

ISSUE BRIEF

Women as the Way Forward

Lessons from Afghan Women's Empowerment Journey—And What Can Be Done Now

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AMBASSADOR ROYA RAHMANI

The South Asia Center serves as the Atlantic Council's focal point for work on greater South Asia as well as relations between these countries, the neighboring regions, Europe, and the United States. It seeks to foster partnerships with key institutions in the region to establish itself as a forum for dialogue between decision-makers in South Asia, the United States, and NATO. These deliberations cover internal and external security, governance, trade, economic development, education, and other issues. The Center remains committed to working with stakeholders from the region itself, in addition to partners and experts in the United States and Europe, to offer comprehensive analyses and recommendations for policymakers.

DEAR READER,

For forty-five bloody years, some group or another has been at war in Afghanistan. Like other Afghan women, my entire life has been shaped by one conflict after another. Born on the eve of the Saur Revolution, I lived through the Soviet invasion, the Civil War, and the Taliban's 1990s rule. Until the intervention, each chapter that unfolded was heartbreak anew. The revival of democracy and freedom brought hope. The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 was even more painful and shocking than anything before because it shattered an era that had been characterized by so much progress. Amid all this turmoil, another battle has been taking place: the long and bitter struggle of Afghan women attempting to claim and retain their place in society.

For as long as I can remember, I've been aware of my womanhood, my otherness. For just as long, I have felt an innate urge to ignore the limitations that were imposed by my gender. As a burka-clad teenage refugee in Pakistan, I was nearly expelled from the Wahhabite madrassa (religious school) I was forced to attend for asking questions about women in Islam that the teachers simply could not answer. Determined to not be constrained by ideas about gender that I firmly believed were misguided, I spent

my whole life inserting myself into what I was told were male spaces. When studying computer science in the early 2000s, there were only a few women in my degree program. While leading the Regional Cooperation Directorate in Afghanistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I was often leading meetings where I was the only woman in the room. And as the first Afghan woman ambassador to both Indonesia and the United States, I succeeded a long line of male ambassadors, directing embassies comprised of almost exclusively male diplomats. As I navigated national security issues, economics, foreign relations, peacemaking, natural disaster response, and much more, I saw over and over again how women were simply excluded from being in the right room at the right table.

To put it simply, women's empowerment is as personal as it can get for me. Working in nonprofit organizations and government for nearly two decades, I witnessed firsthand the lives changed and hopes born out of the opportunities created in Afghanistan during the twenty-year intervention. In the wake of so much progress and hope, the Taliban's brutal oppression of women over the last year and a half has been particularly harrowing and shocking. Each and every woman who was empowered to go to school, go to work, or just generally go where she pleased was a success story. But amid so many successes, individual and structural, there were also enormous failures that allowed Afghanistan to collapse. Our Western allies made mistakes, of course, but Afghans share responsibility for the failure to maintain stability and progress.

Women as the Way Forward attempts to make sense of the mistakes and successes of the last several decades of policymaking, as well as what needs to be done now to prevent further disaster in Afghanistan. This is all examined through a lens of Afghan women's past and future centrality in sustainable and effective policymaking—from security to stability to economics to addressing humanitarian challenges. While the

report's historical review aims to prevent the repetition of past mistakes, the core of the paper is its recommendations for the way forward. Clearly, Western governments have made assumptions about points of leverage with the Taliban that have been incorrect and overall failed to develop a coherent Afghanistan policy. Gaining a better understanding of the Taliban's ideology and goals, which I explore in this paper, is key to formulating more effective and grounded policy. Having completed high school in the same kind of extremist Pakistani madrassas that the Taliban were shaped in, I understand firsthand the extent of their radicalism.

This report has been the product of extensive historical and policy research as part of my work with the Georgetown Institute of Women, Peace and Security, but my personal experiences growing up in Afghanistan and working on Afghan issues over the past few decades have heavily shaped my reflections and assertions within this report. The personal nature of this material means this analysis goes beyond an intellectual exercise or moral dilemma for me. I have fought for women's rights my whole life: the right to go to school and have an income, a voice, and autonomy. I am deeply disturbed and angered by what Afghan women are currently experiencing, and I share the instinctive desire to disengage from Afghanistan entirely given the Taliban's intransigence—or at the very least condition aid on women's rights. However, this does nothing to address the ongoing humanitarian crisis. People simply suffer. Ultimately, we must be doing all that is possible to save lives. It is my hope that this report can help to make the road ahead clearer. The futures of so many Afghans—young girls banned from school, women imprisoned in their own homes, and an entire generation whose dreams have been crushed—depend on what we do now.

Sincerely,

Roya Rahmani

INTRODUCTION

After the fall of Kabul, analysis poured out while the Afghan people suffered. The predominant themes were shock, grief, and reflection. How could this have happened? Does this mean that the last twenty years of investment were a waste? What should the international community do now? What would be the fate of Afghan women? This paper aims to explore an interrelated but more specific question: if women had been better incorporated and more empowered over the last two decades, would the outcome have been different?

The reality is that women's roles have always been at the center of Afghan politics, from the dethroning of a progressive king a century ago to the Taliban's overthrow of Afghanistan's developing democracy. From the Soviets to the Americans, women have also always been a key part of other countries' moral rationale for intervention. Even now, the international community is hesitant to provide humanitarian aid to a starving population due to the Taliban's oppression of women. Despite women always being central to the "problem," they have never truly been integrated and empowered as part of the "solution." This is a fatal mistake. It may be acknowledged in the discourse that Afghan women are key to lasting peace in Afghanistan, but actions—and funding—have not matched words. Women's repeated sidelining has fundamentally undermined Afghan security and development strategy. The reality is that until women are truly elevated to a national security priority, not just a moral or developmental one, Afghanistan cannot find true peace or stability.

As the international community formulates new policies toward a Taliban-led Afghanistan, lessons from past engagement must be truly learned from, not just acknowledged. However, Afghanistan is a fundamentally different place now than it was under the Taliban's 1990s regime, and old policies cannot simply be recycled. This means encouraging women's participation not just on a national or political level, but in all national security strategy, economic projects, and development of institutions that will guide the future of Afghanistan. The Taliban's dehumanization of women makes these goals seem far-fetched; however, the international community has notable opportunities for innovative policymaking. International engagement has failed so far because the West has no leverage—but leverage can be created. By empowering the population and engaging with the Taliban in new and creative ways, progress can be made to both alleviate the humanitarian crisis and get women back into the public sphere.

The goal of this paper is threefold. The primary goal is to highlight the centrality of women in all policymaking and sustainable problem-solving—from security to stability to economics to addressing humanitarian challenges. Without looking at policymaking through this lens, efforts to promote security or improve the condition of the population will inevitably fail. Critically, these conclusions are not unique to Afghanistan; they can be applied in other contexts, such as the reconstruction of post-war Ukraine, where women also are not overtly included in peacemaking and peace-building efforts. The second goal is to ensure that the international community does not repeat its past mistakes or simply recycle old policies. Exploring the ways that women have been integrated and empowered (or not) over the last century of Afghan history, in particular the successes and failures of the twenty-year international intervention, is central to understanding the structures and material realities that today's policies are being constructed upon. The final goal is to present innovative recommendations for what the future of the international community's engagement with Afghanistan could look like. In the absence of international attention and leverage, new ideas must be explored, discussed, and rapidly implemented to ensure the damage that the Taliban regime is inflicting cannot be deepened.

Part 1 provides a basic overview of the last century of Afghan history, especially how political change was always heavily influenced by conflicts over women's rights. This section highlights that the debate over Afghan women's role is not new, nor is the empowerment of women necessarily a modern development or foreign imposition. The following two sections explore the duality of international engagement in Afghanistan post-2001, highlighting both what went wrong and what was done well. Part 2 explores the weaknesses of international efforts to support Afghan women from 2001 to 2021, such as underfunding, weak goals, and politics superseding needs. Part 3 pivots to look at the intervention's incredible achievements in empowering Afghan women, despite the challenges. This includes surging metrics on health and education, as well as substantial improvements in women's presence in local and national politics. The remaining sections look at the current situation in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Part 4 examines how dramatically reality has shifted for Afghan women since the Taliban takeover in August 2021. Part 5 analyzes why the international community's efforts to engage with the Taliban and support Afghan women since August 2021 have been largely unsuccessful. Finally, part 6 provides robust recommendations for how the international community can create leverage in its engagements with the Taliban and better support the Afghan population through innovative policymaking and international engagement.

PART 1

HISTORY: CONFLICTS OVER WOMEN'S ROLES IN AFGHANISTAN (1919-2001)

Afghanistan has infamously been deemed the worst place in the world to be a woman—but things have not always been this way.¹ Over the last century, Afghan women's rights have continuously swung back and forth between incredible progress and devastating rollbacks. From a controversial king who gave women the right to vote in 1919 to the Taliban regime's brutal dehumanization of women in the 1990s, cultural and political tensions surrounding women's roles in society have often dominated political discourse, leading modern regimes to put their stance on women at the center of their political identity. As international policymakers look to Afghanistan's future, they must first acknowledge that the societal rifts being navigated during reconstruction efforts were not new or provoked by Western intervention. These debates and power struggles have been a moral guide of Afghan history for over a century and form the basis for future efforts to rebuild Afghanistan for men and women alike.

King Amanullah's Radical Progressivism (1919-1929)

King Amanullah Khan, an Afghan monarch who ruled from 1919 to 1929, launched the first comprehensive effort to institutionalize women's rights. Under his new constitution, all citizens had guaranteed civil rights regardless of gender, women had the right to vote, schools were established for both boys and girls, and marriages without the woman's consent were banned. His wife, Queen Soraya Tarzi, played a key role as the face of this modernization, publicly unveiling and carving out a place for women in the public sphere. While many urban Afghans celebrated these reforms, rural populations felt threatened, fearing the dissolution of their traditional culture and power structures. Many tribal leaders in particular felt that the transformation of women from subdued commodities to empowered equals would threaten their existing system of governance and diminish their power. Although the reasons for King Amanullah's deposition in 1929 are complex, the friction over women was a key factor. Of the ten-point manifesto that the rebels drafted at the beginning of the revolution, five of the points were criticizing the changes to the status of women.²

Slow Progress and a Pivotal Constitution (1929-1978)

After the overthrow of King Amanullah, a four-year power struggle ensued. During this time, Amanullah's most progressive reforms were repealed. Once a new regime was established under King Mohammad Zahir Shah in 1933, the young king navigated gender policy more cautiously, ensuring policies did not dramatically upset tribal leaders, clerics, and mullahs. However, women's rights steadily inched forward for several decades, culminating in the progressive 1964 Afghan Constitution. This landmark document reinstated women's right to vote, established their right to run for office, and formalized their legal equality with men. Notably, four women participated in the *loya jirga* (consultative council) that established the new constitution, marking women's first role in national-level politics since Queen Soraya's overthrow.

Mohammad Daoud Khan's 1973 coup and subsequent establishment as Afghanistan's first president resulted in some moderate improvements for women. Some achievements, such as the appointment of the first ever woman minister, were even somewhat radical. However, urban-rural divides continued to jeopardize progress. Although four women were elected as members of parliament during the first election, women only held office for a single term and virtually no women voted outside of urban centers, showing how compartmentalized modernization efforts were. Two distinct developmental realities existed side by side: while urban women unveiled and participated in politics, conservative leaders in rural areas continued to treat women as their property. The fundamental political and developmental divides between urban and rural areas led to urban residents looking down upon rural populations, while rural communities saw city dwellers as morally corrupt. With 90 percent of the lower parliament representing rural constituencies, little additional progress was able to be made.

The Communist Era and the "Liberation" of Afghan Women (1978-1992)

This period of caution and compromise came to an abrupt end after communist revolutionaries overthrew and executed President Khan in the 1978 Saur Revolution. The new communist regime aggressively pursued gender equality in line

1 Georgetown Institute of Women Peace and Security, "Women Peace and Security Index 2021/2022," <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/the-index/>.

2 Fayz Muhammad, *Kabul Under Siege: Fayz Muhammad's Account of the 1929 Uprising*, ed. Robert D. McChesney (Princeton, New Jersey: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1999).

with communist ideals. When the regime was increasingly destabilized in 1979, the Soviet Union justified its invasion and encouraged recruits by claiming they were fighting for the “liberation of Afghan women.”

Although the USSR was motivated by ideological and geopolitical concerns first and foremost, women’s participation in political and government life did drastically change under the communist regime. The Soviet-backed government expanded women’s secular education and encouraged women to take professional positions in universities and the civil service. During this era, women made up 70 percent of teachers, 40 percent of doctors, and 50 percent of university students.³ Several women were even highly ranked government officials, and seven women were members of parliament in 1989.⁴ Unlike previous movements that almost exclusively included wealthy, urban women, this transformation included women that were middle class and sometimes even rural.

However, this rapid, forceful overhaul of women’s roles in society deeply upset and isolated the conservative segments of Afghan society. As resentment deepened over the invasion, occupation, and foreign imposition of women’s roles, resistance crystallized in the form of the mujahideen. These Islamic guerillas claimed to be freedom fighters pushing back against Soviet-imposed secular education and women’s empowerment. Caught up in the throes of the Cold War, the United States and Saudi Arabia supported the fundamentalist resistance, leading to the 1989–1992 Afghan Civil War. As the conflict raged and cultural conservatism reached new heights, women’s rights were pushed to the back burner.

The Return of Oppression under Mujahideen and Taliban Regimes (1992-2001)

In 1992, the Soviet-backed government collapsed, and the mujahideen seized control. Afghanistan was proclaimed “free from the bondage of atheist rule,” and women were once again relegated to the home. Veil requirements were reinstated, women were banned from office work, and girls’ schools, proclaimed by the mujahideen to be a “hub of debauchery and adulterous practices,” were shut.⁵ However, the mujahideen were never able to truly consolidate power and lacked the totalitarian control needed to implement many of these dramatic changes. Many women remained in the workplace, although

risks of abduction and murder for having “poisoned” modern minds skyrocketed.

In 1996, an even more extreme Islamic fundamentalist group seized power: the newly formed Taliban. The Taliban imposed unprecedented restrictions on women, claiming that they were protecting women and their honor by restoring “true” Islamic governance. Quickly and comprehensively, women were completely removed from public life and increasingly oppressed in the private sphere.

Women at the Center of Afghan History

Women’s rights have not been the main driver of conflict in Afghanistan; however, they have always been at the center of moral justifications for invasions and coups, opposition to authority, and conflict. Tensions surrounding women’s roles in society have been so fraught in the Afghan consciousness that every regime over the last century has had women’s status as an anchor of their belief system and a means of energizing their base, either promising to protect women’s honor by restoring traditional values or to liberate women by giving them access to public life and individual rights. Be it in support of Western liberalism, communism, or Islamic fundamentalism, the debate over women’s rights has always been a central part of Afghanistan’s search for national identity.

PART 2 WHAT DID NOT WORK: INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS TO EMPOWER AFGHAN WOMEN (2001-2021)

When coalition forces entered Afghanistan in 2001, their primary military goals were to defeat al-Qaeda and overthrow the terrorist-shielding Taliban regime. However, the moral basis of the military intervention was overtly the liberation of Afghan women. Forty-one countries led by the United States dedicated the next two decades to enshrining Afghan women’s right to education, access to the public sphere, and ability to participate meaningfully in society. The international community partnered closely with the new democratic Afghan government and launched numerous programs promoting women’s rights. This was a period of extreme duality: many mistakes were made, but there were many incredible successes as well. The primary mistake the international community made was failing to achieve true inclusivity. Key programs

3 Rosemarie Skaine, *Women of Afghanistan in the Post-Taliban Era: How Lives Have Changed and Where They Stand Today* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2008).

4 V. M. Moghadam, “Revolution, Religion and Gender Politics: Iran and Afghanistan Compared,” *Journal of Women’s History* (1999).

5 Torunn Wimpelmann, “Intrusions, Invasions, and Interventions: Histories of Gender, Justice, and Governance in Afghanistan,” in *The Pitfalls of Protection: Gender, Violence, and Power in Afghanistan* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2017), 27-50.

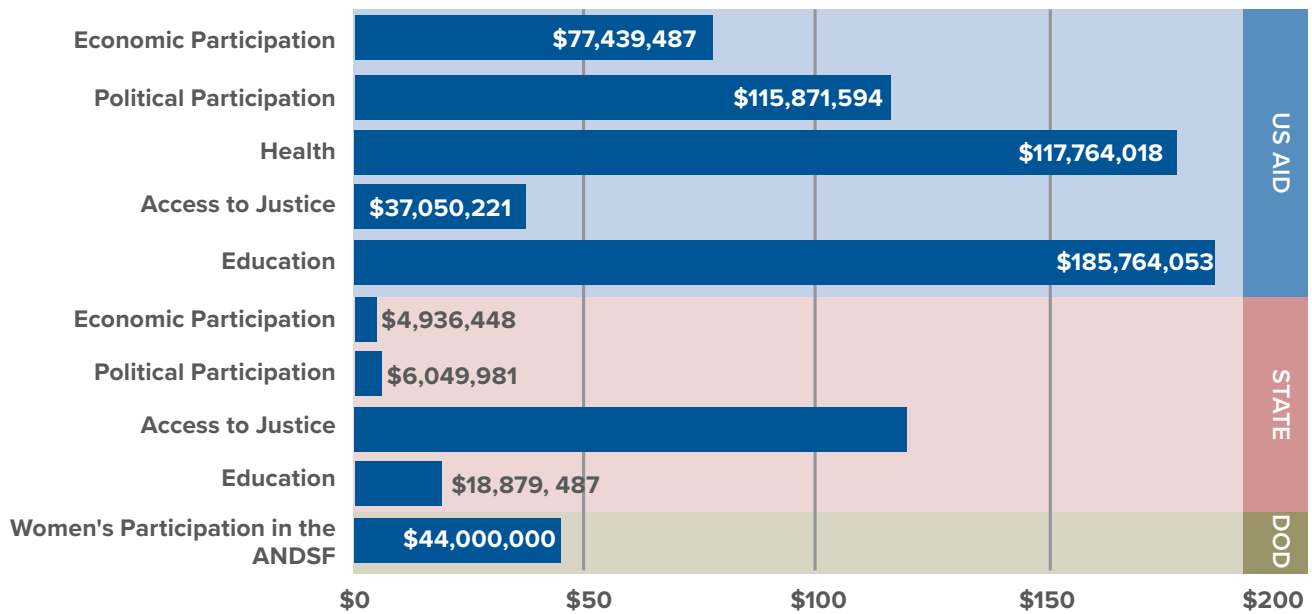
were underfunded, definitions of success were warped, and women were not truly and substantially integrated into the formation of a new, secure state.

Women's Empowerment Programs Were Not a Funding Priority

Despite lofty professed goals and US spending of an estimated \$2.3 trillion on the war (more than \$300 million a day for twenty years), the international community did not provide sufficient funding for programs that directly targeted women's empowerment.⁶ Funding levels for these programs were minor compared to funding for military operations and broader development initiatives. Because the United States was the primary funder of post-2001 development efforts in Afghanistan and has the most publicly available audits of expenditures, US initiatives are the focus of this section.

The Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) estimates that the United States spent approximately \$141.25 billion on reconstruction assistance since 2002: \$86.38 billion for security operations, \$35.95 billion for governance and development, \$4.13 billion for humanitarian aid, and \$14.79 billion for the operation of US government agencies on the ground.⁷ By comparison, only \$787.4 million was spent on programs that directly targeted women and girls—0.006 percent of the total budget.⁸ The US public commitment to women's rights in Afghanistan would suggest significant funding would have been dedicated to women's empowerment initiatives. However, if funding is an indicator of priorities, the issue of Afghan women's rights was clearly marginal relative to the overall defense and development budgets in Afghanistan. This figure may be an underestimate since gender mainstreaming was a key component of US strategy in Afghanistan and in theory all US government programs would have had a

Figure 1: Support for Gender Equality—Disbursements by Sector and Agency for US Programs Supporting Afghan Women and Girls, 2002-2020 (\$ millions)



Source: SIGAR, February 2021 report on Support for Gender Equality, 40.

6 "Human and Budgetary Costs to Date of the U.S. War in Afghanistan, 2001-2022," Costs of War (website), Brown University Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, August 2021, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022>.

7 SIGAR, *Support for Gender Equality: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, Report, February 2021, 40.

8 SIGAR, *Support for Gender Equality*, 152.

gender component. However, even this adjustment does not justify programs specific to women's empowerment comprising such a small portion of overall expenditure.

As Figure 1 indicates, funding was directed to key areas such as education, health, and access to justice. Unfortunately, many of the programs that were established were run ineffectively. The US Agency for International Development's biggest women's empowerment project, Promoting Gender Equity in National Priority Programs (aka Promote), is a model example of these failures. With its ambitious goal to improve the status of more than 75,000 Afghan women at all levels of society, implementation was challenging. The scope of the project led to the inclusion of too many implementing partners that did not coordinate effectively with each other. The use of extensive contracting and subcontracting, a common practice for US aid agencies, added complexity within the network of implementers and made it difficult for on-the-ground feedback to reach high-level program designers back in Washington. This created a toxic cycle, with poorly designed projects executed just to fulfill grant obligations. Furthermore, Promote's initiatives were not planned to be sustainable. Once the funding for Promote ended, the projects abruptly ceased to exist. At the end of the program, Promote supported numerous women-owned businesses and had placed a total of 21,761 women in jobs in the civil service and private sector.⁹ However, the rapid cutoff of support undermined this progress, reducing the effectiveness of the already limited funds being allocated. Problems with contractor chains and unsustainable programming were not unique to Promote; they were representative of systemic issues affecting many programs, including those that focused on gender.

The Afghan Government Was Not Truly Committed to Women's Leadership

Appointment of Women

The Afghan government did not prioritize women's meaningful participation in positions of power. Instead, it primarily focused on the establishment of bureaucratic offices and placing women in highly visible positions, where they symbolized empowerment without necessarily accessing real power. The main exception to this trend was President Ashraf Ghani's first presidential term from 2014 to 2019.

Earlier, under President Hamid Karzai (2001-2014), Afghanistan's first democratically elected president following the fall of the Taliban, women with specific profiles were slowly and cautiously integrated into relatively uncontroversial leadership positions. This meant only older women with relationships to jihadist figures and political, ethnic, and financial backing could access positions in appropriately feminine ministries, like public health, social work, and women's affairs. Karzai's 2008 cabinet included one woman, and in 2012 it contained three. Ultimately, Karzai sought to gain political favor from progressives and the international community without taking bold steps that would draw criticism from prominent conservatives.

President Ghani took a more progressive approach to women's leadership, especially during his first term, when women's political participation reached an all-time high. For the first time, young, educated women and men, many of whom lacked traditional profiles for appointments, were appointed extensively across all government bodies. Within the first few years of his presidency, Ghani appointed four women ministers, four female ambassadors, two female governors, and one mayor. Plus, for the first time, a woman was nominated to the Afghan Supreme Court.¹⁰ Ghani also made a commitment to increase women's representation on provincial councils, an effort that was largely successful.¹¹

Ghani's reelection in 2019 was hotly contested by a close runner-up, weakening his administration and incentivizing appointments that consolidated power instead of furthering development goals. Men and women without political, ethnic, or economic leverage were frequently replaced with nominees intended to gain the support of influential politicians. Furthermore, the withdrawal of US troops and decreased pressure from the international community regarding women's appointments gave the Ghani administration the space to undermine some of the progress that had been made in his first term.

However, as the new election neared, Ghani was not willing to sacrifice his reputation as a progressive reformer. Fewer women were appointed overall, but he strategically placed women in roles that were the most visible to Western allies. For the first time, women were appointed as deputy ministers

9 SIGAR, *Support for Gender Equality*, 96.

10 Sudarsan Raghavan, "Historic Bid to Become Afghanistan's First Female Justice Falls 9 Votes Short," *Washington Post*, July 27, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/an-afghan-judge-was-nominated-to-the-supreme-court-trouble-is-shes-a-woman/2015/07/27/bbb80a82-2ef3-11e5-818f-a242f28e7022_story.html.

11 Jennifer L. Windsor, "Afghan Women a Year into Ghani Presidency," *Women Around the World* (blog), Council on Foreign Relations, October 5, 2015, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/afghan-women-year-ghani-presidency>.

at the Ministries of Defense and Interior, and nine women were appointed to the forty-six-member High Council for National Reconciliation.¹² Furthermore, following Western pressure to increase election transparency, two women were selected to head the Independent Election Commission and Electoral Complaints Commission.¹³ Ultimately, Ghani's reduction of women's appointments while campaigning for reelection and during his second term was due to his belief that true women's empowerment was not crucial to him retaining the domestic or international political support needed to stay in power.

Election of Women

As Afghanistan's democracy was constructed post-2001, a new constitution was crafted that mandated that women must comprise at least 25 percent of parliament. When the first parliamentary elections occurred, sixty-eight women won seats, more than fulfilling the quota requirement. With substantial numbers of women appointed and elected, it appeared that women had been successfully incorporated and Afghanistan was progressing in a new direction. However, the reality was more complex.

Despite their powerful ability to guarantee women unprecedented access to positions of power, quota systems can also lead to convoluted political realities that inhibit women's ability to legislate. Ultimately, women parliamentarians were generally beholden to a variety of interests in order to get elected and be protected by political actors who had more traditional political capital. One female parliamentarian claimed off the record, "Half the women in Parliament belong to some warlord."¹⁴ This created a culture where some women would not speak out against their patron warlords and supported legislation that was antithetical to their interests. Even without a patron dominating their decisions, a former MP observed that the "ethnic, religious, political, and financial loyalties of female members of parliament limited their capacity to promote women's cause."¹⁵

While it may be true that women parliamentarians often were not able to be effective, their presence in the uppermost echelons of government was still inherently important. They were potent symbols of progress and set a precedent for female

leadership in a society where they previously would not have been able to access such opportunities. Critically, it also provided an opportunity to "learn by doing" as they gained critical experience governing and reconstructing a country. This progress will be explored further in later sections.

The International Community Applauded Too Much for Too Little Progress

Showcasing a Few Women Without Widespread Women's Leadership

The Afghan government was effective in making it appear that women had been successfully integrated into government because of the high-level positions that some women filled. The international community leaned into this optical illusion, spending substantial resources on showcasing the few women in positions of power by inviting them to their countries, giving them prestigious awards, and promoting their stories. To be fair, the celebration of Afghan women leaders by the international community had some positive indirect outcomes. It gave women leaders increased visibility and encouraged other women in Afghanistan to aspire to positions of leadership. However, this also led to the perpetuation of systemic issues. With the international community content to keep promoting the same group of women, there was little incentive for the regime to develop sustainable and far-reaching institutional mechanisms that elevated new women's voices to leadership roles. The Afghan government continued to feed the international community excuses about the expansion of leadership, such as there not being enough educated and competent women to fill government positions. Western leaders continued to accept these excuses and keep the bar for women's leadership too low, especially for positions below the ministerial and parliamentary levels.

The international community's willingness to accept this inadequate status quo appeared to be because they perceived this as a huge step for Afghanistan and genuinely believed it to be the extent of progress possible—or at least good enough for Afghanistan. On the other hand, they may have recognized the gaps, but underestimated the critical importance of deeper integration and broader empowerment of

12 Frud Bezhan and Satar Furogh, "Acceptance Is First Challenge for Afghanistan's First Female in a Senior Security Post," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, December 6, 2018; and "Munera Yousufzada Becomes the First Afghan Woman to Be Appointed as Deputy Defense Minister," Khaama Press News Agency, May 19, 2019.

13 Sulaiman, "New Electoral Commission Leaders Reflect Women's Achievements since Taliban Rule," Salaam Times, March 14, 2019.

14 Ann Jones, "Women and Warlords," *Nation*, May 4, 2006, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/women-and-warlords/>.

15 Aarya Nijat and Jennifer Murtazashvili, "Women's Leadership Roles in Afghanistan," United States Institute of Peace Special Report 380, September 2015.

women. Regardless of the cause, the international community did not critically assess the extreme challenges and constraints that new women leaders faced. In addition to having to build unfavorable alliances as outlined in the above section, Afghan women who were elevated to positions of power and prominence frequently faced political strife or even physical violence from both men and women who resented their prestige. Despite their vulnerability, the government failed to develop protective mechanisms. Women were left exposed and undermined, and the international community never made rectifying this a policy priority.

Lack of Follow-through on International and Legal Commitments Supporting Women

From 2001-2021, the Afghan government proactively enshrined women's rights in the nation's legal framework, signing numerous international conventions and developing expansive legislation to protect women's rights. These moves were widely praised by the international community. However, Afghanistan's commitments and participation were often performative, and the government failed to deliver on its international and legal commitments. In fact, officials signed many of the documents and resolutions fully aware that they did not have the infrastructure, funding, or political will to deliver on their commitments. The goal was more to gain approval from the international community than to make serious progress on legal protections for women.

When the Afghan government ratified the Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2003, it was proclaimed that the Afghan government was on track to set up a government that respected and empowered women.¹⁶ After all, Afghanistan was the first country in the Muslim world to ratify CEDAW without any formal reservations.¹⁷ Ratification laid the foundation for Afghan women and civil society activists to use the principles and values outlined in CEDAW to shape gender equality provisions when drafting the 2004 constitution.¹⁸ This new constitution stated that men and women have equal rights and duties before the law, a commitment that was praised by the international community as a powerful symbol of Afghanistan's commitment to women's rights. However, it is worth noting that another article in

the constitution states: "No law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of the holy religion of Islam in Afghanistan," which created space for subjective interpretations of sharia law to take precedence over constitutional guarantees for gender equality.¹⁹

CEDAW was also used to shape key Afghan legislation, such as the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (2007-2017) and the first National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security, which aimed to boost the inclusion of women in national peace and security frameworks.²⁰ However, this legal framework was rarely successfully implemented either due to a lack of political will or cultural resistance. This was in part because reforms were not well communicated to all levels of government. Local-level authorities did not understand the progressive reforms, and there was no system to monitor their implementation or obligate them to change their practices. Furthermore, many laws that explicitly discriminated against women went unaddressed or were even actively defended, such as the Shia Personal Status Law that endorsed marital rape.²¹

A list of women's rights legislation created by the Afghan government can be found in Annex I. The United Nations International Treaties to which Afghanistan is a signatory are found in Annex II.

The Failure to Integrate Women into Afghanistan's Security Strategy

After 9/11, the international community primarily viewed Afghanistan as a security issue. All development initiatives—from economic development to governance reforms to women's empowerment—were crafted through this lens. Ultimately, the military realized that in order to achieve their security goals, they had to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people by helping them rebuild a country that was completely demolished.

The effects of this were complex, ranging from the militarization of provincial reconstruction to forced political compromise. One of its most dramatic effects was the near universal

16 Cheshmak Farhoumand-Sims, "CEDAW and Afghanistan," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 11, no. 1 (2009), <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol11/iss1/10>.

17 Farhoumand-Sims, "CEDAW and Afghanistan."

18 Wazhma Frogh, "Afghanistan's National Action Plan," London School of Economics, *LSE Women, Peace and Security* (blog), November 2017, 4, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/2017/11/28/afghanistans-national-action-plan-a-wish-list-of-many-dreams-wazhma-frogh-102017/>.

19 Afghanistan's Constitution of 2004.

20 Frogh, "Afghanistan's National Action Plan."

21 Heather Barr, "Afghanistan: Failing Commitments to Protect Women's Rights," Human Rights Watch, July 11, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/07/11/afghanistan-failing-commitments-protect-womens-rights>.

rationalization of the exclusion of Afghan women from security-related processes. Afghan women, who largely lacked political capital, were not perpetrators of violence, and were not part of any party leadership, almost never had their perspective incorporated on security matters since they were not viewed as integral players. Similarly, during the peace process, while inclusivity was one of the international community's key demands, the focus was only on including different ethnic groups and political alliances, not the female half of the population.

Following resurgent interest in UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 provisions on women, peace, and security (WPS) and the development of a WPS National Action Plan, programs were launched in 2010 that fostered the recruitment, retention, and integration of women into the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). A key component was a commitment from the interior and defense ministries to fill 10 percent of all Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police positions with women by 2020.²² Progress was made, but this goal was far from achieved. In 2020, women made up 3.25 percent of service members in the Afghan National Police and less than 1 percent of Afghan National Army positions.²³

This failure occurred despite heavy US involvement. The Department of Defense spent \$44.6 million on women's participation in the ANDSF, and Congress appropriated \$110 million in total for supporting Afghan women in the ANDSF.²⁴ Furthermore, the US National Military Strategy included objectives to ensure the meaningful inclusion of women, deploying Female Engagement Teams and Civil Support Teams to this end.²⁵ However, the United States was inhibited by its own failure to sufficiently implement WPS values within all levels of its own military. US military leaders and senior advisers were not well versed in WPS strategies and were not equipped to use a gendered perspective during strategic planning.²⁶ Consequently, gender advisers were often sidelined from security conversations, and operational leaders did not incorporate gendered perspectives into their daily operations. This did not just limit their ability as teachers; it limited their ability to be role models for WPS integration since many operations were conducted alongside Afghan forces.

Additionally, despite a top-down commitment to WPS, Afghan commanders on the ground did not fully understand or embrace WPS tactics. The Department of Defense noted a lack of political will from the Afghan Ministries of Defense and Interior, suggesting that bare minimum efforts were designed to maintain relations with international donors.²⁷ Consequently, women who served in the ANDSF faced sexual harassment and discrimination from male colleagues who rarely faced consequences. In theory, funding women's participation in the armed forces was an important step toward implementing UNSCR 1325, but in practice little progress was made and the women who did serve in uniform did so at great personal cost. Furthermore, since women were typically only integrated at the lowest levels, they had little power to share their perspectives and shape security strategy.

ANDSF participation was just one small piece of women's broader integration into security structures. However, it cannot be overlooked. The ANDSF and large swaths of the government were originally formed out of former combatants such as Northern Alliance members, leading to the systematic embedding of combatants into positions of power.²⁸ Consequently, women were excluded from these new power structures, simply because they were not the ones who had been holding the guns. In a country so dominated by security considerations, breaking the structural and normative barriers by claiming a place among the ANDSF would lead not only to introducing women's perspectives in a military context, but also shift the narrative away from women as victims and toward women as relevant actors. Clearly, efforts were largely unsuccessful, and women should not have to be involved in the military to be seen as credible actors, but these efforts are still important to consider for these reasons.

Outside of security forces, Afghanistan's efforts to integrate women into higher-level security strategy, peace negotiations, and donor pledge meetings were often cosmetic as well. In high-level diplomatic discussions on peace such as the Doha "peace" talks, women were relegated to lesser roles since they were not seen as a critical part of Afghanistan's security framework. The exclusion of women from security strategy and peacemaking was a fatal mistake. Women may not have

22 SIGAR, *Gender Equality*, 125.

23 SIGAR, *Gender Equality*, 125.

24 SIGAR, *Gender Equality*, 196.

25 Kyleanne Hunter et al., "A Cornerstone of Peace: Women in Afghanistan," US Army War College, January 8, 2021, <https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/articles/womens-security/>.

26 Hunter et al., "A Cornerstone of Peace."

27 Sophia Jones, "The Many Dangers of Being an Afghan Woman in Uniform," *New York Times Magazine*, October 5, 2018.

28 Ali A. Jalali, "Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces: Mission, Challenges, and Sustainability," United States Institute of Peace, 2016.

had traditional political capital or been the ones holding the guns, but they had a key role to play in the formation of a lasting, inclusive peace. They are key to reducing violence at the family level. They even could have made security-driven development projects more successful given their key insights into the communities they were intended to serve. Ultimately, their meaningful incorporation in security discussions and strategies would have fundamentally changed the outcome.

A New Definition of Success Eroded the Priority of Women's Rights

For Washington, the complete US military withdrawal from Afghanistan became the new definition of success. Consequently, brokering a deal with the Taliban became an urgent necessity, even at the cost of women's rights.

During the first decade of international intervention, gender equality in Afghanistan was a high priority for the international community. A fundamental shift occurred when this goal became secondary to quickly crafting a peace deal. Ultimately, the 2020 Doha agreement between the United States and the Taliban downgraded gender equality to an assumed give-away. Tellingly, the US-Taliban agreement did not include any mention of women's rights, leaving the issue up to intra-Afghan dialogue. Women's rights had previously been a key element of rationalizing the continued US military presence in Afghanistan; once the United States committed to withdrawal and no longer needed that justification, concrete efforts to support Afghan women's freedoms started to fade. Instead, Afghanistan's purportedly immutable culture was scapegoated.

Tragically, the withdrawal of US troops led to an increased threat to women's security. The increase in violence against women demonstrated how critical the presence of international troops and accountability were to safeguarding women's rights. Regardless, the Kabul government continued to showcase its support for women's rights in hopes of gaining more funding and favor from the international community. The administration continued to rely on its typical strategy:

placing women in high-level positions as tokens, but not comprehensively including them or giving them real access to power. The uneven composition of peace talk delegations was a failure of the Afghan government, but the international community's weak efforts to increase representation highlight their relative passivity on gender issues in pursuit of a faster, easier peace deal. From 2005 to 2020, there were sixty-seven rounds of peace talks (defined as formal and informal negotiations, exploratory meetings, and internationally backed consultations). Women were present at only fifteen sessions (22 percent).²⁹ Again, they were not seen as important parties that brought political factions, ethnic groups, or other key groups to the table. Their other key roles in security were neglected. This undervaluing of women's role was reflected in the Afghan government's inclusion of only four women out of twenty-five delegates for the 2020 intra-Afghan talks in Doha.³⁰ Qualified and dedicated Afghan women were a part of the negotiation team, but they were not enabled to be more than a token within a token few. The delegation itself was not endowed with any power, but rather passed messages back and forth, and the women's role in this was even minimized. Unsurprisingly, the Taliban's twenty-one delegates included no women.

In Afghanistan, ultimately all policies came back to security. By excluding women from major decision-making related to security and peace, they were effectively excluded from the most important, high-level decision-making. This did not just undermine women's empowerment; the Afghan government's preoccupation with who had or had not held a gun, political capital, and the correct ethnic loyalties instead of who was most likely to foster peace led to a fundamental undermining of the chance for a durable peace.

Afghan Women's Limited Access to Economic Opportunities

Afghan women's lack of access to economic opportunities was a major barrier to women's meaningful participation in the public sphere. The impact of women's limited access to economic opportunities will be explored in a subsequent paper.

29 "Afghanistan Case Study: Current Peace Effort," Women's Participation in Peace Processes, Council on Foreign Relations (website), n.d., accessed February 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/afghanistan>.

30 "Afghanistan Case Study," Council on Foreign Relations.

PART 3

WHAT DID WORK: IMPROVEMENTS IN LIVELIHOODS FOR AFGHAN WOMEN FROM 2001-2021

In the wake of the Taliban's 2021 takeover and rollback of women's rights, international analysts widely lament that the twenty years of investment into Afghan women was a waste because the status of women had changed overnight. Other commentators focus on the failures highlighted in the previous section, arguing that little genuine progress was truly made. However, these narrow analyses neglect the radical improvements that were made in Afghan women's lives following the intervention.

In fact, the improvements made in women's lives are one of the greatest achievements to come out of the intervention. The current oppression of women does not nullify past truths. The women who were educated over the past two decades will never become uneducated again. Most of the children who were able to survive due to improved infant and maternal mortality rates are still alive. Perhaps most importantly, women's mindsets were irreversibly transformed to see themselves as equal individuals with undeniable rights and valuable skills.

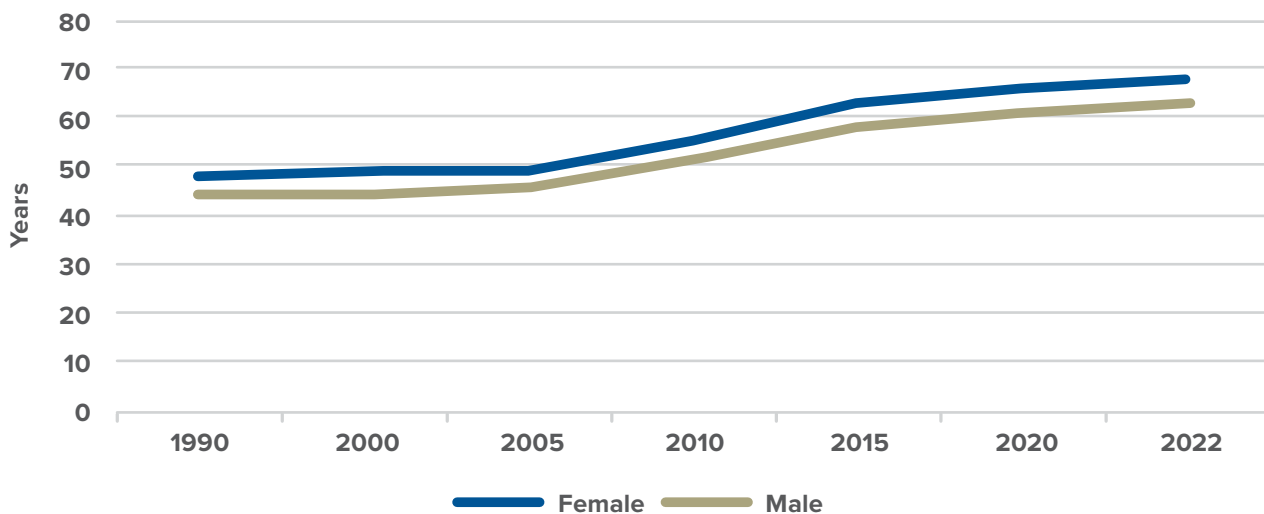
Improvements in Afghan Women's Lives by the Numbers

During the intense conflict and oppression between 1990 and 2000, women's life expectancy increased a mere year from forty-eight years to forty-nine years. However, the increase between 2001 and 2021 was incredible. Women registered a stunning change in life expectancy of 68 years—a jump of nineteen years, nearly one year of additional life for every year of international engagement. Men's life expectancy increased a bit less, up eighteen years, rising from forty-five years to sixty-three years.³¹

Furthermore, maternal mortality (per 100,000 live births) dropped from 1,450 in 2001 to 638 in 2017. Access to female-specific healthcare and improved medical facilities led to much healthier pregnancies and births.³²

Similarly, the infant mortality rate dropped from 87.9 deaths per 1,000 births in 2001 to 45 in 2020. Effectively, the infant mortality rate was cut in half as a result of the international community's investments.³³

Figure 2: Life Expectancy in Afghanistan



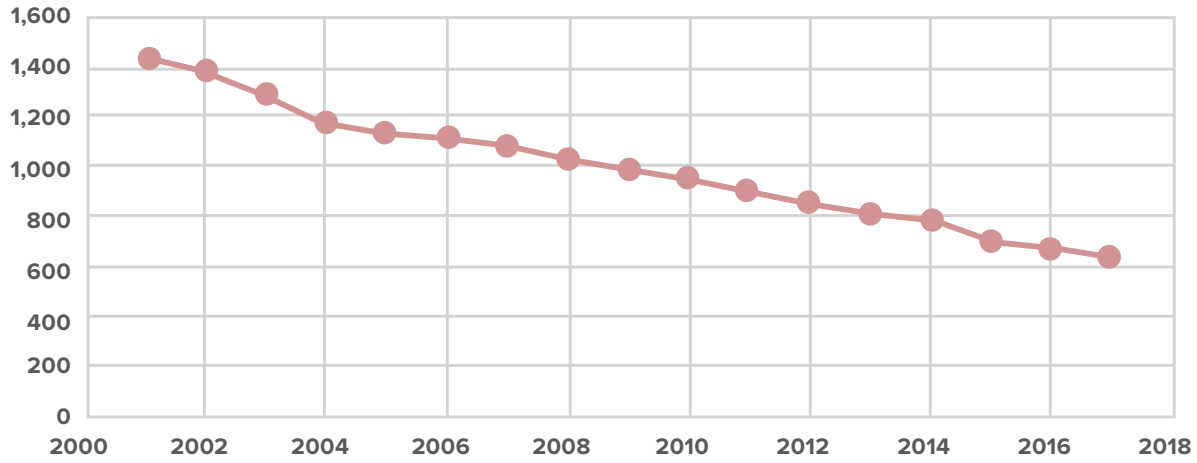
Source: Author's chart, using World Bank Group data, "Life Expectancy at Birth (years)."

31 "Life Expectancy at Birth," World Bank Group Gender Data Portal.

32 "Maternal Mortality Ratio," World Bank (data site), from *Trends in Maternal Mortality: 2000 to 2017* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2019).

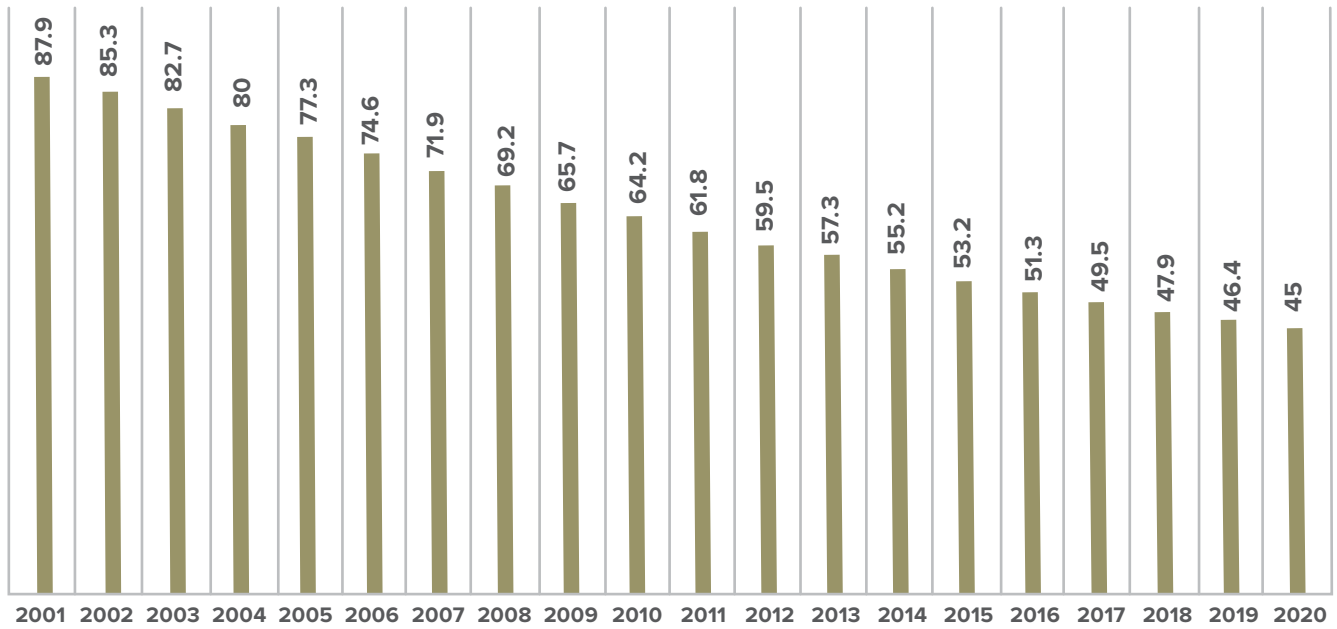
33 "Mortality Rate, Infant," World Bank (website), estimates developed by the UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation.

Figure 3: Maternal Mortality Rate (per 100,000 live births)



Source: World Bank Group data, "Maternal mortality ratio."

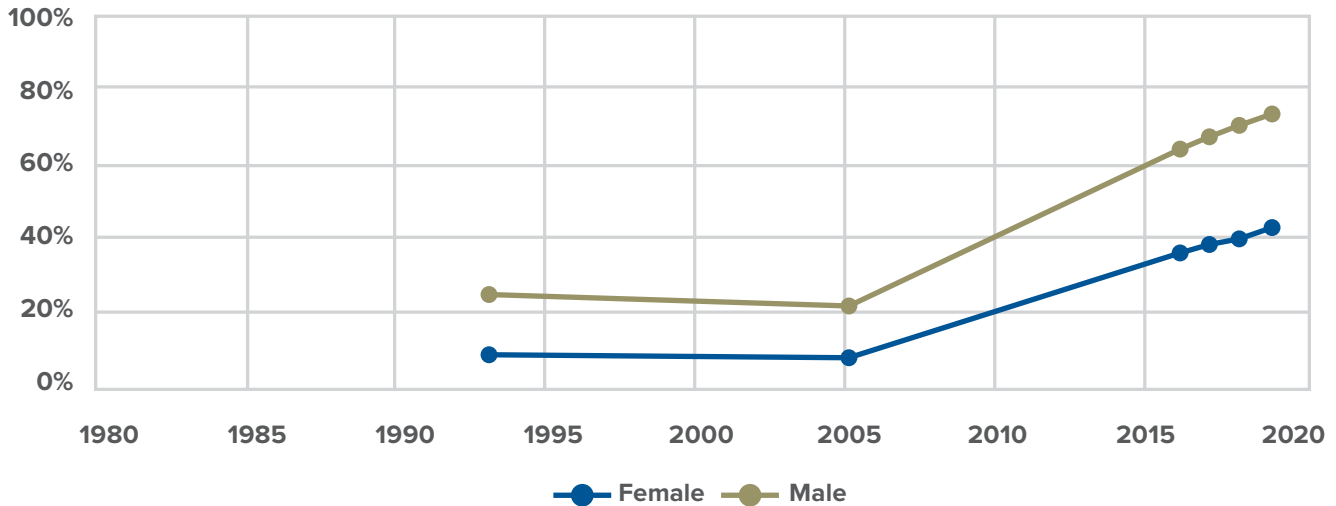
Figure 4: Infant Mortality Rate (per 1,000 live)



Source: World Bank data, "Mortality rate, infant."

Improvements in Education

Figure 5: Lower Secondary Completion Rate

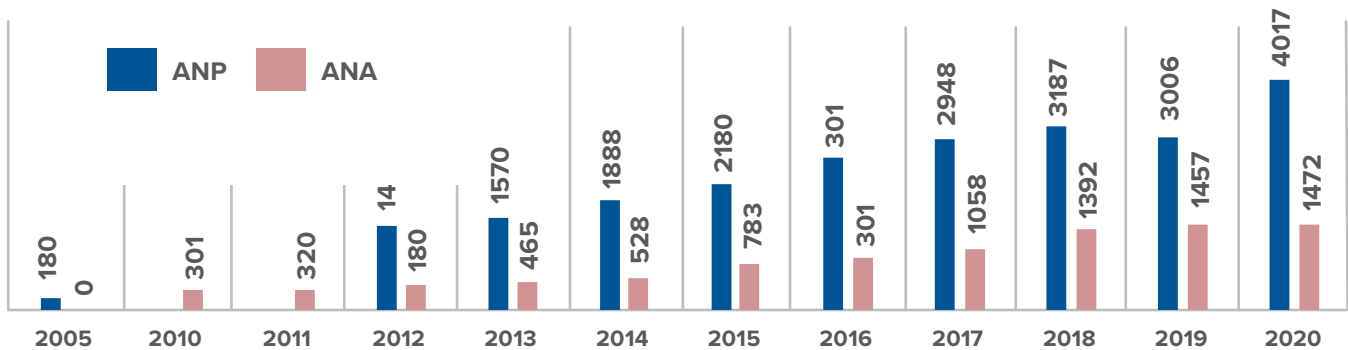


Source: World Bank data, “Lower secondary completion rate, total.”

There were also incredible improvements in access to education for all children. Getting girls in school as often as boys remained challenging, but girls’ lower secondary education completion rate still skyrocketed from 8.9 percent in 2005 to 43.1 percent in 2019. The rate for boys increased from 22.7 percent in 2005 to 72.7 percent in 2019.³⁴ Women

were able to enroll in higher education in record numbers as well, comprising 24.6 percent of university students. Increased enrollment in all levels of education is justly considered one of the biggest successes of the international intervention in Afghanistan.

Figure 6: Number of Women in Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army



Source: SIGAR, February 2022 report, “DOD Efforts to Recruit, Retain, and Train Women in the Former Afghan National Defense Security Forces.”

34 “Lower Secondary Completion Rate,” World Bank Gender Data Portal.

Integration into Security Forces

Although women did not make up a large proportion of the ANDSF, the increase in numbers over time shows the slow but significant growth of women's role in security forces—a huge achievement for women across the country. Recruitment dates also steadily increased over time, as reflected in the graph above. For example, only 180 women were in the Afghan National Police in 2005, but 4,017 served in 2020. Overall, women eventually made up 1.9 percent of the Afghan National Army and 3.6 percent of the ANP.³⁵

The Top-Down Approach for Gender Equality Was Effective

Although women's integration was not holistic, many of the initiatives to integrate women using top-down tactics (such as quota requirements) had groundbreaking results at both the national and local levels. These outcomes in government, politics, business, sports, and more were only feasible because of Afghan women's bravery and hard work, but opportunities for growth would not have existed to the same extent without top-down implementation. By conditioning aid at high-level donor conferences on the Afghan government's ability to empower women, the international community was able to effectively pressure the Afghan government to uphold its gender equality commitments. From major cities to provinces to the most remote districts, women's presence in all levels of governance set in motion a shift in mindset and real advancements that trickled down to women in all spheres.

Afghan Women's Political Participation at the National Level

Women's representation at the national level may have been insufficient overall and somewhat inorganic, but top-down efforts institutionalized women's roles in the uppermost echelons of the government in a way that no other initiatives could have. As the Afghan government and international community worked together to imagine a future where Afghan women

were empowered at the national level, new mechanisms had to be created. In pursuit of this new reality, a constitutional *loya jirga* met in 2003 to establish the parameters of a reformed Afghan state. Women represented more than one-fifth of this grand council.³⁶ Subsequently, the new 2004 constitution granted women the right to vote, set quotas for women's participation in parliament, and codified the equality of men and women.³⁷ From the first parliamentary election in 2004 until the final election in 2018, women consistently held over 27 percent of the seats in parliament, slightly exceeding the constitutional quota.³⁸ The establishment of a Ministry of Women's Affairs and appointment of a woman minister were key steps in getting women's issues addressed at the national level.

Afghan Women's Participation at the Local Level

Top-down initiatives to integrate women into political leadership at the local level were somewhat more complex due to significant variance in attitudes toward women by region. With 74 percent of the Afghan population living in rural areas and drastic differences in parliamentary representation by region (for example, 43 percent women in Kabul province versus 11 percent in Khost), political realities are starkly different.

However, there was notable success in top-down efforts to integrate women into provincial councils and community development councils (CDCs). Afghan law mandated that women must hold at least 25 percent of seats at the provincial council level.³⁹ This was effective, although controversial due to many women winning elections with very few votes. Consequently, a 2013 election reform bill lowered the percentage of seats reserved for women from 25 percent to 20 percent.⁴⁰

Another effective program invited local women to participate in community development councils, so they had an increased role in community politics. The initiative was enormously successful. In 2019, 50 percent of the 9,708 elected CDC members were women, and 87 percent of community development initiatives included at least one priority project for women.⁴¹

35 SIGAR, "DOD Efforts to Recruit, Retain, and Train Women in the Former Afghan National Defense Security Forces," Audit Report, 22-12-AR, February 2022, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/SIGAR-22-12-AR.pdf>.

36 Oliver Lough et al., *Equal Rights, Unequal Opportunities: Women's Participation in Afghanistan's Parliamentary and Provincial Council Elections* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, March 2012), 8.

37 Lough et al., *Equal Rights, Unequal Opportunities*, 9.

38 UN Women, "Women in Politics: 2021 Map." <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2021/Women-in-politics-2021-en.pdf>.

39 SIGAR, "Barriers to Greater Participation by Women in Afghan Elections," SIGAR Audit 10 1, October 28, 2009.

40 Equality for Peace and Democracy, *Gender, Governance, and Corruption: Examining the Relationship between Corruption, Gender, and Parliamentary Representation in Afghanistan*, December 2015.

41 Muhammad Tariq et al., "Political Participation of Women in Afghanistan in the Present Set-Up," *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change* 15, no. 7 (2021).

A World Bank report which analyzed the effectiveness of women in CDCs found that women who participated in the developmental councils had overall higher rates of political participation and socialization outside the household than those who did not participate, showing that these top-down initiatives had multifaceted impacts.⁴² It is important to note that even though women had high rates of participation in CDCs, provincial-level governments were still overall very conservative and dominated by local warlords.⁴³ Regardless, women gained critical experience in governance and community building, better equipping them for higher levels of political participation.

Increasing Professional Opportunities

The establishment of an Afghan Women's Chamber of Commerce was a turning point in Afghan women's ability to establish and develop more formalized businesses. It opened up additional pathways for learning and provided access to new parts of society. Overall, more than 17,000 women-owned businesses were founded, which created more than 129,000 jobs.⁴⁴

The revamping of the civil service sector also drastically increased women's professional access. Traditionally, many hiring initiatives in Afghanistan rely on patronage networks. This practice could not be eradicated quickly; however, in 2014, Afghanistan began an overhaul of the government's civil service recruitment process aimed at leveling the playing field. In addition, parliament passed anti-sexual harassment laws and introduced a gender integration policy in 2018.⁴⁵ However, the most significant reform was the creation of the merit-based hiring system for civil servants and teachers, which encouraged greater transparency in the hiring process and provided a pathway for women to enter the competitive workforce. In

2018, 22.5 percent of civil servants were women, and the Afghan government aimed to increase the number by 30 percent in the following five years.

Women Emerge in New Areas of Afghanistan's Cultural Landscape

As Afghan women expanded their role in society, reclaimed space in the public sphere, and pursued unprecedented educational opportunities at home and abroad, they felt empowered to expand their horizons in sports, music, and the arts as well. From the establishment of an award-winning, woman-owned and -led film company in 2003 and the establishment of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM) in 2010 to reintroduction of music into Afghanistan society, the arts began to thrive in post-Taliban Afghanistan—and women took a leading role.⁴⁶

Women's sports also grew substantially as women's freedom of movement expanded along with their freedom to dream. National teams were established in cricket, soccer, basketball, wheelchair basketball, handball, track and field, martial arts, volleyball, and cycling.⁴⁷ Many of the women who played on these teams faced intense backlash from their communities and sometimes even death threats. However, they persisted in claiming their right to participate in society how they chose and kept competing until they were able to compete internationally.

The explosive growth of these newly accessible forms of expression and participation reflected a larger cultural shift that was beginning to take place across the country. Afghanistan was now a country where women could be artists, musicians,

42 Tariq et al., "Political Participation of Women."

43 SIGAR, *Gender Equality*, 83

44 Matthew P. Funaiolo and Fina Short, "Women-Owned Businesses in Afghanistan Are in Jeopardy," Center for Strategic & International Studies, September 10, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/women-owned-businesses-afghanistan-are-jeopardy>.

45 Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission, "Reforms in Review—Part 5: Reforming the Civil Service Commission and Public Sector," Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

46 "About Us," Afghanistan National Institute of Music | ANIM.

47 Tessa Nichols, "Honoring the Afghan Women's Sports Teams Likely to Be Banned by the Taliban," Just Women's Sports Inc., September 27, 2021, <https://justwomenssports.com/reads/afghan-womens-sports-teams-banned-by-taliban/>.

and athletes instead of just conforming to the narrow role that previous generations experienced. Freedom was burgeoning in multiple forms.

A Shift in Mindset

Ultimately, all of these changes created a fundamental shift in Afghan society, which led to an overall shift in mindset. Women became entrepreneurs and entered new professions, establishing computer coding schools, clothing lines, restaurants, construction and logistic companies, and so much more. Women's entrance into the formal workforce enabled them to have more control over their own lives and their families' futures.

Different career paths became more accepted. Traditionally, women were only able to be doctors or teachers. However, as women increasingly worked in nongovernmental organizations and government, including at higher levels, Afghan men started to acknowledge women's ability to perform in complex positions. The financial incentive of an additional household income was also influential. These dual phenomena encouraged Afghan men to support girls' education and women's participation in the labor force. More than ever, they saw a future for girls outside of marriage and saw the potential for women to create upward economic mobility in the family.

Although women were more constrained in rural areas, important progress was still made. Cross-country efforts to empower rural women—development councils, women's

councils, mayoral appointments, and more—were a big part of why efforts in this era were more successful than centralized, urban-focused Soviet-era policies. Instead of deepening the rural-urban divide, it was slowly bridged. More attention should have been paid to support women outside of cities, but the faster progress in urban centers was not emblematic of failure in rural areas. After all, progress naturally takes longer in more conservative areas. Furthermore, exposure to the rapid changes happening in cities was effective in altering rural populations' outlook toward women's abilities. Over time, Afghan men in the most conservative parts of the country were making headlines for taking their daughters to schools on the back of their motorbikes and waiting behind the schools until their dismissal.⁴⁸ Young rural women were even increasingly permitted to move to Kabul to attend better universities, when just a few years prior the idea of an unmarried woman living away from family was inconceivable.

Women with power and freedom are fundamentally changed; they are empowered in a way that cannot be reversed. For this reason, this shifted mindset has the power to last even under Taliban rule. However, the longer the Taliban are in power and the more distanced people are from their experiences of empowerment, the more entrenched this new reality will become and the more the Taliban's message will start to resonate with the population. Undeniably, radicalization is a much easier and more rapid process than openness and empowerment. This process of disillusionment will be stratified between groups, with urban women who have the fullest knowledge of what they are missing being most resistant to resurging conservatism.

48 Hasib Danish Alikozai and Habibzada Mohammad, "Afghan Father Travels for Miles and Waits for Hours Every Day to Educate Daughters," Voice of America, December 24, 2019, https://www.voanews.com/a/extremism-watch_afghan-father-travels-miles-and-waits-hours-every-day-educate-daughters/6181591.html.

PART 4 AFGHAN WOMEN FROM AUGUST 2021 TO PRESENT

The Women Left Behind

As the Taliban returned to power in August 2021, thousands of Afghans fled to Kabul Airport, worried for their lives and what their future would look like. Footage emerged of runways flooded with desperate Afghans, along with photos of airplanes stuffed with those lucky enough to make it on board. The crowd was almost exclusively men. Of the special immigrant visa (SIV) applicants who are awaiting evacuation by the US government, an estimated 93 percent are men.⁴⁹ Women, of course, played a massive role in reshaping Afghanistan, but often in roles that did not qualify them for evacuation via the SIV program or other formal pathways. During the airlift, thousands of women who served in the former government or took a leading role in forming a new Afghanistan—judges, parliamentarians, nonprofit workers, athletes, civil servants—struggled to get on evacuation lists despite their lives being in danger. Some Afghan women leaders were fortunate enough to be evacuated by various nongovernmental organizations and entities such as the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security. However, most women leaders remain stranded.

Protests in Response to the Taliban

Since August 2021, the Taliban have imposed more than thirty-three edicts repressing women. They have banned women from public life and spaces, required face coverings in public, instituted a total ban on secondary and university education, and required women to be escorted by a mahram (a male escort, typically an unmarried family member).⁵⁰ In addition to the severe restrictions on movement, the Taliban have begun carrying out floggings, whippings, and stonings of women who violate their interpretation of sharia law. Women detained for activism and protesting have been tortured and beaten in prisons.

In response to the crushing human rights violations by the Taliban, Afghan women have displayed extraordinary courage and resilience. Those who have taken to the streets against the regime, mostly protesting for the first time, have done so at great risk to themselves and their families. However,

after the Taliban began proactively arresting female activists and their families in January 2022, many activists were forced to go underground and halt their demonstrations. The Taliban's ban on women accessing higher level education drew women back out into the streets at the end of 2022. Despite the subsequent arrests, informal protests continued with some protesting indoors, making signs, and reaching out to media organizations.

The Taliban know that educated women are the greatest threat to their regime. Senior Taliban leaders remember well the 1980s demonstrations led by female high school students that ignited mass uprisings against the Soviets. They are wary that schoolgirls may again organize and lead a revolt against their policies.

Afghan Men's Engagement on Women's Rights

Afghan men have mostly remained publicly silent and minimally attended protests on women's rights, raising questions among members of the international community about their attitudes. The reasons for their absence are complex given that "Afghan men" is a category of nearly twenty million people, but highly relevant factors include conservatism, grudges, fear, or lack of incentive.

Although many men's views of women's role and position in society progressed rapidly over the past two decades, the majority of Afghan men remain largely conservative.⁵¹ The Taliban clearly have some support among the Afghan people, and even those who disapprove of their regime may approve of their policies on women. Even among those who do support women's rights, some men are resentful of affirmative action programs that provided women with more opportunities over the past twenty years and welcome the advantage men now have in employment.

Crucially, many men who are sympathetic simply do not see an incentive to participate given their fears of repercussions. Fairly, men are afraid of the Taliban's brutal reactions to protestors, and in many cases doubt whether their support has any impact, especially given limited international attention. There also is a common belief that only women who risk their lives protesting in the street will "earn" a resettlement visa from a Western country.

49 Kim Staffieri, Matt Zeller, and Michael Trudeau, *The Left Behind Afghans: One Year Later*, Association of Wartime Allies, August 15, 2022, 2, <https://iava.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/AWA-Aug-2022-Withdrawal-Survey-Results.pdf>.

50 Belquis Ahmadi and Scott Worden, "The Taliban Continue to Tighten Their Grip on Afghan Women and Girls," Analysis and Commentary, United States Institute of Peace, December 8, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/12/taliban-continue-tighten-their-grip-afghan-women-and-girls>.

51 Asia Foundation, "Afghanistan in 2021: A Survey of the Afghan People."

Humanitarian Aid in the Taliban Context

In the absence of a functioning economy, foreign aid is Afghanistan's sole lifeline for humanitarian support. Since December 2021, the UN has distributed \$1.8 billion in aid for use by UN entities and approved partners.⁵² Even so, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates that "a massive two-thirds of Afghanistan's population will be in need of humanitarian assistance in 2023 as the country enters its third consecutive year of drought-like conditions and the second year of crippling economic decline."⁵³

Worsening matters, there are major challenges to equitably distributing aid. Women and women-headed households, already struggling disproportionately due to employment restrictions, have lost access to aid in many cases due to the regime's December 2022 ban on female humanitarian workers. Appalling as this decision is, nongovernmental organizations that have halted ground operations while waiting for the UN Security Council's assessment are only worsening the humanitarian crisis. Ceasing humanitarian aid in response to the oppression of women punishes men and women alike.

PART 5 ANALYSIS OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY'S ENGAGEMENT FROM 2021 TO PRESENT

After the fall of Kabul, the international community scrambled to develop a strong, unified response. These organizations hoped that public condemnations and economic incentives would entice the Taliban to respect human rights, especially women's rights—but that strategy has failed. The Taliban clamor for international recognition and increased aid, yet simultaneously insist that the West must respect their sovereign right to govern using their oppressive ideals. The West has so far refused to partner with a regime that violates its principles, leading the World Bank, other key development banks like the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and global international development agencies to withhold development funding. This pressure has not worked to alter Taliban policies, and the standoff has reached an impasse as the Taliban have continuously demonstrated that they do not care about international recognition or engagement if it means compromising their ideology. This perceived ideological threat has led the Taliban to treat international strategy meetings focused on Afghanistan as propaganda. Furthermore, the West's withholding of funds

has given the Taliban room to claim that the ongoing humanitarian crisis is directly the West's fault, a narrative that has gained traction even in Western countries.

So long as the West continues to repeat the same tactics of engagement and ineffective means of leverage, they will not make progress with the Taliban. In order to formulate more effective policy, the international community needs to acknowledge that: the West's minimal leverage requires developing truly innovative policy; the Taliban will not compromise on their ideology; and the West's obdurate approach is pushing the Taliban toward new international partners.

The West Has No Leverage

Since the Taliban takeover, the international community has used all its traditional tools to try to achieve its goals: imposing sanctions, publicly condemning the regime, threatening the withdrawal of aid, and holding negotiations that have gone nowhere. Nothing has worked. Women are kept out of universities by armed guards, banned from working at nongovernmental organizations, and publicly flogged. The key issue is a fundamental asymmetry of understanding. The Taliban have had decades to observe and understand how the international community operates. They know that just allowing girls into school or giving in to some of the international community's demands will not lead to the aid or recognition they desire. Furthermore, these capitulations would lead to a foundational undermining of Taliban ideology which could threaten their legitimacy. On the inverse, the international community does not understand why the Taliban do not care about the pressure being applied and vastly underestimates the extent to which the Taliban are motivated by their extremist ideology. International recognition, improved government services, and humanitarian aid mean nothing to an organization that knows the lifeblood of its legitimacy is its ideological rigor. Therefore, alternative approaches must be utilized, some of which are outlined in the next section.

The Stranglehold of Taliban Ideology

The Taliban follow a logic distinct from the West. Their state is not a democracy but an emirate, where ideology is critical fuel for keeping the machine running. Providing services and keeping constituents happy is not key to maintaining power; maintaining ideological supremacy is. Even if they capitulated

52 "Cash Shipments to the UN in Afghanistan—Info Sheet," UN Assistance Mission (UNAMA), January 9, 2023, <https://unama.unmissions.org/cash-shipments-un-afghanistan-%E2%80%93info-sheet#:~:text=Since%20this%20transfer%20mechanism%20commenced,amounts%20of%20individual%20cash%20shipments.>

53 "Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Planned Response 2023," UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), December 1, 2022, [https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-and-planned-response-2023-endriips.](https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-and-planned-response-2023-endriips)

and received aid, they would constantly be pressured to compromise their ideology in order to retain funding. The Taliban do not believe that clearly unsustainable aid is more valuable than the eternal salvation that is promised in heaven.

Furthermore, capitulating to promoting gender equality and basic human rights would severely undermine Taliban recruitment techniques. In order to lure young people into their movement, they need people to live in an environment with hunger, poverty, limited education access, and poor job opportunities so that they turn to the Taliban for security and opportunity. Effectively repressing and terrorizing the population also reduces the possibility of revolt. In particular, the Taliban's extremist ideology feeds off of the oppression of women. The Taliban know that educated and empowered women can change society. By preventing women from accessing education and opportunities for personal development, they both directly lower the chance that empowered women will rebel against Taliban policies or cause a changed dynamic at the family level, which is the nucleus of Afghan society. Furthermore, removing women from the workplace opens up more jobs for the Taliban to reward followers with: Employment is an especially potent award amid economic turmoil.

Capitulation would also undermine the Taliban's belief that they are more powerful than the foreign forces they claim to have defeated, such as the United States. As they see it, for two decades they fought to "free Afghanistan from occupation and make it an Islamic country," which they achieved by "opposing the US, the rest of the world, and winning." The Taliban's historical and continued war against Western powers is one of their biggest sources of power and legitimacy. If they cave to international demands that go against Islamic fundamentalist values, this not only undermines their claims of victory but potentially leads to ideological splits and internal fracturing. Deeply embedded in a hierarchical and inaccessible power structure, this sacrosanct ideology has fueled the morale of its fighters for many years. Thus, intense condemnations from the international community can be perceived as a form of political capital that more deeply entrenches the

Taliban's hardline stances. By that logic, whatever the West wants is the antithesis of what the Taliban should do.

It is also important to note that analysis pointing to a "Taliban 2.0" is not grounded in reality. The Taliban are not different now. Policies are as oppressive and violent as before. Even before their takeover, their aggressive targeted assassination campaign during peace negotiations blatantly shows their nature. Beyond this, the Taliban have vocally claimed to be consistent in their views over time. They have unshakable faith that their interpretation of Islam is the correct one, despite condemnations from other Muslim countries or the clear subjectivity of many of their claims. This sanctity leads to challenges in getting any reforms genuinely considered.

The Evolution of the Taliban's International Relations

Because of the centrality of ideological maintenance to the Taliban's longevity and the West's inflexible approach, the Taliban are being driven to partners who do not have human rights demands or require them to make ideological concessions. The West's repeated demands for progress on human rights and women's rights reflect moral imperatives; however, they only further alienate the Taliban. The Taliban are more willing to accept compromises that do not affect their ideology, such as Russia's demands for a more ethnically inclusive government.⁵⁴ The Taliban have quickly met these more palatable requests by appointing a few individuals from other ethnicities. Russia is clearly a more permissive partner, having recognized Taliban diplomats and signed provisional economic deals.⁵⁵

This alternate funding is growing increasingly critical as the security situation within Afghanistan deteriorates. In particular, the group known as Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) has enlarged its presence in northern and eastern Afghanistan, increased its attacks, and received increased funding from the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) since the Taliban takeover.⁵⁶ The resurgence of al-Qaeda and the institutionalization of the Haqqani Network present challenges not only to security, but internal political dynamics. With funding scarce

54 Ayaz Gul, "Russia Says 'Inclusive' Afghan Government Key to Recognizing Taliban," Voice of America, June 15, 2022, voanews.com/a/russia-says-inclusive-afghan-government-key-to-recognizing-taliban-6618812.html.

55 Mohammad Yunus Yawar and Charlotte Greenfield, "Afghan Taliban Sign Deal for Russian Oil Products, Gas and Wheat," Reuters, September 28, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/exclusive-afghan-taliban-sign-deal-russian-oil-products-gas-wheat-2022-09-27/>.

56 Alex Zerden, "What Is Known About ISIS-K Funding in Afghanistan?," *Lawfare* (blog), Lawfare Institute in cooperation with the Brookings Institution, August 30, 2021; Rahim Faiez, "Islamic State Claims Afghanistan Airport Checkpoint Bombing," Associated Press, January 4, 2023; and Twenty-seventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2368 (2017) Concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities [with two transmittal letters], UN Security Council S/2021/68, distributed February 3, 2021.

and territorial control eluding them, the Taliban are struggling to keep internal terrorist groups under control and maintain a monopoly of violence.⁵⁷

This urgent need for funding has led to the Taliban proactively undertaking novel foreign relations strategies. In addition to engaging diplomatically and economically with Russia, the Taliban are vigorously building up relations with China, which desires security cooperation to control Uyghur militants in northeastern Afghanistan and access to economic projects such as rare earth mining. The Taliban have also cleverly made wealthy Middle Eastern nations compete against one another for economic contracts within Afghanistan. Perhaps most surprisingly, the Taliban have operated more independently from Pakistan than expected, a historic partner who was key to the Taliban's ascendance to power. Pakistan's support was in part contingent on expectations that the new Taliban regime would work closely with the Pakistani government. However, the Taliban are intent on proving their sovereignty: they have established diplomatic relations with India and have been providing safe haven to the Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP), an insurgent group seeking to overthrow the Pakistani government.⁵⁸

Furthermore, calls for change and critical statements from other Muslim countries have not been successful in changing the Taliban's extremist policies, especially toward women. As mentioned above, even though many Muslim countries have condemned the Taliban's treatment of women and reiterated that Islam allows much of what the Taliban has banned, the Taliban regime refuses to acquiesce to any interpretation of Islam that does not support their central ideology. Yielding on women's issues would pose a particularly big threat to their ideological foundation. It also requires less potential compromise within the already fractured Taliban since the oppression of women is easier to agree upon.

PART 6 RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite these challenges, the international community has some room to maneuver. Clearly, the Taliban holding power is causing ever-deepening harm to progress on social and security issues, making reconstruction more difficult, expensive, and time consuming each and every day. While the regime stays in power, concrete steps have to be taken within the current context to counteract urgent security threats, provide critical aid, get children back in schools after a year-and-a-half gap, and address other imminent issues. Recycling policies from 1996 will not work. After twenty years of societal transformation, Afghanistan is a fundamentally different place. This new era calls for creative solutions. Without innovation, no progress can be made.

Similarly, without engagement, no progress can be made. Wariness to engage in Afghanistan is reasonable, given the moral complexities and the Taliban's unwillingness to compromise. However, when the alternative is doing nothing and allowing innocent people to suffer, it is impossible to claim that disengagement is taking the moral high ground. With people's lives on the line, engagement cannot be treated as an intellectual debate. Policies must navigate moral complexity to attempt to do what simply must be done, even if this necessitates difficult compromises, uncomfortably bold policymaking, and temporarily setting aside certain desired objectives.

Forum for International Consultation

The international community has failed to achieve its goals in the Taliban's Afghanistan thus far—be it because of the prioritization of other crises or simply not fully knowing how to approach the situation in Afghanistan. The time has come for leaders to reevaluate their course of action and acknowledge difficult truths. Open and frank deliberations need to occur promptly among former coalition members so that priorities and strategies can be effectively synchronized going forward.

Strategy meetings on Afghanistan have been occurring on an ad hoc basis, but this is insufficient. Discussions must be held regularly, reflecting a shift from disjointed and reactive policymaking to proactive and strategic engagement. Understandably, governments are unable to devote substantial resources to Afghanistan at this point, but some of the needed infrastructure for engagement exists. A primary group

57 *Twenty-seventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team.*

58 Scott Worden, "You Can't Choose Your Neighbors: The Taliban's Testy Regional Relationships," Analysis and Commentary, United States Institute of Peace, September 1, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/09/you-cant-choose-your-neighbors-talibans-testy-regional-relationships>.

of key players, such as prior coalition partners' special representatives and relevant government advisers, must form a core group to keep abreast of developments and craft policy. Nongovernmental organizations and multilateral representatives with on-the-ground knowledge will be key for supplying information to this group so decisions can be made on a substantive, pragmatic level.

However, this core group's conversations cannot stay within the group. They need to ensure that key government agencies are briefed and engaged. For example, the US Department of Treasury plays a key role in sanctions policy; Treasury officials need to know when to issue licenses to keep the Afghan people supported while undermining the Taliban. Humanitarian agencies need to have nuanced guidance on where needs are most extreme. Conversations with intelligence agency counterparts will also be key for addressing the complex security aspects of engagement. The core group also needs to talk to relevant economic stakeholders, such as technology companies able to collaborate on aid packages. By having all of these conversations ongoing simultaneously and providing a common forum, there is an increased ability to coordinate on and understand overlapping issues—for example, how security and humanitarian issues interact.

This forum will be most productive if discussions are wide-ranging but focused on the most critical underlying principles. To that end, a key element is exploring and coordinating on the following questions:

- To what extent is Afghanistan a security concern, and what issues are most concerning from this viewpoint?
- What resources and leverage are available to the West, and how willing are these nations to mobilize them? What can and cannot be done by non-Afghan parties?
- What does the empowerment and support of the Afghan people look like in practice? What needs to be done—from humanitarian aid to employment and education to the integration of women in society—and is the international community committed to these plans?
- How open is the international community to trying novel ideas and approaches to address the unique challenges presented?

Recommendations

- **Create a core group of key players** (including the United States, the United Kingdom, several European Union member states, Islamic countries such as Qatar and Indonesia, etc.) who meet monthly to discuss key priorities in Afghanistan and coordinate on strategy. Coordinate with a larger group of relevant parties biannually.
- **Engage with nongovernmental and multilateral organizations** with insight into the situation on the ground.
- **Engage with countries neighboring Afghanistan** to the extent possible.
- **Keep counterpart agencies informed** (such as the Department of Commerce or equivalent ministries, legislatures, intelligence agencies, defense departments, development agencies, etc.) regarding on-the-ground realities and broader strategies so more informed decision-making can be made. The US Director of National Intelligence could play a key role in coordinating the distribution of information among US intelligence agencies and preventing critical oversights. Furthermore, although Afghanistan is an overtly political issue within the US Congress, continued monitoring of the situation among subcommittees of the Senate Foreign Relations and House Foreign Affairs committees is an apolitical way to keep abreast of and involved in important developments.
- **Keep Afghan diaspora leaders and experts engaged** on critical issues. The diaspora has significant insights that can be harnessed by inviting qualified members of the diaspora to speak to issues such as counterterrorism, counternarcotics efforts, specific economic issues, women's leadership, and more. These topics can be explored in a structured, time-bound forum where representatives of the diaspora can provide feedback on a specific list of questions that are shared in advance.

Security Strategy

When the Taliban controlled Afghanistan from September 1996 to October 2001, each and every month of those five years bred more and more destruction of what had been previously achieved. Similarly, the longer the Taliban stays in power today, the more the reforms of the last twenty years will

be erased and the harder it will be to rebuild a thriving Afghan society and secure region.

As society disintegrates further, more room is created for terrorist groups to flourish. Not only do the Taliban lack the ability to maintain control of their territory, joining terrorist groups is becoming increasingly attractive to a suffering population. Parents watch their children starve and are desperate to take action. Desperation, rising levels of crime in Afghan cities, and resentment of the lack of action against the Taliban by any other party all contribute to a growing base of adherents. The rapid growth of ISIS-K in the region is a frightening manifestation of this phenomenon.

Afghanistan is now a perfect breeding ground for extremism, especially for youth who have had opportunities and freedoms stripped away from them overnight. Contrary to popular belief, studies have shown that youth who join al-Qaeda are not usually recruited; the majority of young men who join actively sought out these terrorist organizations as they navigated “emotional struggles for purpose, direction, and identity that are common in adolescent development in most cultures.”⁵⁹ Young people need opportunities to create a purpose for themselves; otherwise, they may seek purpose through unconventional and potentially harmful means.

All of this is exacerbated in a society where women are erased. They have less ability to shape their children's futures at the family level, and norms of violence and oppression are demonstrated to children in familial relationships. Furthermore, by not integrating women into the economy, the workforce and capacity for growth are cut in half. A perpetually weak economy only decreases potential productive avenues for desperate young men to take. Providing women with rights and opportunities must be at the top of the regional and global security agenda. Otherwise, the social vacuum created will be filled by terrorist groups and extremist ideology.

However, one point of complexity must be acknowledged: a destabilized Central Asia is not necessarily contrary to Western interests. If prior coalition partners are able to monitor terrorist activity effectively and ensure that they do not have the capacity to strike Western countries, instability in the region might serve geopolitical interests by keeping China and Russia preoccupied with challenges in their own backyard. However, this realpolitik approach entails sacrificing values, allowing local populations to suffer, and risking un-

foreseen long-term consequences. While this context must be understood and acknowledged, it is not a goal recommended in this paper. Instead, the recommendations focus on transforming and building up society, while remaining mindful of the broader security context.

Recommendations

- **Closely and minutely coordinate security, intelligence, and intervention strategies among NATO countries.** These strategies must be creative and original, as traditional approaches have already proven to be ineffective. Historically there has been a disconnect between tactical-level operators and NATO policymakers. To gain critical insight, those developing strategy need to meaningfully engage with NATO forces that were operating in Afghanistan, groups currently doing humanitarian work on the ground, intelligence officers, and others doing tactical work.
- **Ensure the security implications of women's oppression are at the center of all efforts to reclaim women's rights in Afghanistan.** On every agenda of every meeting, the implications for women must be considered, whether discussions are centered on counternarcotics or targeting the next al-Zawahiri-type militant. Past gender mainstreaming efforts have fallen short, in large part because having a representative who pushes for the gendered perspective is insufficient; the element of gender must be integrated into every element of every policy discussion.
- **Promote policies centered on education.**
 - Encourage educational exchanges on a regional and global scale to prevent the perpetuation of harmful ideologies within a closed society and to ensure the next generation is exposed to different ideas. By providing children—including the Taliban's children—scholarships that are evenly distributed between genders, women will receive high-quality education and men will be exposed to more progressive dynamics. This could be key to preventing indoctrination and radical training being at the core of how the next generation is raised. The original mujahideen may have been fighters in the field turned into politicians, but their children were raised differently and are often more permissive; they are businessmen, intellectuals, and sometimes even technocrats. Given this funda-

59 Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1968); and US Army Col. John M. “Matt” Venhaus, “Why Youth Join al-Qaeda,” United States Institute of Peace Special Report 236, May 2010, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/SR236Venhaus.pdf>.

mental shift, educational opportunities will be particularly attractive.

- Resume and increase Fulbright scholarships for Afghan students. Set a quota for female participation.
- Fund Afghan private universities. Prior to the takeover, Afghanistan had 167 private universities operating, and most of them were self-funding.⁶⁰ Economic collapse has prevented families from being able to afford tuition, leading to professors' salaries going unpaid and institutions shutting down. Funding students to study abroad is important, but many students will not return to Afghanistan after studying elsewhere. Many others are unwilling or unable to leave Afghanistan to study. By providing in-country opportunities, more students will be able to access higher education and impact Afghanistan more substantially. While the international community should never stop pushing for women's education, withholding funding for men's education benefits no one. In fact, it will limit families' economic opportunities and make violence against women more likely.
- Ensure strong rural-area advertising of the educational policies discussed above to promote progress across the nation.
- **Develop economic projects on trade, investment, infrastructure, and connectivity** that foster economic development. Regional powers like China and Russia have already increased their development investments, and the West must remain active in this space.⁶¹ Ensure these projects have elements that include broad swaths of the population, including both men and women. Right now, the Taliban have nothing to lose; they need to be given something to lose. Leverage can be created by building up a space for potential loss. It is nonsensical to attempt to prevent the Taliban from benefiting from this support. Ultimately, it will benefit them no matter what, and the people cannot be punished due to this fear. It is worth noting that local nongovernmental organizational capacity has been decimated, and aid cannot be absorbed as

productively as desired. However, there is no alternative infrastructure to work with. Given the urgency, the international community must work with what they have for now, and this will organically lead to growth in such local capacity over time. To increase technocratic capacity more quickly, nongovernmental organizations still operating on the ground can also offer express trainings to less experienced organizations' staff and members of civil society.

Aid as Leverage

The first step to progress is reimagining what aid is. Despite the massive aid budget that has been allocated, the number of people starving and in misery continues to rise each month. This is in large part because the humanitarian aid that has been deployed thus far has created a culture of dependency and victimhood, instead of helping to drive empowerment and opportunities for sustainable development. Changing the way that aid is distributed is essential for developing more effective responses and ensuring more than just a brief lifeline is delivered. Once again, it is imperative that distributors come up with original and context-based solutions, exploring loopholes while maintaining discretion and sensitivity. Grassroots networks, especially local mosques and Islamic organizations, are key to providing context and establishing trust.

Recommendations

- **Localize aid distribution networks** and strengthen grassroots capacity. Embassies, government offices, and foreign nongovernmental organizations need to work closely with local nongovernmental organizations that have key information about the realities on the ground. Mosques and local leaders are also critical to gaining fuller understandings of local communities and shaping public opinion. The international community, especially Islamic countries, can help ensure that mosques are used as centers of community, not spaces that spread oppression, by distributing aid through mosques. This could include establishing a day that is set aside for women to receive aid and communicate community needs. By linking all of this information and key resources together, a web of connections can be created that is best equipped to develop creative solutions that truly impact communities.

60 Liaqat Ali Akhlaqi et al., "Institutional Autonomy in Private Higher Education of Afghanistan," *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews* 9, no. 2 (2022).

61 Jennifer Murtazashvili, "China's Activities and Influence in South and Central Asia," Testimony before the United States-China Economic and Security Review Commission, May 17, 2022, published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/05/17/china-s-activities-and-influence-in-south-and-central-asia-pub-87146>.

- **Center Afghan women in all aid initiatives.** This can be achieved in a variety of ways.
 - Develop a program specific to aiding widows since frequently only women are allowed to distribute aid to other women. The Taliban will likely be sympathetic to widows from within their group who need active support; if they are not sympathetic, they will at least be strategic and allow this program. Further discontent and potentially even desertion will be fostered among the ranks if the regime does not even allow Taliban widows to receive support. Taliban leaders know that fighters may leave if they do not believe their family will be taken care of after their death.
 - Bolster the value of women and girls in households, providing special assistance to households that have women or girls and thereby reducing the struggle of women and children to access aid. For example, extra dried meat or rice could be added to food aid packages distributed to families with female children on the premise that they need it for their “weaker” bodies. Families tend to invest limited resources into a single child they view as having promise, so both increasing the food supply in a family and directly increasing a girl’s value is critical.⁶² This is especially important given Save the Children’s estimate that up to 121,000 children were sold or exchanged in just the first seven months after the Taliban’s takeover; this number is undoubtedly even higher now.⁶³ Extra aid linked to girls may make them more valuable and less likely to be sold.
 - Focus on local partnerships with aid distributors explicitly requiring the adoption of programs that promote female-specific tasks. This creates an opportunity for women to be brought together and have their status increased as distributors. These programs could focus on anything traditionally female, such as including infant formula in aid packages and requiring mandatory sessions on how to administer these products to children in order to receive packages.
- Link food distribution to healthcare in some cases. Studies show that the distribution of food can incentivize hesitant or time-poor populations to spare the time to get their children vaccinated.⁶⁴ Requiring medical checkups, polio vaccinations, or other key healthcare support for women and children as a condition for food aid distribution at certain sites ensures that the healthcare of vulnerable populations is not entirely neglected.

Understanding the Taliban Better

In addition to reevaluating the security situation and aid practices, the international community must find ways to better comprehend and navigate the leadership, power hierarchies, and dynamics within the Taliban’s regime. Of course, the point of engagement is not simply to engage; the West needs to engage in order to be able to better maneuver. Most negotiations or exchanges between the international community and Taliban occur with members who serve as high-level officials and cabinet members in Kabul. However, these representatives have increasingly less influence and decision-making ability as power is even more deeply concentrated at the top. The real heart of the Taliban lies in the impenetrable holy black box that contains its highest-level leadership. The West cannot forget that the Taliban regime is an emirate centered around a supreme leader who has been chosen by God to preside over society. The supreme leader is the main source of the ideology that fuels and energizes the rest of the movement. Ultimately, the West can most effectively make an impact by engaging directly with the supreme leader. These meetings will neither directly influence policy nor establish productive diplomatic relations—but they will undermine Taliban members’ perception of leadership’s black box as divine and impenetrable.

However, it is unlikely that the supreme leader will be willing to accept meetings with Western officials. If officials cannot obtain meetings with the supreme leader, they must get as close to where power is concentrated and decisions are made as possible. The purpose is twofold. Firstly, the supreme leader commands all moral issues and strategic deals. Getting as close as possible to this “divine” source will help Western officials better

62 Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo, *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2021).

63 “Afghanistan: Desperate Mother Agreed to Sell her Unborn Baby as Debt-Ridden Families Are Pushed to Crisis Point,” Press Release, Save the Children, May 17, 2022, <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/about-us/media-and-news/2022-press-releases/afghanistan-desperate-mother-agreed-to-sell-unborn-baby-families-in-debt-pushed-to-crisis-point>.

64 Banerjee and Duflo, *Poor Economics*.

understand the decision-making coming from what is currently a black box of leadership. Secondly, they may be able to influence the people who surround the supreme leader.

Recommendations

- **Identify the people closest to top leadership**, in particular those who are entrusted with responsibility and significantly relied on for the maintenance of the state. This may not be those with the highest rank; what matters most is an individual's relationship with the supreme leader. The head of ad hoc committees and other division commanders are potential influencers, and developing relationships with them could be impactful. Intelligence collection will be key to deepening understanding, as well as forging closer diplomatic relationships with regional powers. It is important to understand not only who is influential within Afghanistan, but who is influential in regional diplomacy.
- **Direct time and resources to reach the Taliban where it matters most** rather than just engaging with mid-level moderates. The oppression of women is so central to the Taliban's ideology that it undergirds every element of the relationship between the Taliban and the West. Consequently, no moderate will ever have the authority to turn away from this philosophy, nor will they be willing to put their career and physical security at risk to push for change.
- **Continue to engage with mid-level officials when it matters.** Intelligence operations in particular will need to coordinate with all levels of government in order to obtain a deeper understanding of internal government dynamics. It also provides access to information on the security situation.
- **Recognize and navigate areas of opportunity amid thriving corruption** in Afghanistan, as the economy deteriorates and Afghans become increasingly desperate, including within the regime itself. Many Taliban officials realize the regime is unstable and believe they should collect rents while they can. Although most citizens and lower-ranked personnel are kept in line by the severe punishments for wrongdoing, the higher levels of the regime have greater freedom from accountability. This space is complex to navigate, but the West needs to recognize the points of leverage available in this context and utilize them accordingly.

Media and Mobilization

Media and technology will be crucial in local mobilization efforts. Unlike 1996, most Afghans have a mobile phone, internet access, and social media. Although the Taliban are monitoring social media users, there are no signs they plan to cut internet access. To the contrary, they are reportedly attempting to upgrade to 4G networks, and the approximately \$77 million of taxes the government collected from internet and mobile phone operators since taking over is a crucial source of income.⁶⁵ These new tools are here to stay and must be used proactively by the international community to disseminate key information about the Taliban's failures, coordinate mobilization, and provide educational resources. With electricity shortages and decreased internet access, this approach has clear limitations. However, it can be thought of as the first round of spreading information. Locals with internet access and electricity will then spread information to the rest of their community via word of mouth.

Recommendations

- **Work with technology companies** to increase access to social media, information about the humanitarian response, and educational resources. The international tech sector should include tablets and other relevant devices as part of aid packages. These devices would ideally be uploaded with educational materials, providing girls in particular with channels to educate themselves and connect to the world once again. These educational materials should be in local languages and have content that is curated carefully to avoid potential controversy. These channels can also be used to warn of incoming natural disasters and other emergency events. Ideally, this initiative would be led collectively by the international community, especially including Islamic leaders like Indonesia, in order to gain credibility and trust.
- **Brainstorm new ways to keep local populations informed of efforts to distribute humanitarian aid.** If the Taliban prevent aid from being distributed due to the inclusion of educational materials, people must know so they are aware of who is responsible and know to hold the Taliban accountable. Public announcements directly from press rooms are ineffective and inaccessible. The Afghan people need to be reached through more grassroots methods including through popular social media sites such as Facebook,

65 Jamie Tarabay and Eltaf Najafizada, "Taliban Continues Censorship, Web Blocks as It Promises 4G," Bloomberg, August 31, 2022.

WhatsApp, and Twitter. Locals might not be willing to post about controversial topics since it can endanger their families; however, social media cells outside of Afghanistan, ideally comprised of Afghan diaspora, could be used.

- **Acknowledge and monitor the power of the people who are angry** at the regime. Do not undermine the power of people even if they are hungry—or especially if they are hungry. If there is continuous and consistent support available that the Taliban are denying access to, the people will come together. When a critical mass is reached, it becomes much harder for the regime to retaliate against everyone. Part of the Taliban's legitimacy is derived from the lack of mass nonmilitary resistance. Giving people additional reasons to draw together could undermine this legitimacy. Human and open-source intelligence capabilities are critical for effectively monitoring this.
- **Increase Afghans' connectivity** to foster economic growth and keep Afghans connected with the outside world. To this end, development agencies should support Taliban efforts to develop 4G capabilities. Furthermore, building computer labs and libraries with computers should be an infrastructure priority. In the long run, this effort will empower the Afghan people more than it will benefit the Taliban.
- **Subsidize local, independent media** when possible and safe. This financial support not only builds up civil society, but keeps information flowing into and out of Afghanistan, allowing Afghans to stay in touch and the international community to keep its finger on the pulse in Afghanistan. Be mindful that reporters may face retribution for accepting Western grants and minimize risks whenever possible.

Diplomacy and Regional Leverage

The international community also needs to consider alternative approaches to diplomacy, both bilaterally and regionally. All tools need to be leveraged to induce the Taliban to incorporate women back into society—but traditional “microphone diplomacy” through public statements, lamenting tweets, and public condemnations is not the same as proactive engagement. While these public statements might communicate a government's stance and gain political capital with a domestic audience, it is not the optimal way to actually have an impact. Fortunately, there are several opportunities for improving diplomatic engagement.

Recommendations

BILATERAL

- Send overwhelmingly female delegations in all engagements with the Taliban. Recent high-level delegations featuring women leaders have been great starts, but this effort can be increased even more. After these meetings, advertise them aggressively. The Taliban's willingness to meet with foreign women matters, and the Afghan people need to see it. This needs to be encouraged regionally in particular. Taliban leadership's meeting with Pakistani Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Hina Rabbani Khar created a stir on social media, showing how impactful these visuals are.
- Meet with women to hear their perspectives on community as part of visits to Afghanistan by international delegations. Following consultations, women's perspectives should be conveyed and incorporated whenever possible. This helps elevate the status of women in a society in which their role is currently defined by dependency and confinement.

ISLAMIC COMMUNITY

- Bring the Taliban into direct conversation with other Islamic nations. Though the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and ulemas from around the world have repeatedly criticized and condemned the Taliban's interpretation and implementation of Islam, these actions have not yielded direct results. Direct conversation with other Islamic nations might be more impactful than these high-level statements. This could be strongly incentivized given the international Islamic community's role in aid distribution. Additionally, non-Taliban local clerics could visit a more moderate but devout country like Indonesia so they can observe different forms of Islamic governance.
- Better understand the impact of the Taliban's continued structural dependencies and social ties to conservative madrassas in Pakistan. What the Pakistani ulema says matters to Taliban leadership. It is key that the international community more broadly gains insight into the conversations happening in this space and attempts to influence them.

- Partner with Islamic countries, as mentioned several times above, in providing humanitarian relief and overall engagement. They may be able to shape the perspectives of local clerics and help make mosques a place of empowerment. Most critically, they have the experience, expertise, and credibility needed to engage and advise on practical mechanisms for the implementation of programming that will hopefully ensure the Taliban will be more cooperative.

REGIONAL

- Adopt a more cascading regional strategy. Currently, the cores of regional relationships are security cooperation and economic projects. Afghanistan is eager to form these regional ties, and initiatives like water treaties or electricity-sharing agreements are great windows for relationship building. As economies grow and ties increase, the Taliban are exposed to different values and discouraged from further radicalization. Furthermore, economic opportunities that need to include women are further developed. The international community can have a key role in fostering and incentivizing these relationships. The resumption of large-scale regional development projects by the ADB, World Bank, and other relevant actors can foster growth even more. Projects that focus on infrastructure and connectivity are most important for long-term regional engagement and development. If the West does not engage in this space, regional powers will.

Increased Economic Engagement

The benefits of increasing economic opportunities for the people in Afghanistan are long term and widespread. Not only do economic opportunities undermine the Taliban's strategy of keeping the population beaten down, but it also lifts whole families out of poverty and empowers citizens to take a more active role in building their future. Currently, women and children are the most vulnerable to poverty due to the limitations of their economic access, but the right opportunities can be critical in breaking this cycle.

Furthermore, economic access can reshape the power dynamic that current efforts for economic engagement have created. The international community's outpouring of humanitarian aid makes the population dependent on temporary relief measures. However, shifting from a focus on emergency humanitarian assistance to more sustainable and large-scale economic development initiatives reorients the dependency from the people to the regime. The Taliban's increased de-

pendency also would create a new potential point of leverage for the international community to push for women to be incorporated into the economy. To take advantage of this, these economic projects must be crafted specifically with women's inclusion in mind so that it is difficult for the Taliban to exclude women. For example, private women's commissions can be formed in each project to provide key information that only women would have access to, such as informing a dam project on what times of day homes need the most electricity or communicating other household needs. However, it is critical that funding, aid, or investment are not explicitly linked to women's rights. Economic leverage must be fostered by the creation of dependencies, not by placing conditionalities on investments. More specific recommendations will be provided in a subsequent paper.

Ambassador Roya Rahmani has over 20 years' experience working with governments, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector. She currently serves as a distinguished fellow at Georgetown University's Global Institute for Women Peace and Security, the chair of Delphos International LTD, a global financial advisory firm based in Washington, DC, and a senior adviser at the Atlantic Council's South Asia Center.

Rahmani was the first woman to serve as Afghanistan's ambassador to the United States of America and held the role from 2018 to 2021. She was also the first woman to serve as Afghanistan's ambassador to Indonesia, serving from 2016 to 2018.

She holds a bachelor's degree in software engineering from McGill University and a master's degree in public administration from Columbia University.

ANNEX I: WOMEN'S RIGHTS LEGISLATION CREATED BY THE AFGHAN GOVERNMENT

Afghan Constitution with Gender Equality Provisions (2004)

Elimination of Violence Against Women Law (2009)

National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan (2008-2018)

Afghanistan National Development Strategy (2008-2013)

Family Law (1976)

Regulation on women shelters or Women Protection Centers

Policy to increase girls' enrollment in schools

Law on guardianship of orphaned children (1977)

Women's Economic Empowerment National Priority Program (2017)

Procedure for the prevention of discrimination (2003)

Amendment of some of the provisions in the Civil Servants Law in favor of women (2003)

National Strategy for Elimination of Violence against Women and its implementation plan (2016)

Modification of Elector Law with a view to gender equality (2016)

Adoption of regulation for the prevention of sexual harassment (2008)

Anti-Harassment Law (2016)

Policy to improve female prisoner's access to justice

ANNEX II: UNITED NATIONS INTERNATIONAL TREATIES TO WHICH AFGHANISTAN IS A SIGNATORY

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1983)

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1983)

International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (1983)

Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1987)

Convention on the Rights of the Child (1994)

Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (2002)

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (2003)

Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2003)

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2012)

Optional Protocol of the Convention against Torture (2018)

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Atlantic Council

1030 15th Street, NW, 12th Floor,
Washington, DC 20005

(202) 463-7226, www.AtlanticCouncil.org