

AFGHANISTAN

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

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INTRODUCTION

The United States became engaged in Afghanistan in 2001 and has continued that engagement for the past 18 years, in part because our national security depends upon Afghanistan's stability. Some Americans are frustrated over Washington's involvement in a prolonged and costly conflict, and that sentiment is understandable. However, it would be a grave mistake to withdraw remaining coalition forces without a clear roadmap for peace that protects nearly two decades of hard-won rights and liberties for the Afghan people.

To be clear, we are not advocating for a perpetual U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. We believe the Afghan people should and will control their futures, but at this crucial time during the country's nascent journey toward freedom, United States support is still needed.

Women have the most to lose if the clock turns back. Under Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001, women and girls were brutalized, isolated, and marginalized. Citizens fell into poverty and despair. The Taliban imposed a dogmatic government relegating women and girls to second-class citizenship.

Since the Taliban's fall, women and girls have made substantial gains in the areas of education, health care, economic inclusion, and civic and social life. These advances are at risk — the United States must not abandon Afghan women and girls.

Afghan defense forces require further training to provide security for their people, and we must sustain robust support for the country's infrastructure, institutions, and citizens. Without this aid, the country could return to a dictatorship, leaving women and girls particularly vulnerable to decisions made by extremists.

Afghan citizens are not the only ones at risk. As Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov said, "A country that does not respect the rights of its own people will not respect the rights of its neighbors." Besides dehumanizing and demoralizing women and girls, the Taliban allowed Afghanistan to become a haven for terrorists who instigated the 9/11 attacks.

The United States' national security is directly tied to the success of transitioning nations like Afghanistan. Violence, poverty, and oppression breed conditions that lead to instability and extremism. Moreover, societies cannot succeed if half the population, namely women and girls, are marginalized and brutalized. For these reasons, building a stable and democratic Afghanistan should remain a priority for the United States and its allies.

The alternative is leaving a vacuum that will be filled by America's ideological adversaries such as China, Russia, Iran, the Islamic State, and others who seek to overturn the liberal democratic order. Beijing and Moscow would not be troubled by an Afghan regime that brutalizes women and girls or that provides safe harbor to terrorist organizations plotting against the United States.

For nearly a year, Washington and the Taliban [engaged in peace talks](#) over the country's future. While the Afghan government had been excluded from direct discussions, government officials participated in unofficial capacities.¹ Talks had even progressed to the point where an agreement in principle was

¹ Secunder Kermani, "Afghanistan talks agree 'roadmap to peace,'" BBC News, 9 July 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48919335>.

reached and seemingly supported by both parties.²

As of the writing of this paper, however, negotiations ended abruptly when President Trump cancelled further meetings, citing the Taliban's continued attacks that claimed the life of an American soldier.³ It is uncertain if the year-long dialogue will be salvaged or how immediate U.S. engagement in Afghanistan will be affected.

Several things are still clear. The Taliban's commitment to a pluralistic society that incorporates diverse beliefs and populations is questionable. Their continued attacks and violent opposition to democratic elections do not convey an organization committed to peace, tolerance, or the will of the Afghan people.

Moreover, lasting peace will be challenging if Kabul is excluded from critical discussions. This is important because future negotiations may determine the extent of American involvement. Additionally, any peace deal may drive some Taliban fighters to join a [resurgent Islamic State](#) in Afghanistan,⁴ and a withdrawal by the U.S. and NATO could lead [key Afghan warlords to prepare for a potential civil war](#).⁵

For a peaceful Afghanistan, more must be done to strengthen the country's domestic security forces; support foreign aid to improve development, infrastructure, and good governance; and engage men and women to uphold equality for all citizens.

The United States must consistently and directly consult Afghan women to understand the major issues they face. It is vital that Washington support the inclusion of women, civil society, and other marginalized groups throughout the peace process and its implementation.

Since the Taliban's fall in 2001, women and girls have made substantial gains in the areas of education, health care, civic and social life, and economic inclusion. This report explores the achievements made and remaining challenges for women and girls. Additionally, it spotlights inspirational women. Afghan women have made great progress in the past 18 years — the United States must stand with them in their march forward.

EXAMINING AFGHAN WOMEN'S GAINS SINCE 2001

EDUCATION

Why is this important?

Women's and girls' access to education is essential for Afghanistan's social and economic development. When women are educated, they are more likely to become [gainfully employed](#), raising the income of the entire household.⁶ Just one year of secondary education for a young girl can lead to a wage increase

² Mujib Mashal, "To Start Afghan Withdrawal, U.S. Would Pull 5,400 Troops in 135 Days," 2 September 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/02/world/asia/us-withdrawal-afghanistan-taliban.html>.

³ Lyse Doucet, "Trump cancels secret US meeting with Afghan Taliban," BBC News, 8 September 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49624132?fbclid=IwAR0mC6OmYk4mdYQrJznbHKswN3BNdOvltqPKKplHGmOtMIQDU111huPIJ>.

⁴ Abdul Qadir Sediqi and Ahmad Sultan, "Taliban, U.S. pact in Afghanistan could boost Islamic State," Reuters, 15 August 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-afghanistan-islamicstate/taliban-u-s-pact-in-afghanistan-could-boost-islamic-state-idUSKCN1V50XS>.

⁵ Scott DesMarais, "Afghanistan's Warlords Prepare for Civil War," Institute for the Study of War, 15 August 2019, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/search/label/Afghanistan>.

⁶ UNESCO, et al, *Financing Education – Investments and Returns: Analysis of the World Education Indicators, 2002 Edition*, <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/>

of [up to 25 percent later in life](#), breaking the cycle of poverty for multiple generations.⁷ The impact of education extends beyond families and communities to the country as a whole. A 2003 study of 19 developing countries by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization showed that for every one-year increase in a country's average years of schooling, its long-term economic growth [increased by 3.7 percent](#).⁸

Education also directly impacts the well-being of Afghanistan's children. According to an assessment of 175 countries between 1970 and 2009, for every one-year increase in the average education of reproductive-age women, the country experienced a 9.5 percent reduction in child deaths. In other words, [half of the reduction in child mortality over the past 40 years is due to the better education of women](#).⁹

Overall, educated women have fewer children because of their increased access to opportunities in higher education and employment, and their children tend to be [healthier and better educated](#).¹⁰ Since 43 percent of Afghanistan's population is under the age of 14, Afghan children's health and education are crucial to the future of the country.

What gains have been made?

More than 9 million Afghan children are enrolled in school today, including [over 3.5 million girls](#).¹¹ That is 3.5 million more than were allowed to attend school in 2001. In addition to an increase in public and private schools in urban areas, community-based education effectively reaches children in more remote places.

In 2017 and 2018, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) supported the establishment of 8,440 community-based education and accelerated learning classes, [ensuring more than 53 percent of Afghan girls had access to quality education](#).¹² [Razia's Ray of Hope Foundation](#), a grassroots organization, provides community-based K-12 education to more than 741 students and access to economic opportunity and training. Organizations like these are imperative to safeguarding girls' access to education.¹³

This progress extends to tertiary education. According to the Afghan Ministry of Education, [public and private universities](#) enroll around 300,000 students, including 100,000 women.¹⁴ At the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF), a private, independent, nonprofit, co-ed institution, [42 percent of enrolled students in 2018 were women](#).¹⁵ Notable AUAF alumnae include Onaba Payab, the first female valedictorian of AUAF, a Fulbright Scholar, and an education advocate; and [Gharasany IbnulAmeen](#), recognized as the 2019 Woman of Distinction by the NGO Committee on the Status of Women, NY.¹⁶

[documents/financing-education-investments-and-returns-executive-summary-2002-en_3.pdf](#).

7 Population Reference Bureau, *The Effect of Girls' Education on Health Outcomes: Fact Sheet*, 2011, www.prb.org/girls-education-fact-sheet/.

8 UNESCO, et al. *Financing Education-Investments and Returns: Analysis of the World Education Indicators, 2002 Edition, Executive Summary*, http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/financing-education-investments-and-returns-executive-summary-2002-en_3.pdf.

9 Patricio V. Marquez and Melanie Walker, "Healthy women are the cornerstone of healthy societies," *World Bank Blogs*, World Bank Group, 12 January 2017, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/health/healthy-women-are-cornerstone-healthy-societies>.

10 Save the Children, *State of the World's Mothers, 2005: The Power and Promise of Girls' Education*, 2005, http://www.ungei.org/SafeTheChildren_SOWM_2005.pdf.

11 U.S. Agency for International Development, "Afghanistan: Education," 22 July 2019, <https://www.usaid.gov/afghanistan/education>.

12 *Ibid.*

13 Razia's Ray of Hope Foundation, "About the Foundation: Education Empowers," <https://raziasrayofhope.org/about-the-foundation.html>.

14 The Initiative to Education Afghan Women, "The Initiative To Educate Afghan Women Pilots Professional Development," 10 February 2018, www.ieaw.org/single-post/2018/02/08/The-Initiative-To-Educate-Afghan-Women-Pilots-Professional-Development-Program.

15 U.S. Agency for International Development, "Afghanistan: American University of Afghanistan (AUAF)," December 2018, www.usaid.gov/news-information/fact-sheets/american-university-afghanistan-auaf.

16 Friends of the American University of Afghanistan, "AUAF Graduate to be Honored with 2019 Woman of Distinction Award," 5 February 2019, <https://friendsofauf.org/auaf-graduate-to-be-honored-with-2019-woman-of-distinction-award/>.

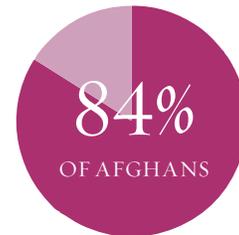
Moreover, Afghans' largely support girls' access to education – 84 percent agreed in The Asia Foundation's [2018 Survey of the Afghan People](#) that women should have the same opportunities as men in education. And, 40 percent of respondents who “strongly” agreed with gender equality in access to education were men. This is important because it demonstrates that Afghans, including men, feel ardently about women's rights to education. Safeguarding those rights are central to current and future peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government.



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agree that women should have the same opportunities as men in education

What challenges remain?

Illiteracy and lack of educational opportunities are the biggest problems facing women in local areas according to the Survey of the Afghan People. Attacks on schools by anti-government elements and Afghan security forces' use of schools in support of military efforts have put children at risk of severe harm.

In 2015, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and UNICEF documented [132 conflict-related incidents against schools and 369 school closures](#). In addition, seven incidents of threats and intimidation led to the closure of 213 schools, affecting at least 50,683 girls.¹⁷ The [Islamic State – Khorasan Province \(IS-KP\)](#), an affiliate of ISIS, has also executed attacks against schools in eastern Afghanistan, including ones in Kabul.¹⁸ Continued training of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) will mitigate some of these risks.

Additionally, poverty impacts access to education, at times contributing to child labor or early marriage. Girls with no education are three times more likely to marry by 18 than those with a secondary or higher education.¹⁹ Long distances to the closest school and harassment also restrict access.

While teachers have low absence rates, the [short-schedule teaching time in public schools and lack of sufficient training](#) impact the quality of education and ultimately, student learning.²⁰ [Since 2008, USAID has trained 480,000 teachers](#),²¹ and organizations like the Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL), founded by Dr. Sakena Yacoobi, [provide training](#) in modern pedagogical and interactive, student-centered teaching methods.²² According to Dr. Yacoobi, AIL has trained 28,200 teachers, and the Afghan government has adopted its methods in its teacher training.

17 UNAMA, et al. *Education and Healthcare at Risk: Key Trends and Incidents Affecting Children's Access to Healthcare and Education in Afghanistan*, United Nations, April 2016, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/education_and_healthcare_at_risk.pdf.

18 Paul Lushenko, "ISKP: Afghanistan's New Salafi Jihadism," Middle East Institute, 19 October 2018, www.mei.edu/publications/iskp-afghanistans-new-salafi-jihadism.

19 Girls Not Brides, "What is the impact of Child Marriage: Education," <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/themes/education/>.

20 Ezequiel Molina, et al. *The Learning Crisis in Afghanistan: Results of the Afghanistan Saber Service Delivery Survey*, 2017, World Bank Group, September 2018, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/588881536147087211/pdf/AUS0000428-REVISED-SABER-SD-Afghanistan-digital-9-27.pdf>.

21 U.S. Agency for International Development, "Afghanistan: Education," 22 July 2019, www.usaid.gov/afghanistan/education.

22 Afghan Institute of Learning, "Teacher Training," www.afghaninstituteoflearning.org/teacher-training.html.

In addition, the [World Bank's Education Quality Reform in Afghanistan project](#), which the United States supports financially, aims to increase equitable access to primary and secondary education, particularly for girls in lagging provinces, and to improve learning conditions in Afghanistan.²³ These are just a few of the ongoing efforts to improve access to and the quality of education, and no one stands to benefit more than Afghanistan's young women and girls.

What is at stake?

A return to Taliban-era restrictions on women and girls' education would be devastating. In a [2016 paper](#) published in the *Journal of Comparative Economics*, researchers found that women who were exposed to Taliban rule as children were less likely to be employed outside of home and more likely to be married at a younger age.²⁴

Child and early forced marriage not only trap girls in a cycle of poverty, they also [exponentially increase the girl's risk](#) of maternal and infant mortality.²⁵ According to one study, even a 10 percent reduction in child marriage could reduce a country's maternal mortality rate by as much as 70 percent.²⁶ Afghanistan has some of the worst maternal and infant mortality rates in the world. Afghan women's right to education, opportunity, prosperity, and health are inextricably intertwined.

Afghanistan's population is young – approximately [63 percent of Afghans are under the age of 25](#).²⁷ This group will lead the country's future. Assuring equal access to quality education is essential to maintaining the strides women and girls have made and ensuring they are among the key decision makers of tomorrow.

Despite Taliban pledges to support Afghan women's rights within an Islamic framework, reports show that in some districts the militants [only allow girls to attend school until sixth grade](#).²⁸ The United States and the international community must remain engaged to ensure that any peace agreement, implementation commission, and post-conflict aid package guarantees Afghan women and girls the right to an education.

WOMEN'S HEALTH CARE

Why is this important?

Women's health is not only important for women themselves, but also for the [well-being of their families, communities, and countries](#). Healthy mothers tend to have healthier children, and this effect can span subsequent generations. Greater access to higher education and employment coupled with women's agency over the number of children they bear can raise incomes and reduce poverty. Furthermore, research indicates that how a country protects and promotes the health of women impacts their development and economic performance.²⁹

23 The World Bank, "Projects & Operations: Project EQRA, Additional School Building Improves Learning Environment in Eastern Afghanistan," 17 December 2018, <http://projects.worldbank.org/P159378?lang=en>.

24 Abdul G. Noury and Biagio Speciale, "Social constraints and women's education: Evidence from Afghanistan under radical religious rule," *Journal of Comparative Economics*, vol. 44, no. 4, Nov. 2016, pp. 821–841, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0147596716300373>.

25 Girls Not Brides, *Talking points: Child marriage and maternal and child health*, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Child-marriage-and-maternal-health-Girls-Not-Brides-Updated-27-May-2013.pdf>.

26 *Ibid.*

27 UNFPA Afghanistan, "Young People," 5 October 2017, <https://afghanistan.unfpa.org/en/node/15227>.

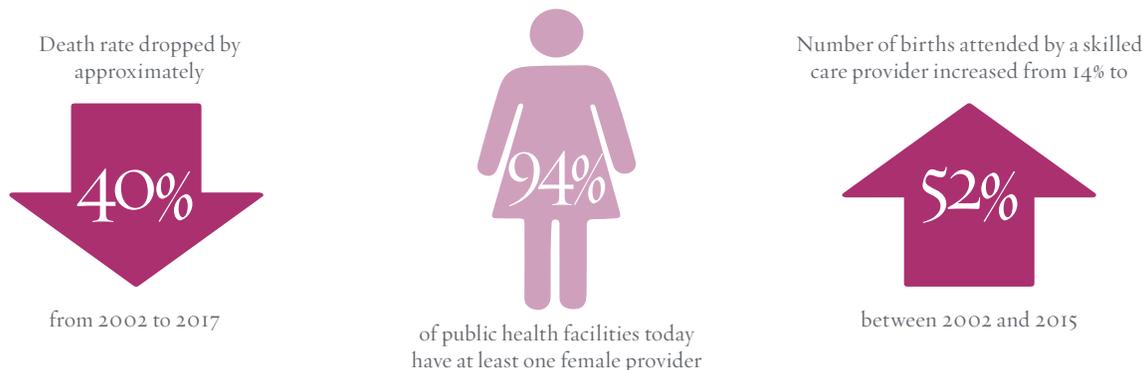
28 Eltaf Najafzada, "Afghan Girls Risk Lives in Secret Bid to Break Taliban's Grip," Bloomberg, 30 July 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-07-30/dreaming-of-graduation-afghan-girls-look-to-u-s-taliban-talks>.

29 Kristine H. Onarheim, et. al. *Economic Benefits of Investing in Women's Health: A Systematic Review*. Edited by Jodi Pawluski, PLOS ONE, 30 March 2016, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4814064/pdf/pone.0150120.pdf>.

What gains have been made?

Afghanistan's health system has made [steady progress](#) over the last 18 years, with increased access to services throughout the country. Improvements include greater physical capacity to deliver care, better management systems, and more human capital in the health sector.³⁰ In 2018, a total of [3,135 health facilities](#) were functional, which ensured access to health care that's within two hours' distance by almost 87 percent of the population, a marked improvement from the Taliban era.³¹ Moreover, the death rate has [dropped by approximately 40 percent](#) from 2002 to 2017.³²

Women's access to health care and beneficial outcomes have seen similar improvements. During most of the Taliban era, women could only be seen by female providers. With limited female providers, no new female providers graduating from schools, and the ban on female providers working outside the home, women were essentially [prohibited from obtaining health care](#).³³ Those who did manage to find female providers could only leave home to seek care [in the company of a male escort](#), even during emergencies.³⁴ Today, Afghan women have greater access to health facilities, and the number of female health workers has increased.



Encouragingly, between 2002 and 2015, the maternal mortality rate in Afghanistan [declined by 60 percent](#) according to the World Bank.³⁵ USAID has also reported that the number of women attended by a skilled care provider at birth [increased from 14 to 52 percent](#) between 2002 and 2015.³⁶ These numbers reflect the progress made for women's health, rights, and empowerment in Afghanistan.

In 2002, [only 25 percent of health facilities](#) employed a female health worker.³⁷ With financial assistance from USAID and other international donors, the World Bank supported over 2,400 public health facilities in all 34 provinces, with [94 percent of the facilities reporting at least one female health care provider](#).³⁸ Leaders like Massoma Jafari, vice president of the Afghanistan Midwives Association, are improving health outcomes for women through local initiatives.

30 World Bank Group, *Progress in the Face of Insecurity: Improving Health Outcomes in Afghanistan*, 2018, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/724291522691782187/pdf/123809-v2-PUBLIC-14838-AfghanistanRpt-WEB.pdf>.

31 World Health Organization, Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, "Afghanistan: Health System," <http://www.emro.who.int/afg/programmes/health-system-strengthening.html>.

32 World Bank Group, "Death Rate, Crude (per 1,000 People)," World Bank Open Data, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.CDRT.IN?locations=AF>. Calculated: 11.167 in 2002 to 6.587 in 2017.

33 Amnesty International UK, "Women in Afghanistan: the back story," 25 November 2014, www.amnesty.org.uk/womens-rights-afghanistan-history.

34 Human Rights Watch, "The 'Ten-Dollar Talib' and Women's Rights: Afghan Women and the Risks of Reintegration and Reconciliation," 13 July 2010, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/07/13/ten-dollar-talib-and-womens-rights/afghan-women-and-risks-reintegration-and>.

35 World Bank Group, "Maternal mortality ratio (modeled estimate, per 100,000)," World Bank Open Data, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.STA.MMRT?locations=AF>. Calculated: 996 to 396.

36 U.S. Agency for International Development, "Maternal Health in Afghanistan," 21 August 2017, <https://www.usaid.gov/actingonthecall/stories/afghanistan>.

37 *Ibid.*

38 U.S. Agency for International Development, "Afghanistan: Health," 18 July 2019, www.usaid.gov/afghanistan/health.

What challenges remain?

In 2015, UNAMA and UNICEF documented [64 incidents of threats and intimidation](#) of health personnel, leading to the closure of at least 19 clinics.³⁹ In the same year, 129 health workers were killed, injured, or abducted. Attacks on health facilities and the use of clinics as barracks or bases to mount security operations by both insurgents and pro-government forces inhibit all Afghans' access to health care.

According to the Afghan Ministry of Public Health, violence like suicide bombings and armed conflict is a [leading cause of death and disability](#),⁴⁰ forcing the government to devote financial resources to the treatment of injuries and trauma rather than the improvement of health care for women and children, one of the goals of [Afghanistan's National Health Strategy](#).⁴¹ Moreover, a lack of current and available data has resulted in debates about the [accuracy of reductions in maternal mortality](#).⁴²

Cost of treatment, distance to a health facility, and social and cultural norms limit women's access to health care, mobility, and agency.⁴³ Nearly 9 in 10 ever-married⁴⁴ women aged 15 to 49 in the [2015 Afghanistan Demographic and Health Survey](#) reported at least one problem in accessing health care.

Inequitable access between rural and urban areas, as well as women's geographic isolation compounds these issues.⁴⁵ While there has been an increase in female health workers since 2002, an acute shortage based on the needs of the population still exists. According to the 2018 Survey of the Afghan People, four provinces have no female providers at all. Afghans who have financial means annually divert about \$300 million for treatment outside Afghanistan, mainly in India and Pakistan. With a more accessible and effective health care system, this \$300 million could instead be infused into the Afghan economy.

What is at stake?

In 2001, Afghanistan's maternal mortality ratio, estimated at 1,600 per 100,000 live births, was the [highest ever recorded](#).⁴⁶ [One in four children](#) died by the age of five.⁴⁷ In just the first five years after the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan's infant mortality rate [dropped by 18 percent](#), meaning 40,000 to 50,000 infants who were dying annually during the Taliban era were now living.⁴⁸ Each healthy child is a sign of progress and what is at stake.

Afghanistan's public health system has come a long way but is still heavily reliant on donor funding for basic health care services. The United States must continue to support the country's health care system and ensure progress is sustained. A functioning, efficient public health system means more to

39 UNAMA, et al. *Education and Healthcare at Risk: Key Trends and Incidents Affecting Children's Access to Healthcare and Education in Afghanistan*, United Nations, April 2016, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/education_and_healthcare_at_risk.pdf.

40 The Asia Foundation, *A Survey of the Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2018*. Edited by Tabasum Akseer and John Rieger, 2018, <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/2018-Afghan-Survey-fullReport-12.4.18.pdf>.

41 Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Public Health, *National Health Strategy, 2016-2020: Sustain Progress and Building for Tomorrow and Beyond*, September 2016, http://www.nationalplanningcycles.org/sites/default/files/planning_cycle_repository/afghanistan/afghanistan_mophstrategy2016-2020_final09september2016111201614508950553325325.pdf.

42 Rod Nordland, "Reported Gains in Afghan Maternal Health Are Found to Be Implausible," *New York Times*, 4 December 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/05/world/asia/afghanistan-maternal-mortality-rate.html?login=email&auth=login-email>.

43 Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of Public Health and Central Statistics Organization, *Afghanistan Demographic and Health Survey, 2015, January 2017*, <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR323/FR323.pdf>.

44 This includes women who are married, separated, widowed, or divorced.

45 World Health Organization, Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, *Health profile 2015: Afghanistan*, https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/250375/EMROPUB_2016_EN_18925.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

46 World Health Organization, "From Trauma to Recovery: Addressing Emergency Care in Afghanistan," April 2018, <https://www.who.int/features/2018/emergency-care-afghanistan/en/>.

47 Sean Carberry, "An Afghan Success Story: Fewer Child Deaths," *NPR*, 4 February 2014, <https://www.npr.org/2014/02/04/269551459/an-afghan-success-story-fewer-child-deaths>.

48 Carlotta Gall, "Infant mortality rate in Afghanistan down 18 percent in 5 years," *New York Times*, 26 April 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/26/world/asia/26iht-kabul.5.5458699.html>.

women and girls, who often face the greatest consequences of insufficient or costly health care. For Afghanistan's women and girls to contribute productively to society and the economy, access to health care access is mandatory.

CIVIL AND SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

Why is this important?

Empowering women leads a country toward peace and prosperity and contributes to a more stable global community. Studies have noted a generally [positive relationship](#) between gender equality and democratic consolidation. This makes sense — a more open society that encourages broader political participation will result in more women in the country making decisions, taking leadership positions, and advancing policies that empower women overall.⁴⁹

As an [Inclusive Security report](#) states, “Where women are more empowered in multiple spheres of life, countries are less likely to go to war with their neighbors, to be in bad standing with the international community, or to be rife with crime and violence within their society.” Data shows gender equality indicates a country’s level of peace more than other political and economic factors. The same report cites that greater female representation in parliaments reduces the risk of civil war.⁵⁰

During its reign, the Taliban expunged women from public life, including political participation. The good news is Afghanistan is not starting from scratch. Prior to the theocratic state imposed on the Afghan people by the Taliban from 1996 to 2001, the country was a very different place. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the government was progressive, opening public spaces to women and permitting access to employment and education. Today, several generations of women, pre- and post-Taliban, know a society that empowers women.

Empowering women in political and civic life helps lift women out of poverty, despair, and violence. It also develops a more transparent and open society that respects the rights of all citizens. Doing so fosters more peaceful relations within the region and the world.

What gains have been made?

With the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan needed to reopen society to half its population. The Taliban prevented women from leaving their homes without male escorts, and women were not allowed to vote or run for office. The Taliban’s Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice “regularly flogged, beat, and otherwise punished women in detention centers and public places for violating Taliban dress codes, which include wearing the burqa, a one-piece garment covering the entire body,” noted Freedom House.⁵¹

The post-Taliban era marked a period of renewal for Afghan women. The Bonn Agreement, which formally ended Taliban rule, saw Hamid Karzai emerge as the leader of a temporary government; he

49 Ted Piccone, *Democracy, gender equality, and security*, Brookings Institution, September 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/fp_20170905_democracy_gender_security.pdf.

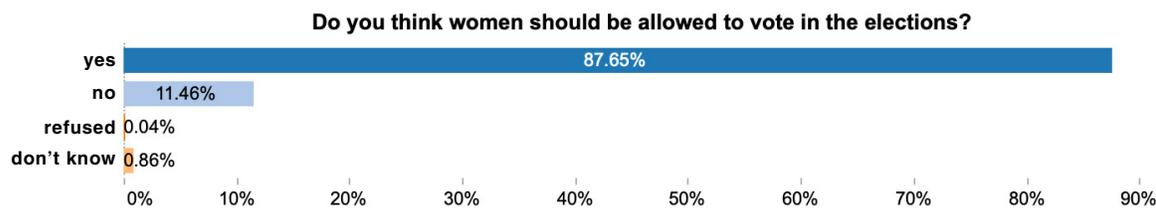
50 Marie O’Reilly, *Why Women? Inclusive Security and Peaceful Societies*, Inclusive Security, October 2015, <https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Why-Women-Report-2017.pdf>.

51 Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2001: Afghanistan,” <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2001/afghanistan>.

[named two women to his cabinet](#): Sima Samar as the Deputy Chair and Minister of Women's Affairs and Suhaila Seddiqi as the Minister of Public Health.⁵² Karzai's interim administration managed the country for several months until the loya jirga, a nationwide gathering that results in decisions of national importance, appointed a transitional government in 2002. The loya jirga, which included approximately 200 women, chose Karzai to continue leading the country and initiate the important work of establishing a new constitution.⁵³ In January 2004, the new Afghan constitution was ratified, guaranteeing equal rights for women and reserving more than 25 percent of seats in the national assembly for women.

Since then, Afghan women's participation in the country's political process has been robust. In the country's first post-Taliban presidential election in 2004, women [made up 41 percent of all registered voters](#).⁵⁴ The following year, women accounted for more than 10 percent (approximately 500) of all candidates in parliamentary and local council elections, and at least [68 were elected](#) to the Wolesi Jirga.⁵⁵ In 2009, two women contended for the presidency. In 2018, despite an atmosphere of violence, women represented 16 percent of all candidates in the long-delayed parliamentary elections. This was an increase from previous elections.⁵⁶

According to the annual [Survey of the Afghan People](#), more than eight in 10 Afghans believe women should have the right to vote, and this number has remained consistently high since the question was first asked in 2008.⁵⁷ The shared belief suggests a strong foundation on which to continue expanding Afghan women's political and civic participation.



The Asia Foundation, "A Survey of the Afghan People 2006-2018," The Asia Foundation data portal, <http://surveys.asiafoundation.org/Dashboard?SurveyCode=AGSAP1&SampleName=GP&SectionName=Default&LanguageName=English>.

Women are also working to secure their country's future beyond politics by [contributing to other civic institutions](#). Now, Afghanistan has more than 1,000 female journalists and [more than 6,000 female judges, prosecutors, lawyers, and security force personnel](#).⁵⁸ According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction's (SIGAR) April 2019 report, the [ANDSF has 4,984 female personnel](#), an increase of nearly 650 compared to last year.⁵⁹ Given the Taliban's historical view towards women, all are prime examples of national service by courageous women.

52 Mark Oliver, "The new Afghan administration," The Guardian, 5 December 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/dec/05/ganda.markoliver>.

53 Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2003: Afghanistan," <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2003/afghanistan>.

54 Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2005: Afghanistan," <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2005/afghanistan>.

55 Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2006: Afghanistan," <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2006/afghanistan>.

56 Belquis Ahmadi, and Wagma Yameen Zia, "Breaking Down Barriers for Women and Youth in Afghanistan," United States Institute of Peace, 7 November 2018, <https://www.usip.org/blog/2018/11/breaking-down-barriers-women-and-youth-afghanistan>.

57 The Asia Foundation, "A Survey of the Afghan People 2006-2018," The Asia Foundation data portal, <http://surveys.asiafoundation.org/Dashboard?SurveyCode=AGSAP1&SampleName=GP&SectionName=Default&LanguageName=English>.

58 Belquis Ahmadi, "Afghanistan Talks: No Women, No Peace," United States Institute of Peace, 1 March 2019, <https://www.usip.org/index.php/publications/2019/03/afghanistan-talks-no-women-no-peace>.

59 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, 30 April 2019, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2019-04-30qr.pdf>.

What challenges remain?

Serious challenges remain for women's political and civic participation. Afghanistan still needs sustained support and engagement from the United States and its allies to support Afghan women in their quest to expand their rights. According to the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), female candidates in post-Taliban Afghanistan have experienced gender-based hostility, harassment, and threats on the campaign trail. [Many candidates reported](#) their campaign signs being defaced; one testimonial suggested that such signs were joked about as invitations by candidates “to spend the night with them.” One of the biggest challenges candidates expressed was skepticism from male constituents that women could effectively deliver results for their electorates.

According to the AREU report, women also faced a lack of security on a larger scale. In past elections, candidates described threats or confrontation by armed supporters of the opposition.⁶⁰ In the 2018 parliamentary elections, a suicide bomber [targeted at least one female candidate's rally](#) and killed more than 20 people.⁶¹ Still, [more than 400 women](#) campaigned to represent their fellow citizens in the national assembly.⁶²

Sadly, over the past few years public opinion has seemingly waned toward female politicians. According to the [Survey of the Afghan People](#), the belief that political leadership positions are equally for men and women declined from 49.5 percent in 2006 to 43.4 percent in 2017. Over that same period, those who believe such leadership positions are mostly for men rose from 36.8 to 43.8 percent. Then, in 2018, support for political leadership roles being equal for men and women fell from 43.4 to 31.4 percent. This may be explained by a newly added response to the question: “Anyone based on merit”; it received 19.5 percent.⁶³ Both of these answers combined account for a majority of respondents, which could mean more Afghans are “gender blind” when it comes to political leadership and simply favor high-quality politicians who can best represent their interests. Even so, a plurality in 2018 still view the positions as mostly for men and the overall trend since 2006 suggests weakening confidence in women's political-leadership ability.

A [United Nations Development Fund for Women report](#) noted that, “several [Afghan] women parliamentarians complained about their lack of impact and limited capacity -building, for example on budgetary issues. They frequently observe poor attendance of meetings of women MPs, even when concerning capacity-building measures such as English training or computer courses.”⁶⁴ Such attitudes suggest a need for more focused efforts to bolster female candidates and sitting members of the Parliament of Afghanistan.

These efforts should start with training designed in coordination with Afghan women politicians that deepen desired skill sets, build capacity, and enhance effectiveness within the national assembly. However, training alone does not guarantee success and must be coupled with efforts to support qualified Afghan women leaders to contend for influential positions within the government. Women also need access to resources that facilitate the implementation of their ideas and policies, which boosts their public credibility.

60 Oliver Lough, et al. *Equal Rights, Unequal Opportunities: Women's Participation in Afghanistan's Parliamentary and Provincial Council Elections*, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, March 2012, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4f5f04172.pdf>.

61 Radio Free Afghanistan, “Bomb Kills At Least 22 At Election Rally For Afghan Woman Candidate,” RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 13 October 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/bomb-kills-at-least-12-at-election-rally-for-afghan-woman-candidate/29541616.html>.

62 Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2019: Afghanistan,” <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/afghanistan>.

63 The Asia Foundation, “A Survey of the Afghan People 2006-2018,” The Asia Foundation data portal, <http://surveys.asiafoundation.org/Dashboard?SurveyCode=AGSAP1&SampleName=GP&SectionName=Default&LanguageName=English>.

64 Andrea Fleschenberg, *Afghanistan's parliament in the making: Gendered understandings and practices of politics in a transitional country*, UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), 2009, <https://www.refworld.org/publisher/UNIFEM,AFG,4ad14372,0.html>.

The [Survey of the Afghan People](#) found that public support for women's participation in the armed services and police declined between 2014 and 2018, falling from 41.9 to 34 percent.⁶⁵ This may be less about perceptions of women's capabilities and more about public unwillingness to see women take on the increasing risks associated with service. As noted by the [SIGAR 2019 High-Risk List](#):

On January 24, 2019, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said that about 45,000 Afghan security personnel have been killed since he became president in September 2014. That number indicates that in those roughly 53 months, around 849 Afghan security personnel have been killed per month on average. [The NATO Resolute Support mission] told SIGAR in October 2018 that, "From the period of May 1 to the most current data as of October 1, 2018, the average number of casualties the ANDSF has suffered is the greatest it has ever been in like periods."⁶⁶

These figures, while grim, demonstrate the importance of continued support and training for Afghan security forces. They also demonstrate the willingness of Afghans to volunteer for military service despite these dangers. If security improves, women's opportunities are likely to improve as well.

What is at stake?

Afghanistan is full of trailblazers who have not allowed the obstacles such as those presented above to derail their political and social participation. They have used their platforms to forge paths for all Afghan women. What is at stake is the ability of women leaders like them to continue their work, influence others, and lead courageously in Afghan society.

H.E. Roya Rahmani, who earned an appointment as the [first female Afghan Ambassador to the United States](#) in 2018, is a great example. Throughout her career, Ambassador Rahmani has been a model for public service, demonstrating how Afghan women can shape their country's domestic and international policies. Starting her professional life as a human rights advocate in civil society, she transitioned from activist to politician where she advanced women's empowerment programming in the Ministry of Education of Afghanistan. Ambassador Rahmani then served in several distinguished posts at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including serving as ambassador to Indonesia and ambassador to the Association of South East Asian Nations.

Ambassador Rahmani offered her vision for the future, saying, "I'm optimistic because of the resilience of our people and their resolve for democracy ... the women and girls, they are not only thinking they need to struggle to be financially independent or have a place in the family decision-making apparatus, but they are thinking about what is it that they enjoy doing in life. They're thinking of sports, they're thinking of music."⁶⁷

Another example is Captain Niloofar Rahmani. In 2012, Rahmani became the first female fighter pilot in the Afghan military. The Taliban had forbidden her to attend school, work, or show her face in public. Supportive members of Rahmani's family were driven into hiding after death threats and assassination attempts. As a result, she sought [asylum in the United States](#) in 2016 which was granted two years

65 The Asia Foundation, "A Survey of the Afghan People 2006-2018," The Asia Foundation data portal, <http://surveys.asiafoundation.org/Dashboard?SurveyCode=AGSAP1&SampleName=GP&SectionName=Default&LanguageName=English>.

66 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *2019 High-Risk List*, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/spotlight/2019_High-Risk_List.pdf.

67 George W. Bush Presidential Center, "The Strategerist Podcast, Episode 12: Ambassador Roya Rahmani," 29 March 2019, <https://www.bushcenter.org/publications/podcasts/channels/strategerist/ep-12-roya-rahmani.html>.

later.⁶⁸ Even so, she broke barriers in Afghan society, demonstrating that women are capable of defending their country.

Offering [a message to Afghan women and girls](#), Captain Rahmani said, “My hope and wish for all the women in Afghanistan is that they fight and raise their voice ... as women, if we doubt ourselves, we will not get anywhere.” She has also expressed the importance of encouraging men to better understand their role in empowering women, saying, “We need to change more men’s mentality in Afghanistan to get where we want to be with women. If we do not have the support of men with us, I don’t think we’ll empower more women to be there because they’re afraid they will not be welcomed.”⁶⁹

U.S. support has provided an opportunity for these women to flourish in society. A hasty American withdrawal may deprive future Afghan women of the same access to the civil and social spheres.

ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

Why is this important?

Studies have shown that gender equality is critical to a country’s economic growth and stability. As [noted by the International Monetary Fund](#), “... women’s economic empowerment is key for growth both through the direct impact of the size of the labor force on output and through the impact of productivity.”⁷⁰ A [report by McKinsey](#) estimated that if women participated in the economy at the same rates as men, it would add up to \$28 trillion to the annual global GDP by 2025.⁷¹

When you allow more people to participate in a country’s economy, you reap greater benefits – ingenuity, innovation, production, efficiency, spending power, leadership, and economic diversification. Additionally, when women serve in senior management and other leadership positions, corporations and the banking sector experiences greater profits and stability.⁷²

Women’s economic empowerment also has impact beyond traditional notions of wealth and employment. Foremost for Afghanistan is that gender equality and women’s economic empowerment have strong ties to [prosperity and peace](#) in societies.⁷³ As shown in a [study on the roles of women in local peacebuilding](#) in Afghanistan, Liberia, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sierra Leone, women say they are unable to engage in peacebuilding activities because of the dual burden of their domestic roles and income-generating activities, as well as a lack of control over household income.⁷⁴ When women control income, they are [more likely to engage in civil-society activity](#) and contribute to inclusive governance. They also strengthen the effectiveness of post-conflict economic activities and accelerate economic recovery, which is critical in breaking cycles of war and poverty.⁷⁵

68 Jane Dalton, “Afghanistan’s first female military pilot granted asylum in US after fleeing Taliban death threats,” The Independent, 4 May 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/afghanistan-first-female-pilot-us-asylum-granted-niloofer-rahmani-taliban-threats-a8336051.html>.

69 George W. Bush Presidential Center, “The Strategist Podcast, Episode 04: Niloofer Rahmani,” 23 January 2019, <https://www.bushcenter.org/publications/podcasts/channels/strategist/ep-04-niloofer-rahmani.html>.

70 International Monetary Fund, “Pursuing Women’s Economic Empowerment,” 31 May 2018, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Policy-Papers/Issues/2018/05/31/pp053118pursuing-womens-economic-empowerment>.

71 Johnathan Woetzel, et al. “How advancing women’s equality can add \$12 trillion to global growth,” McKinsey & Company, September 2015, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/employment-and-growth/how-advancing-womens-equality-can-add-12-trillion-to-global-growth>.

72 International Monetary Fund, “Pursuing Women’s Economic Empowerment,” 31 May 2018, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Policy-Papers/Issues/2018/05/31/pp053118pursuing-womens-economic-empowerment>.

73 Marie O’Reilly, *Why Women? Inclusive Security and Peaceful Societies*, Inclusive Security, October 2015, <https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Why-Women-Report-2017.pdf>.

74 Ivan Cardona, et al. “From the ground up: Women’s roles in local peacebuilding in Afghanistan, Liberia, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sierra Leone,” Institute of Development Studies; ActionAid; Womankind Worldwide, September 2012, https://www.womankind.org.uk/docs/default-source/resources/reports/ftgu_report_low-res.pdf?sfvrsn=4.

75 Radhika Coomaraswamy, *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325*, UN Women, 2015, [https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/UNW-GLOBAL-STUDY-1325-2015%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/UNW-GLOBAL-STUDY-1325-2015%20(1).pdf).

What gains have been made?

The Taliban [banned women](#) from essentially all employment. This became increasingly problematic as their draconian laws also forbade women from seeking health care, pursuing education, or receiving other services from male professionals.⁷⁶ Without income, many women — particularly widows — were forced to beg for food.

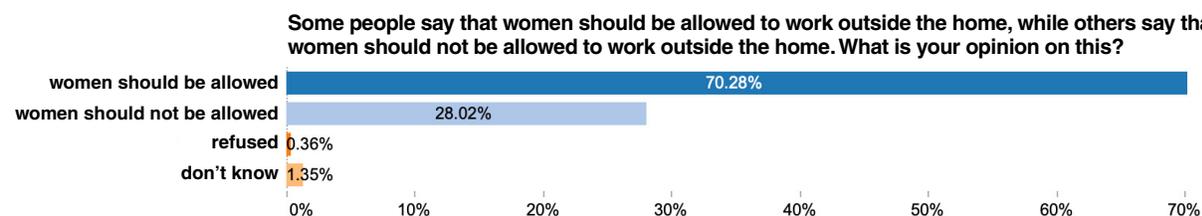
In post-Taliban Afghanistan, women experienced new opportunities to participate in the economy. This was a major milestone that improved women's status in society. Since that time, the United States and the international community have made major pushes to develop and support Afghan women entrepreneurs.

These pushes have resulted in substantial success. According to the [Afghanistan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industries \(AWCCI\)](#), 1,150 female entrepreneurs have invested in Afghan businesses over the past 18 years. In total, they have invested \$77 million, which created 77,000 jobs across the country.⁷⁷

Not all women want to be entrepreneurs, nor can entrepreneurial projects employ all women. That is why it's encouraging to see the Afghan government increasing the number of women in civil-service jobs. A [new policy](#) aims to grow this number from 22 to 30 percent by 2020 through a quota system, incentives, workplace protection, and better professional development.⁷⁸

In addition, according to UNAMA, the Afghan government recently approved a [policy promoting women's access to inheritance and property-ownership rights](#), with the aim of increasing women's economic empowerment and financial independence.⁷⁹

More broadly, evidence has emerged over the past decade that women are building economic capacity and gradually moving toward greater inclusion. According to the [2018 Survey of the Afghan People](#), the number of respondents who say female members contribute to their household income is up from 13.6 in 2009 to 19.1 percent in 2018. During that same [timeframe](#), nearly 70 percent of respondents, with only slight variations over 10 years, consistently supported women working outside the home.⁸⁰



The Asia Foundation, "A Survey of the Afghan People 2006-2018," The Asia Foundation data portal, <http://surveys.asiafoundation.org/Dashboard?SurveyCode=AGSAP1&SampleName=GP&SectionName=Default&LanguageName=English>.

76 Freedom House, "Afghanistan: Freedom in the World 2002" <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2002/afghanistan>.

77 Rohullah Arman, "AWCCI Releases Figures on Women Entrepreneurs," TOLO News, 10 February 2019, <https://www.tolonews.com/business/awcci-releases-figures-women-entrepreneurs>.

78 Report of the Secretary-General, *The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security*, United Nations General Assembly & UN Security Council, 28 February 2019, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/sq_report_on_afghanistan_6_march_2019.pdf.

79 Ibid.

80 The Asia Foundation, "A Survey of the Afghan People 2006-2018," The Asia Foundation data portal, <http://surveys.asiafoundation.org/Dashboard?SurveyCode=AGSAP1&SampleName=GP&SectionName=Default&LanguageName=English>.

Additionally, the [United Nations Human Development Report](#) shows modest gains by women in establishing themselves financially. Between 2011-2017, women with an account at a financial institution or a mobile money-service provider ages 15 and older increased from 2.6 to 7.2 percent.

What challenges remain?

Afghanistan has come a long way since the days of the Taliban, but it remains a poor country. This will not change until Kabul – with the support of the United States and others in the international community – overcome numerous challenges facing the Afghan economy. Research shows that greater gender equality leads to more robust economic growth; the numbers are still far too low when it concerns women’s economic inclusion in Afghanistan.

The country’s tenuous security situation supersedes all other factors. Perpetual instability and violence deter investment, hinder the development of business infrastructure, and breed fear that limits women’s (and others’) participation in the economy. Spurring sustainable economic development will be a struggle until rule of law is established nationwide and the terrorist insurgency is defeated. The Afghan economy’s current [dependence on international aid](#) amplifies the importance of overcoming these challenges.⁸¹

Violence also affects [attitudes toward women’s economic inclusion](#). Over the last decade, a quarter of Afghans steadily opposed women working outside the home.⁸² Two of the top three reasons cited for this opposition since 2016 were “uncertain conditions” and “bad security,” which rose from 16.7 to 23.7 percent and 11.9 to 14.3 percent, respectively. Consequently, the second-most popular reason for opposition to women’s employment, Sharia law, dropped from 24.1 to 17.6 percent.

One could also argue that the international community should diversify its mindset regarding entrepreneurship as a vehicle for women’s economic empowerment. Yes, it is a powerful tool that has proven successful, but its impact can be multiplied when complemented by other economic initiatives. As the United States and its allies continue to invest in Afghanistan’s development, more programs could build capacity for women to enter service and trade-based workforces. Women also need more help developing the skills to occupy IT, legal, and administrative-type jobs needed by small- and medium-sized businesses.

More broadly, Afghanistan faces challenges to sustainable economic development that affect women and men alike. These include government corruption, bureaucracy, and the potential integration of returning refugee populations, if the peace process is successful.

What is at stake?

Afghan women’s quest to achieve economic independence, support their families, and contribute to their country’s economic growth remains a struggle. However, they have not allowed the challenges to derail them from pursuing their goals.

81 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, 30 April 2019, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2019-04-30qr.pdf>.

82 The Asia Foundation, “A Survey of the Afghan People 2006-2018,” The Asia Foundation data portal, <http://surveys.asiafoundation.org/Dashboard?SurveyCode=AGSAP1&SampleName=GP&SectionName=Default&LanguageName=English>.

Freshta Hazeq was born in Kabul but fled with her family to Pakistan and Iran when the Taliban came to power. Freshta returned to Afghanistan in 2002 and became a translator for an international NGO. The job enabled her to travel through the country's provinces for the first time in her life. Her eyes were opened to the struggles – poverty, hunger, and widespread illiteracy — of her people, particularly women, outside of Kabul. Freshta decided that women needed to improve their livelihoods and could do so through business; she chose to start in the male-dominated industry of printing. Freshta's competitors resented the fact that she was a woman. She endured death threats, threats toward her children, and sabotage at her office.

Despite this, Freshta expanded into other sectors. Reflecting on her experiences, she offered this advice: “[Women] should commit themselves to never quitting. Of course, as an individual we cannot change the whole, big society, but to a small extent, we, each of us, can be a change maker.”⁸³ Women like Freshta will never give up fighting for their rights, but they still need support to cultivate an environment where Afghan women can participate in the economy, earn income, and own businesses. That will not happen if we lose the gains of the past 18 years.

Without continued U.S. support in developing women business leaders like Freshta and expanding the space in which they can operate, Afghanistan will lose crucial contributors to its economic growth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the streets of Kabul today, young girls in school uniforms walk to school; women go to work as teachers, civil servants, health workers, and more; Afghans watch women broadcasters on the evening news and listen to their voices on the radio. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita has tripled since 2001; 85 percent of the population had electricity in 2016 compared to virtually none in 2000; and more than 65 percent of Afghans have access to safe drinking water. This is what is at risk.

Afghan women, and Afghanistan as a whole, have made real progress since 2001. These hard-won gains have come through the investment of the United States and the international community and the relentless work of Afghan citizens and government toward the development of their country. The work has been difficult, and severe challenges remain.

For Afghanistan to be a peaceful nation for women and all Afghans, more must be done to improve security and promote social, political, and economic development. The United States must stand beside Afghanistan as a partner and friend and consult directly with Afghan women through this difficult process.

We make the following recommendations on how Washington can achieve this:

⁸³ George W. Bush Institute, *We are Afghan Women: Voices of Hope* (New York: Scribner, 2016).

CONTINUED U.S. SUPPORT OF THE AFGHAN NATIONAL DEFENSE AND SECURITY FORCES (ANDSF) IS IMPERATIVE.

The United States has spent 17 years helping to develop and maintain the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) through the support of U.S. troops and financial assistance. Today, the United States continues to train, advise, and assist the ANDSF, thereby helping to improve its effectiveness. It takes time, commitment, and continuous training to develop an effective, efficient security force. However, Afghanistan needs significant support to keep Afghans safe. Despite the operational challenges and heavy casualties in the fight against the Taliban and other groups, ANDSF personnel continue to do their jobs. They recognize that without safety and security, there is no stability; without stability, Afghans will not thrive.

The dissolution of the Afghan army and police in the wake of the Soviet departure in 1989 led to lawlessness that massively harmed Afghan women. Without stability, Afghanistan is likely to become a haven for violent extremism once again. The United States must continue to support the ANDSF if Afghanistan is to achieve peace.

THE UNITED STATES AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY MUST CONTINUE TO SUPPORT AND FUND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFGHANISTAN THAT IS ALIGNED WITH NATIONAL-LEVEL POLICIES AND PRIORITIES.

Afghanistan has worked hard to reduce its reliance on foreign assistance since 2014 and has made significant progress in areas such as revenue collection. However, for Afghanistan to fully realize this goal, foreign assistance will be needed [until 2030](#), according to World Bank estimates.⁸⁴

Women and girls have made significant gains, but those advances are at stake if the United States drastically reduces its foreign-assistance funding before these gains are consolidated and permanent. Dedicated funding for activities that prioritize gender equality — including Afghanistan's National Plan for Women, Peace and Security — and include local women's groups will be crucial to any post-agreement aid package. Stability requires: equal access to justice; respect for human rights; effective rule of law and good governance; transparent, effective, and accountable institutions; and access to quality education, particularly as insecurity and poverty threaten to undercut substantial gains already achieved in this area. Stability-boosting efforts with both public- and private-sector engagement will help to undermine extremist narratives.

⁸⁴ World Bank Group, *Afghanistan to 2030: Priorities for Economic Development under Fragility*, 2016, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/156881533220723730/pdf/129161-WP-P157288-Afghanistan-to-2030-PUBLIC.pdf>.

AFGHAN WOMEN MUST BE ACTIVE, INTEGRATED PARTICIPANTS IN ANY PEACE TALKS, PEACE-AGREEMENT IMPLEMENTATION, AND VERIFICATION MECHANISMS WITH THE TALIBAN.

Women's meaningful inclusion in all aspects of life — social, political, and economic — is essential for Afghanistan's stability and prosperity. This is most urgent in peace talks with the Taliban.

Research shows that women's inclusion positively impacts the process and outcomes of peace. A study of 40 peace processes in 35 countries over the last three decades found that women's inclusion and influence in peace processes resulted in greater instances of reaching a peace agreement, implementing that agreement, and sustaining the agreement long term. [Women improve the process and outcomes of peace talks](#) by promoting dialogue and trust, bridging divides, mobilizing coalitions, raising issues that are vital for peace, and prioritizing gender equality.⁸⁵

Women's inclusion in peace talks ensures the processes are effective from the start. Without them, agreements are likely to dissolve. Without gender equality — and its positive impact on economic growth and political stability — *countries* are more likely to fall apart.

Unfortunately, the Taliban's continued acts of violence and opposition to democratic elections raise doubt about their sincerity in this process. As such, women must be central to the peace negotiations and press the Taliban on its commitment to a pluralistic society that elevates all Afghans, regardless of gender.

While Afghan women have been included in informal Afghan government delegations and have independently held discussions with the Taliban, the status of Afghan women will ultimately be determined during intra-Afghan talks. Women alone should not bear the burden of championing women's rights – all participating delegations should have access to training and gender expertise to ensure an inclusive peace process.

The United States government must ensure that intra-Afghan talks and U.S.-Taliban talks are transparent and enable equal participation. This includes allowing adequate time for women's groups to prepare, consult, and ensure that delegations represent the country as a whole. Washington must also ensure Afghan women are a core part of the conversation once an agreement has been reached. For example, groups that implement, monitor, and verify the peace agreements should include women.

⁸⁵ Marie O'Reilly, *Why Women? Inclusive Security and Peaceful Societies*, Inclusive Security, October 2015, <https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Why-Women-Report-2017.pdf>.

CONCLUSION

What happens around the world matters to us here at home. The American people should care about Afghanistan for reasons of morality and security. U.S. national security and its stake in international security make it in our nation's best interest to continue to secure Afghanistan's hard-won gains of the past 18 years.

Achieving lasting peace in Afghanistan requires certain conditions that ensure security and stability. These conditions include maintaining the constitutional order, respecting the rights of Afghan citizens, suffocating resurgent extremist forces such as the Islamic State and other actors who are committed to violence, and maintaining effective and accountable institutions. These conditions cannot exist without advancing gender equality.

Afghanistan has made significant progress for a country that has endured four decades of war. However, security challenges negatively impact the gains Afghan women have made.

The United States must remain engaged in Afghanistan by strengthening the country's security forces, providing foreign aid to improve its infrastructure, good governance, and engaging men and women to cement equality for all citizens. Afghan women must not lose their basic human rights: access to education and health care; political and economic freedoms; and other important achievements since the fall of the Taliban. Afghan women have said they will not go back to the way things were. We must stand by them.



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