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GENDER & POLITICS: Maintaining Women's Meaningful Participation in Afghanistan

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OVERVIEW

Afghanistan stands on the brink of an historic, albeit precarious, peace between the Taliban and the National Unity Government. The prospect of peace with the Taliban presents both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, such a peace would open new ground for reconstruction and development by eliminating, or at least diminishing significantly, the armed conflict that has plagued Afghanistan for decades.

On the other, bringing conservative Taliban policies into the formal structures of governance threatens to roll-back the hard-fought, socially progressive gains of the past 20 years—particularly in terms of the rights of women.¹ The U.S. and its allies have invested considerable resources to institutionalize women's rights and opportunities in Afghanistan. If peace and reconstruction are to proceed, these investments must continue. According to a recent World Bank policy note, the Afghan government will need between \$6 and \$8 billion dollars a year in international aid to “fund basic services, support faster economic growth, and consolidate and sustain any potential reduction in violence following a political settlement with the Taliban.”²

Previous investments have resulted in demonstrable gains. For women, access to healthcare, education, and economic opportunity far exceed the levels under Taliban rule. Among international donors, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has learned important lessons from the past two decades of engagement in socio-economic development, importantly under the Promoting Gender Equity in National Priority Programs (Promote) umbrella. Promote³ was the single, largest investment in women's empowerment and gender equity ever made by USAID and ran between 2015 and 2020. An investment of more than \$200 million, Promote is complemented by an expansive package of development assistance from USAID, including private sector economic growth programs, healthcare, education, and good governance. Together, these programs support Afghanistan's reconstruction and protect the social gains of the past 20 years in a post-settlement context.

Socio-economic gains are at risk, not only in light of a potential peace deal with the Taliban, but because of the apparent donor fatigue after two decades in Afghanistan. In 2015, the U.S. government disbursed over \$9 billion across all government agencies working in Afghanistan. By 2020, that number declined to \$812 million – a decrease of roughly 90 percent.⁴ As international attention and foreign aid has shifted away, Afghanistan's progress has clearly slowed. Assessing key socio-economic development indicators over the past five years, there is a clear correlation between U.S. support and the correspondent development outcomes. Women's rights and opportunities in Afghanistan have generally deteriorated. Afghanistan was ranked the world's second most dangerous country for women in 2018.⁵ It comes as no surprise then that nearly half of all Afghan women would like to leave the country, particularly those in Taliban-controlled territory.⁶

¹<https://giwps.georgetown.edu/an-open-letter-from-world-leaders-calling-for-afghan-womens-meaningful-participation-in-the-peace-process/>

²The World Bank, *Financing Peace: Fiscal Challenges and Implications for a Post-Settlement Afghanistan* (December 2019, available at <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/776581575555846850/pdf/Financing-Peace-Fiscal-Challenges-and-Implications-for-a-Post-Settlement-Afghanistan.pdf>)

³<https://www.usaid.gov/afghanistan/promote/>

⁴https://explorer.usaid.gov/cd/AFG?fiscal_year=2020&measure=Disbursements

⁵Thomas Reuters Foundation, *the world's most dangerous countries*, available at <https://poll2018.trust.org/>

⁶Ray, Julie, *Inside Afghanistan: Nearly Half of Afghan Women Want to Leave*, Gallup, September 23, 2019, available at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/266897/inside-afghanistan-nearly-half-afghan-women-leave.aspx>

A subtext to framing the three recommendations below is that women are recognized as carriers and transmitters of an ethnically, behaviorally, culturally diverse nation. For these three suggestions to morph into reality, any change in Afghan culture or tradition must be rooted in education and supported by the community. Today, educated women contribute to important societal roles as evidenced by the work of the USAID Promote: Women in Government (WIG) project. Women will further drive institutional change across sectors and within households. Rather than subverting culture, women embrace it as they change it.

Women convert the most important aspects of their culture, such as modesty, hospitality, and respectfulness, to effective application in their work. They listen carefully to village elders. They use their culture to justify improving the lives of family, friends, and neighbors. By personal action, they illustrate that cultural norms are not static but can be executed in constructive, distinctive, malleable ways⁷ that ensure their enshrined constitutional rights. As culture modernizes, women exercise its dynamic aspects to promote change for the women, peace and security agenda, economic inclusion, and civil and political participation.



RECOMMENDATION 1: WOMEN, PEACE, AND SECURITY

Substantial inclusion of women in a peace negotiation makes a resulting agreement 64 percent less likely to fail and 35 percent more likely to last at least 15 years.⁸ With a low level of women's participation, Afghanistan is the least peaceful country in the world and the site of the most violent conflict.⁹ In 2018, Afghanistan had the world's highest rate of war-related civilian casualties, even higher than Syria, with some 25,000 people killed (compared to under 20,000 in 2015).¹⁰ The share of territory under government control fell to 54 percent as of October 2018, its lowest since the Special Inspector General

for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) started tracking this data in 2015.¹¹ A more recent study found that, in 2020, the Afghan government controls just 33 percent of districts.¹² Fear for personal safety peaked in 2019 at 75 percent of survey respondents, up from 65 percent in 2014 and higher than any year since the Survey of the Afghan People began.¹³ According to a United Nations report, civilian deaths reached a record high in the third quarter of 2019.¹⁴ Vulnerable groups, specifically women, suffer disproportionate harm.

As a frequent visitor to Afghanistan, Former Administrator of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and Former New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark observed, "Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries on earth. Security issue or no security issue, there would need to be a focus on it."

⁷ Chiovenda, Melissa Kerr: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/afghan-women_b_1409068

⁸ Council on Foreign Relations: <https://www.cfr.org/report/how-womens-participation-conflict-prevention-and-resolution-advances-us-interests>

⁹ Therese Pettersson and Magnus Öberg, "Organized Violence, 1989–2019," *Journal of Peace Research* 57, No. 4 (June 16, 2020), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0022343320934986>

¹⁰ *The Economist*, Prisoners of war (17 August 2019), available at <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2019/08/17/violence-in-afghanistan-last-year-was-worse-than-in-syria>

¹¹ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress (30 January 2019), p. 43, available at <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2019-01-30qr.pdf>

¹² <https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan>

¹³ The Asia Foundation, *A Survey of the Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2019*, pp. 228, available at <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/afghanistan-in-2019-a-survey-of-the-afghan-people>

¹⁴ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Quarterly Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: 1 January to 30 September 2019 (17 October 2019), available at https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_protection_of_civilians_in_armed_conflict_-_3rd_quarter_update_2019.pdf

Building a stable Afghanistan requires the support and engagement of both men and women. To-date, women have been dramatically underrepresented in the peace and security architecture. Despite numerous calls from civil society, women are poorly represented at the Doha, Qatar peace negotiations. To ensure that women's rights are central to the dialogue, activist organizations insisted that women constitute at least 30 percent of the Afghan government's negotiating team; this target was not achieved. Women's rights groups believe 30 percent representation would provide a critical mass guaranteeing that women's voices are heard, and that any peace agreement includes clear, verifiable assurances that women will not only maintain the gains they have enjoyed in these last several years, but will also achieve further gains through an inclusive, durable peace.¹⁵

Women's role in the security services – the Afghan National Police (ANP) and military – is perhaps even more important. The presence of female police officers is critical in a culture of extreme gender segregation. Female police officers are better able to address complaints and resolve disputes with other women, particularly when it involves gender-based violence. Unfortunately, according to the latest Afghan government figures, the Ministry of Interior, which oversees the ANP, employed just 321 women, or less than five percent.¹⁶

The Afghan government already has ambitious targets for women's inclusion in peace and security. The U.S. supports many of these initiatives and publicly announced its own policy on implementing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. The WIG project actively supported the Ministry of Women's Affairs and other Afghan government partners to develop the follow-on National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA). NAPWA provides comprehensive, whole of government targets for women's inclusion, specifically in the security sector. This comes in addition to the Policy on Increasing Women's Participation in the Civil Service – another policy that received support from WIG – which sets a two percent annual target increase of women in the civil service.

Sustained support from the U.S. and its allies is necessary to fully realize these policy goals. In the first place, the U.S. must maintain its commitment to these important policies in any post-settlement unity government with the Taliban. Beyond rhetorical support, the Afghan government needs consistent donor engagement to implement these policies and generate the desired outcomes. Continued donor programming around women's rights, opportunities and protections, including gender-based violence, anti-harassment, and security sector reform, will help translate these policies into action. Goals should include increasing women's participation in the security sector, genuine representation in the peace negotiations, oversight of the peace plan implementation, and evaluation and monitoring, as well as attaining the established targets for women's role in the civil service.

¹⁵ Jalbert, Ph.D., Susanne E. at <https://www.devex.com/news/opinion-for-the-women-of-afghanistan-peace-with-the-taliban-may-not-end-the-war-98141>

¹⁶ NSIA 2019



RECOMMENDATION 2: WOMEN'S ECONOMIC INCLUSION

Over time, the intensification of the conflict between the Taliban and Afghanistan's National Unity Government has limited the impact of donor assistance across the board and constrained economic growth. 2018 was the slowest year for economic growth since 2001, with just 1 percent growth in gross domestic product.¹⁷ According to the latest Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey, the national unemployment rate is 24 percent.¹⁸ High unemployment paired with widespread job scarcity has intensified competition for formal employment in both the public and private sector. The most popular occupations for both men and women fell into the informal employment category in 2019 — farmers, skilled workers and artisans, and informal sales.¹⁹ Across age groups, participation in income-generating activity is particularly low among 18-to-25-year-olds. Only 36 percent of this age demographic reported earning income last year.²⁰

Unemployment more acutely affects women and youth, with 41 percent and 31 percent unemployment respectively.²¹ Just 10 percent of female respondents reported engaging in income-generating activity in 2019, compared to 82 percent of men.²² The percentage of families reporting that female members contribute to household income fell from 22 percent to 18 percent.²³

Women's education is crucially linked to economic inclusion. A positive attitudinal cultural shift in public approval for women's educational opportunities continued to climb in 2019 — up to nearly 87 percent, the highest level of support since 2012.²⁴ Of the roughly 9.3 million children in school, 39 percent are girls. That is up from fewer than 50,000 girls in school under the Taliban.²⁵ Support for women's work outside the home increased by 8 points to a record high of 76 percent. However, according to the Asia Foundation, "While it is tempting to see this as a sign of growing support for women's rights, approving women's employment may be a measure as much of economic hardship as of support for women's rights and autonomy."²⁶



¹⁷ World Bank website, "GDP growth (annual %) — Afghanistan," available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=AF>

¹⁸ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistics Organization, Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey 2016–2017, pp. v, available at <https://washdata.org/sites/default/files/documents/\\reports/2018-07/Afghanistan%20ALCS%202016-17%20Analysis%20report.pdf>

¹⁹ Ibid, The Asia Foundation, 2019, pp. 94

²⁰ Ibid, The Asia Foundation, 2019, pp. 90

²¹ Ibid, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistics Organization, 2016–2017, pp. 67

²² Ibid, The Asia Foundation, 2019, pp. 91

²³ Ibid, The Asia Foundation, 2019, pp. 226

²⁴ Ibid, The Asia Foundation, 2019, pp. 218

²⁵ Figures on the number of children in school vary significantly and are contested.

²⁶ Ibid, The Asia Foundation, 2019, pp. 222

“Local people disapproved of women working in public life, but as I have my family’s support, I will not let negative attitudes deter me,” said one female prosecutor with the Afghan Attorney General’s Office.

Taken together, these forces pose a daunting challenge to young women seeking to institutionalize the meager gains that have been made in terms of women’s economic inclusion. Add cultural norms that confine women in the home, and the prospect of increasing women’s economic participation becomes even more distant. Regardless of interpretation, sustaining the gains made toward universal women’s education is critical to ensure continued economic engagement.

In September 2018, USAID released the latest Country Development and Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) for Afghanistan. The CDCS came nearly a year after USAID/Afghanistan’s Plan for Transition document expired in 2017. The new CDCS is USAID’s guiding document for Afghanistan and emphasizes private sector, export-led economic growth as the central thrust of the U.S. development strategy. The U.S. and international donors should continue to focus specifically on women’s economic participation, supporting programs that increase marketable skillsets, expanding opportunities for women-owned businesses, and cultivating international linkages that expose Afghan products to new markets. This is not a charitable exercise, but rather one focused on providing targeted support to competitive businesses to remove the constraints preventing their growth, expand their sales, and organically create jobs. Donor support should focus on establishing and sustaining workplace protections for women, ranging from strong (and enforceable) anti-harassment regulations to providing infrastructure, such as basic needs for women’s restrooms in the workplace.



RECOMMENDATION 3: **WOMEN’S CIVIL AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

Protecting women’s rights requires that women have a sustained presence in the government decision-making process. The progress on increasing women’s representation in the government is mixed. Despite moderate progress, women’s rights and opportunities suffered overall, in line with deterioration in the security environment and an economic downturn — a worrisome worldwide trend aimed at dismantling legal protections and diminishing gender-equitable support systems.²⁷ In Afghanistan, the instability resulting from a delayed and contested presidential election, insecurity of active war, and a contentious peace process has affected the success of strategies to increase women’s representation in government and politics.

²⁷ Mingeiroum Kalliopi Mingeirou, quoted in “Across the Globe, a ‘Serious Backlash Against Women’s Rights’” by Alisha Haridasani Gupta, December 4, 2019, The New York Times, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/04/us/domestic-violence-international.html>

From 2014 to 2019, there was virtually no change in the number of women serving in Parliament. The quotas for women's representation in the Wolesi Jirga and the Meshrano Jirga remained static throughout this period, with 67 women in the lower house and 19 women in the upper house.²⁸ Roughly a third of the seats in the upper house remain vacant, pending appointments from district councils. The overall percentage of women in Parliament in 2018 was 27 percent. Support for the idea that political leadership positions should be shared equally between men and women fell by 10 percentage points: from 42 percent in 2014 to 32 percent in 2019.²⁹ Women lag far behind men in the number of leadership positions held and in their lack of freedom to engage in political and social activities. In the civil service, women's participation is reported to be 27 percent where women largely hold lower-level positions with limited decision-making power. The country's only female governor left office in 2017; all 35 provincial governors, positions of significant power and authority, are again entirely male.

On the other hand, popular approval of women working in government offices increased minimally by one percent over the past five years, from 70 to 71 percent.³⁰ There are four female ambassadors representing Afghanistan abroad. There is one female mayor in the Maidan Shar municipality of Wardak province. A record number of women ran for public office in the 2018 Parliamentary elections.³¹ On an optimistic note, Afghanistan recently secured a seat at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women – for the first time in its history³² – added four women to the Afghanistan Peace Negotiations Team in Doha,³³ and appointed eight women to the High Council for National Reconciliation.³⁴ These moderate gains occurred in a period of pronounced uncertainty for women's rights.



²⁷ Mingeiroum Kalliopi Mingeirou, quoted in "Across the Globe, a 'Serious Backlash Against Women's Rights'" by Alisha Haridasani Gupta, December 4, 2019, The New York Times, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/04/us/domestic-violence-international.html>

²⁸ Inter-Parliamentary Union, Afghanistan, available at https://data.ipu.org/node/1/basic-information?chamber_id=13574

²⁹ Ibid, The Asia Foundation, 2019, pp. 213

³⁰ Ibid, The Asia Foundation, 2019, pp. 225

³¹ Ahmadi, Belquis, Afghan Women Defy Violence and Vote, United States Institute of Peace, November 6, 2018, available at <https://www.usip.org/blog/2018/11/afghan-women-defy-violence-and-vote>

³² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/09/afghanistan-secures-coveted-seat-women-commission-200915110345254.html>

³³ <https://kabulnow.af/2020/03/afghan-government-finalizes-negotiating-team-for-talks-with-taliban/>

³⁴ <https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/afghan-president-names-council-for-peace-deal-with-taliban/>

USAID-funded programs, like WIG, have sought to increase the number of women working in government. WIG successfully facilitated civil service job placements for over 1,700 women; however, more work remains as the Afghan government strives to meet the target of 30 percent women in the civil service by 2020. The same applies to women, whether they are entering the private sector or civil society. The U.S. and international donors should continue efforts to cultivate an inclusive society that can effectively advocate on a range of issues, including women's rights and opportunities. Accountability is essential. Donor support, particularly on-budget funding, should be tied to the achievement of targets for women's inclusion. The data on government employment is inadequate. Without accurate data on the number of women employed in the civil service, accountability for targets is impossible. More accurate data would also support the government's existing anti-corruption work – identifying and eliminating so-called ghost workers.

CONCLUSION

Many senior officials within the Afghan government have a progressive vision for the future of the country, and women in particular. Unfortunately, it will be difficult to implement this vision without significant investments in institutional strengthening, the collection and dissemination of accurate data, and capacity-building to realistically implement and sustain accountability for the existing laws and policies that are currently on the books—much less develop and implement new policies to promote gender equity.

The Taliban, on the other hand, has an alternative vision for the country and a parallel policymaking process. In one of its more progressive statements, a Taliban leader recently wrote in a New York Times opinion piece that the group “will find a way to build an Islamic system in which all Afghans have equal rights, where the rights of women that are granted by Islam – from the right to education to the right to work – are protected.”³⁵ This sounds all well and good; however, it is worth noting that during the Taliban's tenure from 1994 to 2001, the group used the same language to describe its policies on gender equality, i.e. that they guaranteed women's rights according to Islam. Clearly this was not the case, as evidenced by the zero level of women's inclusion or societal participation in that era, where women and girls were systematically excluded from virtually all forms of socio-economic participation or protection.

Based on new research from the United States Institute of Peace, the Taliban's position on women's rights has evolved since 2001. The group now supports a limited set of rights for women and girls on a case-by-case basis. For instance, the Taliban began supporting girls' education, but only in certain areas of Afghanistan and only when communities demanded it.³⁶ This piecemeal and highly localized approach to providing women's rights does little to guarantee gender equity on a national scale.

The insistence of stanch international transparency, targeted upstream systems, and a triangulated methodological approach opened an honest conversation to shift gender equity dialogues and dynamics

³⁵ Haqqani, Sirajuddin, “What We, the Taliban, Want,” The New York Times (February 20, 2020), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/opinion/taliban-afghanistan-war-haqqani.html>

³⁶ Jackson, Ashley and Rahmatullah Amiri, “Insurgent Bureaucracy: How the Taliban Makes Policy,” United States Institute of Peace (November 2019), available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/11/insurgent-bureaucracy-how-taliban-makes-policy>

within the government of Afghanistan. As evidenced by the increased percentage of female employment in the civil service, as well as new legal instruments and amplified advocacy efforts, WIG³⁷ policy pursuits leave an enduring legacy to move equity forward – one that must be followed up with continued engagement by the U.S. and its allies.

The Afghan Provincial Women's Networks and Women in Peace Coalition released a joint statement directly requesting international donors to hold the Afghan government, security forces, and media accountable for the past two-decades of women's earned, sustainable progress.³⁸

The international community must raise its collective voice to advocate for the established constitutional protections of human rights of all Afghan people, particularly women. Adroit advocacy must include: 1) women, peace and security measures, 2) women's economic inclusion, and 3) women's civil and political participation. Keep global conversations elevated to maintain two-decades of gains for Afghan women.

³⁷ Final USAID Promote: Women in Government (WIG) report: https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00WJP9.pdf

³⁸ British & Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group at <https://www.baag.org.uk/news/afghan-women-demand-just-and-accountable-peace>

POLICY BRIEF TEAM



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Previously, Cortright was the director of policy studies at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies and director of the institute's Peace Accords Matrix project, the largest existing collection of implementation data on intrastate peace agreements.



Robert Lord-Biggers is an international development practitioner who works largely in post-conflict and transitional states spanning across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. He is currently a Senior Program Manager in Chemonics' Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Afghanistan portfolio, and previously served as communications advisor for the USAID Promote: Women in Government project. His work focuses on conflict prevention and resolution, transitional justice, and gender inclusion. Mr. Lord-Biggers holds a bachelor's in international relations from Hendrix College and a master's in international peace and conflict resolution from the American University's School of International Service.

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