite decades of efforts, the organizations supported by USAID and other donors remain heavily dependent on foreign funding.

Hundreds already have, and many more are on the verge of closing.⁵³⁷ Members of grassroots civil society organizations told SIGAR they were concerned about continuing funding. “Our government does not have any special budget,” said one male member of a civil society organization in Kandahar Province. “Local businessmen

and contributions from local people can play a role, but that can only pay for a small percentage of expenses.”⁵³⁸

Another civil society organization member from Helmand Province said that “without international funding, we will not be able to provide good quality services to people. . . . There were many CSOs and other organizations that were operating in the past, but now they do not exist. The only reason is lack of funds.”⁵³⁹

One reason organizations gave for their reliance on donor money was Afghanistan’s high poverty rate, which means local funding is often nonexistent. Another reason given was lack of volunteers.⁵⁴⁰ A weakened culture of volunteerism is in part a result of organizations’ long-term reliance on international funding.⁵⁴¹ Helena Malikyar, an Afghan political analyst, told SIGAR that civil society organizations rarely object to donors’ programs for the fear of losing funding. The organizations use some of that funding to pay employees to do work that was once done by volunteers, which creates a disincentive for volunteers to do anything for free if there is a chance of getting paid. “No one wants to do anything, for women or for other parts of the community, if there is no funding attached to it,” Malikyar said.⁵⁴²

That attitude reflects the enormous economic pressures faced by most Afghans. A member of a civil society organization in Uruzgan explained, “Afghans are not in the position to do volunteer work because every Afghan has to feed his family first—and then he can do volunteerism. So if funding decreases, then Afghans will prioritize feeding their families only, and will not be able to focus on social work. Therefore, to continue social work, Afghans need funds from the international community.”⁵⁴³

Moreover, some initiatives by more recent programs proved to be unsustainable. For example, Musharikat had envisioned that some young women participants would become activists, but according to the midterm evaluation, there was too little training and mentorship to turn aspiring participants into “the next generation of activists.”⁵⁴⁴ A final evaluation of the Afghan Civic Engagement Program found that it improved the professional capacity of individual participants, but had not led to their engagement with the government to influence policies. For that to happen, the evaluation said, program graduates needed continuing support and mentoring. It concluded:

The youth activism grants and the [Emerging Civil Society Leader] network suffer from significant sustainability challenges and both components will need further support after ACEP if they are to be maintained. Even though there is very high demand and affirmation for the [Emerging Civil Society Leader] programme by participants, given the relatively high degree of investment per individual grantee, the program may not be an efficient application of resources.⁵⁴⁵

INSIGHTS INTO USAID’S PROMOTE PROGRAM

USAID began implementing Promoting Gender Equity in National Priority Programs (Promote) in 2015 and has disbursed \$233.2 million to date. The program aimed to improve the status of more than 75,000 young Afghan women in all levels of society.⁵⁴⁶ In a public speech in 2013, then-USAID Administrator Rajiv Shah described Promote as “the largest investment USAID has ever made to advance women in development.”⁵⁴⁷

Though an assessment of Promote is outside the scope of this report, SIGAR conducted interviews for this report with U.S. officials, implementing partners, and Afghans who had extensive knowledge of the program’s design and implementation. The discussion below conveys some of their views of the program, and presents information that USAID has provided to SIGAR regarding Promote’s achievements.

Promote consisted of four components, three of which have ended, while the Musharikat component was extended to 2021 (see Table 4).⁵⁴⁸

TABLE 4

THE FOUR COMPONENTS OF PROMOTE	
Component	Goals and Objectives
Women’s Leadership Development (WLD)	To enable 25,000 women to enter the public, private, and civil society sectors and advance into decision-making and leadership positions at the national, provincial, and district levels.
Women in Government (WIG)	To place at least 3,000 university graduates into full-time jobs in the Afghan government, facilitate a women-friendly environment for female staff, and to increase local support for women in government.
Women in the Economy (WIE)	To increase the participation of 40,000 women in the private sector through new or improved employment opportunities and increased revenue for women-owned businesses and businesses with at least 10 percent female employees.
Women’s Rights Groups and Coalitions (Musharikat—meaning partnership in Dari/Pashto)	To build and support coalitions of 5,000 women’s rights activists and civil society organizations that would advocate for women and influence policies at the local, provincial, and national levels.

Source: SIGAR, *Promoting Gender Equity in National Priority Programs (Promote): USAID Needs to Assess this \$216 Million Program’s Achievements and the Afghan Government’s Ability to Sustain Them*, SIGAR 18-69 Audit Report, September 2018, p. 3; Checchi and Company Consulting, Inc., *Mid-Term Performance Evaluation of the Promote Women’s Leadership Development Program*, prepared under contract for USAID, September 2017, p. 13; Chemonics International Inc., *Moving Equity Forward: USAID Promote: Women in Government Final Program Report*, prepared under contract for USAID, April 20, 2020, p. 8; Development Alternatives Inc., *Promote: Women in the Economy, Annual Report—Year 4 (October 2018–September 2019)*, prepared under contract for USAID, October 30, 2019, p. 5; Management Systems International (MSI), *Midterm Performance Evaluation: Promoting Gender Equality in National Priority Program Project—Women’s Rights Groups and Coalitions (Promote Musharikat)*, prepared under contract for USAID, May 2020, pp. viii, 2.

The original concept paper for Promote asserted that investments in Afghan women and girls since 2001 had created a pool of roughly 200,000 educated women aged 17 to 30, and that “unleashing the productive potential of this group of women could greatly improve Afghanistan’s development prospects.” The paper stated that the program would “provide educated young women with opportunities to develop strong, demand-driven technical skills, plus senior level management and leadership abilities, and facilitate women’s entry and advancement into mid-high level positions in government, the private sector and civil society.” The underlying assumption was that these long-term investments would “produce a critical mass of women leaders” across key sectors of society, which would then “change the decision-making paradigm at the upper levels of government, civil society, and the economy.” The end result would improve the lives of women and girls—and lead to social and economic progress for the country.⁵⁴⁹

Mary Fontaine, a former senior gender advisor at USAID/Afghanistan, defended the technical analysis, theories of change, and basic assumptions behind Promote, but found fault in how it was implemented. Fontaine said that participants in a part of the program—Women’s Leadership Development—were supposed to be selected because they were “champions and change-makers” who would be trained in analyzing indicators of women’s status and developing

actions for improvement, but that this emphasis was missing in the program's implementation.⁵⁵⁰ A senior policy advisor at USAID observed, "The assumption was that there would be a groundswell of young participants, but there just wasn't."⁵⁵¹ A 2018 SIGAR audit also noted the difficulty implementers had in finding eligible participants. One obstacle was the requirement that participants be between 15 and 30 years old, which USAID removed in 2017.⁵⁵²

Michelle Barsa, a senior expert on gender and Afghanistan, suggested that a smaller-scale, more holistic approach might be more impactful.⁵⁵³ Naheed Sarabi, former deputy minister of policy at the Ministry of Finance, who was involved in consultations on Promote, also expressed reservations about the program's design: "At the beginning, the idea was so vague, and I kept telling them, 'This approach does not work. Whatever training you're giving these women to work in the government is not demand-based, and when it's not demand-based, you're creating high expectations that won't be met at the end of the day.'"⁵⁵⁴

Other criticisms focused on poor internal communication and a lack of planning for long-term sustainability. Afghan women's rights activist Wazhma Frogh, who was also involved in the initial design phase of Promote, observed, "Different contractors were put in charge of different components of the program, so each component became too disconnected from the others. The implementation stage is where things tend to go wrong. While the contractors did engage with women NGOs, they did not take a long-term approach."⁵⁵⁵ Palwasha Hassan, a co-founder of the Afghan Women's Network, told SIGAR that the Women's Leadership Development component helped to "enhance the leadership capacity of thousands of women and boosted their confidence to lead many social entrepreneurial initiatives." On the other hand, she commented that the Musharikat component, which aimed to build a national coalition of women's rights groups, failed to improve the sustainability of the civil society organizations it supported. "What is left of Musharikat today?" she asked. "Did they create a network that still exists today?"⁵⁵⁶

Michelle Morgan, a former chief of party for the Women in the Economy component, said, "Part of the problem preventing women from getting a job is that in Afghanistan, most people don't hire based on your training or degree or qualification. Most people hire based on networks, knowing people, or having recommendations about them so they can trust them. It's a big trust issue."⁵⁵⁷

Sippi Azarbajani-Moghaddam, an international consultant and gender specialist, underscored the need for USAID and its implementing partners to better understand the sources of power and authority in Afghanistan: "You have to look at what gives people authority and legitimacy in Afghan society," she told SIGAR—and these do not necessarily derive from job qualifications, training, or merit. In Afghanistan, she said, "one of those is money—cold hard cash. Other things are largesse and the ability to develop your own patronage networks, which provide people jobs and so forth."⁵⁵⁸

Some interviewees believed that Promote's high profile worked against it: Because it launched as the number of U.S. and coalition forces were being drawn down, it came to be seen as the next big money spigot for U.S. contracts. According to Fazel Rahim, former gender advisor at USAID/Afghanistan, "The focus on gender integration across the portfolio was shifted toward Promote, because it had become such a political project. The President, Chief Executive Abdullah, the First Lady came to launch the project—that's when everybody was looking at Promote, including the businesses who had lost their incomes from the reduction in military contracts."⁵⁵⁹

In September 2018, SIGAR published an audit of the program. The key finding was that "after three years and \$89.7 million spent, USAID/Afghanistan [had] not fully assessed the extent to which Promote [was] meeting its overarching goal of improving the status of more than 75,000 young women." This was partly due to dramatic changes in Promote's performance indicators, which made it difficult to evaluate the program's impact over time. For example, the target number for women in new or better jobs set by the Women's Leadership Development component was lowered from its original goal of 12,500 to 1,824. Similarly, the initial target number for the same indicator under the Women in the Economy component was 25,000, which USAID lowered to 21,000 and then again to 17,500. At the same time, USAID

increased the program’s target for internships and apprenticeships from 2,000 to 9,500, while also reducing the length of the project by one year. The agency did not perform a baseline study until more than two years into the program, limiting its ability to monitor and assess the program’s impact.⁵⁶⁰

These criticisms do not take away from Promote’s real achievements: helping to place women in public and private sector jobs, advancing women-friendly policies within Afghan ministries, carrying out media campaigns, supporting civil society organizations, and informing the peace process. In September 2020, USAID reported to SIGAR that Promote had placed a total of 21,761 women in jobs—1,892 in civil service jobs and 19,869 in the private sector.⁵⁶¹ According to the final report for the Women in the Economy component, this component supported more than 400 women-owned businesses, and placed more than 10,000 women in three- to nine-month paid internships and apprenticeships in sectors where women’s employment was well received, such as in health and education.⁵⁶² “By offering the incentive of placing a person in an internship and covering most of the cost of the stipend, it gave the intern the opportunity to prove ‘I can do the job,’” Michelle Morgan, the former chief of party, told SIGAR. “A lot more interns were offered a job from having done the internship than we expected. If the interns successfully completed the internship, they were much more likely to get a job immediately, even with another employer, because now they had that reference and that trust.”⁵⁶³

USAID reported that the Women in Government component helped several ministries to develop and adopt 15 policies that aimed to benefit women in government, including a policy on increasing women’s participation in the civil service and in drafting a national gender policy. USAID stated that the component also launched media campaigns to rally public support for women working outside the home.⁵⁶⁴ USAID told SIGAR that to help inform the Afghan government’s peace talks with the Taliban, Promote’s Musharikat surveyed more than 1,000 women across 29 provinces, and that the survey found that women “overwhelmingly seek women’s full participation in the peace process and want constitutional protections, including the right to an education and work.”⁵⁶⁵

Promote’s reported successes could mean important, life-changing impacts for thousands of women and their families. However, the quality and sustainability of the program’s outputs and outcomes remain undetermined.

Promote’s successes, as reported by USAID, could mean important, life-changing impacts for thousands of women and their families—an achievement that should not be discounted. However, the quality and sustainability of the program’s outputs and outcomes remain undetermined, since no final independent evaluation has been conducted of Promote or any of its components. SIGAR interviewees’ perceptions about lessons learned from Promote’s design and implementation provide some insight into pitfalls to be avoided in the future, should a similar gender-focused program in Afghanistan be pursued.

KEY FINDINGS

- Women’s participation in the Afghan Parliament and provincial and district councils has significantly increased since 2001, with 27 percent of parliamentary seats and 25 percent of provincial and district council seats reserved for women. Women comprise almost 50 percent of elected community development council members.
- U.S. and other international support has been crucial in supporting Afghan women leaders who have pushed for greater political participation.
- However, women politicians, voters, and advocates continue to face violence and intimidation, pervasive sexual harassment, and lack of mobility—one reason that the greater political participation by women has not always translated into meaningful representation for women.
- Women’s participation in civil society organizations also increased, both as beneficiaries and as employees. However, these organizations mainly operated in urban areas and remained heavily dependent on foreign funding and short-term projects. Reduced external funding caused hundreds to close their doors, with many more on the verge of closing.
- The increase in women’s participation in civil society organizations was in part due to U.S. programs that were designed to support Afghan civil society broadly, with a special focus on organizations led by or supporting women.
- Women’s presence in the media increased significantly since 2001. A rapid growth and diversification of media created roles for women as both consumers and producers of media content.
- Women’s increased presence in and access to media appear to have helped shift public attitudes to more positively view women’s rights. The United States has directed significant funding and effort to developing the Afghan media sector and supporting women’s participation in it.
- A substantial minority of Afghan women have insisted on their right to vote. However, extensive fraud in Afghan elections has called into question the reliability of vote totals, particularly those cast by women. The percentage of votes from a given jurisdiction cast by women has been used as a proxy for the rate of fraud.
- While USAID has reported important successes from its program Promote, the quality and sustainability of the program’s outputs and outcomes remain undetermined because no final independent evaluation has been conducted of the program or of any of its components.



AFP photo

CHAPTER 8

ACCESS TO JUSTICE

Though the Afghan government has passed important laws designed to increase women’s access to justice and combat gender-based violence, a complex web of political, institutional, cultural, and legal barriers continues to stymie progress. Yet increases in women’s employment throughout the justice sector since 2001 show that women are making inroads into a system historically dominated by men. These gains, limited as they are, reflect what is possible and serve as reminders of the difficult work that remains.

AFGHANISTAN’S LEGAL PROTECTIONS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS ARE CRITICAL STEP, BUT STILL EXIST MOSTLY ON PAPER

On paper, Afghanistan’s legal framework offers women and girls many protections. Article 22 of the Afghan constitution states that “The citizens of Afghanistan, man and woman, have equal rights and duties before the law.”⁵⁶⁶ International treaties to which the Afghan government is a signatory, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, theoretically provide women with added protections.⁵⁶⁷ In theory, these laws and treaties set important legal standards for the advancement of women’s access to justice. In reality, enforcement in Afghanistan has been minimal.⁵⁶⁸

The same holds true for another landmark piece of legislation, the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law. Promulgated by presidential decree in 2009, the law explicitly criminalized rape for the first time in Afghanistan.⁵⁶⁹ The law also criminalizes numerous other acts of violence against women, including forced marriage, underage marriage, and giving baad.⁵⁷⁰ Since then, lackluster implementation has underscored the challenges involved in enacting comprehensive legal reforms.

In theory, laws and treaties set important legal standards for the advancement of women's access to justice. In reality, enforcement in Afghanistan has been minimal.

Part of the reason for the Afghan government's slow-moving enforcement of the law has been a lack of awareness among police, prosecutors, and other government officials, especially in rural areas.⁵⁷¹ Many women are also unaware of the rights afforded to them under the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law, and lack access to legal aid.⁵⁷² In the first year of the law's implementation, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission recorded 2,299 complaints of violence against women and found that only 101 cases (roughly 4 percent) led to indictments.⁵⁷³

One researcher with a focus on gender in Afghanistan suggested that the law was rushed into implementation and created unrealistic expectations. According to the researcher, "People wanted to see it implemented, but nobody was really interested in the reasons why it was not being implemented." The law, which was never formally ratified by parliament, "highlights the short-termism that has become characteristic of these efforts; people can only think one month or a year ahead. There is no willingness to do things properly, which takes years," the researcher added.⁵⁷⁴

Mehdi Hakimi, the executive director of the Rule of Law Program and a lecturer-in-law at Stanford University, pointed to the Afghan legal education system as one reason for the limited application of the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law. According to Hakimi, students who are educated in Sharia law "place less emphasis on codified state laws, such as the EAW law or constitutionally guaranteed rights, vis-à-vis dubious interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence." He added, "expecting [lawyers and judges trained in Sharia] to implement the EAW law properly is wishful thinking to some degree."⁵⁷⁵

Violence against women is often underreported.⁵⁷⁶ According to UNAMA, police tend to steer women victims away from the formal judicial system toward informal mechanisms such as mediation, which also helps to explain the small indictment and conviction rates.⁵⁷⁷ "Only one in five Afghans believe that women should be able to access justice through the courts system on their own," according to a 2012 perception survey conducted by State.⁵⁷⁸

Using mediation or other informal means to resolve offenses of violence against women has elicited mixed reactions from both Afghan women and the international community. In a 2015 report, UNAMA acknowledged that mediation seems to offer “an accessible, faster, cheaper and culturally acceptable solution to seeking justice and remedies” for women survivors. But, it added, “mediation processes raise human rights concerns, notably with regard to obtaining the free consent of the victim, fairness, independence and clarity as to who and how the process will be undertaken, and ensuring an appropriate outcome and follow-up of any decision voluntarily agreed to by the parties.”⁵⁷⁹ Tadamichi Yamamoto, former UN special representative for Afghanistan, asserted that “the use of mediation in criminal cases serves not only to normalize violence against women but also to undermine confidence in the criminal justice system as a whole.”⁵⁸⁰

Mediation is unregulated, and there is no standard operating procedure or set criteria for who can mediate disputes.⁵⁸¹ However, UNAMA also reported that mediation had been the “expressed preference of many women,” in part due to a lack of confidence in the formal criminal justice system and a preference for expeditious resolution.⁵⁸² Women may also prefer the informal system to avoid the income loss and social stigma that can result from a partner or husband going to jail.⁵⁸³

In many parts of the country, informal systems of justice coexist with formal state courts.⁵⁸⁴ Rural areas in particular “suffer from a generally weak formal justice system that is unable to arbitrate and adjudicate local civil and criminal disputes.”⁵⁸⁵ Informal justice systems are broadly defined as customary or religious structures administered by a jirga or shura composed of male elders. They are not affiliated with formal state courts. How they function and the rulings they make are informed by local norms that prioritize social cohesion and family unity, as opposed to individual rights or official laws and decrees.⁵⁸⁶

*Women seeking redress via the formal justice system
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themselves facing further punishment.*

Women seeking redress via the formal justice system for abuse or other violent crimes can actually find themselves facing further punishment. It is not uncommon, for example, for a woman fleeing an abusive household to wind up being charged with *zina*, having sex outside of marriage.⁵⁸⁷ This common occurrence reflects a broader issue within the justice sector: the Afghan government punishing women and girls for so-called “moral crimes” and acts that have “no grounding in codified law.”⁵⁸⁸ According to estimates from a 2013 Human Rights Watch report, “Half of all women in prison and about 95 percent of girls in juvenile detention in Afghanistan have been arrested on ‘moral crimes’ charges.”⁵⁸⁹



Female members of the Afghan National Police face social disapproval and a lack of opportunities for advancement. (U.S. Army photo by Lt. Charity Edgar)

International donors, including the United States, established shelters to protect women and girls fleeing abuse. State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) provided most of the international support, which by 2013, according to INL, benefited "approximately 2,000 women and children annually."⁵⁹⁰ Shelters are an essential resource for women seeking a safe space for themselves and their children. The shelter system is, however, a sensitive topic. Many shelters face threats to their security and opposition from religious and political leaders, some of whom spread unfounded rumors that the shelters are brothels.⁵⁹¹

NUMBER OF WOMEN WORKING IN JUSTICE SECTOR STILL SMALL COMPARED TO MEN, BUT REFLECTS IMPORTANT PROGRESS

Women's participation in the judicial sector as judges and police officers has risen only incrementally since 2001, but even this small increase is significant. Increasing the number of women working in the judiciary is important for several reasons. Evidence suggests that the lack of women working as police, attorneys, and judges may discourage women from seeking redress through the justice system.⁵⁹² For example, a female victim of abuse may be reluctant to speak with a male police officer, especially if it involves sharing information about a traumatic event or a family member.

The Afghan government set ambitious goals to increase the number of women police officers in the male-dominated Afghan National Police. In 2010, the Ministry of Interior stated that it hoped to have 5,000 women serving in the police forces by 2014.⁵⁹³ Yet as of 2019, only 3,650 women were working as police officers (roughly 4 percent of the

entire force).⁵⁹⁴ Even so, this was a significant increase from the 180 women in the force in 2005.⁵⁹⁵ Part of this growth includes women working within the Ministry of Interior's Family Response Units. Created in 2007, these units help women register complaints with the police.⁵⁹⁶ According to UNAMA, "police in provinces where [family response units] have been established and whose members are mainly female generally receive more complaints and are more likely to act upon them."⁵⁹⁷ However, women family response unit officers are not always provided with specialized training in how to deal with situations involving violence against women.⁵⁹⁸

Recruitment and retention of women police officers are constrained by several barriers. These include familial pressure to not go into policing, sexual harassment and abuse from colleagues and superiors, few prospects for professional development, and lack of child care. Other problems are more basic: many police stations lack female-only or locking toilets.⁵⁹⁹ The vast majority of women police are based in major cities, meaning that women in smaller cities and rural areas rarely engage with female officers.⁶⁰⁰

The very idea of a woman judge challenges societal norms that persist in many parts of the country. Women working as judges face opposition from conservative elements in the population, the Taliban, and constituencies within the Afghan government.⁶⁰¹ At an unofficial February 2019 meeting in Moscow between prominent Afghan politicians and the Taliban, the Taliban is reported to have proposed that "women could go to school and hold political office, but not become judges."⁶⁰² The Afghan government has also resisted the idea of woman judges. In 2015, President Ghani nominated Anisa Rasooli to become the first female judge to the Supreme Court, but the parliament failed to ratify her nomination. If all 69 female members of parliament had voted in favor, then the nominee would have been confirmed; as it was, the vote illustrated the fact that women in parliament are not a monolithic voting bloc, and that some may have political interests that supersede women's issues.⁶⁰³ Rasooli pointed to Afghan tradition and culture as challenges for women judges. "In some places, people do not accept that a female should judge them," she said.⁶⁰⁴

At an unofficial February 2019 meeting in Moscow between prominent Afghan politicians and the Taliban, the Taliban is reported to have proposed that "women could go to school and hold political office, but not become judges."

Nonetheless, women are increasingly working as judges. In 2007, the Ministry of Women's Affairs reported that 73 women were serving as judges—roughly 5 percent of the total number of judges in the country.⁶⁰⁵ By 2018, there were reportedly a total of 2,061 judges, of whom 261—roughly 13 percent—were women.⁶⁰⁶ This rise in representation, like the increasing numbers of women in the Afghan National Police, is confined mainly to urban areas such as Kabul and other major cities.⁶⁰⁷



Women cadets practice marksmanship for two weeks out of their eight-week basic police training at Central Training Center Kabul. (NATO photo by Mass Communications Spec. 1st Class Christopher Mobley)

Ultimately, efforts to increase women’s access to justice reveal the challenges and opportunities facing those fighting for a more just and equitable judicial system, as well as their extraordinary determination. Nonetheless, the legal infrastructure established since 2001 to increase access to justice for women and girls remains fragile. While the passing of the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law was an important milestone, data on its implementation, as well as the low number of women working as judges and police, show that despite gains in the years since 2001, women still face enormous hurdles in seeing their legal rights protected.

“There is no shortcut to justice,” said Shaharзад Akbar, who chairs the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. Still, she added, while “the question of access to justice for women is still a problem. . . . The awareness of women’s rights is much better.”⁶⁰⁸

AFGHAN VOICES: IMPUNITY PERPETUATES DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Based on SIGAR-commissioned interviews in Afghanistan.

The interviews commissioned by SIGAR confirm a grim reality for Afghan women: domestic violence is a persistent feature of everyday life. The primary source of violence against women, observed one woman from Kunar Province, is in the home. “Men do not let women . . . defend their rights. Women are not allowed to have opinions in the household and when they do, they have trouble with their husbands and sometimes their other family members.”⁶⁰⁹

“Our husbands are the biggest source of violence in our community and home because they beat us. . . . They break our head, hands, and feet. The other day [my husband] beat his second wife so badly that she had to go to doctor. They are very cruel,” said one woman from Kabul Province.⁶¹⁰ “He beats us if we speak up. He beats us if our children are hungry. He beats us when our children are sick and we ask for money to take them to doctor.”⁶¹¹

Very few interviewees mentioned the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law, suggesting that awareness of laws designed to prevent violence against women remains limited—although it is unclear how much increased awareness would change entrenched cultural norms. Still, improving the implementation of legal protections for women depends in part on women’s and men’s familiarity with these laws.

More broadly, several interviewees noted the need for increased awareness among men and women about domestic violence and its impact on women and families.

“It is very bad to be violent against women according to Islam and the law. Women should have awareness programs so that they know about their rights,” said a male community development council member from Bamyan Province.⁶¹² One woman from Kunar Province echoed this sentiment. “Men are causing such violence because they do not have awareness, so there has to be awareness programs for such men, especially in rural areas,” she said. “There has to be awareness programs in radio, TV, and through media. Community leaders should have meetings with men and women so that both men and women know about their rights.”⁶¹³

“Men are causing such violence because they do not have awareness, so there has to be awareness programs for such men, especially in rural areas.”

—Woman from Kunar Province

A female participant in a USAID-funded program commented positively on the program: “We received workshops on violence against women as well in this project. This project benefited us in realizing our rights. We now know much more about our rights than before.”⁶¹⁴

U.S. PROGRAMS SUPPORTING WOMEN'S ACCESS TO JUSTICE

Both State and USAID implemented several rule of law programs with objectives related to increasing women's access to justice. The four programs included in this analysis, while varying in scope and objectives, included efforts to raise public awareness of women's legal rights, promote women's access to formal and informal justice mechanisms, increase access to legal education for women, and strengthen the justice sector's capacity to enforce existing laws and protect the constitutional rights of women (see Table 5). This section summarizes key commonalities between the programs and discusses challenges with assessing their impact and effectiveness.

TABLE 5

SELECTED U.S. RULE OF LAW PROGRAMS				
Name of Program	Agency	Initiated	Completed	Amount Disbursed
Rule of Law Stabilization Program—Formal Component (RLS-F)	USAID	2012	2014	\$22.2 million
Rule of Law Stabilization Program—Informal Component (RLS-I)	USAID	2012	2014	\$15.1 million
Building Rule of Law in Afghanistan	State	2011	2015	\$8.2 million
Supporting Access to Justice in Afghanistan (SAJA)	State	2014	2017	\$17.1 million

Source: USAID, responses to SIGAR data calls, October 2020; State, response to SIGAR data call, July 2, 2020.

U.S. Programs Sought to Expand Women's Access to Justice within the Formal and Informal Systems

Both State and USAID worked to strengthen linkages between formal and informal systems of justice as a way to expand women's access to both. The Rule of Law Stabilization Program—Informal Component, which worked primarily with traditional dispute resolution bodies outside the formal system, included activities to raise public awareness of the need for women's access to justice. These included the distribution of brochures and magazines, as well as radio programs that educated people on their legal rights. The program also conducted workshops for male and female elders on the rights of women under Sharia and Afghan constitutional law.⁶¹⁵ The Rule of Law Stabilization Program—Formal Component worked to expand prospects for women in the judiciary by holding forums on prerequisites to become a judge at eight different universities for female students. The program also held judicial trainings for judges, lawyers, and other judicial personnel on Afghanistan's laws guaranteeing the rights of women.⁶¹⁶

State's Building Rule of Law in Afghanistan program encompassed three projects designed to improve the link between the informal and formal justice systems. These included Female Justice Committees, which helped women navigate the formal and informal judicial systems, training for male and female alternate dispute resolution practitioners in formal laws, and a legal clinic at Herat University that provided students with opportunities to visit nearby villages to learn about local informal justice bodies.⁶¹⁷



Housewives, university students, and other members of Bamyán's Civil Society Human Rights Network watch the UNAMA-produced documentary on the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law. (UNAMA photo)

Involving Women in Conflict Resolution, Judicial Training, and Education about Their Rights

All four programs provided support to women's groups, networks, and associations working to expand women's access to justice. The Rule of Law Stabilization Program–Informal Component established 25 women's dispute resolution groups, comprised of female elders who helped resolve conflict within their communities.⁶¹⁸ Members of these groups were provided with opportunities to attend workshops where they learned how to better align informal dispute resolution with Afghan laws.⁶¹⁹

Rule of Law Stabilization Program–Formal supported the Afghan Women Judges Association, which advocated for women working in the judicial system.⁶²⁰ The program also facilitated gender justice trainings for law students and Afghan Women Judges Association members that covered issues such as women's property rights, marriage and divorce law, the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law, and inheritance rights.⁶²¹

Supporting Access to Justice in Afghanistan provided support to the Afghan Shelter Network, an umbrella group of organizations running women's protection centers. Program support included trainings for shelter staff in "managerial, financial and fundraising skills" and coordination with Afghan government bodies working to prevent gender-based violence.⁶²²

Building Rule of Law in Afghanistan funded 18 Female Justice Committees. The committees, similar to the dispute resolution groups established by Rule of Law Stabilization–Informal, helped women understand different avenues of justice available to them in both the formal and informal systems, and trained them in resolving family disputes. Committee members told program evaluators that their role was "largely to provide legal advice and teach women about their rights under Afghan law."⁶²³

Nature of Actual Impact Is Unclear

Many of the justice programs reviewed by SIGAR claim success without providing clear evidence to support their findings. To demonstrate impact, several program reports and evaluations cited evidence such as quotes from program beneficiaries or number of women trained in a specific skill or topic. Many of the final reports and evaluations, however, acknowledged that establishing a correlation between program activities and related outcomes was not always possible. Ultimately, insufficient monitoring and evaluation of program activities and unsubstantiated claims of success make it impossible to assess the actual impact that these programs had on improving women's access to justice.

Rule of Law Stabilization–Informal stated that “gender equity in access to and outcomes of [traditional dispute resolution] was a project priority considered in all activities.” But a final report and a final evaluation both frequently referred to challenges with determining the impact of these activities.⁶²⁴ The program was based on the assumption that project activities would reduce the number of traditional dispute resolution decisions that negatively impact women. Qualitative data gathered by program evaluators showed that traditional dispute resolution decisions continued to harm women, but evaluators concluded that no inferences could be made from such anecdotal evidence.⁶²⁵ A final evaluation of the program conceded that it was “not designed to test for causal linkages” between programming and a decrease in violence against women.⁶²⁶ A SIGAR audit on rule of law programs concluded that the “extent to which USAID’s Rule of Law Stabilization–Informal met its objectives cannot be fully determined because of deficiencies in the program’s performance management system.”⁶²⁷

Insufficient monitoring and evaluation of program activities and unsubstantiated claims of success make it impossible to assess the actual impact that these programs had on improving women’s access to justice.

A gender assessment conducted for Rule of Law Stabilization Program–Formal cites support for women’s enrollment in the Stage program—a two-year training program for students interested in becoming judges—as one of the program’s greatest successes.⁶²⁸ The program, however, is located in Kabul, so recruits came only from “the immediate area around the capital.”⁶²⁹ Rule of Law Stabilization Program–Formal also included a campaign of print, television, and radio messages informing women of how to make use of the formal justice sector. Yet according to the final evaluation, “no monitoring activities were undertaken to verify that the intended recipients actually received tangible benefits from the materials distributed.”⁶³⁰ The program ultimately concluded that it supported a “4.3 percent increase in the number of female judges since 2006,” yet provided little evidence of any specific link between the program and this outcome.⁶³¹

An important component of Supporting Access to Justice in Afghanistan was the program’s effort to increase the effectiveness of the Elimination of Violence Against Women units, created in 2010 by the Afghan attorney general’s office to prosecute crimes involving gender-based violence.⁶³² By 2014, the prosecution units were operating in 18 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces.⁶³³ Supporting Access to Justice in

Afghanistan held mentoring sessions with prosecutors pursuing alleged violations of the law—yet according to a final evaluation, those sessions had limited impact on the prosecutors’ day-to-day work.⁶³⁴ Evaluators were unable to gather any evidence that individuals trained by the program shared their knowledge or their acquired skills with other members of their unit.⁶³⁵ Ultimately it was difficult to measure any increased effectiveness of the Elimination of Violence Against Women prosecution units, evaluators said, and “no particular trend [could] be discerned in terms of whether the number of cases prosecuted by the units has increased or decreased.”⁶³⁶

A final evaluation of Building Rule of Law in Afghanistan suggested that the Female Justice Committees established by the program created a “stronger environment in which women may access justice,” and that these committees “contributed to a stronger link between the formal and informal justice sectors.”⁶³⁷ The final evaluation, however, noted that “it is not known to what extent . . . the . . . program has contributed [to these gains], nor if there were any other contributing efforts made outside of the program.”⁶³⁸ According to the program, training for alternate dispute resolution practitioners working in the informal system “provides a platform for enhancing women’s access to justice”—yet the evaluation concluded that it was “difficult to ascertain” whether this program had any meaningful impact on women’s access to justice.⁶³⁹

KEY FINDINGS

- On paper, Afghanistan’s legal framework offers women and girls many protections. In reality, enforcement of these laws has been minimal.
- Neither the formal or informal justice system offers women adequate protection of their rights. Women seeking redress via the formal system often encounter corruption, or find themselves facing unjust punishment. Many women settle disputes or violations of their rights via informal mechanisms like local mediation, but these are unregulated, raise human rights concerns, and undercut the formal justice system.
- Women’s participation in the judicial sector as judges and police officers has risen only incrementally since 2001—and mainly in urban areas—but even this small increase is significant. Increasing the number of women working as police, attorneys, and judges can encourage more women to seek redress through the justice system.
- The Afghan Ministry of Interior’s Family Response Units, which help women register complaints with the police, receive more complaints than regular police units and are more likely to act on them. However, female Family Response Unit officers need more training in how to deal with situations involving violence against women.
- Both State and USAID implemented several rule of law programs with objectives related to increasing women’s access to justice. However, a review of four of these programs revealed that insufficient monitoring and evaluation of program activities and unsubstantiated claims of success make it impossible to assess how much these programs actually improved women’s access to justice.
- In interviews with Afghans commissioned by SIGAR, several women emphasized that domestic violence is a persistent feature of everyday life for women, and that familiarity with laws designed to protect them appeared to be limited.



UNAMA photo

CHAPTER 9

ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

Women have made modest gains in economic participation, especially in owning and running small businesses and obtaining secure jobs in urban areas. But gender disparity has remained one of the most persistent features of the Afghan labor force. National household surveys and in-depth analyses of women’s economic participation have all underscored the disadvantages Afghan women face in the labor force.⁶⁴⁰

SOCIAL NORMS POSE FORMIDABLE BARRIERS TO THE ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

Women seeking to enter the work force in Afghanistan face a formidable barrier: tradition that prohibits interaction between men and women outside the household.⁶⁴¹ There are also ingrained social roles, in which men are expected to be providers and women are expected to be mothers and family caretakers.⁶⁴² According to the 2017 *Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey*—which contains the most recent data on women’s employment—the main reason for women’s economic inactivity was the burden of household responsibilities.⁶⁴³ Even where economic opportunities exist, it is extremely difficult for women to take advantage of them: Unpaid caregiving takes most of their time, precluding them from acquiring the training, job experience, and continuing education they need to compete in the labor force.⁶⁴⁴

Stepping outside of prescribed gender roles places a burden not only on the women who do so, but also on their husbands and male relatives.⁶⁴⁵ “Anything related to women is an issue of honor for the family and the society,” said Wazhma Frogh, an Afghan activist. “Even though families would like their daughters to go to work, they think the society will criticize them for that.”⁶⁴⁶

According to The Asia Foundation survey, support for women working outside the home was declining until 2015, when 64 percent of respondents were in favor. Support has increased since then, reaching 76 percent in 2019, but certain jobs continue to be viewed as more appropriate.⁶⁴⁷ Afghans have consistently viewed female-only schools, public health facilities, and civil service jobs as the most acceptable occupations for women, and employment in the security forces and in private businesses as the least.⁶⁴⁸ Women make up 33 percent of teachers, less than 1 percent of the army, and 3.2 percent of police officers.⁶⁴⁹

“Anything related to women is an issue of honor for the family and the society. . . . Even though families would like their daughters to go to work, they think the society will criticize them for that.”

—Wazhma Frogh, Afghan activist

Traditional cultural norms also create barriers to women’s ownership of property—whether livestock, equipment, houses, or land. Without assets, women have little economic cushion in times of crises or collateral with which to secure loans for starting a business.⁶⁵⁰ Property ownership also offers powerful intangible benefits.⁶⁵¹ “Women’s power generally shifts when women become owners of capital and property in their own right,” said gender specialist Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam.⁶⁵²

Afghan law does entitle women to own and claim property, but women are usually compelled to waive these rights due to tradition, culture, and social pressure. Low levels of education, lack of awareness of their legal rights and legal procedures, family and community expectations, and fear of being socially ostracized all make it difficult for women even to claim inheritances explicitly given to them.⁶⁵³

AFGHAN VOICES: GENDER NORMS, SEXUAL HARASSMENT, AND LACK OF JOBS ARE SOME OF AFGHAN WOMEN'S BIGGEST CONCERNS

Based on SIGAR-commissioned interviews in Afghanistan.

About half of those interviewed—33 out of 65—cited lack of jobs as one of the biggest challenges facing women and men. Lack of employment opportunities has been especially frustrating for educated women. Several women and men noted that even when women manage to overcome obstacles to get an education, it is hard for them to find a job due to poor economic conditions.⁶⁵⁴

Some men perceive women working outside the house as a threat to their honor because it makes them appear incapable of supporting their family.

When job opportunities are available, women often face cultural barriers that their male counterparts do not. As one woman from Kunduz Province noted, “When women want to get a job, they need a man’s opinion and permission—a big group of people make the decision about a woman’s job.”⁶⁵⁵ Another woman from Kunar Province put it this way: “If a woman wants to work, first she will face challenges and disagreement at home. When she convinces her family members after arguing with them for several days, then she will have to face opposition from the community’s members, religious leaders, and local elders. There are always going to be people in the community who

don’t think working or being outside of the house is a good thing for women. This is a man’s world, and we have to fight to be in it.”⁶⁵⁶ Many men and women said that work outside the house was viewed as a man’s responsibility; some men perceive women working outside the house as a threat to their honor because it makes them appear incapable of supporting their family.⁶⁵⁷

Increasing violence and sexual harassment of women in the workplace were sometimes behind families’ reluctance to allow women to work outside the house.⁶⁵⁸ One woman from Balkh Province said that men would allow women to work if it was safe.⁶⁵⁹ Another said that there is a perception that “women are taken advantage of” at work.⁶⁶⁰ In insecure areas like Kunar Province, women working in government offices feel threatened.⁶⁶¹ “When men go to work, no one harasses them or says bad words to them,” said one man from Kandahar Province. “On the other hand . . . when a girl goes to school, people call her bad names. Men can get access to everywhere at any time but women cannot do whatever they want, like going to the doctor.”⁶⁶²

LIMITED GAINS IN WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT STATUS

While there has been some progress in women's access to employment in urban areas, women overall continue to be less secure in their jobs than men, to work fewer hours, and to earn less income.⁶⁶³ According to The Asia Foundation annual surveys, unemployment has consistently ranked as one of the top three problems facing Afghan women.⁶⁶⁴

Of the 41 percent of working-age Afghans who were employed in 2017, for example, only 16 percent were women, a decline from 18 percent in 2013.⁶⁶⁵ The only economic sector with a female majority is manufacturing, where women make up 65 percent of employment. While manufacturing is an important sector in a developing economy, it accounts for only 18 percent of overall employment in Afghanistan, and women's involvement is almost entirely limited to carpet weaving and sewing.⁶⁶⁶ Manufacturing jobs also have the lowest pay.⁶⁶⁷ In the community and social services sector—a category that includes mostly public services and formal jobs, and that provides relatively higher wages—women comprised only 9.6 percent of all employment, a slight decline from 11 percent in 2013.⁶⁶⁸

A basic reason it is hard for women to enter the labor force is that jobs are scarce for everyone. The drawdown of foreign military forces since 2012 and the corresponding drop in international aid, as well as deteriorating security and political instability, have all contributed to a steep rise in poverty.⁶⁶⁹ From 2016 to 2017, nearly 16 million Afghans lived below the **poverty line**, about double the number in 2007 to 2008.⁶⁷⁰ It is even worse as of 2021: According to the World Bank, another 1.9 to 6 million Afghans may fall into poverty, due to the economic downturn during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶⁷¹

The **poverty line** is “the national average threshold for the cost of covering basic needs.” The 2017 Afghan poverty line was 2,064 afghanis per person per month, which translates to around \$1 per day.

Source: Government of Afghanistan, Central Statistics Organization, *Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey (ALCS) 2016–17, 2018*, p. 99.

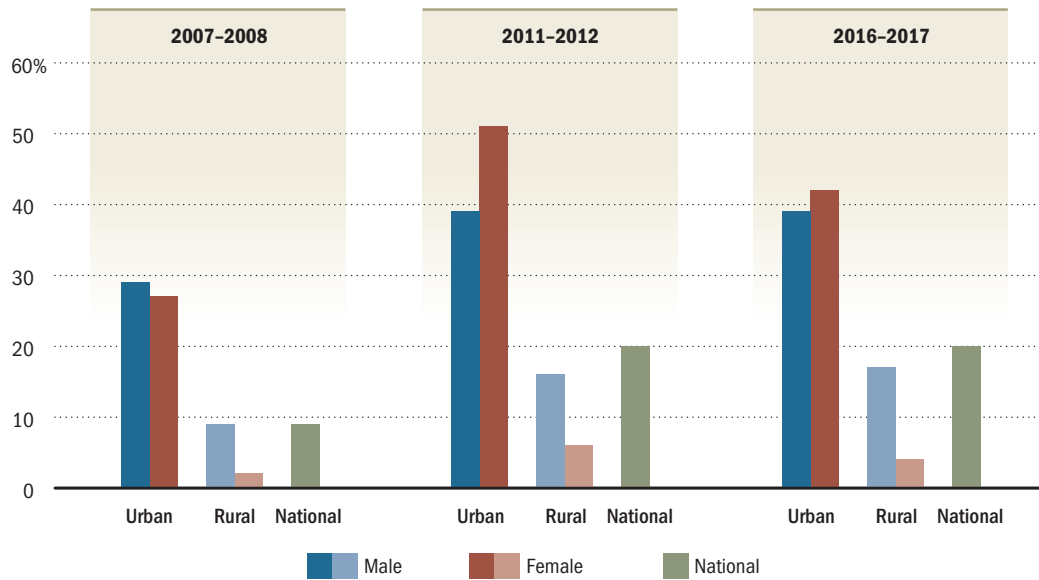
Yet every year, an estimated 400,000 people enter this shrinking labor market—in a country with almost no social safety net.⁶⁷² For those who do find work, it is often in jobs categorized as “vulnerable”—jobs that are insecure, unstable, and low-paid, and which are apt to vanish at any time.⁶⁷³ Overall, a staggering 80 percent of employment in Afghanistan falls into this category, affecting both men and women, particularly those in rural areas.⁶⁷⁴

Only 20 percent of jobs in Afghanistan could be classified as secure—that is, they offer “fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, and better prospects for personal development.”⁶⁷⁵ This kind of employment is mainly an urban phenomenon, and it is here that women have made modest gains. Figure 11 shows that coinciding with the surge in foreign aid and military presence in 2010 and 2011, the portion of stable jobs peaked between 2011 and 2012 for both men and women, but urban women saw even greater gains than men. Though the number of such jobs later declined, women still held more secure jobs as of 2017 than they did in 2007—and within this 20 percent of all jobs, and within urban areas, women's employment actually surpassed men's. This demonstrates that as of at least 2017, some economic gains for a small percentage of women had proved to be durable.

Civil service jobs are an important source of secure employment for women. Figure 12 shows that the percentage of women in the civil service (excluding the Afghan army and police) increased from 18 percent in 2007 to 25 percent in 2019. However, these

FIGURE 11

PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL EMPLOYMENT CATEGORIZED AS 'SECURE' (BY YEAR, RESIDENCE, AND GENDER)

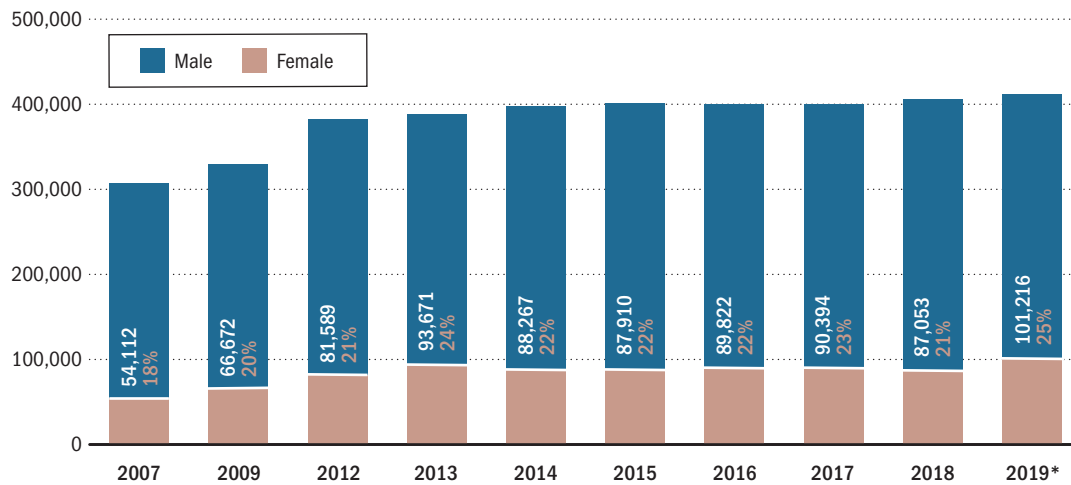


Note: According to the Afghanistan Central Statistics Organization surveys, secure employment—which the CSO terms “decent employment”—included job categories such as salaried workers in public and private sectors, and employers.

Source: Government of Afghanistan, Central Statistics Organization, *National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2007/08: A Profile of Afghanistan*, October 2009, p. 32; Government of Afghanistan, Central Statistics Organization, *National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2011-2012 (Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey)*, 2014, p. 35; Government of Afghanistan, Central Statistics Organization, *Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey (ALCS) 2016-17*, 2018, p. 63.

FIGURE 12

WOMEN EMPLOYEES VS TOTAL EMPLOYEES IN CIVIL SERVICE, 2007-2019



* The 2019 data is as of the third quarter.

Source: Government of Afghanistan, Central Statistics Organization, *Women and Men in Afghanistan - 2011, 2012*, p. 34; Government of Afghanistan, Central Statistics Organization, *Women and Men in Afghanistan - 2014*, no date, p. 13; Government of Afghanistan, Central Statistics Organization, *Women and Men in Afghanistan - 2016*, July 2017, p. 18; Government of Afghanistan, National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA), *Yearbook: Women and Men in Afghanistan - 2017*, May 2019, p. 13; Government of Afghanistan, NSIA, *Yearbook: Women and Men in Afghanistan - 2018*, November 2019, p. 13; Government of Afghanistan, NSIA, *Quarterly Statistical Indicators, Third Quarter 2019*, December 2019, p. 2.

civil service jobs were concentrated in urban areas and in only a few ministries.⁶⁷⁶ The legal system offers a similar story: Only 12 percent of judges and 5 percent of lawyers in Afghanistan are women.⁶⁷⁷

Gender disparity is even more pronounced in decision-making positions in the civil service, where 85 percent of all such positions are held by men. But that is slowly changing: Women held 15 percent of government decision-making positions in 2018, up from 10 percent in 2013.⁶⁷⁸

Only 20 percent of jobs in Afghanistan could be classified as secure. This kind of employment is mainly an urban phenomenon, and it is here that women have made modest gains.

WOMEN-OWNED BUSINESSES HAVE INCREASED, BUT REMAIN FEW AND LARGELY LIMITED TO CITIES

Although owning a business is not a widely accepted occupation, women have made some inroads into the male-dominated private sector. Afghan women have always assisted in producing marketable products such as dried fruits and carpets, but they were rarely direct sellers. Since 2001, there has been growth in the number of women-operated businesses selling directly to the public. Most of these started in the decade following 2001 and were in urban areas; most were owned by women with high levels of education who had support from their families.⁶⁷⁹ But those urban women were the exception; overall, women are still a small minority—about 5 percent—of business owners. A 2015 assessment by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute noted that while women have made some significant achievements in the private sector, “this group of female trailblazers is very much elite.”⁶⁸⁰

U.S. PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT WOMEN’S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

This section provides an overview of five USAID programs that were designed to develop a thriving private sector economy that included women’s participation in the workforce (see Table 6 on the following page). To do this, USAID used a variety of mechanisms, including providing skills training, internship programs, and grants to small women-owned businesses.

The programs’ underlying assumption was that women’s economic participation was limited due to lack of skills and limited access to money and markets. By training women in key skills and assisting them in the job search, and providing women businesses with small grants, the hypothesis went, the number of women in Afghanistan’s economy would increase. Overall, there have been some positive trends. While they are still small in numbers and concentrated in urban areas, there are more women-run businesses and more women employed in both private and public sectors than there were 20 years ago. According to the evaluations of these programs, some



Afghan women have a long tradition of making exquisite handicrafts, jewelry, and clothing. (UNAMA photo by Sayed Mohammad Shah)

TABLE 6

SELECTED USAID ECONOMIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS			
Name of Program	Initiated	Completed	Amount Disbursed
Afghanistan Small and Medium Enterprise Development (ASMED)	2006	2012	\$113.9 million
Assistance in Building Afghanistan by Developing Enterprise (ABADE)	2012	2018	\$104.9 million
Afghanistan Workforce Development Program (AWDP)	2012	2018	\$49.2 million
Women in the Economy (WIE)	2015	2020	\$70.6 million
Women in Government (WIG)*	2015	2020	\$37.8 million

* Women in Government is included here as a USAID program supporting women’s economic participation. However, it is not an Economic Growth program and is managed by USAID’s Office of Democracy and Governance. Because an important component of the program is internships, we analyzed it alongside other Economic Growth programs that implemented internships as a key activity to help women find jobs.

Source: USAID, responses to SIGAR data calls, October 2020.

program beneficiaries were able to find jobs and start new businesses. However, it is unclear how sustainable these gains are. Moreover, programs were unable to measure how much of a role the training and grants played in actually creating new jobs or women-owned businesses, and implementers appeared to measure success by the number of trainings instead of their quality.

Technical Training Programs: An Emphasis on Numbers, Not Knowledge

All the programs reviewed by SIGAR focused on training in such skills as business management, project and financial management, civil service, leadership, marketing, and proposal and report writing. Programs evolved to deliver trainings more relevant to sectors with more job openings, such as information technology, media, health care, and education.⁶⁸¹

The Afghanistan Small and Medium Enterprise Development program, which ran from 2006 to 2012, for example, provided funding to various companies and associations to train job seekers in gemstone cutting and carpet design.⁶⁸² Another program, the \$49.2 million, six-year Afghanistan Workforce Development Program, began in 2012 and also focused on providing training and job-placement support for 25,000 Afghans, 25 percent of whom had to be women.⁶⁸³

Programs were unable to measure how much of a role the training and grants played in actually creating new jobs or women-owned businesses, and implementers appeared to measure success by the number of trainings instead of their quality.

Women in the Economy, the largest component of USAID's Promote program, ran from 2015 to 2020 and had a \$70.6 million budget.⁶⁸⁴ (For more information on Promote, see pp. 94–96.) Women in the Economy aimed to create employment for 17,500 women through skills trainings in sectors with higher demand, such as education, media, medical services, and telecommunications.⁶⁸⁵ According to Michelle Morgan, a former chief of party for Women in the Economy, the program differed from Afghanistan Workforce Development Program in providing more specific and flexible types of trainings. For example, Women in the Economy identified midwives who had received some basic medical training from other international organizations but who were unemployed. Through the program, these midwives were given on-the-job training to become nurse's assistants, or to help with district clinics' day-to-day patient care.⁶⁸⁶

However, these programs lacked a mechanism to assess the effectiveness of trainings. For example, the final evaluation of the Afghanistan Small and Medium Enterprise Development program noted that it lacked a training needs analysis or any way of measuring what skills trainees had actually acquired.⁶⁸⁷ The final evaluation of the Assistance in Building Afghanistan by Developing Enterprise program noted that there was no evidence that the trainings resulted in real jobs for women.⁶⁸⁸ One Afghanistan Workforce Development Program implementing partner reported that over 28,000 training participants were placed in new jobs or received promotions, 10,252 or 35.6 percent of whom were women—well above its 25 percent target.⁶⁸⁹ These numbers, however, were never independently verified.⁶⁹⁰ A midterm evaluation found that training participants were generally satisfied with the trainings and mainly complained about their short-term nature.⁶⁹¹ But even this surveyed only 62 training participants, all of whom were employed—thus skewing the results.⁶⁹²

USAID reported that upon its completion, Women in the Economy had helped 19,869 women find employment—but, again, a final evaluation has yet to verify these numbers.⁶⁹³ The 2017 midterm evaluation applauded the program for addressing barriers to women's access to jobs, such as lack of skills and experience. However, the report noted shortcomings in the quality of training providers and an “obsession” with

numbers among the regional staff, which made it difficult for the evaluation team to get qualitative feedback.⁶⁹⁴

U.S. Programs Facilitated Internships to Improve Women's Employability

Internships were another vehicle for U.S. efforts to support Afghan women in the workplace; they were key components of Promote's Women in the Economy and Women in Government and, to a lesser extent, the Afghanistan Small and Medium Enterprise Development program.⁶⁹⁵ The latter reported that by the time the program ended in 2012, 75 to 80 percent of its interns had found jobs. However, the final evaluation stated that the program's impact on women could not be assessed because the program had not disaggregated data by gender.⁶⁹⁶

Women in Government was primarily designed to help the Afghan government meet its target of filling 30 percent of its civil service jobs with women by 2020—a target set by the 2007 National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan. Women in Government provided nine months of coursework and a three-month internship at a government office. USAID aimed to place 2,100 women in government jobs by the end of the program.⁶⁹⁷ The program ultimately placed 1,016 women in civil service jobs—about half of its projected target.⁶⁹⁸

According to the 2018 midterm evaluation, one reason for the low placement rate was that the program underestimated the time it took to get a civil service job and failed to take into account their limited availability.⁶⁹⁹ A 2018 SIGAR audit had also found that the program had no plan for recruiting or placing interns, beyond a letter from the Afghan government expressing general interest in absorbing the program beneficiaries into government jobs.⁷⁰⁰ Moreover, USAID reported that the Afghan government's recruitment policies changed during implementation of the program, making it even more difficult for the program to meet its target.⁷⁰¹ Another reason for the program's low job placement level, according to former director Mina Sherzoy, was nepotism. Although women scored high in the civil service exam, she said, they were not hired due to "favoritism, corruption, or discrimination against women."⁷⁰²

U.S. Programs Awarded Grants to Women-owned Businesses, but Did Not Assess Results

U.S. programs also gave grants to women-led small businesses and women's business associations as part of U.S. efforts to improve women's economic participation. The Afghanistan Small and Medium Enterprise Development program, the Assistance in Building Afghanistan by Developing Enterprise program, and, to a smaller extent, Women in the Economy, all provided small grants to women-owned microbusinesses and women business associations. The first primarily helped establish and fund associations, including 116 women business associations. However, towards the end of the program, implementers recognized that support to business associations was ineffective and discontinued it.⁷⁰³ Assistance in Building Afghanistan by Developing Enterprise, the successor program, awarded in-kind grants in the form of machinery and equipment directly to businesses.⁷⁰⁴ To increase profits and job opportunities for women, Women



Women spin thread at an Agriculture Fair in Mazare Sharif, Balkh Province in 2009. (USAID/Afghanistan photo)

in the Economy provided marketing help and loans to 448 women-owned companies or companies in which more than 30 percent of employees were women.⁷⁰⁵

The final evaluation of the Afghanistan Small and Medium Enterprise Development program suggested that the program largely focused on tracking the numbers of businesses supported and trainings provided, as opposed to outcome indicators, such as whether a business was profitable and sustainable.⁷⁰⁶ Likewise, the final evaluation of the Assistance in Building Afghanistan by Developing Enterprise program found that data on outcome indicators, such as jobs and sales, was unreliable and invalid.⁷⁰⁷ Moreover, in its third year, the latter shifted its support from microbusinesses with fewer than 10 employees to small and medium businesses.⁷⁰⁸ The program had initially included microbusinesses specifically to support the development of women-owned businesses, which accounted for most of the microbusiness category.⁷⁰⁹ However, the implementing partner found it challenging to work with microbusinesses, as they tended to have limited organizational capacity or growth prospects.⁷¹⁰ According to the final evaluation, this shift led to better results in terms of increases in jobs and sales overall. But that came at a cost to women-owned businesses, which continued to struggle with less access to resources, markets, and networks.⁷¹¹ The evaluation concluded that the program had “minimal effect” on women’s economic empowerment, since only 4 percent of the program’s in-kind grants went to women-run businesses.⁷¹² The initial target had been 20 percent.⁷¹³

The midterm evaluation of Women in the Economy noted that it takes time for the monitoring and evaluation subcontractor to build enough trust with businesses to obtain their financial information—and without that information, it was too soon to assess the effectiveness of the program.⁷¹⁴ But this problem was not new: Previous

USAID programs had encountered difficulty in getting reliable financial information from program-supported businesses. A 2018 SIGAR lessons learned report that assessed the support to businesses provided by the Afghanistan Small and Medium Enterprise Development and the Assistance to Building Afghanistan by Developing Enterprise programs concluded that they were unable to obtain reliable and adequate information on partner firms, and that companies prepared documents such as registration, tax filings, and business plans solely to obtain donor grants.⁷¹⁵ According to the latter program’s final evaluation, it was “virtually impossible” to verify information on jobs and sales provided by Afghan businesses.⁷¹⁶

KEY FINDINGS

- Women have made modest gains in economic participation, especially in obtaining secure jobs in urban areas and in owning and running small businesses. Women’s share of secure jobs in urban areas increased from 27 to 42 percent between 2007 and 2017. However, women overall continue to be less secure in their jobs than men, work fewer hours, and earn less income.
- The number of women-operated businesses also grew after 2001, but women are overall still a small minority—about 5 percent—of business owners. Most of these businesses were in urban areas; most were owned by women with high levels of education and support from their families.
- The percentage of women in the civil service—an important source of employment for women—increased from 18 percent in 2007 to 25 percent in 2019. However, these civil service jobs were concentrated in urban areas and in only a few ministries. Although still small, the percentage of women in decision-making positions increased from 10 to 15 percent between 2013 and 2018.
- Several U.S. programs aimed to increase women’s participation in the workforce. Activities included providing skills training, internship programs, and grants to small women-owned businesses. Some program beneficiaries were able to find jobs and start new businesses, but it is unclear how sustainable these gains are. Moreover, programs were unable to measure how much of a role the training and grants played in actually creating new jobs or women-owned businesses, and implementers appeared to measure success by the number of trainings instead of their quality.



DVIDS photo

CHAPTER 10

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE AFGHAN NATIONAL DEFENSE AND SECURITY FORCES

The meaningful inclusion of women in the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces is a practical necessity in Afghanistan.⁷¹⁷ Because Afghan culture and tradition preclude the free interaction of men and women, male soldiers and police are unable to effectively interact with nearly half of the population—including female suspects, women at airports or national borders, and female victims of domestic violence.⁷¹⁸ A lack of female police officers and soldiers hamstring key security objectives, including combating the high rates of sexual abuse and domestic violence throughout the country (addressed in greater detail in chapter 8).⁷¹⁹

Despite the enormous obstacles to women who seek to join and progress within the ANDSF, Afghan women continue to volunteer and serve in the Afghan National Army, Afghan Air Force, and Afghan National Police—often at great personal risk—forging a path for the women who will join after them.⁷²⁰ As Second Lt. Zala Zazai, a newly-minted female police officer posted to Khost Province in June 2020, told the *New York Times*, “God makes it easier, but I have to find the strength. . . . Women should claim their place. I know if I spend a year here, it will make a difference.”⁷²¹

TARGETS FOR RECRUITING WOMEN TO THE ANDSF WERE UNREALISTIC; FEMALE SERVICE MEMBERS HARASSED, THREATENED

In the early years of the reconstruction effort, the Afghan and U.S. governments did not prioritize the recruitment of women into security forces. But in 2008, the Afghan government's National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan noted that the "number of women in the ministries of interior and defense are too few, and women in these ministries are too outranked and too marginalized to be able to influence the processes and substance of decision-making." The plan sought to address this gap by assigning the ministries of defense and interior the job of coming up with an affirmative action policy and strategies to increase the number of women serving in the ANDSF by 20 percent within 10 years, with a long-term goal of creating a force that was 30 percent female.⁷²² In May 2010, the ministries of interior and defense committed to filling 10 percent of all uniformed Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police positions with women by 2020, and the Afghan National Army initiated its first training class for female officers.⁷²³

Before 2010, U.S. efforts to build Afghan security forces focused on achieving an ethnic, regional, and political balance among male recruits to the ANDSF.⁷²⁴ The recruitment of women did not become a U.S. priority until closer to 2010.⁷²⁵ U.S. support for women's recruitment, retention, and progress within the ANDSF was shaped by the objectives set out in UN Security Council Resolution 1325.⁷²⁶ Between fiscal years 2014 and 2021, the Congress authorized up to \$240.6 million from the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund for the recruitment, retention, integration, training, and treatment of female security personnel. Ultimately, \$110 million was appropriated in those years for these activities.⁷²⁷

Since 2010, the Afghan ministries of defense and interior have attempted to increase recruitment and retention of women by establishing various gender working groups and offices assigned to improve gender integration efforts within the ANDSF. Some efforts were aimed at laying a foundation for a culture supportive of women—such as the army's incorporation of trainings on gender, women's representation, and respect for female service members into its Basic Warriors Training.⁷²⁸ Others focused on institutionalizing mechanisms for women's recruitment, training, and retention, such as the female-specific incentive structures and literacy programs instituted by both ministries.⁷²⁹

These ministries have also undertaken public affairs and media campaigns, delivered trainings on gender integration, sexual harassment, and assault prevention for unit leaders and service members, and altered policies to encourage women's participation in the ANDSF—such as recoding *tashkil* positions to be open to women, or adjusting training schedules to accommodate the needs of female recruits.⁷³⁰

U.S. and coalition forces assigned a number of gender advisors to the Afghan ministries of defense and interior in an effort to assist with gender integration efforts.⁷³¹ U.S.-appropriated funds were directed toward recruitment and salary incentives, uniforms

Tashkil is a Dari word meaning "organization." The Afghan government's tashkil is a document that establishes a ministry's staffing levels, and is an essential component of the government's budgetary and payroll processes.

Source: SIGAR, *Actions Needed to Mitigate Inconsistencies in and Lack of Safeguards over U.S. Salary Support to Afghan Government Employees and Technical Advisors*, SIGAR Audit-11-5, October 29, 2010, p. 13.



An Afghan Air Force Fly-Away Security Team member directs passengers onto an aircraft on July 22, 2018, at Kabul Air Base. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Jared Duhon)

for women, building and security improvements (including women’s training centers and schools, housing, child care centers, gyms, dining facilities, and bathrooms), women-specific training, and courses on violence against women and self-defense, among other things.⁷³² But according to Michelle Barsa, a senior expert on gender and Afghanistan, this significant allocation of resources often left basic problems unaddressed, such as limitations on women’s mobility for recruitment or training purposes, as well as social barriers to women’s interactions with male recruiters.⁷³³

These efforts also encountered strong familial and cultural resistance, based on traditional expectations that women should mainly be engaged in household duties. As Barsa told SIGAR, “The dominant social norm surrounding Afghan women in the police is that it is not an honorable activity for women, and the sanctions are severe when it comes to violating this norm.”⁷³⁴ The dangerous nature of military and police work exacerbates familial concerns about women’s safety in such jobs, compounding difficulties in recruitment and retention.⁷³⁵ Barriers to women’s education also have prevented many women from meeting the educational requirements of the ANDSF.⁷³⁶

Women serving in the security forces often face a daunting array of problems: social stigma, discrimination from male colleagues, resistance from the communities where they work, and harassment and abuse from their male colleagues.⁷³⁷ Women working in both the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police are subject to frequent bullying, discrimination, sexual impropriety, and assault.⁷³⁸ One video shared widely on Afghan social media in November 2017 showed Colonel Ghulam Rasoul Laghmani, head surgeon in the Afghan Air Force, demanding sex from a female subordinate in return for a promotion.⁷³⁹ With no sexual harassment or assault policies in place within the ministries of defense or interior as of 2018, women have few available mechanisms to report such abuse.⁷⁴⁰ In addition to these challenges, opportunities for

women's career development are limited. Well-trained and educated women report finding themselves limited to menial tasks, such as tea-making or cleaning, regardless of their abilities or job descriptions.⁷⁴¹ As Mina Sherzoy, former director of Promote's Women in Government program, told SIGAR, "If you want to help and increase women's participation in the military or police . . . you have to offer incentives, build trust, and assure their families of their safety and security first."⁷⁴²

Given these realities, it is not surprising that as of January 2020, women service members made up just 3.25 percent of uniformed positions in the Afghan National Police, and less than 1 percent of uniformed Afghan National Army positions—well below the initial 10 percent goal.⁷⁴³ It is important to note that this 10 percent threshold was highly ambitious: even in the United States, women make up only about 16 percent of the U.S. military enlisted forces.⁷⁴⁴ It has also been revised over the years.⁷⁴⁵ In early 2015, the Resolute Support Gender Office determined these initial goals were unachievable, based on existing recruitment and retention rates and training capacity. As a result, the Gender Office changed its own targets for the number of uniformed women in the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police from a percentage of the total force to 5,000 and 10,000 women, respectively, by 2025.⁷⁴⁶ Based on reported total force strength numbers as of February 2015, this change constituted a drop of approximately 11,700 in Resolute Support recruitment targets for women in the Afghan National Army, and 5,500 for women in the Afghan National Police.⁷⁴⁷ Three years later, in 2018, the Afghan National Army also downshifted its goal to filling 3 percent of its positions with women by 2021 (with an eventual goal of 10 percent), and the Afghan National Police retained its goal of 10 percent but shifted the target date from 2020 to 2021.⁷⁴⁸

DOD has often attributed the lack of progress toward these recruitment goals to a lack of political will on the part of the Afghan ministries of defense and interior.⁷⁴⁹ When asked what the Afghan National Army was doing to reach recruitment goals for women in late 2014, U.S. Forces – Afghanistan told SIGAR, "At this stage, not much. They drag their feet, no plans are being fully implemented, and they only do a minimum of what they consider is needed to keep up a good working relation to the international donors funding the security forces."⁷⁵⁰ As SIGAR has noted, conditioning U.S. assistance on Afghan ministries taking necessary actions can be counterproductive when there is little Afghan buy-in; applying pressure can result in the Afghan government giving only lip service to lofty goals or concealing day-to-day practices.⁷⁵¹ A 2014 United States Institute of Peace analysis found that this can be particularly true when applying conditionality to gender-related initiatives when there is no political will for such reforms.⁷⁵²

In every National Defense Authorization Act since fiscal year 2014, the Congress has required DOD to spend at least \$10 million annually to support women in the ANDSF. According to DOD, the most efficient way to meet that requirement has been to build facilities to support female police and military troops. SIGAR conducted an audit of DOD's construction of 29 such facilities, through contracts awarded between 2015 and 2017. SIGAR selected 17 of the 29 projects for site visits, and found only three

being used mostly as intended. Of the remaining 14, six were completely unused, five were mostly unused, and three were being used by men in the ANDSF. DOD identified multiple reasons for this, including Afghan cultural hostility to women training in some areas where the projects were located, lack of water and electricity, and the Afghan government's failure to provide necessary equipment and furniture.⁷⁵³

After 11 years and \$110 million in appropriations, this lack of progress on women's inclusion in the ANDSF inevitably raises questions about whether such goals are even feasible, and how much money should be dedicated to them. Recently, DOD efforts to support women in the ANDSF have shifted from mainly increasing recruitment numbers to improving the conditions of their employment and integration.⁷⁵⁴ Efforts to "address the root causes of low female participation in the security sector, such as cultural and societal norms, high levels of illiteracy, and gender-based violence" will be a long-term challenge, DOD said in a recent report to the Congress.⁷⁵⁵ Given the enormous barriers faced by women in Afghanistan's security forces, DOD's shift to focus more on working conditions and protections seems a necessary step on the road to women's safe and meaningful participation in the ANDSF. As Naheed Sarabi, former deputy minister of policy for the Ministry of Finance, told SIGAR:

It's not okay to throw [women] in that situation and tell them to handle it themselves. . . . Such initiatives will become so vulnerable to cases of intimidation, and those kinds of responses are unsustainable. When you put a woman in the police force, you have to make sure that you give her sufficient facilities and security to remain in the police force, and then she will make an avenue for other women to join. That is the key to empowerment.⁷⁵⁶

KEY FINDINGS

- Initial Afghan goals for the recruitment and retention of women in the ANDSF, which U.S. efforts sought to help the Afghan government achieve, were highly unrealistic. These targets have been adjusted over the years to provide more realistic goals, based on recruitment trends and capacity.
- Since 2014, the Congress has appropriated \$110 million in funds toward increasing women's inclusion in the ANDSF. The result has been only a minimal increase in women in the Afghan National Army and a modest increase in women police officers.
- Afghan women must overcome a range of significant barriers to serve in the security forces, including cultural resistance, threats to their personal safety, and pervasive harassment and discrimination.
- DOD efforts to support women's meaningful inclusion in the security forces have recently shifted to improving the working conditions and protections for women serving in the ANDSF, rather than mainly seeking to increase women's recruitment numbers.



AFP photo

CHAPTER 11

FUTURE THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Afghan women and girls have made important gains in some sectors since 2001 and limited progress in others. Today, facing the withdrawal of international forces and the prospect of a peace agreement that would bring the Taliban closer to power, Afghan women have reason to question whether these hard-won achievements will be protected. This chapter discusses factors that could undermine women's status and rights, and how the United States might mitigate those threats and build on the gains achieved since 2001.

TROOP REDUCTIONS, PEACE NEGOTIATIONS, AND REDUCED DONOR FUNDING INCREASE UNCERTAINTY FOR AFGHAN WOMEN

The February 29, 2020, agreement between the United States and the Taliban consisted of four components, the first of which was a conditions-based U.S. troop withdrawal timeline. As of November 2020, U.S. troop numbers were approximately 5,000, and on January 15, 2021, DOD announced that force levels had been further reduced to 2,500, the lowest since 2001. The Biden administration and the Congress have three months to decide whether the United States will withdraw all U.S. troops by April 30, 2021, pursuant to the U.S.-Taliban agreement.⁷⁵⁷ The other three components of the agreement were Taliban assurances that Afghanistan will not be used as a base for international terrorist groups to threaten the security of the United States or its allies, Taliban commitment to intra-Afghan negotiations, and a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire.⁷⁵⁸ Details of a ceasefire, as well as the next steps on achieving an agreement



Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, participates in a signing ceremony with Taliban deputy leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, in Doha, Qatar, on February 29, 2020. (State photo by Ron Przysucha)

on a future political road map for Afghanistan, were to be discussed during intra-Afghan negotiations.⁷⁵⁹ The agreement between the United States and the Taliban was notable for what it did not include: women’s rights, as well as other issues relating to human rights, elections, political structures, and power-sharing. Instead, these issues were to be determined during intra-Afghan negotiations, by the Afghan people themselves.⁷⁶⁰

While the expectation is that Afghan government negotiators will use their leverage to preserve women’s rights, it remains to be seen how hard the government negotiating team will push to do so—or how its leverage might erode over time if the Taliban make further battlefield gains.

The intra-Afghan negotiations, delayed due to disagreements on prisoner releases and the COVID-19 pandemic, formally began on September 12, 2020.⁷⁶¹ A comprehensive peace agreement remains elusive, and questions remain regarding the reintegration of ex-combatants into Afghan society, proposals for a revised constitution and interim government, and—most importantly for purposes of this report—the commitment from all sides to support the gains and rights of women and girls.⁷⁶² At the negotiating table, both Afghan government and Taliban leverage will likely be determined in part by what happens on the battlefield.⁷⁶³ Reduced U.S. support to Afghan forces could indirectly affect the balance of the negotiating parties’ leverage. Moreover, while the expectation is that Afghan government negotiators will use their leverage to preserve women’s rights, it remains to be seen how hard the government negotiating team will push to do so—or how its leverage might erode over time if the Taliban make further battlefield gains. It is also unclear to what extent the Taliban will try to erode legal rights and access to services for women and girls.

International donors from 66 countries and 32 international organizations convened virtually in Geneva in November 2020 to reaffirm their financial commitments to Afghanistan.⁷⁶⁴ Altogether, they pledged around \$3.3 billion for 2021, and committed similar amounts for each of the next four years.⁷⁶⁵ The projected total of \$13.2 billion is about \$2 billion less than the 2016 pledge for 2016 to 2020.⁷⁶⁶ At the Geneva conference, the United States pledged \$300 million in civilian aid for 2021, with an additional \$300 million for 2021 conditioned on “progress in the peace process.”⁷⁶⁷ Donors highlighted conditions on their aid contributions, including progress toward peace, the protection of human rights and women’s rights, and tackling corruption. The meeting’s communiqué stated, “We call for an inclusive and meaningful peace process with the participation of women, youth and ethnic, religious and other minorities. We affirm that any political settlement must protect the rights of all Afghans, including women, youth and minorities.”⁷⁶⁸

Afghan leaders have serious concerns about continued international aid, for good reason: Some fear a repeat of 1992, when Soviet aid disappeared and Afghan President Mohammed Najibullah’s government collapsed.⁷⁶⁹ The result was widespread social chaos and violence, as various warlords fought to stake out their territory and divvy up what resources were left.⁷⁷⁰ Today, as the international presence in Afghanistan declines, violence is “well above historic norms” as the Taliban seek to expand their territorial control.⁷⁷¹ Another deeply troubling threat to women’s security has emerged: an increase in targeted killings of community leaders, attacks which often go unclaimed. The *New York Times* documented at least 136 such killings—of civil servants, journalists, and human rights workers—in 2020.⁷⁷² On January 17, 2021, two female judges working for the Supreme Court were shot and killed in Kabul, while on their way to work, by unidentified gunmen.⁷⁷³

The impacts of a further descent into violence, including increased civilian deaths, massive internal displacement, and health and education challenges, pose the greatest long-term threat to Afghan women, who have already borne four decades of war.⁷⁷⁴ (See chapter 2 for more discussion of the war’s impact on women.)

COVID-19 HAS INCREASED UNEMPLOYMENT AND DOMESTIC ABUSE

In addition to political, security, and economic challenges, Afghans face another threat: the COVID-19 pandemic. Controlling the virus has been more difficult because of the shortage of healthcare workers and infrastructure, the influx of thousands of Afghans returning every week from Iran, and low levels of public awareness and health literacy about sanitation and hygiene practices.⁷⁷⁵ The lack of testing capability means that up to 90 percent of collected samples are untested, and therefore go unreported.⁷⁷⁶ Of the limited number of tests conducted, Afghanistan’s positivity rate—the percentage of tests that reveal COVID-19 infection—was nearly 43 percent as of July 2020, one of the highest in the world.⁷⁷⁷

The economic implications of the pandemic are dire. The World Bank stated that South Asia would likely experience its worst economic performance in the last four decades and predicted that Afghanistan would be one of the worst regional performers in 2020. Projections of Afghanistan's economic contraction ranged from between 5.5 and 7.4 percent.⁷⁷⁸

According to a separate World Bank study, the percentage of the Afghan population living in poverty could increase from 54.5 to 72 percent. If so, another 6 million Afghans would slip into poverty, putting enormous pressure on already-strained basic services delivery.⁷⁷⁹ Johns Hopkins University suggested a possible 18 percent increase in child mortality and a 14 percent increase in maternal mortality as indirect consequences of the virus' spread.⁷⁸⁰ Already, Oxfam has placed Afghanistan among 10 "extreme hunger hotspots," meaning over one-third of the population—about 11 million people—have insecure food supplies, and about 41 percent of children are undernourished.⁷⁸¹

The World Bank has approved a grant totaling \$280 million for COVID-19 relief for continued health and education services, to meet sanitation and infrastructure needs, to support the health sector in maintaining emergency services, and to strengthen disease surveillance, testing, and treatment.⁷⁸² As of August 2020, USAID and State had allocated around \$39.4 million in COVID-related assistance to Afghanistan and contributed \$90 million in support through the World Bank.⁷⁸³

Meanwhile, the pandemic has severely affected women in Afghanistan. Layoffs pose a threat to the gains women have made in the workforce.⁷⁸⁴ Schools in Afghanistan have been closed for all but one and a half months of the entire academic year, increasing the risk of dropouts.⁷⁸⁵ Added to the burden of child care and housework are increased levels of unemployment, domestic violence, and greater restrictions on movement caused by the pandemic and stay-at-home orders.⁷⁸⁶

Women also face extra challenges seeking medical care during the pandemic: Cultural norms often demand that women patients see female doctors, who are in short supply. Mehdi Hakimi, the executive director of the Rule of Law Program and a lecturer-in-law at Stanford University, told SIGAR, "Due to deeply entrenched sociocultural norms, many Afghans are reluctant to allow their mothers, wives, daughters, or sisters to visit a doctor directly, or at all, if that doctor is a male. Such misguided notions of 'honor,' which is another form of violence, can prevent proper medical diagnosis and access to life-saving treatment, and result in profoundly perilous consequences."⁷⁸⁷

AFGHAN VOICES: COVID-19 HAS LED TO SCHOOL CLOSURES, ECONOMIC HARDSHIPS, AND DOMESTIC ABUSE

Based on SIGAR-commissioned interviews in Afghanistan.



The U.S. government provided 100 ventilators to the Government of Afghanistan on October 1, 2020, to support the COVID-19 pandemic response. (USAID/Afghanistan photo)

In interviews commissioned by SIGAR in 14 provinces, Afghans said that school closures, economic hardships, and increased domestic violence were the most common effects of the pandemic.⁷⁸⁸

“Everyone was locked at home like in a cage, shops were closed. If someone had some food, they eat. The people who didn’t [eat], their life was so difficult; the government also didn’t help them. I don’t know where it went, all that help. People have seen this help on TV, but not in reality,” said one interviewee from Balkh Province.⁷⁸⁹ “Educational centers are closed up to now and our children are wandering aimlessly on the streets,” said a male member of a community development council in Kandahar

Province.⁷⁹⁰ One woman from Kunar Province said, “Schools and universities closed and people were left behind from education.”⁷⁹¹

Ten interviewees, both male and female, out of 45 discussed increased domestic violence towards women as a secondary effect of the pandemic. “Men don’t like to sit at home, they were moving outside. When [the pandemic began], the city was locked, the market was locked. Then family violence increased,” said a man from Farah Province.⁷⁹² A woman from Kunar said, “For women, it brought many negative changes because all people sat at their homes due to closure of offices and businesses. This paved the way for domestic violence against women. My friends have also said that the men in their families are happier with women at home, so it might be difficult for them [women] to go back to the office when they have the opportunity.”⁷⁹³

“For women, [COVID-19] brought many negative changes because all people sat at their homes. . . . This paved the way for domestic violence against women.”

—Woman from Kunar Province

TALIBAN PRACTICES VARY BY REGION, BUT STILL REPRESS WOMEN THROUGH SOCIAL CONTROLS

With the United States and the Taliban in agreement on some form of U.S. troop withdrawal, two questions related to women’s rights stand out. How much have the Taliban’s ideas about women’s roles in society changed? And what can Afghan women and girls expect from any future government—at the local and national levels—in which the Taliban exert influence?

In a February 2020 opinion piece published in the *New York Times*, Sirajuddin Haqqani, the deputy Taliban leader, said, “I am confident that, liberated from foreign domination and interference, we together will find a way to build an Islamic system in which all Afghans have equal rights, where the rights of women that are granted by Islam—from the right to education to the right to work—are protected, and where merit is the basis for equal opportunity.”⁷⁹⁴ The Taliban had made similar claims in their 2018 letter to the American people—and in fact their rhetoric has not much changed since their previous time in power.⁷⁹⁵ The Taliban’s own constitution—crafted in 1998 by 500 Islamic scholars but never ratified—granted freedom of expression, women’s education, and the right of a fair trial, but with an important caveat: These were rights afforded within the limits of the Taliban’s strict interpretation of Sharia law.⁷⁹⁶

The Taliban argue that, under their regime, women will enjoy all rights “granted by Islam.”⁷⁹⁷ Given the Taliban’s track record of interpreting those rights, Afghan women’s rights advocates are wary. Ghizaal Haress, assistant professor at the American University of Afghanistan, said, “If we leave it to the Taliban’s broad interpretation or to [their] broad idea of women’s ‘Islamic values,’ then we’re going to be in trouble.”⁷⁹⁸

“If we leave it to the Taliban’s broad interpretation or to [their] broad idea of women’s ‘Islamic values,’ then we’re going to be in trouble.”

—Ghizaal Haress, assistant professor, American University of Afghanistan

A better indicator of what a Taliban role in government might look like are Taliban practices on the ground, in areas they currently influence or control. Although detailed, reliable information on this topic is limited, making it difficult to draw broad conclusions, there is evidence of significant regional variances among Taliban shadow governments in the imposition of their rigid dogmas, as well as in service delivery. For instance, on education, a Human Rights Watch report found:

Although the Taliban officially state that they no longer oppose girls’ education, very few Taliban officials actually permit girls to attend school past puberty. Others do not permit girls’ schools at all. . . . Their inconsistent approach to girls’ schools reflects the differing views of provincial Taliban commanders, their standing in the Taliban military command hierarchy, and their relationship with local communities. In some districts, local demand for education has convinced or compelled Taliban authorities to take a more flexible approach.⁷⁹⁹



A young midwife advises a mother and her five-month-old daughter at a village health clinic in Parwan Province. (World Bank photo by Graham Crouch)

The Taliban's position today is that it has closed girls' schools only as a necessity of war, and that it has never been opposed to girls' education. But its definition of "education" is tightly constricted. In interviews with residents of Wardak, Helmand, and Logar Provinces, where a Taliban shadow government has held sway for years, researcher Ashley Jackson found that the Taliban insisted that schools replace books about Afghan culture and law with religious texts. They banned the teaching of English and strictly vetted who could teach, transferring or punishing any teacher who offended them.⁸⁰⁰

At the same time, some Taliban insiders have cooperatively established an organization to raise money for girls' schools in insurgent-held areas—and "perhaps in response to unrelenting international criticism," as of 2016 a group of Taliban leaders reportedly operated a university and a school attended by both girls and boys in Kabul (on a strictly gender-separated basis).⁸⁰¹

Jackson also found that Taliban courts are becoming more prevalent across the country as they fill the gap created by an ineffective and corrupt state justice system.⁸⁰² In a study based on interviews with claimants and defendants in civil cases in Taliban courts, Jackson and researcher Florian Weigand found that interviewees saw Taliban courts as more accessible, quicker, fairer, and less corrupt than state courts.⁸⁰³ But the authors emphasized that people living in Taliban-influenced areas felt they had few alternatives to Taliban courts, and the Taliban have been known to "punish those who take their cases to a state court instead of a Taliban one."⁸⁰⁴ Ambassador Franz-Michael Mellbin, former European Union Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, stressed that Taliban courts may be seen "as more fair by respondents simply because the men who direct and choose to use them are empowered by them—not because [the courts] are more just towards the Afghan people who suffer their consequences and of whom the majority are women and children."⁸⁰⁵

It is unclear to what extent women are protected in criminal cases. According to one Human Rights Watch report, victims of domestic violence are often sentenced to pursue mediation within the family, or lashed if convicted of "moral crimes"—such as sex outside of marriage or running away from home to escape abuse.⁸⁰⁶ The study

by Jackson and Weigand found that female interviewees have used the Taliban civil courts to obtain divorces from forced marriages or abusive husbands and to enforce inheritance and property rights for women.⁸⁰⁷ In some cases, women—who may choose to argue their case in person, or have a male proxy—have experienced more protection and choice from the Taliban civil courts.⁸⁰⁸ Yet Jackson and Weigand emphasized that their findings “should not be seen as representative, and more fieldwork is required.” Further, their research was mainly on civil, not criminal, cases. They noted, “Much remains unknown about Taliban official policy and de facto practices, particularly concerning *hudud* punishments, such as death, stoning, and amputation.”⁸⁰⁹

During Taliban rule in the 1990s, the ban on female professionals had one exception: healthcare workers.⁸¹⁰ Women were allowed to treat women in women-only wards of public hospitals.⁸¹¹ Today, the Taliban still seem to value female practitioners, as the practice of gender-segregated health services continues in Taliban-controlled areas.⁸¹² Healthcare delivery services vary by location, with more comprehensive Taliban-administered health services and personnel in areas of greater Taliban control. Taliban interact with and request support from international aid organizations and even government entities that provide health care, while strictly monitoring—and sometimes threatening or blocking—their activities.⁸¹³ According to the Jackson report on living conditions in areas under Taliban influence, respondents claimed that there are far fewer instances of corruption and theft among the Taliban than among government and Afghan military officials.⁸¹⁴

Taliban members claim that they have not imposed the social restrictions that exist in the areas they control, but rather that these reflect local community norms. Strict social norms regarding women’s dress and movements are common among rural communities, including in conservative government-held areas. Yet this is not the whole picture. For instance, the Taliban have encouraged residents and imams of the local mosques to report on community members who skip prayers or engage in prohibited behavior. Social controls embodied in “morality” officials—known as “vice and virtue” police when the Taliban were in power in the 1990s—continue to operate in districts under Taliban control.⁸¹⁵ In her interviews with people living under Taliban control, Jackson encountered many who described “a sense of foreboding and a creeping quality to Taliban authority that allowed them to ‘prepare themselves’ to comply with the rules—or leave.”⁸¹⁶

Even more worrying, in 2019, UNAMA documented four occasions of human rights violations against women by the Taliban—three public lashings and one execution, all on grounds of “immoral” acts. The executed woman’s “crime” included being alone with a man helping her flee an abusive home. The man received 40 lashes on so-called charges of elopement.⁸¹⁷

Ultimately, the kind of life Afghan women will face under any government in which the Taliban exert an influence will be a product of the Taliban’s ability—or inability—to negotiate their differences with the Afghan government and local communities, and the varying beliefs and practices within their own ranks. However much the Taliban has evolved, it struggles to keep pace with a country profoundly changed by war and a generation of women determined not to endure the abuse their mothers and grandmothers suffered.

AFGHAN VOICES: APPREHENSIONS ABOUT GREATER TALIBAN INFLUENCE, AMID DISILLUSIONMENT ABOUT TALIBAN AND GOVERNMENT

Based on SIGAR-commissioned interviews in Afghanistan.

Both male and female interviewees expressed varying degrees of concern regarding a Taliban resurgence. Many respondents expected that life for rural women would remain largely unchanged in the event that the Taliban exerts more influence in government, but that urban women would be most affected, as they have made greater social gains.⁸¹⁸

A few respondents were optimistic about a more progressive Taliban worldview. A male community development council member from Nangarhar said, “I hope that [the Taliban has] changed because they are living luxurious lives in Qatar and have enrolled their own women in schools there as well. So they will want the same for Afghan women.”⁸¹⁹

Others were uncertain about how greater Taliban influence in government might affect women. A female provincial council member from Balkh was concerned they may threaten her position in government. “One [good thing] related to Taliban during their regime, there was no robbery and such negative activities,” she said. “But as a provincial council member I don’t know how they will deal with me. Every group has good and bad among them, and the Taliban is the same. We are afraid of both sides.”⁸²⁰

Another respondent, a female provincial council member in Kunduz, was apprehensive about a Taliban resurgence. “During the last five years, Kunduz Province has fallen to the Taliban on two occasions, and the women were victims,”

she said. “Women have lost their children, husbands, property and life in the districts and the city. . . . I have no hope for a better future for women in Afghanistan.” At the moment, she added, the Taliban “have full control in all districts. They are collecting taxes for electricity, transportation, farmers, and customs. Day [by] day, they become more powerful.”⁸²¹

“Every group has good and bad among them, and the Taliban is the same. We are afraid of both sides.”

—Female provincial council member from Balkh

Some feel disillusioned by all parties. A male representative of internally displaced people in Helmand Province said, “I haven’t seen any differences from the Taliban time and the present government. . . . It [is] us who are poor and hungry who die. . . . I am tired of my life and I want to be killed in a suicide attack. . . . The Taliban’s children are in Pakistan. Ghani’s children are in the U.S. and Abdullah’s children are in India, so how can they feel what I feel and solve my problems? I am not happy about the government, Daesh, or the Taliban.”⁸²²

PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

Women Participate in Negotiations with the Taliban; Women’s Rights Are a Potential Fault Line

Afghanistan peace negotiations between representatives from the Afghan government and the Taliban began in Doha, Qatar, on September 12, 2020. The Afghan government’s 21-member negotiating team includes four women: Fatima Gailani, former constitutional commissioner and president of the Afghan Red Crescent Society; Fawzia Koofi, former member of parliament; Habiba Sarabi, former minister of women’s affairs and former governor of Bamyan Province; and Sharifa Zurmati, former member of parliament and former member of the Independent Election Commission.⁸²³ There are no women on the Taliban negotiating team.⁸²⁴

In interviews, the female negotiators have talked about their motivations and ambitions for the peace talks, and described their concerns for their country, which include but also transcend women’s rights protections. “For me it was like a dream come true,” Gailani told *Deutsche Welle* of her participation in the talks. “The last 42 years of my life [were] dedicated to seeing peace one day in my country.” Gailani describes herself as an activist for women who has “equal passion for other things which are not right in my country.” For her, “a cease-fire is the number one priority. The people of Afghanistan have put tremendous hope in these peace talks.”⁸²⁵

In September 2020, Sarabi told UN Women, “The situation facing Afghan women today is not the same as it was a few decades ago. We are more mobilized. Social media has helped us raise our voices. Now many women participate in public life and hold public



President Ashraf Ghani and First Lady Rula Ghani host UN Security Council members at a state dinner at the Presidential Palace in Kabul. (UNAMA photo by Fardin Waezi)

office.” She continued, “I am currently participating in the peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban to try and ensure that women are at the center of the ongoing negotiations. Without women’s participation in this process, there will be no lasting and sustainable peace.”⁸²⁶

The 2015 Afghanistan National Action Plan on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 called for the Afghan government to promote women’s inclusion in peace processes.⁸²⁷ In August 2020, Ghani created a High Council for Women to coordinate on gender equality issues, but it remains to be seen how relevant the council can be in the peace negotiations.⁸²⁸ During exploratory dialogue sessions with the Taliban before the 2020 start of formal negotiations, women had few seats at the table.⁸²⁹ The Taliban have never included a woman on their side of dialogue sessions.⁸³⁰ Koofi, present at the informal talks on three occasions, recalled, “Since our side had women delegates, I suggested to them [the Taliban] that they should also bring women to the table. They laughed immediately.”⁸³¹

However, there were indications that women participating in a July 2019 dialogue with the Taliban in Doha had an impact. Mary Akrami, director of the Afghan Women’s Network and one of 11 women present, said, “[the Taliban] behaved so nicely. They took pictures with us. I was teasing them. I asked about their families.”⁸³² Palwasha Kakar, an Afghan American who studies women negotiators in conflict zones at the U.S. Institute of Peace, monitored the Doha session from Washington. In a press report, she described the meeting as an example of women finding space to negotiate with the Taliban, and recounted that Taliban members in Doha had engaged in long discussions about scripture with female participants. Kakar learned that “a week after the talks, the Taliban sent night letters across northern Afghanistan asking [its] soldiers to de-escalate violence and refrain from attacking women and children.”⁸³³

A Council on Foreign Relations report described how Afghan women have engaged in the peace process outside direct participation in talks. According to the report, women have helped broker local deals: “Female members of provincial peace councils have negotiated directly with insurgent leaders to support the reintegration of demobilized Taliban fighters into local communities, facilitate the release of hostages (which they succeeded in doing by first reaching out to the wives of Talibs), and mobilize local support for the peace process, including by encouraging local insurgents to participate in talks.”⁸³⁴ Ambassador Mellbin concurred, “There is no doubt that at the local level women can and sometimes do play an important role in ensuring ceasefires and local peace deals, often at personal risk. More assistance should focus on supporting this.”⁸³⁵

Despite increased engagement, a UN Women Global Study report on peace processes worldwide notes that the number of women participating in peace processes does not necessarily mean that they have an effective role; some serve to merely create the illusion of inclusion. Women selected to participate may lack legitimacy, according to the report. “This can sometimes be the result of division among women over key issues or lack of a collective voice,” it said. “But often, it is because a small group of male

leaders makes all the important decisions, even if the process has been opened up to include women's groups." In nearly all cases examined, decision-making was left to male leaders, despite women's presence.⁸³⁶ These findings underscore that women simply present during talks with the Taliban is not enough; they must be included as active decision-makers in all the nuanced settings of negotiations—in preparation meetings, formal sessions, pull-asides, and everything in between.

Afghan women's struggle to assume meaningful leadership roles in talks with the Taliban echoes their experiences of the past decade and a half. An Oxfam study of the country's peace processes reviewed "a total of 67 exploratory meetings, formal and informal negotiations, and internationally-backed consultations between 2005 and 2020, and found that women were present on only 15 occasions (22 percent)."⁸³⁷ As another example, between 2014 and 2019, the number of women on the High Peace Council rose from 13 to 26 percent, but some regarded their presence as mostly symbolic.⁸³⁸ "The majority of the [High Peace Council] are tribal elders and they don't believe in women's rights," Sarabi, the council's deputy chair, wrote of her experience. "They [looked] at me very strangely. . . . It is very difficult and sometimes they do not listen to us."⁸³⁹ The council came to be seen by some as a patronage mechanism rather than an effective peacemaking body, and was dissolved in 2019.⁸⁴⁰

Although Afghan women have taken on leadership roles in many ways, they face an uphill climb in seeking to influence the peace process at a national level. Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, in a 2018 *Accord* article on women's participation in the peace process, wrote that Afghan women's groups "lack a clear narrative and a representative movement with sufficient influence to sustain itself." Without addressing these shortfalls, Azarbaijani-Moghaddam argued, women's presence in the peace process may not bring about real advances or protect the achievements made to date.⁸⁴¹

At least one women's rights advocate is troubled by an either-or narrative that is gaining traction: Afghanistan can have women's rights without peace, or peace without women's rights. "Whenever you talk about women's rights, you get tagged as a person who is against the peace process," Naheed Sarabi, former deputy minister at the Afghan Ministry of Finance, observed.⁸⁴² Ben Acheson, former director of the Office of NATO's Senior Civilian Representative, emphasized that women negotiators "should not only be at the table to talk about gender—they should be helped to play a meaningful role on all issues." He added that male negotiators "should be speaking up for women's rights too—something the U.S. could impress on them."⁸⁴³ Both of these actions—female negotiators actively engaging on all issues on the table, and male negotiators presenting a united front with their female colleagues—may help counter the perception of a fault line between pursuing peace and preserving women's rights.

AFGHAN VOICES: WOMEN LAMENT LACK OF TRANSPARENCY AND INCLUSION IN PEACE PROCESS

Based on SIGAR-commissioned interviews in Afghanistan.

Several respondents complained about the lack of transparency in the ongoing peace talks. “The presence of women is not visible in the peace talks and thus the fate of women is unclear,” said a female participant in a USAID-funded program in Nangarhar Province.⁸⁴⁴ A female member of parliament, also from Nangarhar, remarked, “We are worried because whatever happens, it is behind closed doors. . . . Eight women were selected to participate in peace talks with Taliban, [so we] don’t know if they can defend women’s rights or not.”⁸⁴⁵ (Note: Four women are on the Afghan government negotiating team in Doha.)⁸⁴⁶

A female provincial council member in Khost said, “In order to avoid a worse future, this should be included in the peace deal that women rights must be guaranteed. Women should be allocated participation. There should be transparency in this regard. Currently, law is not ruling but powerful militia people rule. No noteworthy efforts are made for women. Only those women who have some links with high-ranking government officials and with embassies are [advancing], but the low profile and [poorer people] are suffering.”⁸⁴⁷

One woman expressed a willingness to accept certain constraints in exchange for the opportunity to participate in the peace process: “There should be a guarantee to bring [women] in for peace talks, and I don’t think this would be difficult. If I can be in service to women in a burqa that is no problem for me. If my room is separate and my male colleague’s room is separate, I don’t have any problem. But we have to do our service and make our place,” said a female member of a civil society organization in Balkh Province.⁸⁴⁸

While cultural norms remain a serious challenge for women’s participation in the peace process, one male member of a civil society organization in Uruzgan Province said he was proactively working to involve women: “We have also conducted many meetings regarding the contribution of women in the peace process. In these meetings, we have raised awareness among people that women can play a role in peace building by advising their sons not to opt for war but instead to take part in the peace process.”⁸⁴⁹

Opportunities to Advance Women’s Rights in the Peace Process: U.S. Messaging, Leverage, and the Question of Conditionality

A key question is whether and how the United States can help ensure that women’s rights are preserved in a post-peace agreement scenario in which the Taliban may become part of the Afghan political system. The U.S. government’s three main sources of leverage in this respect are its military presence, diplomacy, and financial assistance to the Afghan government.

Thus far in the peace process, the United States has not tied its level of military engagement in Afghanistan to protections for women’s rights.⁸⁵⁰ U.S. senior officials have clarified that the timeline in the agreement for the withdrawal of international military forces is not conditioned on the Taliban’s achievement of any particular political outcomes associated with Afghanistan’s negotiated future, such as women’s status and rights—but say that this issue should be discussed among Afghans in the peace negotiations.⁸⁵¹ It is also important to acknowledge that U.S. leverage in Afghanistan is now at lower levels than in previous years, given far fewer U.S. troops in country, lower assistance levels, and the perception among Afghans that the U.S. government is eager to reduce its engagement and presence in the country.⁸⁵²

U.S. leverage in Afghanistan is now at lower levels than in previous years, given far fewer U.S. troops in country, lower assistance levels, and the perception among Afghans that the U.S. government is eager to reduce its engagement and presence in the country.

Nevertheless, the United States continues to rely on diplomacy and aid as critical tools for effecting change. U.S. and international engagement since 2001 has, in some cases, been instrumental in promoting and protecting Afghan women’s rights.⁸⁵³ Interviews with Afghans commissioned by SIGAR indicated that some Afghans—women and men—see the United States as significantly contributing to progress in women’s rights, education, and participation in public life (see pp. 33–34).⁸⁵⁴

Today, the 2017 Women, Peace, and Security Act commits the United States to working for the inclusion of women in “preventing, managing, and resolving conflict.” Some analysts and advocates stress that vocal, public U.S. support can help pressure Afghan negotiators to ensure that women participate in the negotiations, and that any eventual peace agreement protects women’s rights and the gains made since 2001—echoing very similar concerns voiced in the lead-up to the security transition in 2014.⁸⁵⁵ In August 2020, the Women’s Affairs Commissions of the Afghan Parliament sent a letter to the Congress emphasizing that negotiations with the Taliban must not sacrifice Afghanistan’s democratic system, rights for women and minorities, freedom of expression, or other democratic values. The letter asked members “to closely monitor the peace process and ensure its transparency.”⁸⁵⁶

One anticipated element of Afghan peace negotiations—a constitutional review—could address several important issues: the political structure of the Afghan state, including the role of the Taliban; the rights of Afghan citizens, especially women; and the country’s foreign policy.⁸⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch has stressed the importance of preserving the provisions of constitutional articles 22, 44, and 48, which state that men and women “have equal rights and duties before the law,” the right to education, and the right to work, respectively.⁸⁵⁸ An encouraging sign is the fact that the Afghan population appears to support the goal of protecting women’s constitutional rights. In its 2019 Survey of the Afghan People, the Asia Foundation found that 87 percent of respondents said it is very important or somewhat important that the current constitution be protected in any agreement with the Taliban, and 79 percent said that women’s rights are very or somewhat important.⁸⁵⁹

In President Ghani’s remarks at the 2018 Geneva conference on Afghanistan, he said, “Let me be clear—women’s participation is of strategic importance to our country’s national security and economic development. If there is any lingering question about whether the rights or opportunities of women will be given up, I can guarantee you that they will not be. The proud people of Afghanistan, men and women, also guarantee it. Our women leaders here today and around the country guarantee it.”⁸⁶⁰

U.S. senior diplomats have sought to apply pressure on Afghan negotiators to protect women’s rights by hinting at future reductions in aid. In July 2019, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Alice Wells suggested that the United States would tie future funding to the protection of women’s rights. “As we seek a negotiated political settlement to the Afghan conflict, we will continue to make it clear that Afghanistan’s future relationship with the international community, and particularly donors, will depend heavily upon the inclusivity of that peace, including the rights of women,” she said. “No current or future Afghan government should count on international donor support if that government restricts, represses, or relegates Afghan women to second-class status.”⁸⁶¹

“No current or future Afghan government should count on international donor support if that government restricts, represses, or relegates Afghan women to second-class status.”

—Alice Wells, acting assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian affairs

More recently, U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad also implied that future U.S. aid would be linked in some way to women’s rights protections, though his rhetoric appeared less stern than Wells’ message. “The United States will continue to advocate our values, including electoral democracy, rights of women and religious minorities, rule of law, free speech and free press,” he said. “At the same time, we recognize that only Afghans can find a sustainable formula that’s unique to their history and culture. While we do not seek to impose our system

on others, we have made it clear to the negotiators that their choices and conduct will affect the size and scope of future U.S. assistance. And this is the position shared by Afghanistan's other major donors."⁸⁶² In remarks at the donor conference in November 2020, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated, "I want to be clear that the choices made in peace negotiations will affect the size and scope of future international support and assistance." He reiterated "the importance of respect for the rights of all Afghans, including women, youth, and minority groups."⁸⁶³

However, some advocates for gender equality in Afghanistan see U.S. official statements as equivocating on the importance of women's rights in the context of peace negotiations.⁸⁶⁴ This perception may be partly due to Ambassador Khalilzad's statements that Afghans themselves should decide on matters like women's rights, suggesting a hands-off U.S. approach. An Afghan woman who previously held positions in the Afghan government told SIGAR, "I don't think we really know what the U.S. wants right now on women's rights. We don't know what their perspective is, because there are conflicting messages coming from the embassy about this. That will put Afghan women in a very difficult situation in negotiations with the Taliban."⁸⁶⁵

A female researcher with 20 years of experience working on gender, human rights, and governance programs in Afghanistan told SIGAR, "After the fall of the Taliban, [the United States] put so much pressure and emphasis on women's role as decision makers and beneficiaries. We focused on this so much, and the Afghans took [the United States] seriously—both the Afghan government and Afghan community. But when we lost interest and began treating it as an Afghan-only issue, the Afghans also lost interest."⁸⁶⁶

Members of the Congress have considered several ways of conditioning assistance to Afghanistan on the protection of women's rights. According to a Congressional Research Service report, the House Appropriations Committee-passed fiscal year 2019 State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs appropriations bill "would have required the Secretary of State to certify that the Afghan government is protecting women's rights (among other conditions) before obligating funds," but that provision was not included in the final bill.⁸⁶⁷ Another bill was introduced in the House in 2019 to condition reductions in the U.S. military presence on, among other things, the Director of National Intelligence certifying that Taliban leaders commit to "protecting the rights of women and girls and supporting the Afghan constitution." The bill was not passed.⁸⁶⁸ More recently, the House-passed fiscal year 2021 National Defense Authorization Act included language prohibiting "the use of funds to withdraw U.S. forces below certain levels until the Administration submits a report that includes an analysis of the impact of a U.S. withdrawal on Afghan women's rights."⁸⁶⁹ Although this condition was not retained in the final bill passed by the Congress, the final legislation states that "it is in the national security interests of the United States to . . . protect the hard-fought gains for the rights of women, girls, and other vulnerable populations in Afghanistan."⁸⁷⁰

Vocal U.S. support for gender equality issues and women's rights—and presenting a united front with other international partners—may help focus international attention

on these issues, remind Afghan powerbrokers that the world is watching, and lend support to Afghan leaders and advocates who share U.S. goals. U.S. assistance to the Afghan government remains an important lever. While U.S. assistance to Afghanistan has steadily declined since 2013, it still accounts for roughly 10 percent of GDP.⁸⁷¹ Given this level of support, the U.S. government has ample opportunity to engage with Afghan officials and continue to raise concerns about women's and girls' access to public services, the protection of their rights, and expansion of their access to justice. U.S. agencies can continue to integrate gender issues across their programming, and work closely with Afghan ministries, civil society organizations, and international partners to do so.

KEY FINDINGS

- Foreign troop reductions, reduced donor funding, ongoing Afghan peace negotiations, the possibility of a future Afghan government that includes the Taliban, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the worst-case scenario of state collapse raise questions about whether the fragile gains made by women and girls since 2001 will be preserved and expanded.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has led to school closures, restrictions on movement, challenges obtaining medical care, and increased economic hardships and domestic violence, exacerbating already significant challenges for women and girls.
- It is unclear how much Taliban practices have changed since their 1996–2001 rule. While information on Taliban practices in areas they influence or control is limited, there is evidence that practices vary by location. UNAMA has documented instances in which the Taliban exact punishments on the grounds of what they deemed to be “immoral” acts, similar to the days of their rule.
- The kind of life Afghan women will face under any government in which the Taliban exert an influence will be a product of the Taliban's ability—or inability—to negotiate their differences with the Afghan government and local communities, and the varying beliefs and practices within their own ranks.
- Afghan women have participated in informal dialogues and formal peace negotiations in relatively small numbers, and reportedly are engaging on a wide range of issues. It is too early to tell what role they are playing in shaping the discussion and outcome.
- The effort to promote women's rights may be hampered by a growing narrative in Afghanistan that the country can either have women's rights at the cost of peace, or peace at the cost of women's rights.
- Though U.S. leverage in Afghanistan is now lower than at previous junctures, given far fewer U.S. troops in country, lower assistance levels, and perceptions that the U.S. government is eager to reduce its engagement in Afghanistan, U.S. diplomatic tools and aid remain potent levers with which policymakers and officials can continue to push for the protection of women's and girls' rights.



CHAPTER 12

CONCLUSION

AFP photo

Afghan women and girls have made crucial advancements since 2001, especially in access to health care and education, and greater participation in the public sphere. These gains are summarized in the findings below, and appear to stem from myriad factors: the ousting of the Taliban regime, a new political order, economic development, the spread of communications technology and exposure to new ideas, and U.S. and other countries' significant efforts to support women, girls, and gender equality in Afghanistan.

This report identified several aspects of U.S. programs from the last 19 years that have worked, with varying degrees of success, to support women and girls. Since there are more than 100 of these programs, examining each one was outside the scope of this report. Instead, SIGAR closely examined 24 USAID and State programs that were representative of U.S. efforts from 2002 to 2020 to support Afghan women, girls, and gender equality across five key sectors: health, education, political participation, access to justice, and economic participation. We also considered U.S. efforts in the media sector and integrating women into the Afghan security forces. Relying on annual and final program reports, program evaluations, interviews, journal articles, SIGAR audits and reports, and responses to SIGAR data calls, we identified areas where programs saw relatively more success, and where they struggled to overcome barriers or provide evidence of outcomes.

Several themes emerged from our analysis. Many final reports and evaluations acknowledged that establishing a correlation between program activities and related outcomes was not always possible. In many cases, insufficient monitoring and evaluation of program activities and unsubstantiated claims of success made it impossible to assess the actual impact that programs had on improving women's lives or protecting their rights. Such monitoring and evaluation challenges have been regularly identified across the Afghanistan reconstruction effort as a whole; in this respect, these challenges faced in gender-related programming do not appear unusual.

In general, the impact of U.S. programs to support women's political participation, access to justice, and economic participation was harder to measure than that in health and education. One possible reason is that health and education programs lend themselves to more measurable indicators, and entailed rigorous data collection and impact evaluations. Another is that prevailing social and cultural norms present greater barriers to women's advancements in political, economic, and justice sectors, and to their serving in uniform—rendering progress more incremental and difficult to detect. Further, the causal chain between health and education inputs to outcomes appears to be more straightforward than the linkage in other sectors, making it relatively easier to measure program effectiveness. Overall, there is broad demand within the Afghan population for health and education services, and U.S. agencies have responded with well-designed and effective programs.

Our program analyses revealed examples of learning, adaptation, and success on the part of U.S. agencies. Though the 24 programs as a group did not frequently include efforts to engage men and boys, several programs—in maternal health, support for civil society, and rule of law—did proactively engage and educate men, or gathered data on men's views in order to inform program design. These program activities showed some evidence of efficacy, for example, in increasing men's knowledge of available contraceptives.

In the health sector, midwifery training gave women valuable medical training, as well as a degree of economic independence and the opportunity to serve as role models in their communities. Maternal health programs made creative use of media and mobile technology in order to improve women's access to reproductive health services, especially in rural areas. Given the COVID-19 pandemic and challenges related to rural accessibility, such creative use of mobile technology is an area to explore for future assistance efforts.

USAID also invested significant resources in rigorously evaluating and reevaluating education programs, particularly community-based education programs, and in finding communities that strongly supported this concept. These efforts contributed to the success of this educational model in expanding girls' access to education.

In efforts to expand women's employment, programs evolved to target trainings to sectors with more job openings, such as information technology, media, health care,

and education. Other programs helped to expand women's participation in civil society organizations, both as clients and as service providers.

We also found shortcomings and barriers. Many of the former had to do with the failure to assess the efficacy of programs. The impact of trainings—whether provided to healthcare workers, women parliamentarians, civil society organizations, prosecutors, or female professionals and business owners—was often poorly measured, if at all. There was a focus on the number of trainings provided, with minimal efforts to assess their effectiveness. Sustainability was another issue. Program evaluators found that in many cases, the entities supported by U.S. funding—for instance, community-based education schools and civil society organizations focused on gender issues—foundered or closed without continued donor support. Due to insufficient monitoring and evaluation of the rule of law programs examined by SIGAR, it was not possible to assess the impact of the program activities that sought to improve women's access to justice.

We also found that U.S. agencies sometimes did not sufficiently account for external but well-known barriers to progress. Sustaining gains in girls' access to education, for instance, faces threats from corruption and weak capacity within Afghan government institutions, as well as deteriorating security which threatens to disrupt school operations. Despite marked improvement across numerous maternal health indicators, there remains a vast disparity between rural and urban areas, and several programs reported difficulties in recruiting female staff for remote or insecure provinces. Afghan government targets for increasing women's participation in the security forces, which the United States supported, were overly ambitious, largely due to strong cultural resistance and threats to their safety; Afghan women serving in the forces are subjected to pervasive harassment.

Rhetoric in earlier years which closely associated the advancement of Afghan women's rights with the U.S. military intervention may have fostered unrealistic expectations of what could be achieved. On the other hand, Afghan men and women who had some exposure to U.S. efforts to advance gender equality praised U.S. efforts. The U.S. presence in Afghanistan and the Afghan government's awareness that women's rights are important to the U.S. government were key factors, they said, in improving the social and political climate on the issue.

Today, several risks threaten to undercut or undo progress for women and girls: intensified violence and, at worst, state collapse; Afghan peace negotiations that could result in an agreement which erodes women's and girls' rights; the possibility of a future Afghan government that includes the Taliban, whose practices in some areas still violate women's basic human rights; lower donor funding than in previous years; and a dire economic and humanitarian situation exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gains achieved by Afghan women and girls remain fragile and uneven, highlighting the urban-rural divide in Afghanistan. Future U.S. efforts to improve gender equality must account for the formidable sociocultural, political, and security barriers to progress.

Ensuring that U.S. efforts are informed by the varied experiences of women and girls will mean engaging with Afghan women and men, girls and boys from a wide range of socioeconomic, ethnic, geographic, and educational backgrounds.

To the extent possible, programs should be rigorously evaluated to ensure effectiveness. Successes and failures should be identified and discussed candidly. Shortcomings may be a result of external factors beyond the control of program implementers, or they may be a result of flawed design or implementation; either way, impact evaluations can help agencies and implementers identify needed adjustments and improvements. USAID's experience evaluating community-based education efforts in Afghanistan is an example of such a virtuous cycle.

The United States must carry out monitoring and evaluation not only to prevent waste, but to ensure that limited resources will go where they can have the most impact. Every poorly designed or poorly implemented program has an opportunity cost. Further, such programs can “unfairly raise program participants’ expectations, undermining their trust and confidence in the United States and wider donor community, and even fuel enmity,” observed Ian Kaplan, senior education specialist at the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee.⁸⁷²

The impact of U.S. backing for Afghan women's rights should not be underestimated. There are intangible, hard-to-measure benefits from U.S. support for women and girls; the sheer existence of programming and U.S. policy attention on women's status and rights form part of the “scaffolding” for wholesale change in Afghan social norms, as one former civilian NATO official put it.⁸⁷³ Afghan women themselves point to the vocal support by the United States and other international actors as a key factor in advancing their rights and participation in the public sphere. At this critical moment for Afghan women and girls—as Afghans determine what their country's future political structure will look like—it is as important as ever that the United States continues to support women's rights and gender equality.

This report identifies 12 findings, 8 lessons, and 17 recommendations to help guide the Congress and executive branch agencies in their future efforts to support gender equality in Afghanistan.

FINDINGS

1. Afghan women and girls have achieved significant gains since 2001:
 - **Health:** The maternal mortality ratio—the number of women who die due to birth- or pregnancy-related complications—has declined, with estimates of the decline ranging from 19 to 50 percent. This reflects a number of healthcare improvements. Between 2002 and 2015, the percentage of pregnant women receiving prenatal care by skilled health personnel rose from 16 to 61 percent; between 2002 and 2018, the number of trained midwives grew from an estimated 467 to 4,000, and the share of births attended by skilled health personnel went

from 14 to nearly 60 percent. Between 2002 and 2017, the proportion of health facilities staffed with at least one female health worker rose from 25 to 92 percent. (A caveat is that the methodologies used to generate maternal mortality data have varied over time, and the reliability of some data has been questioned. Thus, while a decline in maternal deaths has likely occurred, a precise measurement of the reduction remains elusive.)

- **Education:** As many as 3.5 million girls (roughly 40 percent of about 9 million students overall) are enrolled in school, though the number of girls actually attending school is almost certainly lower. Still, even a low estimate reflects a marked improvement over the few, if any, girls who attended public school under the Taliban. By 2018, there were approximately 70,000 women in teaching jobs, representing about one-third of the country's teachers. There has been an expansion of community-based education, helping to close the enrollment gap between girls and boys. Literacy rates among girls have risen from 20 percent in 2005 to 39 percent in 2017. Overall support among the Afghan population for women's and girls' access to education has remained high since at least 2006.
- **Political participation:** Unprecedented numbers of women now hold public office. Thanks to a constitutional amendment strongly supported by the United States and other donors, 27 percent of all parliament seats are reserved for women. By law, 25 percent of seats in provincial and district councils are now reserved for women. Nearly half of the 9,708 elected community development council members across the country are women. Women serve as ministers, deputy ministers, and ambassadors, and comprise about 28 percent of employees in civil society organizations. These figures represent the efforts of thousands of women, from the village to the national level. Women's presence in the media also increased significantly since 2001.
- **Access to justice:** Afghanistan has a legal framework for advancing access to justice for women and girls, including constitutional protections for equal rights for men and women, and the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law, promulgated by presidential decree in 2009. The number of women serving in the police rose from 180 in 2005 to 3,650 in 2019. Specialized Family Response Units enable more women to file complaints with the police. From 2007 to 2018, the proportion of judges who are women grew from 5 to 13 percent (from 73 to 261 women).
- **Economic participation:** There are more women-run businesses and more women employed in urban areas than there were 20 years ago. Women's share of secure jobs in urban areas increased from 27 to 42 percent between 2007 and 2017—one of the few labor force indicators where women had greater gains than men. From 2007 to 2019, the share of women in civil service jobs, excluding the army and police, rose from 18 to 25 percent. Women held 15 percent of government decision-making positions in 2018, up from 10 percent in 2013.

2. The positive story of gains across these sectors is tempered by the reality that significant barriers—including restrictive sociocultural norms and insecurity—continue to impede progress for Afghan women and girls.
 - Girls’ access to education is constrained by the lack of female teachers and infrastructure, and pressures on girls to withdraw from school at puberty.
 - A lack of female healthcare providers, restrictive sociocultural practices, lack of education, and prohibitive costs pose barriers to women seeking health care.
 - The quality of health care and education remains a problem, and education gains have been largely at the primary school level.
 - Gains across sectors have been geographically uneven, with rural women and girls experiencing significantly less improvement overall.
 - Women who have ventured into non-traditional and historically male-dominated areas—such as the media, security forces, and politics—are at higher risk of retaliation by the Taliban and anti-government elements.
 - Gender disparity is still a persistent characteristic of the Afghan labor force.
3. Although advancing women’s status and rights was not a reason for the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan, improving the lives of Afghan women and girls was one important goal of the U.S. reconstruction effort.
4. The high-level U.S. political focus on gender issues in Afghanistan translated into congressional and executive branch agency support for significant funding for efforts targeting women and girls. At the same time, that political focus may also have reduced the scrutiny accorded to the design of some gender programs.
5. The United States has disbursed at least \$787.4 million for programs specifically and primarily to support Afghan women and girls from 2002 to 2020, but the total amount of U.S. investments to improve the lives of women and girls is not quantifiable because hundreds of other programs and projects included an unquantifiable gender component.
6. USAID was unable to field the resources and expertise needed to effectively integrate gender-related objectives across programming in Afghanistan.
7. Community-based education has proven effective as a reliable, culturally accepted model for delivering primary education in areas where the formal education system does not operate, and especially in closing the enrollment and achievement gap between girls and boys.
8. The U.S. government’s funding to civil society organizations contributed to an increase in the number of women advocates and organizations focusing on women’s rights. However, many of these organizations are unsustainable without continued assistance.

9. The United States has provided significant support to recruitment and retention targets set by the Afghan government for women's participation in the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, but these targets have been highly unrealistic and unachievable. Although there has been a modest increase in the number of women police officers, women in all parts of the security forces face threats to their personal safety and pervasive harassment and discrimination.
10. Afghan women have assumed leadership roles at the national, provincial, district, and community levels. At the same time, they face a troika of threats: continued or intensified violence, the risk of Afghan peace negotiations leading to erosions of women's rights, and a dire economic and humanitarian situation exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.
11. The kind of life Afghan women will face under any government in which the Taliban exert an influence will be a product of the Taliban's ability—or inability—to negotiate their differences with the Afghan government and local communities, and the varying beliefs and practices within their own ranks.
12. The effort to promote women's rights may be hampered by a growing narrative in Afghanistan that the country can either have women's rights at the cost of peace, or peace at the cost of women's rights.

LESSONS

1. **U.S. and international diplomatic pressure can be instrumental to advancing women's legal rights and participation in public life—in politics, government, media, and civil society.**

After 2001, support from the United States and its international partners created significant opportunities for women. Partly as a result of such diplomatic and programmatic support, Afghan women have served in crucial public and political roles, including as participants of the constitutional and emergency loya jirgas. Prominent Afghan women themselves point to the vocal support by the United States and other international actors as a key factor in advancing women's participation in the public sphere. U.S. funding has also contributed to an increase in the number of civil society and media organizations that employ women, advocate for their interests, and contribute to attitudinal shifts in support of women's rights.

2. **It is critical that U.S. officials working on or in Afghanistan develop a more nuanced understanding of gender roles and relations in the Afghan cultural context—and work to ensure that U.S. policies and programs are responsive to this context. U.S. agencies also need to assess how to support women and girls without provoking backlash that might endanger them or stall progress.**

Numerous officials and experts interviewed for this report described how a failure to anticipate or appreciate Afghan cultural context—for example, that “anything related to women is an issue of honor for the family and the society” —undercut U.S. efforts to support women and girls. For instance, gender advisors on short tours sometimes lacked a sufficient understanding of the culture. Many U.S. strategy documents, especially earlier ones, made little to no mention of the formidable cultural and social barriers to advancing women’s rights and improving their access to services, and thus did not address how to mitigate those barriers. Despite significant funding allocated for increasing women’s participation in the security forces, basic problems were left unaddressed, such as limitations on women’s mobility for recruitment or training purposes. And U.S. military operations, though not part of the reconstruction and development effort, resulted in intrusions into women’s extremely private spaces in the home, which may well have exacerbated hostility toward the United States.

Many Afghans interviewed for this report said that social and cultural norms are one of the biggest barriers to Afghan women’s advancement, particularly in rural areas. As Afghanistan’s turbulent history of social reforms over the past century suggests, efforts to overturn deeply embedded gender norms risk a backlash that can undermine or undo any reform. Changes in social norms are often a series of messy experiments, and may take generations to occur. U.S. agencies and officials must be knowledgeable about local contexts and norms, and design programs that reflect that understanding. Agencies should proactively consult with both women and men regarding social and cultural norms, to ensure all views are taken into account.

In some aspects of U.S. gender efforts, agencies have successfully demonstrated sensitivity and adaptation to Afghan social norms. For instance, community-based education was found to disproportionately improve enrollment and educational outcomes for girls, in part because it is a culturally accepted model for girls’ education that enabled more families to send their daughters to nearby schools. Based on impact evaluations that proved effectiveness, USAID has over time invested more in community-based education as a means to improve girls’ education.

3. Educating Afghan men and boys about gender equality issues and working with them as partners and advocates are critical to advancing women’s status and rights in Afghanistan.

USAID’s 2012 Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy emphasized the importance of working with men and boys, women and girls alike to bring about change, reflecting a best practice identified in the literature on gender and development. As the final report for a maternal health program stated, in a male-dominated culture, “addressing the needs of women requires addressing the concerns of men.” Broader U.S. strategy documents for Afghanistan also set goals to engage and educate men and boys on gender equality issues, though they rarely

articulated in any details what such engagement should entail.

U.S.-supported maternal health programs examined by SIGAR were a bright spot in terms of putting this principle into practice. Several programs incorporated surveys of men to measure attitudinal shifts or their knowledge about family planning and reproductive health. One program was found to have increased men's knowledge of contraceptives. In another program, community health workers collaborated with local health shuras to engage men who objected to their wives seeking care. U.S. programs to support civil society organizations also sought to actively involve men in discussions in which they examined their own gender roles and male attitudes that are harmful to women.

Despite these positive steps, many interviewees for this report observed that in general, U.S. gender-related programs have not done enough to engage men and boys as allies and advocates for gender equality. And based on SIGAR's analysis of 24 relevant programs, activities that involved Afghan men and boys were relatively uncommon.

- 4. Key factors in improving the access of Afghan women and girls to health care and education were existing expertise and capacity within aid organizations, popular demand for these services, consistent funding, and rigorous impact evaluations of programs.**

Long before the 2001 U.S.-led intervention, international aid organizations had been delivering healthcare assistance in Afghanistan. The rapid expansion of health services after 2001 was possible because expertise already existed on the ground, programs were in place that could be scaled up, and the United States and other donors provided an influx of funding. Moreover, there was high Afghan demand for health care. Similarly, Afghan public support for girls' education has been strong throughout the reconstruction effort, and donors have made significant, long-term investments in education. The United States and other donors supported extensive data collection in both sectors, and conducted rigorous impact evaluations that informed program design and implementation. All these factors have contributed to positive outcomes for women's and girls' access to health care and education. An additional reason for greater success in these sectors may be that the causal chain—from program inputs, to outputs, to outcomes—is relatively straightforward, enabling more precise and accurate metrics for success.

- 5. It is crucial that more women assume leadership positions in a wider range of Afghan government ministries, including at the cabinet level.**

More Afghan women serve in government than ever before, with women filling 27 percent of parliamentary seats and 25 percent of civil service positions (excluding the army and police). However, the number of women in ministry leadership roles, where they filled only 15 percent of senior positions, as of 2018, remains limited.

Women's efforts to rise through the ranks are constrained by restrictive and patriarchal norms, which favor men for positions of authority, as well as by sexual harassment and discrimination.

Despite their increased numbers in government, the mere presence of women does not necessarily translate into influence on policy and legislation. More visible and outspoken female politicians often face significant intimidation and violent backlash.

6. U.S. efforts to improve the lives of women and girls will continue to be constrained by significant barriers, especially insecurity and harmful sociocultural norms.

Ongoing conflict often prohibits or reduces women's and girls' freedom of movement, hindering their access to health care, education, and employment. Aid organizations and service providers also have less mobility in insecure areas, and women may lack information about services and opportunities that are available. Further, the conflict itself causes civilian casualties and property damage, inflicting trauma and other costs borne by women and girls, including the burden of greater caregiving responsibilities, increased poverty, and social stigma for widows.

But the more intransigent barrier appears to be restrictive sociocultural norms, such as the requirement that a male family member act as an escort in public, and negative views toward women who work outside the home or in positions of authority. These limit the mobility of women and girls outside the home, and their participation in the workforce and public life. Without local buy-in for easing these restrictive social norms, project outcomes may be limited and unsustainable in the long term.

7. A further reduction in foreign aid and subsequent economic contraction could have disproportionate impact on women, especially urban women who benefited from economic expansion and donors' support in the last two decades.

Afghan women in urban areas benefited from an expansion of formal employment since 2001—which was the direct result of an increase in international funding and subsequent economic growth. However, these secure jobs with decent salaries were largely concentrated in the public sector, which remains highly dependent on donor funding. If there is a further reduction in foreign assistance, it will be extremely difficult for the Afghan government to sustain or boost public sector employment. A major source of informal employment for rural and urban women has been the manufacturing sector, where women make up the majority of the workforce. Although financial returns in this sector are abysmal compared to other sectors, manufacturing has provided women with a source of income that could be lost as the economy shrinks.

- 8. The United States can continue to advance gender equality in Afghanistan by advocating, along with other international partners, that women participate in the Afghan peace negotiations and that the negotiations preserve critical post-2001 gains for women and girls.**

U.S. presence and influence in Afghanistan since 2001 have contributed significantly to women's and girls' advancements. Afghan women themselves have described U.S. support as crucial. In the current environment of political uncertainty, female and male advocates for gender equality in the country have lamented the weakness of U.S. diplomatic pressure on Afghan political leaders and the Taliban to protect women's rights, especially compared to U.S. attention to these issues in the early 2000s and during peace efforts from 2010 to 2012.

Though U.S. leverage today may be lower than at previous junctures, the Afghan government remains heavily dependent on U.S. aid and support. Vocal U.S. insistence on gender equality and women's rights—and presenting a united front with other international partners—may help focus international attention on these issues, remind Afghan powerbrokers that the world is watching, and lend support to Afghan leaders and advocates who share U.S. goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for the Congress

The Congress may wish to consider:

- 1. Ensuring that current funding levels for improving Afghan women's and girls' access to health care and education are preserved because these programs have demonstrated the most measurable success, there remains significant need, and the Afghan population widely supports these efforts**

As overall assistance levels to Afghanistan decline, the U.S. government should build on what has been proven to work, and what the Afghan population at large supports.

One of the reasons for greater success in health and education programs targeting women and girls has been extensive data collection and rigorous impact evaluations to regularly assess program effectiveness. The Congress should continue to provide adequate funding for these critical monitoring and evaluation efforts.

In sectors that have seen less progress in gender equality—such as access to justice and economic participation—gender efforts could be designed and implemented as pilot programs that include rigorous impact evaluations. If shown to be effective, these programs should be scaled up.

2. Conditioning U.S. assistance to any future Afghan government on that government’s demonstrated commitment to protect the rights of women and girls

Any future Afghan government will likely include Taliban figures. During and after Afghan peace negotiations, the Taliban should understand that future financial and international support is directly tied to the preservation of human rights, including women’s rights.⁸⁷⁴ Conditions on future assistance are a key lever for the United States. U.S. senior officials, diplomats, and members of the Congress have already signaled that future U.S. funding will be linked to women’s rights protections by the future Afghan government. The Congress may wish to consider formalizing such conditionality, to continue to pursue U.S. goals of supporting and advancing Afghan women’s rights.

3. Ensuring that the Secretary of State submits the strategy as called for in section 7044(a) of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, including the component to promote the welfare and rights of Afghan women and girls. As the Congress considers fiscal year 2022 foreign assistance levels for Afghanistan, it may wish to take into account what resources may be needed to implement the women’s rights component of that strategy.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, signed into law on December 27, 2020, directs the Secretary of State, in consultation with the heads of other relevant federal agencies, to submit to the appropriate congressional committees within 90 days “a comprehensive, multi-year strategy for diplomatic and development engagement with the Government of Afghanistan that reflects the agreement between the United States and the Taliban, as well as intra-Afghan negotiations.” The strategy “shall include a component to protect and strengthen Afghan women and girl’s welfare and rights, including in any intra-Afghan negotiation and during the implementation of any peace agreement.”⁸⁷⁵ Further, the Joint Explanatory Statement accompanying the Act states that within 90 days, “the Secretary of State shall submit a report to the Committees on Appropriations that includes a detailed description of United States Government advocacy for: (1) the inclusion of Afghan women in ongoing and future negotiations to end the conflict . . . and (2) support for the inclusion of constitutional protections of women’s and girl’s human rights that ensure their freedom of movement, rights to education and employment, political participation, and access to health care and justice in any agreement reached through intra-Afghan negotiations, including negotiations with the Taliban.”⁸⁷⁶

These congressional directives may help to focus U.S. engagement on advancing Afghan women’s rights. Senior State officials have said publicly that the protection of women’s rights will be a high priority for the United States as negotiations go forward—and that though the United States will not be a participant in the talks, it retains influence in the process, given ongoing reconstruction assistance

and diplomatic relations with Afghanistan. However, officials have offered little detail regarding how State, in concert with other agencies, will use its leverage to promote the rights of women and girls as Afghan peace negotiations proceed.

The strategy called for in section 7044(a) could articulate how State will employ its leverage to pursue specific goals—for example, encouraging the preservation of the equality provision in the Afghan constitution and the reserved seats system for women in the parliament. The strategy ideally will help U.S. agencies and the Congress anticipate windows of opportunity during Afghan peace negotiations, as well as prepare to take advantage of those windows to advance gender equality goals. The strategy could also help inform congressional committee decision-making needed to promote the rights of Afghan women and girls as committees consider fiscal year 2022 foreign assistance funding for Afghanistan.

4. Reassessing the requirement for the Department of Defense to spend not less than \$10 million to \$20 million annually on the recruitment and retention of women in the ANDSF, and rather, prioritizing the appropriation of funds to improve working conditions and protections for women in the ANDSF

The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 requires that not less than \$20 million, an increase of \$10 million from the fiscal year 2020 enacted level, from the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund shall be provided for “recruitment and retention of women in the [ANDSF], and the recruitment and training of female security personnel.”⁸⁷⁷ This funding level represents a continued commitment by the Congress to appropriate between \$10 million and \$25 million for these purposes since fiscal year 2014. Yet investments so far have been marginally effective, with consistently dismal gains toward recruitment goals and harsh conditions for the women who serve in these forces. The Congress may wish to focus less fiscal year 2022 funding on recruitment, and instead prioritize funding toward improving working conditions and protections for female service members—in line with the fiscal year 2021 National Defense Authorization Act, which provides additional flexibility in how the funds may be used. The Congress may also wish to focus such efforts more heavily on women in the Afghan National Police who, in their direct interaction with the civilian population, provide Afghan women a critical access point to the justice system and protective services.

5. Increasingly raising women’s rights and gender equality issues in engagements related to Afghanistan—during visits to the country and hearings on Afghanistan, and with international partners

Congressional interactions with Afghan government leaders and civil society—including with Afghan women leaders—can serve a vital role in maintaining attention on gender issues by conveying a consistent U.S. message of support for key reforms and protections, such as the preservation of the Afghan constitution’s equality provision and the reserved seats system for women in the parliament.

Members also have the opportunity to hear the perspective of political leaders—and, critically, of those holding politicians to account. In August 2020, several Afghan organizations—including the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, the Afghan Parliamentary Commission for Civil Society and Women’s Affairs, and the Women’s Parliamentary Group for Political Participation—sent a letter urging the Congress to support protections for Afghan women and promote awareness of their rights, including in congressional hearings on Afghanistan.

Recommendations for Executive Branch Agencies

6. The Secretary of State should continue to work with our Afghan and other international partners to support women’s rights protections in any agreement emerging from Afghan peace negotiations.

The United States should make clear that the Taliban cannot dictate the terms of the negotiations and agreement. In any future modifications to the Afghan constitution, State should use its leverage to support the equality provision and the reserved seats system for women in the parliament. State should seek to do this in coordination with the Host Nation Support Group, consisting of other foreign governments and the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, which will have a physical presence in Doha but which will not be in the conference room during the first round of negotiations—as well as a diverse group of Afghan leaders and civil society organizations.⁸⁷⁸

As a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Afghanistan has an obligation to uphold women’s rights. Afghan peace negotiations present one of the most significant tests of whether Afghan leaders—Taliban and non-Taliban—are willing to preserve the legal framework for women’s rights that has been put in place since 2001.

7. The Secretary of State, the USAID Administrator, and the Secretary of Defense should ensure that gender-related programs and initiatives in Afghanistan include activities that educate and engage Afghan men and boys to challenge stereotypes and reduce hostility to women’s rights and their participation in public life.

Engaging men and boys on gender equality and women’s rights issues is essential to further empowering women and girls. Working with men and boys can transform harmful gender stereotypes, social norms, and behaviors that perpetuate discrimination and inequality. A range of activities have proven successful in shifting the attitudes of men and boys and should be better incorporated into gender-related programs in Afghanistan.

Engaging male religious leaders as advocates for women’s empowerment, for example, can help mitigate the risk of women’s rights efforts being disparaged

as “reformist,” “liberal,” or imposed by the West. Male religious leaders also have a unique ability to disseminate messages to audiences with more restrictive interpretations of Islam who may be more receptive to someone they see as credible.⁸⁷⁹ Integrating curricula that address gender equality into schools and universities has also proven effective in altering social norms and notions of masculinity that perpetuate inequities between males and females.⁸⁸⁰

8. The Secretary of State, the USAID Administrator, and the Secretary of Defense should ensure that monitoring and evaluation systems are in place for programs and initiatives to support Afghan women and girls so that outcomes are assessed and agencies better understand the impact of programming.

While measuring quantitative outputs can help to track the degree to which U.S. assistance reaches Afghan women and girls, agencies must do more to assess actual outcomes over time for women and girls. State, USAID, and DOD should put in place monitoring and evaluation systems that can identify correlations between program activities and improvements in the lives of women and girls. Program evaluations to date often failed to provide reliable evidence for whether program activities led to meaningful outcomes. For example, agencies sometimes focused on the number of trainings provided, rather than assessing the effectiveness of those trainings in improving individuals’ and organizations’ knowledge and skills. Conversely, one of the reasons for greater success in health and education programming appears to be that agencies invested in extensive data collection and rigorous impact evaluations that informed program design and implementation. Where possible, similar efforts should be made in other sectors.

Evaluations should also take into account that it is not always possible to determine whether program activities have a direct causal effect on related outcomes for women and girls. A program may include activities or efforts that do not result in a strict set of observable or measurable improvements, at least not within a short time frame. These efforts, however, may still contribute to wider, intangible shifts in social and cultural norms over time—shifts that are essential to progress and should not be discounted.

9. The Secretary of State should continue to support protective shelters for women and girls fleeing abuse, and increase mentorship and support to the Afghan National Police’s Family Response Units.

These activities are critical to combating gender-based violence in Afghanistan, and have proven effective. Shelters supported by State should coordinate with legal aid offices and family guidance centers to provide legal, health, psychosocial counseling, education, and vocational services to women and children who have experienced gender-based violence. This coordination would provide women

and girls with resources beyond immediate shelter, and give them the tools and resources needed to progress with their lives.

State should also prioritize support for Family Response Units, which are specialized units under the Ministry of Interior that help women register complaints with the police. These units are better suited to addressing sensitive matters such as gender-based violence than regular police units. Providing continued support and training to Family Response Units would help fill a significant gap in women's employment within the police, and improve women's access to this much-needed resource.

10. The USAID Administrator should develop and retain staff with expertise in gender mainstreaming, to better integrate gender into the agency's programming.

Gender mainstreaming is a development approach that aims to draw attention to the various roles that gender norms play in the context of development, and seeks to ensure that programs address disparities in how they might affect men and women. It was a guiding principle of USAID's efforts to integrate gender into all of its programs and activities in Afghanistan. However, USAID was unable to field and retain staff with the expertise necessary to effectively carry out the mainstreaming approach. All technical offices should be equipped with staff who have experience applying the numerous tools involved in mainstreaming. Special attention should be paid to ensuring that USAID staff know how to conduct a gender analysis and put its findings to use.

11. The USAID Administrator should prioritize expanding midwifery education programs, including community midwifery schools, in rural areas where there is a shortage of female healthcare providers and access to maternal care is restricted.

Midwives have proven to be an essential resource for expanding maternal care to women and girls. Beyond being able to provide life-saving assistance, midwives serve as role models within their communities and have reported an increased sense of empowerment and agency that comes from their work. However, women and girls still suffer from a lack of access to care, which is made worse by the shortage of female healthcare providers. Community midwifery programs could serve as an effective tool to help fill these gaps. Midwifery schools can provide an education, source of employment and income, and an effective means to preserve and build upon established gains in maternal health.

- 12. The USAID Administrator should support the Ministry of Education in training more female teachers, providing for more gender-appropriate facilities, and adequately funding and monitoring community-based education in order to meet the demand for girls' education, especially in rural areas.**

Existing efforts to expand girls' education have fallen short of nationwide need and demand, due in part to insufficient Afghan government funding for the Ministry of Education, a lack of gender-appropriate facilities in rural areas, and too few qualified female teachers. Such barriers disproportionately prevent girls from participating in the formal education system. The Ministry of Education is well placed to increase the national pool of qualified female teachers through targeted recruitment and training, which would help increase girls' enrollment at all levels of education. Further, community-based education has proven to be a cost-effective and culturally accepted model for closing the enrollment and achievement gap between girls and boys. In order to ensure that girls' gains made through community-based education are lasting, the ministry should sufficiently fund community-based education and integrate it into the formal education system. USAID should also consider encouraging and supporting the ministry's capacity to monitor community-based education schools and to provide support from hub schools to community-based schools.

USAID engagement in education and higher education should support the development of curricula that help both girls and boys to develop and appreciate gender equality.

- 13. In the absence of sufficient Ministry of Education support for the community-based education system, the USAID Administrator should continue to prioritize the agency's community-based education programming across the country.**

The community-based education initiative has been successful in increasing education services to remote and underserved areas that the Ministry of Education cannot or has not reached. USAID should continue to support this system while increasing the capacity of the Ministry of Education to eventually take ownership of this program. USAID should also continue to gauge the effectiveness of community-based education initiatives through rigorous impact evaluations and frequent assessments.

- 14. The USAID Administrator should ensure that female members of community development councils in Afghanistan—particularly those in rural areas—are consulted on the design and implementation of USAID programs, in order for programs to better address the concerns and priorities of women in rural communities.**

There has been a significant increase in the number of women in community development councils. However, their participation in the community's decision-making remains limited. To the extent possible, USAID should involve female council members in the conceptualization, implementation, and monitoring of program activities. Female council members should serve as local partners, not just beneficiaries. For example, female council members could be mobilized to design and carry out social or civic awareness campaigns, an activity usually implemented by project staff.

Working with female council members may be difficult, given their lack of mobility, domestic responsibilities, and limited confidence and experience. Therefore, USAID should allocate more resources and time to account for such unique constraints faced by female council members.

- 15. The USAID Administrator should provide financial support to Afghan grassroots civil society organizations that advocate for women's rights, particularly those that operate in rural areas.**

While there has been a significant increase in the number of civil society organizations led by or focused on women, they were largely restricted to Kabul and other urban centers. In almost every sector examined by SIGAR, urban women had achieved greater gains than women in rural areas. Rural women have pointed out persistent stifling cultural restrictions that affect their access to health care, education, and economic opportunities.

USAID should provide financial grants to grassroots civil society organizations, particularly smaller organizations that operate in rural areas, so they can continue their work for the protection of women's rights. These grants should be small in scale and provided over a longer time period, such as five or more years. In addition to project-specific grants, USAID should consider grants that partially fund the core budget of these smaller organizations, to provide them predictable funding not tied to a specific program. This approach can enable more creative, locally-driven solutions. Where possible, USAID should also simplify its funding mechanism, including reporting requirements, so that grassroots organizations—which often lack the sophistication and capacity of larger, urban-based organizations—can compete for grants.

Civil society organizations rooted in rural communities may have better understanding of their community, and can better mobilize men and women to

advocate for women's rights in rural areas. But they remain especially dependent on donor funding.

- 16. The USAID Administrator should ensure that job skills trainings for Afghan women are designed to be practical and responsive to market needs, and that the agency assesses the degree to which trainings expand participants' knowledge and skills.**

Skills training was a core component of USAID economic growth programs that aimed to expand women's participation in the workforce. While USAID programs evolved to make trainings more relevant, these improvements were inadequate. USAID programs in which delivery of skills trainings is a major component should incorporate pre- and post-training tests to measure the knowledge acquired by participants. This information could assist USAID in reevaluating and improving the frequency, length, and content of its skills training.

SIGAR's review found that USAID programs did not measure the outcome of the trainings, such as the acquired knowledge, but instead focused on output indicators, such as the number of participants and trainings. Moreover, USAID's third-party evaluators heavily relied on participants' opinions about the quality and efficacy of the trainings. SIGAR's analysis of program evaluations also found that training participants consistently cited common shortcomings, such as limited knowledge of training providers and the short-term and highly theoretical nature of the trainings.

- 17. The Secretary of Defense should continue to focus DOD efforts on improving the working conditions and protections for women serving in the ANDSF, rather than focusing solely on increasing recruitment numbers.**

DOD should continue to emphasize initiatives that support positive conditions for women's integration, such as refining the force structure to support women's professional development and career progression, and supporting policies and workplace cultures that protect women from harassment.

DOD's recent shift toward activities that aim to address the root causes of women's low participation in the Afghan security forces, such as cultural norms and high levels of illiteracy, is a positive development. Examples of such efforts include targeted literacy initiatives, internship programs aimed at increasing community trust in the ANDSF, and policy changes that support women's assignments to locations near their homes of record. These efforts recognize that improving the conditions of women serving in the ANDSF and increasing women's meaningful representation in the forces are interrelated, long-term processes.

A young girl wearing a white hijab is focused on writing in a notebook. She is holding a pen in her right hand and pointing with her left index finger. The notebook has some handwritten text in purple ink. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people in a classroom setting.

APPENDICES & ENDNOTES

World Bank photo

APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

SIGAR conducts its Lessons Learned Program under the authority of Public Law 110-181 and the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended. This report was completed in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency’s Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation (commonly referred to as “the Blue Book”). These standards require that we carry out our work with integrity, objectivity, and independence, and provide information that is factually accurate and reliable. SIGAR’s lessons learned reports are broad in scope and based on a wide range of source material. To achieve the goal of high quality and to help ensure our reports are factually accurate and reliable, the reports are subject to extensive review by subject matter experts and relevant U.S. government agencies.

The research team for this report drew upon a wide array of sources. The team’s documentary research included a large body of publicly available material, including reports, strategy documents, policies, and assessments by the Departments of Defense and State, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the White House, the Afghan government, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, and the World Bank—

as well as U.S. legislation and congressional testimony. These official sources were complemented by hundreds of nongovernmental sources, including books, think tank reports, journal articles, press reports, public opinion surveys, and academic studies. However, a significant portion of the research—particularly the analysis of 24 U.S. programs—depended on SIGAR’s access to material that is not publicly available. This included cables, internal U.S. government memos, State perception surveys conducted in Afghanistan, responses to SIGAR data calls, and program documents, including concept papers, annual and final reports, and midterm and final evaluations. Finally, the team also drew from SIGAR’s own work, embodied in its quarterly reports to the Congress and its investigations, audits, inspections, special projects, and prior lessons learned reports.

While the documentary evidence tells a story, it cannot substitute for the experience, knowledge, and wisdom of people who participated in the Afghanistan reconstruction effort. Therefore, the research team interviewed or held informal discussions with more than 50 individuals with direct and indirect knowledge of gender equality efforts by the United States and its Afghan and coalition partners. Interviews and informal discussions were conducted with U.S., Afghan, and other international experts from universities, think tanks, international and nongovernmental organizations, and government entities; current and former U.S. officials who have deployed to Afghanistan; personnel from State and USAID; and implementing partners.

Interviews provided valuable insights into the rationale behind decisions, the debates within agencies, and the frustrations that span years but often remained formally unacknowledged. Due in part to the politically or culturally sensitive nature of efforts to advance Afghan women’s rights, many interviewees wished to remain anonymous. In such cases, our interview citations use a general attribution, such as “former USAID gender advisor” or “academic researcher on Afghanistan.” The research team conducted interviews in Washington and, for efficiency or due to the COVID-19 pandemic, by phone with interviewees in Boston, Ottawa, Afghanistan, Belgium, Norway, and the United Kingdom. In addition, this report drew from a set of 45 interviews with prominent Afghan women, conducted in Kabul by SIGAR staff, for the October 2016 *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*.

Importantly, SIGAR felt it necessary that this lessons learned report include the voices of Afghan citizens and community leaders themselves, beyond the experts we interviewed directly. This was difficult to accomplish during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸⁸¹ Nevertheless, SIGAR commissioned field interviews with 65 Afghans—both female and male—from 14 provinces. A more detailed methodology regarding this process appears below (see pp. 171–173).

Support for Gender Equality: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan reflects a careful, thorough consideration of these many sources, but it is not an exhaustive review of the topic. The status and rights of Afghan women and girls—and how the United States and other donors sought to support them over nearly two decades—is a massive topic. Any one of the sectors examined in this report could have

formed a study in its own right. Using 2001 as a baseline, SIGAR focused on women's access to health care, education, and justice, and political and economic participation largely because these mirrored the categories of many U.S. gender-related goals, as articulated in strategy documents. In addition, the report addressed the media sector and women's participation in the security forces, as these were also focus areas for U.S. programming and congressional interest.

The research team did not investigate agriculture or infrastructure-related programs because relevant U.S. strategies generally did not place as much emphasis on these sectors. Further, the significant work of other donor governments and organizations to advance gender equality in Afghanistan remained outside the scope of this report. Yet these efforts undoubtedly had an impact on the lives of women and girls.

For each of the five major sectors examined, this report assessed the trend lines in women's status and rights since 2001, drawing on the range of sources described above. To SIGAR's knowledge, no other U.S. government report to date has comprehensively examined the available data across major sectors.

In each of the five major sectors, the research team sought to identify the universe of U.S. gender-related programming (see Appendix D). To do so, the team first assembled lists of all relevant State and USAID programs in Afghanistan of which SIGAR was aware, using USAID's pipeline report (an internal document that tracks USAID programming) and data provided by agencies. SIGAR's categorization of these programs did not align exactly with how State and USAID categorize and code programs, because each agency does so differently. For example, this report's "economic participation" sector included USAID programs coded as Economic Growth, and State programs managed by the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs' Office of Regional Affairs, and by U.S. Embassy Kabul's Public Affairs Section. To identify a similar list of DOD Commander's Emergency Response Program projects focused on women, girls, and gender equality, we searched the project descriptions of a comprehensive database of such projects from fiscal year 2004 to the second quarter of fiscal year 2017. We found 1,579 such projects out of a total of 57,604, but these were not categorized by sector.

Once the report team had compiled sector lists, the team then determined which programs included explicit objectives or activities targeting women, girls, or gender equality goals. The team identified these programs based on a detailed review of data provided by State and USAID, as well as project documents such as annual and final reports, midterm and final evaluations, and fact sheets. Further, from that overall list of State and USAID gender-related programs, the team identified those programs which specifically and primarily supported Afghan women, girls, and gender equality. In this category of programs focused primarily on women and girls, we also included DOD's infrastructure programs to support women in the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, as detailed in Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan's review of such programming. This analysis was important in order to quantify the amount of programming devoted primarily to women, girls, and gender equality goals. This analysis also echoes the approach taken in

a 2014 SIGAR audit.⁸⁸² However, as explained in this report, that amount is a significant understatement of total U.S. gender-related efforts since 2002, given the more than 100 State and USAID programs (as well as 1,579 Commander’s Emergency Response Program projects) which we identified as including gender objectives or activities, but which were not primarily focused on women and girls.

SIGAR twice sought feedback from State and USAID on the report’s program lists by sector, and the identification of programs primarily targeting women and girls. Agencies made adjustments to these lists, which SIGAR adopted.

This brings us to the challenge of assessing the effectiveness of U.S. gender-related programs—which programs worked well, or not. The first methodological problem was the sheer expanse of programming. Assessing more than 100 State and USAID programs was beyond the resources and time frame for this report. Instead, the team selected 24 programs for review, spanning the five key sectors. The team considered the following criteria for selecting programs, though not every program met each criterion: whether the program was one of the costlier programs in that sector, whether it represented U.S. efforts in that sector, whether it was considered a flagship program by the responsible agency—and, lastly, the degree to which SIGAR had access to program documents. The research team analyzed various program documents to assess whether evidence was provided for a causal impact of the program, conclusions about outputs and outcomes, and methods used to reach those conclusions.

This review of 24 programs was inherently limited by the quality of the program reports and evaluations themselves. Most evaluations did not seek to identify causal impact, and instead relied on qualitative data to draw impressionistic conclusions about program effectiveness. Further, some program objectives were so broad and ambitious that demonstrating a causal chain from intervention to desired outcome would be impossible.

It is important to note that an observed gain in women’s status or living conditions does not prove that aid efforts were the primary cause of that gain; determining causality would require baseline and end-line data that are rarely available. Moreover, since many donors and international organizations have worked to address gender inequality in Afghanistan, it is difficult to isolate the impact of U.S. programs from that of non-U.S. programs. Nevertheless, correlations can be observed between U.S. investments and gains for women and girls—particularly in access to health care and education.

The report underwent a peer review process. We received feedback on the draft report from eight subject matter experts, each of whom had significant experience working on or in Afghanistan. These reviewers provided thoughtful, detailed comments on the report, which we incorporated to the best of our ability.

Over the course of this study, the team consulted with officials at DOD, State, and USAID on the scope of the report, and to improve our understanding of the key issues as viewed by each organization. DOD, State, and USAID also provided feedback on

the draft report. Although we incorporated agencies' comments where possible, the analysis, conclusions, and recommendations of this report remain SIGAR's own.

METHODOLOGY FOR FIELD INTERVIEWS COMMISSIONED BY SIGAR

In December 2014, SIGAR entered into a cooperative agreement with Afghan civil society partners in which they agreed to conduct specific inspections, evaluations, and other analyses on SIGAR's behalf. For this report, Afghan partners conducted qualitative interviews with a wide range of Afghan women and men to seek their opinions on various topics related to gender equality issues. Interviews were conducted over a period of four weeks in August and September 2020.

SIGAR's Afghan civil society partner designed and translated a set of interview questions for use with each interview group. Questions were developed in close consultation with SIGAR.

Given the COVID-19 pandemic, almost all interviews were conducted over the phone. However, a small number of interviews were conducted in person, partly due to the conservative nature of communities and limited willingness to allow women to speak openly over the phone. The in-person interviews were conducted in Nangarhar and Helmand Provinces.

Interviews were all conducted in Dari or Pashto, and then translated into English for review and analysis. With the exception of Helmand and Nangarhar Provinces, all interviews were recorded for quality assurance purposes. Interview transcripts also went through a round of editing to ensure meaning and basic syntax were in place.⁸⁸³

In order to preserve interviewees' anonymity, the SIGAR research team removed some information provided in this report's interview citations that could potentially be used to identify interviewees.

Sampling

A total of 65 interviewees were selected based on existing networks of SIGAR's Afghan partners, and included 39 female and 26 male participants throughout 14 different provinces.⁸⁸⁴ Table 7 shows the provincial breakdown of interviews. To include a wide variety of perspectives, SIGAR's Afghan civil partners designed their own sampling methodology to include participants of different genders, in different locations, and with different roles in society. As listed in Table 8, interviewees included members of parliament and community development councils. In some instances, the Afghan research team engaged local community leaders or religious leaders to ensure access to prospective interviewees, and their credibility. Individuals were then asked to make referrals to others who matched the necessary profiles prescribed as part of the research scope to enlarge the network of credible potential interviewees as broadly as possible.

TABLE 7

PROVINCIAL BREAKDOWN OF INTERVIEWEES	
Province	Total
Nangarhar	7
Kunar	5
Kabul	7
Bamyan	8
Kandahar	7
Helmand	6
Uruzgan	2
Balkh	5
Farah	5
Herat	2
Kunduz	6
Khost	2
Badakhshan	2
Jawzjan	2

Source: SIGAR's Afghan civil society partner, *Implementing Gender Research, Data Collection Report*, September 2020, p. 3.

TABLE 8

TYPE OF INTERVIEWEES	
Interviewee Type	Sample
Members of parliament	4
Provincial council members	6
Community Development Council (CDC) members	11
Civil society representatives	11
Female USAID project beneficiaries	15
Male family members of female USAID project beneficiaries	5
Non-beneficiaries of gender programs (male and female)*	13

* The criteria for this category included low socioeconomic status, rural location, single-headed household, and for some, being internally displaced. SIGAR's civil society partner selected interviewees based on availability and willingness to participate.

Source: SIGAR's Afghan civil society partner, *Implementing Gender Research, Data Collection Report*, September 2020, p. 3.

Data Collection Limitations

There were limitations to conducting phone interviews. The use of phones to conduct in-depth interviews often delivers lower-quality results than those interviews conducted face-to-face, for a variety of reasons: interviewers and interviewees are unable to build the necessary rapport prior to starting an interview and interviewees are often unable or unwilling to provide the same time they would in a face-to-face interview. Efforts to mitigate this included interviewers discussing the project in more detail and allowing more flexibility in terms of their availability. Even then, the research team found it difficult to interview members of parliament, for example, because of their unavailability or unwillingness to provide time to interviewers.

Moreover, attempts at identifying interviewees, particularly female beneficiaries, from a diverse group of projects proved to be particularly challenging. Despite many of the U.S.-associated projects being implemented at a national scale, identifying women from specific communities and households took field teams considerable time and negotiation.

Finally, women from rural communities with no or limited education provided less descriptive and detailed feedback in their interviews. This is relatively common in qualitative interviews in Afghanistan, as rural women tend to have limited experience in sharing their opinions on topics pertaining to security, politics, and local issues. Men from the same communities appear to have greater experience and confidence discussing such concerns, and the quality of their interviews is likely to be higher.⁸⁸⁵

Quality Control

All interview questions were translated into Dari or Pashto and reviewed to ensure they accurately reflected the meaning of the original English version. Each interviewee was briefed about the purpose of the interview and given the option of not answering a question or discontinuing the interview at any time. Interviewees were also informed about the audio recording of their interviews and assured that their identity would remain anonymous.

All interviews (with the exception of those involving interviewees from Helmand and Nangarhar Provinces) were recorded for quality assurance purposes, using Android tablets and mobile phones. This enabled the Afghan research team to review the quality of recordings, conduct translations, and provide recordings to SIGAR. Following the completion of an interview transcript, each transcript underwent a thorough data quality review to ensure that it adequately addressed the main interview questions, and that the overall quality of information provided was suitable for analysis. Revisions did not manipulate or omit any information from the interview.

In the initial round of interviews, some interviewees did not provide detailed information. In these cases, follow-up calls were made to capture additional information. In the instances where an interview did not pass the necessary quality indicators, it was excluded from the study and another interview was conducted.⁸⁸⁶

An additional step was taken to ensure the authenticity of interviewees' identity. An Afghan quality control team, hired by SIGAR, and different from the one that had conducted the interviews, randomly selected 18 interviewees as a representative sample of the total 65 interviewees. The quality control team visited seven interviewees in person and contacted 11 by phone. The team asked interviewees questions related to their background, date of the original interview, and topics that were discussed. The team compared the responses to the data collected by the original interviewers. The team's findings showed no discrepancies in the information on interviewees' identity reported by the original interviewers.⁸⁸⁷

APPENDIX B: CONGRESSIONAL FUNDING DIRECTIVES REGARDING SUPPORT TO AFGHAN WOMEN AND GIRLS

TABLE 9

CONGRESSIONAL FUNDING DIRECTIVES REGARDING SUPPORT TO AFGHAN WOMEN AND GIRLS			
Fiscal Year	Amount	Fund	Target
2003	≥ \$7 million	ESF	MOWA; multi-service women's centers; NED
2004	≥ \$70 million	ESF	AIHRC; women-led NGOs
2005	≥ \$50 million		Women and girls; AIHRC; women-led NGOs
2006	≥ \$50 million		Women and girls; AIHRC; women-led NGOs
2007	≥ \$50 million		Women and girls; AIHRC; women-led NGOs
2008	≥ \$75 million		Women and girls; AIHRC; MOWA; women-led NGOs
2009	≥ \$150 million	ESF; INCLE	Women and girls; AIHRC; MOWA; women-led NGOs
2010	≥ \$175 million	ESF; INCLE	Women and girls; AIHRC; MOWA; women-led NGOs; ROL/GBV(GBV) ¹
2011	"maximum extent practicable"	ESF; INCLE	Women and girls; AIHRC; MOWA; women-led NGOs; ROL/GBV
2012	"maximum extent practicable"	ESF; INCLE	Women and girls; AIHRC; MOWA; women-led NGOs
2013	"maximum extent practicable"	ESF; INCLE	Women and girls; AIHRC; MOWA; women-led NGOs
2014	"shall be prioritized"	ESF; INCLE	Women and girls; implementation of US Embassy Kabul Gender Strategy
	≥ \$25 million	ASFF	Women in the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
2015	"shall be prioritized"	ESF; INCLE	Women and girls; implementation of US Embassy Kabul Gender Strategy
	≥ \$25 million	ASFF	Women in the ANDSF
2016	≥ \$10 million; \$25 million goal	ASFF	Women in the ANDSF
2017	≥ \$10 million; \$25 million goal	ASFF	Women in the ANDSF
2018	≥ \$10 million; \$41 million goal	ASFF	Women in the ANDSF
2019	"shall be made available"	ESF; INCLE	Women and girls
	≥ \$10 million; \$25 million goal	ASFF	Women in the ANDSF
2020	"shall be made available"	ESF; INCLE	Women and girls
	≥ \$10 million; \$45.5 million goal	ASFF	Women in the ANDSF
2021	"shall be made available"	ESF; INCLE	Women and girls
	≥ \$10 million; \$29.1 million goal	ASFF	Women in the ANDSF and female security personnel for future elections

Note: This table does not include approximately \$34 million which was made available to provide maternal health services to Afghan women through the Department of Health and Human Services from fiscal years 2004 to 2010. Numbers affected by rounding. Economic Support Fund (ESF); International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE); Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF); Rule of Law (ROL); Gender-Based Violence (GBV); Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC); Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA); National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

¹ "ROL/GBV" refers to congressionally directed support to Afghan women involved in Rule of Law, namely Afghan women investigators, police officers, prosecutors, judges, and social workers tasked with responding to gender-based violence (for example, see: Departments of Transportation and Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act 2010, Conference Report 111-366, p. 1472).

Source: SIGAR, *Greater Coordination Needed in Meeting Congressional Directives to Address and Report on the Needs of Afghan Women and Girls*, SIGAR Audit 10-13, July 30, 2010, pp. 3-4, 18-30; Department of Defense and Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act, 2011, Pub. L. 112-10, 125 STAT. 187; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2012, Pub. L. 112-74, Sec. 7046, 125 STAT. 1235; Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2013, Pub. L. 113-6 Sect. 7046 of Pub. L. 112-74 carried forward by Pub. L. 113-6, Sec. 1101 (a)(6); SIGAR analysis of the National Defense Authorization Acts and Consolidated Appropriations Acts for fiscal years 2014 through 2021, data for 2014-2019, published legislation for FY 2014-FY 2021; Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020, Pub. L. 116-94, 133 STAT. 2899, 2903.

APPENDIX C: RELEVANT U.S. STRATEGIES AND POLICIES

TABLE 10

RELEVANT U.S. STRATEGIES AND POLICIES			
Year	Agency/ Entity	Type/Title	Description
2003*	State	Mission Performance Plan for Afghanistan, FY 2003–2006	State's first mission performance plan to guide U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. According to GAO, the plan was organized around five strategic goals for the reconstruction effort. It also provided an estimate of the financial resources needed; described specific tactics and activities to be undertaken; assigned responsibility for each activity to USAID or other agencies housed within the U.S. embassy in Afghanistan; and defined baseline data, performance indicators, and targets for each performance goal.
2003	State & USAID	State/USAID Strategic Plan for FY 2004–2009	Identifies “a stable and democratic Afghanistan” as a key priority and four objectives in support of this aim: (1) the establishment of internal and external security to ensure economic reconstruction, political stability, and stem the rise in opium production; (2) the establishment of a stable, effective, and broadly representative central government; (3) economic development; and (4) humanitarian assistance. Women are not explicitly mentioned here. Also identifies “democracy and economic freedom in the Muslim world” as another key priority; notes that the agencies will work with Muslim countries “to advance economic reform, increase educational opportunities, and boost political participation, especially for women.”
2005	USAID	USAID/Afghanistan Strategic Plan for 2005–2010	Sets the “strategic direction for the years 2005–2010,” and notes that more detailed operational plans can be found in the mission's annual reports. Identifies “gender equity” as one of the strategic plan's core values: “USAID/Afghanistan has built gender-equity elements into every aspect of its program. It has formulated strategies and activities based on an analysis of how they affect both men and women, girls and boys.”
2008	USAID	Mission Order No 201.02: Gender and Women in Development	Establishes implementation procedures for USAID/Afghanistan's budgeting, programming, and reporting relative to gender, as well as women's earmarks. States that consideration of women's issues and/or gender disparities must be an integral part of activity design, and that activity documents must specify how it will address women/gender issues and expected impact. Also mandates that all performance management plans include output and outcome indicators to monitor the activity's impact on women and gender relations and, as applicable, report gender disaggregated data. Mandates, among other things, the establishment of a gender team to provide guidance, coordination, and support on gender issues for programming.
2009	USAID	USAID Automated Directives System Revision	Contains USAID's policy directives and mandatory procedures. Gender analysis is required to be integrated in strategic planning, project design and approval, procurement processes, and measurement and evaluation.
2009, 2011, 2012, and 2013	State & DOD	U.S. Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan	Provides guidance from the U.S. Chief of Mission and the Commander of U.S. Forces – Afghanistan to U.S. personnel, both civilian and military, on how to focus and execute the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. The plan “directs the prioritization of USG efforts and identifies areas for significant cooperation with the GIROA, ISAF, UNAMA, NATO, and other members of the international community.” 2009: Women's empowerment/advancement is not identified as one of 11 counterinsurgency “transformative effects” 2011: Improving the status of women is incorporated into all objectives and is listed as a campaign objective. The theory of change prioritizes women's increased political participation and access to justice: “Where possible, the USG seeks to improve women's access to justice and justice-sector institutions, as well as support women's participation in the political process and the development of female leaders. Throughout this two-pronged approach, U.S. programming seeks to improve the security, economic, and social well-being of Afghan women and girls.” 2012 & 2013: Gender is identified as a crosscutting effort. Advises the U.S. government to continue mainstreaming gender concerns into policies and programs.

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2010	State & USAID	Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review	Identifies the “protection and empowerment of women and girls [as] key to the foreign policy and security of the United States.” “To that end, women are at the center of our diplomacy and development efforts—not simply as beneficiaries, but also as agents of peace, reconciliation, development, growth, and stability. To foster and maximize the diplomatic and development outcomes we seek, we will integrate gender issues into policies and practices at State and USAID. We will ensure that gender is effectively addressed throughout all bureaus and missions, include gender in strategic planning and budget allocation, and develop indicators and evaluation systems to measure the impact of our programs and policies on women and girls.”
2010	State	Afghanistan and Pakistan Stabilization Strategy	Senator Barbara Boxer criticized the initial January 2010 document, expressing her disappointment that the “detailed, 30-page document that highlights everything from the importance of rehabilitating watersheds to expanding mobile banking system” only makes “one small reference to Afghan women.” The strategy was re-released in February 2010 with a new section, “Advancing the Rights of Afghan Women.”
2010	USAID	USAID Policy Framework 2011–2015	Identifies the promotion of gender equality and female empowerment as the policy’s first operational principle.
2011	White House	U.S. National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace, and Security	Identifies five high-level objectives and corresponding outcomes (based on UNSCR 1325) and tasks agencies with specific actions. Executive Order 13595 directs DOD, State, and USAID to implement the NAP and to report annually on progress made toward achieving the commitments contained in the NAP. Between 2011 and 2017, the Congress made several attempts to turn the policy into law, but none of the bipartisan attempts succeeded until the 2017 WPS Act.
2012	State	Policy Guidance on Promoting Gender Equality to Achieve our National Security and Foreign Policy Objectives	Identifies three mechanisms for promoting gender equality in department bureaus and embassies: (1) planning and budget development (2) programming, monitoring, and evaluation (e.g., integrating sex-disaggregated data into reporting mechanisms); and (3) management and training.
2012	USAID	Gender Equality & Female Empowerment Policy	USAID’s first updated agency policy on gender equality and female empowerment since the 1982 Policy Paper on Women in Development.
2012	USAID	Ending Child Marriage and Responding to the Needs of Married Children: The USAID Vision for Action	Informs USAID efforts to end gender-based violence while strengthening the agency’s commitment to children in adversity, gender equality, female empowerment, and youth development. Additionally, it provides guidance to USAID staff on how to best combat child marriage and address the needs of the more than 50 million children already married.
2012	USAID	Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally	The goal of the strategy is to marshal U.S. expertise and capacity to prevent and respond to gender-based violence globally, based on three guiding principles of prevention, protection, and accountability.
2012	U.S. Embassy Kabul	Gender Strategy	Written to ensure that the “entire U.S. Mission has a common strategic level understanding of gender priorities across sectors that is in line with Washington policy and in-country realities.” The five priority areas include: access to justice and security, leadership and civic engagement, economic development, education, and health.
2017	U.S. Congress	Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017	Developed to “promote the meaningful participation of women in mediation and negotiation processes seeking to prevent, mitigate, or resolve violent conflict.”
2019	White House	United States Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security	Seeks to “increase women’s meaningful leadership in political and civic life by helping to ensure they are empowered to lead and contribute, equipped with the necessary skills and support to succeed, and supported to participate through access to opportunities and resources.”
2019	U.S. Embassy Kabul	U.S. Embassy Kabul Gender Strategy	Articulates six goals: (1) secure the gains achieved protecting women’s rights; (2) increase the participation of women in government workforce, political process, and elections; (3) reduce levels of violence against women and bolster gender equality; (4) improve the quality of and access to education for women and girls; (5) ensure women and girls have access to high quality health care and services; and (6) empower female entrepreneurship and participation in the economy.

*According to GAO, from 2002–2005, USAID operated without a USAID assistance strategy for Afghanistan.

Source: GAO, *Afghanistan Reconstruction: Deteriorating Security and Limited Resources Have Impeded Progress; Improvements in U.S. Strategy Needed*, GAO-04-403, June 2004, p. 33; State and USAID, *Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2004–2009*, August 2003, p. 3; USAID/Afghanistan, *USAID/Afghanistan Strategic Plan: 2005–2010*, May 2005, p. 13; USAID, *Mission Order No 201.02: USAID Mission for Afghanistan*, March 16, 2008; USAID, *Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy*, March 2012, p. 4; U.S. Embassy Kabul and U.S. Forces – Afghanistan, *United States Government Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan*, February 2011, pp. i, 1; U.S. Embassy Kabul and U.S. Forces – Afghanistan, *United States Government Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan*, August 10, 2009; U.S. Embassy Kabul and U.S. Forces – Afghanistan, *Civil Military Strategic Framework*, March 2012, p. 12; State and USAID, *Leading Through Civilian Power: The First Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review*, March 2010, p. 23; State, *Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy*, January 2010; Senator Barbara Boxer, letter to President Barack Obama concerning “Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy,” U.S. Senate, January 22, 2010; State, *Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy*, February 2010; USAID, *Policy Framework 2011–2015*, p. iv; The White House Office of the Press Secretary, *Announcing the U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security*, December 19, 2011; White House, Office of the Press Secretary, *Executive Order 13595: Instituting a National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security*, December 19, 2011; U.S. Department of State Policy Guidance, *Promoting Gender Equality to Achieve our National Security and Foreign Policy Objectives*, March 2012; USAID, *Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy*, March 2012, p. 1; USAID, “Fact Sheet: USAID’s Vision for Action on Child Marriage,” last updated February 12, 2013; USAID, *Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally*, 2012; U.S. Embassy Kabul, *U.S. Embassy Kabul Gender Strategy*, September 2012, p. 1; United States Congress, *Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017*, Pub. L. 115-68, October 6, 2017; *United States Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security*, June 2019, p. 2; U.S. Embassy Kabul, *U.S. Embassy Kabul Gender Strategy*, 2019.

APPENDIX D: U.S. PROGRAMS SUPPORTING WOMEN AND GIRLS OR GENDER EQUALITY GOALS, BY AGENCY

TABLE 11

USAID PROGRAMS THAT SPECIFICALLY AND PRIMARILY SUPPORTED AFGHAN WOMEN AND GIRLS				
Name of Program	Initiated	Completed	Amount Disbursed	Sector
Afghan Women Weaving a Future	2004	2006	\$1.9 million	Economic Participation
Promotion of Women Enterprise Development	2005	2007	\$4.9 million	Economic Participation
Promote—Women in the Economy (WIE)	2015	2020	\$70.7 million	Economic Participation
Rehabilitation and Restoration of Women's Dorms - University of Kabul	2004	2008	\$11.7 million	Education
Social Benefits Program for Afghan Women Weavers Future	2008	2011	\$2.3 million	Education
Sardar Kabuli Girls School Utilities and Site Improvements	2012	2013	\$1.9 million	Education
Afghanistan's Global Partnership for Education Program	2012	2019	\$15.8 million	Education
Afghanistan Reads	2013	2014	\$380 thousand	Education
Increasing Access to Basic Education and Gender Equality	2014	2020	\$77.4 million	Education
PROMOTE Scholarships PAPA	2015	2020	\$1.2 million	Education
Girls' Education Challenge Programme (GEC)	2016	2021	\$25 million	Education
Promote Scholarship Endowment Activity	2018	2023	\$50 million	Education
Communication for Behavior Change: Expanding Access to Private Sector Health Products and Services in Afghanistan (COMPRI-A)	2006	2012	\$36.9 million	Health
Community Midwifery Education	2006	2012	\$60.5 million	Health
Better Health for Afghan Mothers and Children Project	2008	2012	\$700 thousand	Health
Contraceptive Procurement (CCP)	2011	2018	\$13 million	Health
Gender-Based Violence Program Contribution to the World Health Organization	2015	2020	\$6.7 million	Health
HEMAYAT: Helping Mothers and Children Thrive	2015	2020	\$58.7 million	Health
Central Contraceptive Procurement	2015	2020	\$1.4 million	Health
Ambassador Small Grants Program to Support Gender Equality in Afghanistan	2009	2012	\$35.5 million	Justice
Support to Media Afghanistan for Rule of Law Programs	2012	2014	\$999.8 thousand	Justice
Safe House for At-Risk Women and Girls	2012	2014	\$503.4 thousand	Justice
MORE—Ministry of Women's Affairs Organizational Restructuring and Empowerment	2012	2016	\$10.7 million	Political Participation
Promote—Women's Leadership Development (WLD)	2014	2019	\$41.4 million	Political Participation
Promote—Musharikat	2015	2021	\$25.9 million	Political Participation
Promote—Women in Government	2015	2020	\$37.9 million	Political Participation
High-Level Women's Symposium (HLWS)	2016	2016	\$47 thousand	Political Participation

* SIGAR categorized U.S. programs by these sectors, for purposes of analyzing gender-related programs. However, for "economic participation," "political participation," and "access to justice," individual agencies do not use these terms to categorize programming; sector categorizations vary by agency.

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TABLE 12

USAID PROGRAMS WITH A COMPONENT TARGETING WOMEN AND GIRLS, BUT WHICH DID NOT PRIMARILY FOCUS ON WOMEN AND GIRLS

Name of Program	Initiated	Completed	Amount Disbursed	Sector
Agriculture, Rural Investment, And Enterprise Strengthening Program (ARIES)	2006	2009	\$99.1 million	Economic Participation
Technical Assistance Services to Implement the Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises (ASMED)	2006	2012	\$114 million	Economic Participation
Economic Growth and Governance Initiative (EGGI)	2009	2013	\$82 million	Economic Participation
Trade Access and Facilitation for Afghanistan (TAFA)	2009	2012	\$64 million	Economic Participation
RUFCOD- Rural Finance and Cooperative Development	2009	2012	\$40.9 million	Economic Participation
Land Reform in Afghanistan (LARA)	2011	2014	\$41.2 million	Economic Participation
Financial Access for Investing in the Development of Afghanistan (FAIDA)	2011	2017	\$111.6 million	Economic Participation
Trade Access and Facilitation for Afghanistan (TAFA II)	2012	2013	\$19.3 million	Economic Participation
Afghanistan Workforce Development Program (AWDP)	2012	2018	\$49.3 million	Economic Participation
Assistance in Building Afghanistan by Developing Enterprise (ABADE)	2012	2018	\$105 million	Economic Participation
Afghanistan Trade and Revenue Project (ATAR)	2013	2018	\$77.1 million	Economic Participation
Rebranding Afghanistan: Creating Jobs, Changing Perceptions, Empowering Women (RACCEW)	2015	2018	\$4.8 million	Economic Participation
Turquoise Mountain Smithsonian Exhibition	2015	2019	\$535.1 thousand	Economic Participation
The Goldozi Project	2018	2022	\$2.9 million	Economic Participation
Livelihood Advancement for Marginalized Population (LAMP)	2018	2022	\$1 million	Economic Participation
Establishing Kabul Carpet Export Center (KCEC)	2018	2021	\$5.6 million	Economic Participation
Trade Show Support (TSS) Activity	2018	2020	\$6.2 million	Economic Participation
Carpet and Jewelry Value Chains	2019	2023	\$1.4 million	Economic Participation
Recycling Plant Value Chain in Northern Afghanistan for Sustainable Job Creation Program	2019	2023	\$747.5 thousand	Economic Participation
Afghanistan Primary Education Program (APEP)	2003	2007	\$95.2 million	Education
Learning for Community Empowerment Program (LCEP-1) in Afghanistan	2004	2006	\$8.1 million	Education
Ghazi Boys and Karte Girls High Schools	2005	2006	\$598.1 thousand	Education
Financial Management Services for the American University of Afghanistan	2005	2010	\$42.1 million	Education
Partnership for Advancing Community Based Education in Afghanistan (PACE-A)	2006	2011	\$31 million	Education
Building Education Support System for Teacher (BESST)	2006	2011	\$99.8 million	Education
Kabul Schools Construction Program (KSP)	2007	2012	\$30.1 million	Education
BELT EQUIP II	2008	2017	\$116 million	Education
Construction of Health and Education Facilities	2008	2016	\$57.4 million	Education
Support to the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF)	2008	2013	\$41.9 million	Education
Learning for Community Empowerment Program (LCEP-2) in Afghanistan	2008	2013	\$50.3 million	Education
Strengthening Education in Afghanistan (SEA)	2010	2013	\$10.2 million	Education
Multi-Input Area Development Global Development Alliance (MIAD GDA)	2013	2018	\$21.4 million	Education
Support to the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF)	2013	2020	\$77.9 million	Education
Assessment of Learning Outcomes and Social Effects (ALSE) in Community-Based Education	2014	2018	\$6.3 million	Education
Strengthening Education in Afghanistan (SEA II)	2014	2020	\$38.5 million	Education
Afghan Children Read (ACR)	2016	2021	\$44.5 million	Education
Education Quality Reform in Afghanistan (EQRA)	2018	2023	\$46.9 million	Education
Rural Expansion of Afghanistan's Community-based Healthcare (REACH)	2003	2006	\$136.3 million	Health
Health Service Support Project (HSSP)	2006	2012	\$60 million	Health
Partnership Contracts for Health (PCH)	2008	2015	\$230.6 million	Health

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SUPPORT FOR GENDER EQUALITY: LESSONS FROM THE U.S. EXPERIENCE IN AFGHANISTAN

Name of Program	Initiated	Completed	Amount Disbursed	Sector
UNICEF Nutrition Program in Afghanistan	2008	2009	-*	Health
Health Care Improvement (HCI) Project	2009	2013	\$14 million	Health
Health Research Challenge for Impact: Reproductive Age Mortality Survey (RAMOS) II	2010	2011	-*	Health
Health Policy Project (HPP)	2011	2015	\$29.8 million	Health
Weekly Iron Folate Supplement Program	2014	2017	\$5.6 million	Health
Sustaining Health Outcomes through the Private Sector Plus (SHOPS PLUS)	2015	2020	\$9.8 million	Health
Delegated Cooperation for Nutrition	2015	2017	\$5 million	Health
Initiative for Hygiene, Sanitation and Nutrition (IHSAN)	2016	2021	\$43.7 million	Health
Afghanistan Rule of Law Project	2004	2009	\$44.3 million	Justice
Advancing Efforts for Reform and Civic Accountability (AERCA)	2009	2017	\$51.3 million	Justice
Rule of Law Stabilization—Informal	2010	2011	\$14.4 million	Justice
Rule of Law Stabilization—Informal (RLS-I)—Bridge/Follow On Project	2011	2012	\$10.3 million	Justice
Rule of Law Stabilization—Informal Component	2012	2014	\$15.1 million	Justice
Rule of Law Stabilization—Formal Component	2012	2014	\$22.2 million	Justice
Rule of Law Stabilization—Formal Justice Sector	2012	2012	\$299.3 thousand	Justice
SABA Media Organization and Watch on Basic Rights Afghanistan Organization	2012	2014	\$893.9 thousand	Justice
DCAR with DFID for MEC-ODG	2015	2019	\$2.9 million	Justice
Assistance for the Development of Afghan Legal Access and Transparency (ADALAT)	2016	2021	\$38.5 million	Justice
Voter Registration Project and Constitutional Loya Jirga	2003	2006	\$95.2 million	Political Participation
Building Independent Media in Afghanistan	2003	2006	\$6.4 million	Political Participation
Afghanistan Parliamentary Assistance Program (APAP)	2004	2011	\$29.4 million	Political Participation
Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (IPACS)	2005	2010	\$27.2 million	Political Participation
Support Increased Electoral Participation in Afghanistan	2008	2013	\$88.8 million	Political Participation
Support to the Electoral Process (STEP)	2008	2012	\$69 million	Political Participation
Enhancing Legal and Electoral Capacity for Tomorrow (ELECT)	2009	2013	\$58.5 million	Political Participation
Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (IPACS II)	2010	2014	\$44.7 million	Political Participation
Afghanistan Media Development and Empowerment Project (AMDEP)	2010	2013	\$31.8 million	Political Participation
Regional Afghan Municipalities Program for Urban Population (RAMP UP)—RC East	2010	2014	\$93.7 million	Political Participation
Regional Afghan Municipalities Program for Urban Population (RAMP UP)—RC South	2010	2014	\$100 million	Political Participation
Regional Afghan Municipalities Program for Urban Population (RAMP UP)—RC West	2010	2014	\$33.3 million	Political Participation
Kabul City Initiative (KCI)	2010	2013	\$44.1 million	Political Participation
Afghanistan Parliamentary Assistance Program (APAP)	2011	2011	\$4.6 million	Political Participation
Afghanistan Parliamentary Assistance Program (APAP)	2011	2013	\$4.9 million	Political Participation
Regional Afghan Municipalities Program for Urban Population (RAMP UP)—RC North	2011	2014	\$40 million	Political Participation
Afghanistan Parliamentary Assistance Program (APAP)	2012	2013	\$71.6 thousand	Political Participation
Afghan Civic Engagement Program (ACEP)	2013	2020	\$78.8 million	Political Participation
Assistance to Legislative Bodies of Afghanistan (ALBA)	2013	2018	\$24.6 million	Political Participation
Enhancing Legal and Electoral Capacity for Tomorrow (ELECT)	2013	2015	\$65.7 million	Political Participation
Strengthening Political Entities and Civil Society (SPECS)	2013	2016	\$17.8 million	Political Participation
Strong Hubs for Afghan Hope and Resilience (SHAHAR)	2014	2021	\$69.2 million	Political Participation
Promoting Conflict Resolution, Peace Building, and Enhanced Governance	2015	2021	\$10.3 million	Political Participation
Rasana—(Media)	2017	2020	\$8.5 million	Political Participation
Strengthening Civic Engagement in Elections in Afghanistan Activity (SCEEA)	2018	2021	\$12.5 million	Political Participation

SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

TABLE 13

STATE PROGRAMS THAT SPECIFICALLY AND PRIMARILY SUPPORTED AFGHAN WOMEN AND GIRLS				
Name of Program	Initiated	Completed	Amount Disbursed	Sector
Empowering Refugee Returnee and other Socially-Excluded Women in Afghanistan through Sustainable Agribusiness Opportunities and Rights-Based Activities in Parwan and Nangarhar Provinces	2011	2012	\$637.9 thousand	Economic Participation
Critical Skills Development Institute	2012	2013	\$167.3 thousand	Economic Participation
10 Home Shops	2012	2013	\$9.9 thousand	Economic Participation
Women's Resource Center Mazar-e Sharif	2012	2013	\$89.7 thousand	Economic Participation
Afghanistan's International Center for Afghan Women's Economic Development	2012	2014	\$25.6 thousand	Economic Participation
Vocational training program for women involving silk production	2012	2013	\$46.3 thousand	Economic Participation
Means business project	2012	2013	\$58.3 thousand	Economic Participation
Women's career skills program	2012	2013	\$44.7 thousand	Economic Participation
Carpet weaving, basic business and marketing training	2012	2013	\$214.8 thousand	Economic Participation
Young Women's Career Development Center (YWCDC)	2012	2014	\$14.8 thousand	Economic Participation
Weaving Opportunities for Women in Afghanistan	2012	2014	\$202.1 thousand	Economic Participation
Professional and Vocational Education Development Program	2012	2013	\$20.2 thousand	Economic Participation
Building Markets	2012	2013	\$267.6 thousand	Economic Participation
Vocational training program for women to weave carpets	2012	2013	\$43.2 thousand	Economic Participation
Business training to 40 women entrepreneurs	2012	2013	\$252.7 thousand	Economic Participation
Support to Female Handicraft Producers	2012	2014	\$206 thousand	Economic Participation
Marketing Afghanistan's Traditional Arts	2012	2014	\$129.1 thousand	Economic Participation
Central Asia Afghanistan Regional Women's Business Association (CAABWN)	2012	2014	\$83.7 thousand	Economic Participation
AUAF Support for ICWED's Conference on Women in Business	2013	2013	\$7 thousand	Economic Participation
Programming Support for AUAF's International Center for Afghan Women's Economic Development (ICAWED)	2013	2016	\$1.7 million	Economic Participation
Unifying our Voice	2015	2019	\$328.1 thousand	Economic Participation
Improving the Economic Independence of Women Protection Centers and Its Beneficiaries Through Market-Driven Entrepreneurship	2015	2017	\$424.6 thousand	Economic Participation
Sustainable Family Improvement Project Basic Education, Health Promotion and Leadership Development for Women	2011	2012	\$625.2 thousand	Education
Support for Afghan Women to Attend the Asian University for Women	2012	2013	\$100 thousand	Education
Asian University for Women Support Fund	2012	2016	\$1.1 million	Education
AUAF Women's Scholars Program	2012	2017	\$1.7 million	Education
Kapisa 'Girls in School' Campaign	2012	2012	\$3.1 thousand	Education
Internship Program for Mazar and Jalalabad Universities' Female Students	2012	2013	\$86 thousand	Education
English Language Computer and Tutoring Program	2012	2013	\$67.2 thousand	Education
Internship program for students in Herat University Computer Science Faculty	2012	2013	\$11.8 thousand	Education
Leadership Education for Afghan Women	2013	2020	\$1.2 million	Education
Support for Balkh University Women's Dorm	2013	2013	\$255 thousand	Education

Continued on the following page

SUPPORT FOR GENDER EQUALITY: LESSONS FROM THE U.S. EXPERIENCE IN AFGHANISTAN

Name of Program	Initiated	Completed	Amount Disbursed	Sector
Girls Dormitory English and Computer Center Balkh University	2013	2014	\$108.1 thousand	Education
Afghan and American Officially Accredited Women's High School in Kabul	2013	2014	\$125 thousand	Education
Provision of Intensive Basic English Language Study Program for Young Women in Sheberghan, Jawzjan Province	2013	2014	\$96.3 thousand	Education
Balkh Women's Dorm	2013	2015	\$7.7 million	Education
AUAF Scholarships	2013	2019	\$2.7 million	Education
Women's Leadership Fellowship	2016	2020	\$2 million	Education
AUW Scholarships FP (Education and Leadership Development for Young Women from Conflict Zones)	2017	2021	\$973.9 thousand	Education
Judicial Education Program for Afghan Women Judges	2004	2009	\$313.1 thousand	Justice
Women for Afghan Women Family Guidance Center in Kunduz	2010	2012	\$544.9 thousand	Justice
Transit Shelter for Victims of Gender-Based Violence	2010	2011	\$373.1 thousand	Justice
Protection and Promotion of Afghan Women's Rights	2011	2014	\$5.5 million	Justice
Developing the Capacities of Women Judges as Leaders, Trainers, and Catalysts for Enhancing the Rule of Law and Equal Justice in Afghanistan	2011	2014	\$1.1 million	Justice
Women for Afghan Women Family Guidance Center and Shelter in Kapisa	2011	2011	\$146.3 thousand	Justice
Women Correction Officer Training Nebraska	2011	2011	\$9 thousand	Justice
Kabul Female Prison Grant	2012	2014	\$455.3 thousand	Justice
Transit Shelter for Victims of Gender-Based Violence	2013	2013	\$2.3 million	Justice
Women for Afghan Women Transitional Houses	2013	2022	\$3.6 million	Justice
Advancing women's rights and social justice in Afghanistan	2013	2015	\$101.2 thousand	Justice
Herat Children Support Center	2013	2019	\$2.2 million	Justice
Afghan Women's Shelter Fund	2014	Ongoing	\$44.6 million	Justice
Afghanistan Children Support Center Fund (ACSCF)	2014	2020	\$10.1 million	Justice
Supporting Access to Justice in Afghanistan	2014	2017	\$17.1 million	Justice
Women Protection Center (WPC)	2015	2017	\$621 thousand	Justice
Improving the sustainability of an Afghan women's shelter	2015	2019	\$217.8 thousand	Justice
Afghan Women's Leadership Initiative in Support for Adolescent Girls	2015	2020	\$6.9 million	Justice
Kabul Female Prison and Detention Center Grant	2015	2018	\$701.6 thousand	Justice
Supporting Access to Justice in Afghanistan II	2017	2020	\$20.3 million	Justice
Herat Children Support Center	2019	Ongoing	\$276.4 thousand	Justice
Kabul Female Prison and Detention Center Grant	2019	Ongoing	\$79.9 thousand	Justice
Afghanistan Children Support Center Fund (ACSCF)	2020	Ongoing	\$1.4 million	Justice
Afghan Women's Empowerment (AWE) Grants Program	2010	2014	\$4.5 million	Political Participation
Women's Advocacy and Public Awareness	2012	2013	\$7 thousand	Political Participation
Agenda Leaders	2012	2013	\$131.3 thousand	Political Participation
Three weekly women programs	2012	2013	\$170.8 thousand	Political Participation
Leadership education for Afghan women	2013	2017	\$1.2 million	Political Participation
Media & Communications Skills for Women Parliamentarians	2013	2014	\$50 thousand	Political Participation

SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

TABLE 14

STATE PROGRAMS WITH A COMPONENT TARGETING WOMEN AND GIRLS, BUT WHICH DID NOT PRIMARILY FOCUS ON WOMEN AND GIRLS				
Name of Program	Initiated	Completed	Amount Disbursed	Sector
Kandahar and Jawzjan Integrated and Sustainable Services for Returnees and Host Communities	2012	2013	\$1.1 million	Economic Participation
Fergana Valley Textile Industry Development/Mentoring RCE grant	2012	2014	\$281.1 thousand	Economic Participation
Livelihood and Protection Activities in Kabul and Nangarhar	2013	2014	\$1.4 million	Economic Participation
Building Capacity for Improvement	.*	.*	\$98.8 thousand	Education
Literacy Program	2011	2012	\$3 million	Education
U.S.-Afghan LLM/Certificate Program for Afghan Legal Educators	2004	2008	\$1.7 million	Justice
Justice Sector Support Program (JSSP)	2007	2017	\$349.5 million	Justice
Afghan Legal Educators Program (UW-ALEP)	2008	2012	\$5.5 million	Justice
Supporting the National Justice Sector Strategy of Afghanistan: Improving Security, Legal Rights and Legal Services for the Afghan People (NJSS)	2010	2014	\$12.4 million	Justice
Increasing Access to Justice for Family Law Clients and Strengthening the Capacity of Civil Society and Young Lawyers to Protect Human Rights	2011	2016	\$8.7 million	Justice
Access to Justice Small Grants Program	2011	2014	\$24.4 million	Justice
Building Rule of Law in Afghanistan	2011	2015	\$8.2 million	Justice
Friends of the Public-Private Partnership for Justice Reform in Afghanistan (FPJRA)	2011	2016	\$2.7 million	Justice
Afghanistan Legal Education Project (ALEP)	2012	2017	\$6.1 million	Justice
Legal Education Support Program-Afghanistan (LESPA)	2012	2017	\$13 million	Justice
Project to Improve Access to Justice in Nangarhar, Laghman, Kunar, Helmand and Kandahar, and the Justice Center in Parwan and Counter Narcotics Justice Center, while assisting the Government of Afghanistan to Strengthen its Criminal Legal Aid System	2014	2017	\$1.2 million	Justice
Jessup International Law Moot Court Competition-Afghanistan	2014	2016	\$781 thousand	Justice
Legal Aid through Legal Education (LALE)	2015	2020	\$10.1 million	Justice
Building and Consolidating Rule of Law in Afghanistan in the Transition Decade	2015	2019	\$12.1 million	Justice
Legal Education for Visiting Afghan Scholars Program (LEVAS)	2015	2018	\$2 million	Justice
Afghanistan Jessup Moot Court Program (AJMP)	2016	2017	\$541.8 thousand	Justice
Project to Improve Access to Justice by Providing Access to Legal Aid in Nangarhar, Laghman, Kunar, Helmand, and Kandahar Provinces, and in the Justice Center in Parwan, Counter Narcotics Justice Center, and Anti-Corruption Justice Center, while Assisting the Government of Afghanistan to Strengthen its Criminal Legal Aid System	2017	2022	\$1.7 million	Justice
Legal Education Support Program-Afghanistan II (LESPA II)	2017	2020	\$5.2 million	Justice
Afghanistan Legal Education Program II (ALEP II)	2017	2020	\$1.6 million	Justice
Friends of the Public-Private Partnership for Justice Reform in Afghanistan (FPJRA)	2017	2021	\$743 thousand	Justice
Justice Sector Support Program (JSSP)	2017	Ongoing	\$28.8 million	Justice
Kabul Children Support Center Infrastructure Renovation Project	2018	Ongoing	\$749.8 thousand	Justice
Building and Consolidating Rule of Law in Afghanistan in the Transition Decade	2019	2022	\$1.3 million	Justice

TABLE 15

DOD PROGRAMS WITH A GENDER COMPONENT			
Name of Program	Initiated	Completed	Amount Disbursed
Commander's Emergency Response Program projects	2004	2017	\$81.9 million
Infrastructure Support for Women in the ANDSF	2014	2019	\$44.6 million

APPENDIX E: ACRONYMS

Acronym	Meaning
ALCS	Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey
ANDSF	Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
ANP	Afghan National Police
DOD	U.S. Department of Defense
EQUIP	Education Quality Improvement Program
INL	Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (State)
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
UNAMA	UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNICEF	UN Children's Fund
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

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 80. Male member of the provincial council, Uruzgan Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, August 16, 2020; male member of a community development council, Bamyan Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, August 19, 2020; female participant of a USAID-funded program, Farah Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, August 13, 2020.
 81. Male member of provincial council, Uruzgan Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, August 16, 2020.
 82. Male member of a community development council, Nangarhar Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, August 16, 2020.
 83. Male indirect beneficiary of a USAID-funded program, Bamyan Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, August 17, 2020.
 84. Female resident, Badakhshan Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, September 10, 2020.
 85. The Asia Foundation, *A Survey of the Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2019*, 2019, p. 68.
 86. Male member of a community development council, Kunar Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, August 11, 2020.
 87. Female member of a community development council, Kunduz Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, September 10, 2020.
 88. Female resident, Jawzjan Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, September 10, 2020.
 89. President George W. Bush, “Defeating the Terrorist Threat to the United States,” National Security Presidential Directive 9, October 25, 2001, pp. 1–2; Condoleezza Rice, “Declaratory Policy on Afghanistan,” memorandum to the Cabinet, *Rumsfeld Papers*, September 27, 2001, p. 1.
 90. President George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President at Signing Ceremony for Afghan Women and Children Relief Act of 2001,” transcript from the White House archives, Washington, DC, December 12, 2001.
 91. Laura Bush, “Radio Address by Mrs. Laura Bush to the Nation,” transcript from the State archive, Crawford, TX, November 17, 2001.
 92. Afghan Women and Children Relief Act of 2001, Pub. L 107-81, 115 Stat. 811 (2001).
 93. See, for example, Sima Samar, “Feminism, Peace, and Afghanistan,” *Journal of International Affairs*, September 11, 2019; Kim Berry, “The Symbolic Use of Afghan Women in the War on Terror,” *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2003), p. 138; Kevin J. Ayotte and Mary E. Husain, “Securing Afghan Women: Neocolonialism, Epistemic Violence, and the Rhetoric of the Veil,” *NWSA Journal*, vol. 17, no. 3 (Autumn 2005), p. 113.
 94. John R. Allen and Vanda Felbab-Brown, “The fate of women’s rights in Afghanistan,” The Brookings Institution, 19A: The Brookings Gender Equality Series, September 2020.
 95. Patricia Gossman, associate director for the Asia Division, Human Rights Watch, SIGAR interview, January 16, 2020.
 96. Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Kim C. Field, professor of practice at the Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University, correspondence with SIGAR, November 9, 2020.
 97. In 1998, in the first trip by a secretary of state to South Asia in 14 years, Secretary Albright met with Afghan women and girls at a refugee camp in Peshawar, Pakistan, to raise awareness of the Taliban’s abuses. Other key officials working to ensure an Afghanistan policy grounded in women’s and human rights were career Foreign Service officer Theresa Loar and Senator Dianne Feinstein. Feminist NGOs, like the Sisterhood Is Global Institute and the Feminist Majority Foundation, also worked to raise awareness about Taliban atrocities. See Kelly Shannon, *U.S. Foreign Policy and Muslim Women’s Human Rights*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), pp. 131–133, 136, 146–147, 152–154.
 98. Kelly Shannon, *U.S. Foreign Policy and Muslim Women’s Human Rights*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of

- Pennsylvania Press, 2018), pp. 153–154; Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 176, 182.
99. State, “Advancing the Rights of Women and Girls: Keys to a Better Future for Afghanistan,” fact sheet, January 29, 2010. This policy statement did not specify which development indices it was referring to, but probably drew on the UN Development Program’s Gender Inequality Index and Gender Development Index, and the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index. Higher-level policies also pointed to the correlation between peace and prosperity, and women’s empowerment in a given country. See, for example: White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, May 2010, pp. 37–38.
 100. World Economic Forum, *The Global Gender Gap Report 2015*, 2015, p. 36. Similarly, a 2012 literature review found that women’s empowerment and economic development can be mutually reinforcing. However, the review concluded that neither is “the magic bullet it is sometimes made out to be.” Economic development alone will not ensure advancement in women’s status and rights, it said—and interventions that favor women and girls sometimes redistribute resources at the expense of men and boys. The author concluded that policymakers should have more realistic expectations regarding these tradeoffs, while also committing to very long-term actions to empower women—without which deep gender inequities will persist. See Esther Duflo, “Women Empowerment and Economic Development,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 2012, vol. 50, no. 4, p. 1076.
 101. U.S. Embassy Kabul, *U.S. Embassy Kabul Gender Strategy*, no date (n.d.), p. 3. This document was attached to an August 2019 cable (U.S. Embassy Kabul, “Afghanistan: U.S. Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security,” Kabul 004040 cable, August 8, 2019). For studies on the relationship between gender equality and state security, see, for example: Mary Caprioli, “Primed for Violence: The Role of Gender Inequality in Predicting Internal Conflict,” *International Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (2005), pp. 171–172; Eric Melander, “Gender Equality and Intrastate Armed Conflict,” *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 4 (2005), p. 695; Valerie M. Hudson, Bonnie Ballif-Spanvill, Mary Caprioli, and Chad F. Emmett, *Sex & World Peace*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. 110, 112, 114; Marie O’Reilly, Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, and Thania Paffenholz, “Reimagining Peacemaking: Women’s Roles in Peace Processes,” *International Peace Institute*, June 2015, p. 6.
 102. State and USAID, *Leading Through Civilian Power: The First Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review*, March 2010, p. 92.
 103. U.S. Embassy Kabul, *Mission Performance Plan FY 2006*, April 12, 2004, p. 22; U.S. Embassy Kabul, *Mission Performance Plan FY 2007*, April 4, 2005, pp. 26–27, 30–31, 39, 45–46; USAID/Afghanistan, *USAID/Afghanistan Strategic Plan: 2005–2010*, May 2005, p. 22; State, *Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy*, February 2010, pp. 22–24; USAID/Afghanistan, *U.S. Foreign Assistance for Afghanistan: Post Performance Management Plan 2011–2015*, October 2, 2010, p. 6.
 104. U.S. Embassy Kabul, *Mission Performance Plan FY 2006*, April 12, 2004, p. 22; USAID/Afghanistan, *U.S. Foreign Assistance for Afghanistan: Post Performance Management Plan 2011–2015*, October 2, 2010, p. 6, Annex III, p. 4, and Annex IV, p. 5.
 105. U.S. Embassy Kabul’s strategic plans for FY 2009 and FY 2010, drafted in 2007 and 2008, respectively, contained minimal reference to women—except to prioritize “primary health care for women and children.” However, the FY 2011 plan, drafted in 2009, included several targets specific to women and girls, regarding access to education and justice, and training women police. U.S. Embassy Kabul, *FY 2009 Mission Performance Plan*, May 30, 2007, pp. 5, 11; U.S. Embassy Kabul, *FY 2010 Mission Performance Plan*, May 12, 2008, pp. 5, 7, 8, 12; U.S. Embassy Kabul, *FY 2011 Mission Performance Plan*, February 26, 2009, pp. 4, 7, 11, 17.
 106. The strategy also pointed to the promotion of women’s rights as a means to “strengthen Afghan communities against the reach of extremists,” and efforts to ensure that the reintegration of ex-combatants would not undermine women’s rights—likely reflecting concerns that reintegrated and reconciled Taliban fighters could endanger the hard-won gains for women’s rights. State, *Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy*, February 2010, pp. 22–24; State, *Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy*, January 2010; Senator Barbara Boxer, letter to President Barack Obama concerning “Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy,” U.S. Senate, January 22, 2010.
 107. U.S. Embassy Kabul and U.S. Forces – Afghanistan, *United States Government Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan*, August 10, 2009.
 108. U.S. Embassy Kabul and U.S. Forces – Afghanistan, *United States Government Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan*, February 2011, pp. ii, 28; State, *Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy*, February 2010, p. 22; Government of Afghanistan, *National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) 2007–2017*, 2007, pp. 25, 35, 62, 74, 84.
 109. SIGAR, *Greater Coordination Needed in Meeting Congressional Directives to Address and Report on the Needs of Afghan Women and Girls*, SIGAR Audit 10-13, July 30, 2010, pp. 1–4.
 110. Department of Defense and Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act 2011, Pub. L. No. 112-10, 125 Stat. 187 (2011); Consolidated Appropriations Act 2012, Pub. L. No. 112-74, 125 Stat. 1235 (2011).
 111. Helena Malikiyar, political analyst, SIGAR interview, June 1, 2020.
 112. Ben Acheson, independent consultant and former director of the Office of NATO’s Senior Civilian Representative, correspondence with SIGAR, October 6, 2020.

113. U.S. Embassy Kabul, *Mission Performance Plan FY 2006*, April 12, 2004, p. 22; U.S. Embassy Kabul, *Mission Performance Plan FY 2007*, April 4, 2005, pp. 26–27, 30–31, 39, 45–46; USAID/Afghanistan, *USAID/Afghanistan Strategic Plan: 2005–2010*, May 2005, p. 22; State, *Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy*, February 2010, pp. 22–24; USAID/Afghanistan, *U.S. Foreign Assistance for Afghanistan: Post Performance Management Plan 2011–2015*, October 2, 2010, p. 6.
114. U.S. Embassy Kabul, *Mission Performance Plan FY 2006*, April 12, 2004; U.S. Embassy Kabul, *Mission Performance Plan FY 2007*, April 4, 2005; USAID/Afghanistan, *USAID/Afghanistan Strategic Plan: 2005–2010*, May 2005, p. 22; State, *Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy*, February 2010, pp. 6, 23.
115. Government of Afghanistan, *National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) 2007–2017*, 2007, pp. 7–10, 26–27, 40–42, 50–51, 63–65, 74–76, 85–87.
116. U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Afghanistan Reconstruction: Despite Some Progress, Deteriorating Security and Other Obstacles Continue to Threaten Achievement of U.S. Goals*, GAO-05-742, July 2005; SIGAR, *Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-16-58-LL, September 2016, p. 32.
117. NATO, *Lisbon Summit Declaration*, November 20, 2010, p. 3.
118. White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by the President on Afghanistan,” May 27, 2014; SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, October 30, 2011, p. 74.
119. State officials told SIGAR that Afghanistan is a prime case study for the NAP because all the objectives of the NAP are relevant to the situation for Afghan women. SIGAR, *Afghan Women: Comprehensive Assessments Needed to Determine and Measure DOD, State, and USAID Progress*, SIGAR 15-24-AR, December 2014, pp. 3–4; White House, *United States National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security*, December 2011, p. 1.
120. White House, *United States National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security*, December 2011, p. 6. Though this condition was part of the U.S. position on reintegration and reconciliation at the time, reintegration and reconciliation efforts did not bear much fruit. See SIGAR, *Reintegration of Ex-Combatants: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, SIAR-19-58-LL, September 2019, pp. 23–24, 34, 53, 57, 65, 89.
121. Hillary Clinton, “Testimony on Afghanistan and Pakistan,” opening remarks before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, October 27, 2011.
122. White House, *United States National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security*, December 2011, p. 23; SIGAR, *Afghan Women: Comprehensive Assessments Needed to Determine and Measure DOD, State, and USAID Progress*, SIGAR 15-24-AR, December 2014, pp. 4, 11.
123. UN Security Council, *Resolution 1325 (2000)*, October 31, 2000, p. 1; U.S. Institute of Peace, *What Is UNSCR 1325?*, n.d.; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2019, H.J. Res. 31, pp. 363–367; Women, Peace, and Security Act, 2017, Pub. L. No. 115-68, 131 Stat. 1202 (2017).
124. SIGAR analysis of the National Defense Authorization Acts and Consolidated Appropriations Acts for fiscal years 2014 through 2021, data for 2014–2019, published legislation for FY 2014–FY 2021.
125. Human Rights Watch, “Re: US strategy for supporting women’s rights in Afghanistan,” letter to U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, October 19, 2012.
126. Ambassador Franz-Michael S. Mellbin, former European Union Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, correspondence with SIGAR, November 16, 2020.
127. U.S. Embassy Kabul, *U.S. Embassy Kabul Gender Strategy*, September 2012, pp. 1, 3, 4.
128. State official, SIGAR interview, January 28, 2020; State official, correspondence with SIGAR, December 2, 2020.
129. The embassy’s strategy was also intended to align with the *Afghanistan National Development Strategy*, its *Gender Equity Strategy*, and the National Priority Programs. SIGAR, *Greater Coordination Needed in Meeting Congressional Directives to Address and Report on the Needs of Afghan Women and Girls*, SIGAR 10-13-AR, July 30, 2010, pp. 14, 35; U.S. Embassy Kabul, *U.S. Embassy Kabul Gender Strategy*, September 2012, electronic p. 4.
130. U.S. Embassy Kabul, *U.S. Embassy Kabul Gender Strategy*, September 2012, p. 1; State, *Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy*, February 2010, pp. 22–23.
131. U.S. Embassy Kabul, *U.S. Embassy Kabul Gender Strategy*, September 2012, p. 6.
132. SIGAR, *Afghan Women: Comprehensive Assessments Needed to Determine and Measure DOD, State, and USAID Progress*, SIGAR 15-24-AR, December 2014, electronic p. 3, p. 3; State official, SIGAR interview, January 28, 2020; State official, correspondence with SIGAR, December 2, 2020.
133. SIGAR, *Afghan Women: Comprehensive Assessments Needed to Determine and Measure DOD, State, and USAID Progress*, SIGAR 15-24-AR, December 2014, p. 8; former and current interagency gender working group co-chairs, SIGAR interview, December 9, 2013.
134. State official, SIGAR interview, January 28, 2020; State political officer focused on human rights, SIGAR interview, January 28, 2020; SIGAR, *Afghan Women: Comprehensive Assessments Needed to Determine and Measure DOD, State, and USAID Progress*, SIGAR 15-24-AR, December 2014, pp. 8–9.
135. SIGAR, *Afghan Women: Comprehensive Assessments Needed to Determine and Measure DOD, State, and USAID Progress*, SIGAR 15-24-AR, December 2014, p. 9; State official, correspondence with SIGAR, March 6, 2016; State official, SIGAR interview, January 28, 2020; State official, correspondence with SIGAR, December

- 2, 2020.
136. SIGAR, *Afghan Women: Comprehensive Assessments Needed to Determine and Measure DOD, State, and USAID Progress*, SIGAR 15-24-AR, December 2014, p. 9; State official, SIGAR interview, January 28, 2020; State political officer focused on human rights, SIGAR interview, January 28, 2020; State official, correspondence with SIGAR, December 2, 2020.
 137. State official, SIGAR interview, January 28, 2020; State official, correspondence with SIGAR, December 2, 2020.
 138. State, response to SIGAR data call, September 15, 2020; State official, SIGAR interview, January 28, 2020.
 139. U.S. Embassy Kabul, *U.S. Embassy Kabul Gender Strategy*, September 2012, pp. 1, 6, 7, 10.
 140. These actions included “support alliances and networks between activists, businesswomen, and politicians” and “engage and enhance legal aid providers.” U.S. Embassy Kabul, *U.S. Embassy Kabul Gender Strategy*, September 2012, pp. 2–4.
 141. SIGAR, *Afghan Women: Comprehensive Assessments Needed to Determine and Measure DOD, State, and USAID Progress*, SIGAR 15-24-AR, December 2014, p. 10; U.S. Embassy Kabul, *U.S. Embassy Kabul Gender Strategy*, September 2012, p. 6.
 142. Former and current interagency gender working group co-chairs, SIGAR interview, December 9, 2013; SIGAR, *Afghan Women: Comprehensive Assessments Needed to Determine and Measure DOD, State, and USAID Progress*, SIGAR 15-24-AR, December 2014, pp. 10–11.
 143. Women, Peace, and Security Act, 2017, Pub. L. No. 115-68, 131 Stat. 1202 (2017).
 144. Michelle Barsa, senior expert on gender and Afghanistan, SIGAR interview, December 16, 2019.
 145. White House, *United States Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security*, June 2019, pp. 2, 8, 10, 11, 13–14; USAID, *Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy*, March 2012, pp. 4, 11, 14; USAID, correspondence with SIGAR, November 12, 2020.
 146. State, response to SIGAR data call, September 15, 2020. Although IGWG co-chairs told SIGAR in 2013 that the strategy would be revised, this was not done until 2019. Former and current interagency gender working group co-chairs, SIGAR interview, December 9, 2013.
 147. U.S. Embassy Kabul, *U.S. Embassy Kabul Gender Strategy*, 2019, p. 3.
 148. U.S. Embassy Kabul, *U.S. Embassy Kabul Gender Strategy*, 2019, pp. 3, 7–19.
 149. USAID, correspondence with SIGAR, November 12, 2020; State, “Standard Foreign Assistance Master Indicator List (MIL),” n.d.
 150. U.S. Embassy Kabul, *U.S. Embassy Kabul Gender Strategy*, 2019, pp. 17–18.
 151. USAID, correspondence with SIGAR, November 12, 2020; State, *Standard Foreign Assistance Master Indicator List (MIL)*, n.d.
 152. While some Council members have received U.S. government funding, that funding comes from the respective U.S. agency, not through the Council umbrella. State, correspondence with SIGAR, December 3, 2020; State, correspondence with SIGAR, December 15, 2020; State, “U.S.-Afghan Women’s Council: Mission,” accessed January 5, 2021.
 153. Female member of the Afghan Parliament, Nangarhar Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, September 1, 2020.
 154. Female member of a civil society organization, Kunduz Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, August 16, 2020. A male provincial council member said, “All components of U.S. support have proved beneficial to women. . . . [U.S.] support has raised public awareness about women’s rights.” Male member of the provincial council, Uruzgan Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, August 16, 2020.
 155. The National Solidarity Program is a multi-billion-dollar development program in Afghanistan that created democratically elected community development councils and funded small-scale development projects. It is funded primarily through the multilateral Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), which is administered by the World Bank. Andrew Beath, Fotini Christia, and Ruben Enikolopov, *The National Solidarity Program: Assessing the Effects of Community-Driven Development in Afghanistan*, World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 7415, September 2015, p. 10; SIGAR, *Afghanistan’s National Solidarity Program Has Reached Thousands of Afghan Communities, but Faces Challenges that Could Limit Outcomes*, SIGAR Audit-11-8, March 22, 2011, p. 1; female member of the provincial council, Khost Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, September 10, 2020.
 156. Male member of the provincial council, Bamyan Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, August 17, 2020.
 157. Male member of the Afghan Parliament, Kunar Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, September 3, 2020.
 158. Female member of a civil society organization, Farah Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, August 17, 2020.
 159. Female participant of a USAID-funded program, Kandahar Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, August 16, 2020; male member of a community development council, Kunar Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, August 11, 2020; female member of a community development council, Kunduz Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, September 10, 2020; female resident, Jawzjan Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, September 10, 2020.
 160. Male member of a community development council, Balkh Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, September 2, 2020.
 161. Female member of the provincial council, Balkh Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, August 18, 2020.

162. Male member of a community development council, Nangarhar Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, August 12, 2020.
163. Male member of the provincial council, Uruzgan Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, August 16, 2020.
164. Male member of a civil society organization, Kandahar Province, SIGAR-commissioned interview, August 19, 2020.
165. President George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President at Signing Ceremony for Afghan Women and Children Relief Act of 2001,” transcript from the White House archives, December 12, 2001; John R. Allen and Vanda Felbab-Brown, “The fate of women’s rights in Afghanistan,” The Brookings Institution, 19A: The Brookings Gender Equality Series, September 2020.
166. “Afghan Women and Girls: Building the Future of Afghanistan,” Joint Hearing before the Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs and the Subcommittee on International Operations and Organizations, Human Rights, Democracy, and Global Women’s Issues of the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, 111th Cong., February 23, 2010, pp. 1–2 (statement of Senator Barbara Boxer) and pp. 3–4 (statement of Senator Roger F. Wicker).
167. Former senior USAID official, correspondence with SIGAR, November 18, 2020.
168. Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, international consultant and gender specialist, SIGAR interview, December 6, 2019.
169. Jennifer Heath, “Introduction,” in *Land of the Unconquerable: The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women*, ed. Jennifer Heath and Ashraf Zahedi (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), p. 6.
170. Ashley Jackson, independent academic researcher on Afghanistan, SIGAR interview, October 21, 2019.
171. Christoph Zürcher, *Meta-Review of Evaluations of Development Assistance to Afghanistan, 2008–2018: Chapeau Paper*, March 2020, pp. 6–7, 12.
172. Christoph Zürcher, University of Ottawa, SIGAR interview, May 20, 2020.
173. SIGAR, *Afghan Women: Comprehensive Assessments Needed to Determine and Measure DOD, State, and USAID Progress*, SIGAR 15-24, December 2014, electronic p. 2; SIGAR, *Greater Coordination Needed in Meeting Congressional Directives to Address and Report on the Needs of Afghan Women and Girls*, SIGAR Audit 10-13, July 30, 2010, p. i.
174. This amount includes 29 DOD infrastructure programs. SIGAR did not include USAID or State agricultural programming in this analysis. SIGAR analysis of USAID program documentation; SIGAR analysis of USAID response to SIGAR data call, July 6, 2020; SIGAR analysis of State response to SIGAR data call, July 2, 2020; DOD, *Infrastructure Support for Women in the ANDSF FY 2014–2019*, December 2019, p. 1.
175. SIGAR referenced USAID’s pipeline report—an internal document that tracks USAID programming—as well as data provided by agencies to calculate total amounts disbursed for each sector. SIGAR determined which program had a gender component based on a review of data provided by USAID and State, as well as project documents, including annual reports, final reports, final evaluations, and fact sheets. See Appendix A, Methodology, for further information.
176. SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, October 31, 2020, pp. 45, 202.
177. USAID, correspondence with SIGAR, November 12, 2020.
178. SIGAR, *Afghan Women: Comprehensive Assessments Needed to Determine and Measure DOD, State, and USAID Progress*, SIGAR 15-24, December 2014, electronic p. 2, pp. 19–20.
179. SIGAR, *Afghan Women: Comprehensive Assessments Needed to Determine and Measure DOD, State, and USAID Progress*, SIGAR 15-24, December 2014, pp. 20–21.
180. USAID, *Audit of USAID/Afghanistan’s Rural Expansion of Afghanistan’s Community-Based Healthcare (REACH) Program*, August 16, 2006.
181. For the purposes of this report’s analysis, SIGAR categorized State and USAID programs in five main sectors: health, education, political participation, access to justice, and economic participation. This categorization aligns with most U.S. strategy documents dealing with support to Afghan women and girls. However, the categorization does not align exactly with the ways in which State and USAID categorize and code programming. For instance, this report’s “political participation” sector includes USAID programs coded as Civil Society, Democracy and Governance, Elections, and Cross-Cutting. See this report’s Appendix A, Methodology for further clarification.
182. To identify a list of DOD Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP) projects that included some form of support for women, girls, and gender equality, we searched the project descriptions of a comprehensive database of CERP projects from FY 2004 to the second quarter of FY 2017; we found 1,579 projects out of 57,604 total CERP projects. SIGAR analysis of CERP data from DOD, in response to SIGAR data call, October 2017; SIGAR, *Women in the Afghan Security Forces: Better Planning and Program Oversight Could Have Helped DOD Ensure Funds Contributed to Recruitment, Retention, and Integration*, Audit 20-04, 2020.
183. This amount includes 1,579 DOD CERP projects that included some form of support for Afghan women and girls. SIGAR analysis of USAID program documentation; SIGAR analysis of USAID response to SIGAR data call, July 6, 2020; SIGAR analysis of State response to SIGAR data call, July 2, 2020; SIGAR analysis of CERP data from DOD, in response to SIGAR data call, October 2017.
184. World Bank, *National Reconstruction and Poverty Reduction—the Role of Women in Afghanistan’s Future*, March 2005, pp. xvi, 4; UN Women, *UN Women Engagement in Afghanistan*, n.d.; Government of Afghanistan, *Afghanistan National Development Strategy*, 2008, p. 148; UN, *Gender Mainstreaming: An*

- Overview*, 2002, p. v; UN Women, “Gender Mainstreaming,” n.d.; USAID, *Automated Directives System (ADS) 205—Integrating Gender Equality and Female Empowerment in USAID’s Program Cycle*, 2012, p. 14.
185. UN Women, “Gender Mainstreaming,” n.d.
 186. UN, *Gender Mainstreaming: An Overview*, 2002, p. 4; USAID, *ADS 205—Integrating Gender Equality and Female Empowerment in USAID’s Program Cycle*, 2012, p. 14.
 187. UN Women, *25 Years after Beijing: A review of the UN system’s support for the implementation of the Platform for Action from 2014–2019*, October 1, 2020, p. 14.
 188. Caroline Moser and Annalise Moser, “Gender Mainstreaming since Beijing: A Review of Success and Limitations in International Institutions,” *Gender and Development*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2005), p. 13; USAID, *ADS 205—Integrating Gender Equality and Female Empowerment in USAID’s Program Cycle*, 2012, p. 3; USAID, *Mission Order: USAID Mission for Afghanistan*, March 16, 2008.
 189. SIGAR, *Afghan Women: Comprehensive Assessments Needed to Determine and Measure DOD, State, and USAID Progress*, SIGAR 15-24, December 2014, p. 32; USAID, *Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy*, March 2012, pp. 1, 12.
 190. USAID, *Mission Order: USAID Mission for Afghanistan*, March 16, 2008, pp. 1–2.
 191. USAID, *ADS 205—Integrating Gender Equality and Female Empowerment in USAID’s Program Cycle*, 2012, pp. 10, 13, 14, 24.
 192. USAID, *Mission Order: USAID Mission for Afghanistan*, March 16, 2008, pp. 2–3.
 193. U.S. Embassy Kabul, *U.S. Embassy Kabul Gender Strategy*, September 2012, electronic p. 2.
 194. USAID, *Operational Policy: The Automated Directives System (ADS)*, n.d.
 195. USAID, *ADS 205—Integrating Gender Equality and Female Empowerment in USAID’s Program Cycle*, 2012, p. 5.
 196. State, correspondence with SIGAR, December 15, 2020.
 197. State, response to SIGAR data call, September 17, 2020.
 198. Caren Grown, Tony Addison, Finn Tarp, “Aid for Gender Equality and Development: Lessons and Challenges,” *Journal of International Development*, vol. 28, no. 3 (2016), pp. 312–313; Elizabeth Bryan and Jessica Varat, *Strategies for Promoting Gender Equity in Developing Countries*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, July 2008, p. 1; Lee Alexander Risby and Odile Keller, *Mainstreaming Gender Equality: A Road to Results or a Road to Nowhere?*, African Development Bank Group, 2012, pp. 7, 9; Berit Aasen, *Lessons from Evaluations of Women and Gender Equality in Development Cooperation*, Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR), October 2006, p. 8; Anna Wordsworth, *Moving to the Mainstream: Integrating Gender in Afghanistan’s National Policy*, AREU, February 2008, pp. 8, 48.
 199. Mary Fontaine, former senior gender advisor at USAID/Afghanistan, SIGAR interview, January 13, 2020; Caren Grown, Tony Addison, Finn Tarp, “Aid for Gender Equality and Development: Lessons and Challenges,” *Journal of International Development*, vol. 28, no. 3 (2016), pp. 312–313; Elizabeth Bryan and Jessica Varat, *Strategies for Promoting Gender Equity in Developing Countries*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, July 2008, p. 1; Lee Alexander Risby and Odile Keller, *Mainstreaming Gender Equality: A Road to Results or a Road to Nowhere?*, African Development Bank Group, 2012, pp. 7, 9; Berit Aasen, *Lessons from Evaluations of Women and Gender Equality in Development Cooperation*, NIBR, October 2006, p. 8; Anna Wordsworth, *Moving to the Mainstream: Integrating Gender in Afghanistan’s National Policy*, AREU, February 2008, pp. 8, 48.
 200. Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID), *Gender Mainstreaming: Can It Work for Women’s Rights?*, November 2004, p. 6.
 201. USAID, *Gender Impact Assessment*, 2010, electronic p. 23.
 202. USAID, *Mission Order: USAID Mission for Afghanistan*, March 16, 2008.
 203. Mary Fontaine, former senior gender advisor at USAID/Afghanistan, SIGAR interview, January 13, 2020.
 204. Fazel Rahim, former gender advisor at USAID/Afghanistan, SIGAR interview, June 26, 2020; Alexandria Huerta, Laos country director at USAID, SIGAR interview, June 11, 2020.
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- conduct and supervision of audits and investigations relating to the programs and operations funded with amounts appropriated or otherwise made available for the reconstruction of Afghanistan.
- leadership and coordination of, and recommendations on, policies designed to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the administration of the programs and operations, and to prevent and detect waste, fraud, and abuse in such programs and operations.
- means of keeping the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense fully and currently informed about problems and deficiencies relating to the administration of such programs and operation and the necessity for and progress on corrective action.

Afghanistan reconstruction includes any major contract, grant, agreement, or other funding mechanism entered into by any department or agency of the U.S. government that involves the use of amounts appropriated or otherwise made available for the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Source: P.L. 110-181, "National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2008," 1/28/2008.



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