

From the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction Transcript for:
Operation Oversight – Episode 12: Women’s Rights in Afghanistan

Description: Hear about one of the most serious risks to the Afghan reconstruction effort: threats to women’s rights.

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Related Work: [2019 High-Risk List](#)

[Background Music]

[Jennifer George-Nichol] Welcome to Operation Oversight, the official podcast of the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, or SIGAR, as we’re often called. I’m your host today, Jen George-Nichol and I’m joined here by Dan Fisher from SIGAR’s Research and Analysis Directorate. Welcome to the podcast, Dan.

[Daniel Fisher] Thanks for having me, Jen.

[Jennifer George-Nichol] So, in continuing with our little miniseries looking at various areas highlighted in SIGAR’s 2019 High-Risk List, today we’re going to take a bit of a deeper dive into an area that has been making a lot of headlines lately: the status and future of women’s rights in Afghanistan. Dan, you’re one of the authors on that section of the report, is that correct?

[Daniel Fisher] Correct.

[Jennifer George-Nichol] O.K., so set the stage for us. Can you give a little context into why threats to women’s rights was included as an area of significant risk to the Afghan reconstruction effort in SIGAR’s High-Risk List?

[Daniel Fisher] The high-risk area is threats to women’s rights and we chose to include that partly because of historical U.S. investment in that area. So, women’s rights has always been an area of concern for the United States. Which is why the U.S. has committed at least a billion dollars for gender-related programs in Afghanistan and spent approximately an additional one billion dollars on programs for which the advancement of women was a component. But obviously, Jen as you know, I think even with this investment Afghanistan remains one of the most difficult places to be a woman in the world. For example, if we look at the U.N. rankings, Afghanistan ranks 153rd out of 160 countries for gender equality.

[Jennifer George-Nichol] But, things have improved somewhat, right? I mean, surely things are better for women in Afghanistan now then they were under the Taliban?

[Daniel Fisher] You’re absolutely right, that’s a good point. That’s something that’s important to note. So, things have improved and we’ve got several data points that I think demonstrate that. For example, one commonly cited data point is that since 2001, millions of Afghan women have voted. You also have 63 female members of Parliament, out of a total of

320 seats. And you have a whole lot of other areas where women are contributing in ways they were not before the Taliban was overthrown. Another example would be 68,000 women who are instructors in schools and universities. So, overall we're seeing more participation today than we were in 2001.

[Jennifer George-Nichol] Right, which becomes especially important for the U.S., it would seem considering the significant investment that's been made in gender-related programs. In the context of the negotiations with the Taliban and any possible peace agreement that could fold them into the Afghan political and government structure, some of the concern we're facing now must be around whether those gains we've made in women's rights will be preserved.

[Daniel Fisher] Exactly, and of course, one of the big criticisms of how the negotiations have played out, and I'm talking about what we've picked up in the press reporting on this, is that women haven't really haven't been included in the negotiations in any significant way thus far. There were a few women who attended the talks in Moscow between the Taliban and a group consisting of former Afghan government officials and members of Parliament. But that wasn't an intra-Afghan dialogue in the way the Afghan government is thinking about it. And overall, the critique has essentially been, how are you planning on protecting the rights of women if they aren't even involved in the talks. How will this work if women aren't involved? So, I think that's a big concern.

[Jennifer George-Nichol] But it seems like there's also a concern here that any peace agreement wouldn't necessarily mean peace. It feels like there are a number of different ways these peace negotiations could play out and a wide range of possible outcomes. No?

[Daniel Fisher] Correct, I think that's right. And conceptually, a lot of this comes down to how individual Afghans are thinking about the negotiations or the talks. As in, what's their framework and departure point. And I don't think we have an answer to this question. It's not like we've done a survey. But I think what you see in the open source reporting on the talks is that there is a wide range of views.

In other words, do Afghans think the Afghan government and/or the U.S. is bending to the Taliban or the other way around? Is each side approaching potential intra-Afghan talks from equal positions? So basically a key question, given all of that, for all issues related to the "day after" a possible peace agreement is signed is simply, who has more leverage?

And of course, we're not involved in the negotiations so we don't have an institutional opinion on this, but you see this in the reporting and this is something that Afghans are asking. So, on the one hand, if you think the Taliban has more leverage, then you really worry quite a bit about fragile gains in women's rights potentially eroding. If you think the opposite is true, on the other hand, perhaps you're a little less worried about that potential erosion.

[Jennifer George-Nichol] One of the concerns then is that a peace agreement could result in some sort of concession to the Taliban on the issue of women's rights, sort of a return to the 2001 status quo when women couldn't really move around freely. They weren't allowed to attend school and they were basically entirely left out of the economy. No?

[Daniel Fisher] Precisely, so that's definitely the first concern and think that what you're hearing from a lot of women in Afghanistan is 'hey, don't let this thing regress', I think is the central message. We want to maintain the progress that we've seen.

But, I think there's another fear where there's, frankly, a lot of uncertainty still around the extent to which the U.S. will continue to be engaged on this and probably other issues if and when a peace agreement is reached. So, I think Afghans are trying to read the tea leaves and a lot of folks are asking the question 'Where does the U.S. actually stand on this issue at this point? How committed are they?' And I think that uncertainty is creating a lot of anxiety.

[Jennifer George-Nichol] And, for women, in particular that means what?

[Daniel Fisher] I think that means that although the extensive U.S. investment in women's rights over the last 17 years suggests that the U.S. cares, it's two billion dollars effectively, and will continue to care about women's rights, the negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban have really revolved around other issues. So, we're talking about the overall U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan or the international troop presence, a potential withdrawal timeline, and the guarantee which the Taliban has committed to, at least in principle, to prevent Afghanistan from again serving as a safe haven for terrorist groups.

So, what the High-Risk List points Congress towards is this open question of where women's rights fits into this wide range, this litany of U.S. interests that might play into a possible peace agreement and a so-called "day after." To some extent they, they being Congress, might have to grapple with that question as the ones who are controlling the funding.

[Jennifer George-Nichol] Those are some of the uncertainties and questions raised in the High-Risk List, but to even begin to answer those questions it seems like we'd need to know what the Taliban even thinks about women's rights at this point.

I'll just read a statement here that you point to in the High-Risk List. In trying to lay out their current position, the Taliban says "Islam have given women all fundamental rights such as business ownership, inheritance, education, work, choosing one's husband, security, health, and right to a good life" but then, a little later, they seem to be denouncing so-called women's rights activists. So, what's going on here? What can we say about the Taliban's current stance on women because those statements seem to be contradictory?

[Daniel Fisher] I'm glad you brought that up and really, I think, it's about how you or how one interprets the first statement you mentioned with the key question being 'Are you an optimist or a pessimist?' essentially. So while we don't know exactly what the Taliban intended to say here, what you notice is that it's possible to interpret it a number of different ways. On the one hand, the Taliban probably would have said the same thing in 2000. So, that's one interpretation is that things are going to totally regress. And yes, the Taliban are saying this but that doesn't necessarily mean much of anything. On the other, there's consistency between this statement, precisely because of the potentially deliberate ambiguity with what the current situation for women in Afghanistan is, which is that yes, women have certain rights per

prevailing Afghan laws and per the constitution. While the Afghan government may nominally protect those rights, it's not as if the situation for women in Afghanistan is great. And so I think a lot of people overall aren't reassured by the Taliban's statement, the fear is still there because it could mean such a wide ray of things, which is why it remains such a concern.

[Jennifer George-Nichol] And at this point, don't we have some evidence of that? I mean, the High-Risk List mentions it, some examples of how women's rights are playing out in areas of Afghanistan that are currently controlled by the Taliban.

[Daniel Fisher] Of course, yes. And SIGAR has not necessarily looked into this. But I do think there is this narrative out there that hey, you know, maybe the Taliban has become a little bit more liberal. Maybe they're softening up some of their stances. And you see this playing out I think in some of the research that's being done on this issue of service delivery in areas under Taliban control.

For example, there's this great piece that came out recently from the Afghan Analysts Network (AAN) which looks at a district called Dasht-e-Archi up in Kunduz Province in northern Afghanistan. And AAN basically went in and talked to a bunch of Afghans on the ground, in that district, and what they were told is that there's a girls' high school located in an area captured by the Taliban in late 2018. And, according to the school's headmaster, the Taliban did not close the school when they took over the area and in fact, allowed students to hold their final exams in November. It's not like we can confirm this, but, this is per the research that AAN did.

What the Taliban also told AAN was that they would allow girls to attend the high school the following year, which started back in March of this year, March 2019. So, others in the area in Dasht-e-Archi district, are I think very skeptical of this and believe that the Taliban will close the school if they haven't done so already. But I think what we see here is what might be and what some certainly interpret to be a softening of the Taliban's stance relative to women.

So, on the one hand, the Taliban apparently leave this particular school open, at least temporarily. But, on the other, in this and other areas, girls really can't go to school after a certain age unless there are female teachers. And because there are so few female teachers in Taliban-controlled areas, what that effectively means is that, after about grade five, girls are not going to school, which is clearly an issue and which clearly keeps girls and women in a certain disadvantageous position in those areas.

[Jennifer George-Nichol] So, it sounds like really it's kind of hard to know. Are there any other indicators we can be looking at that tell more of a story?

[Daniel Fisher] I mean, as you point out, I think it's pretty ambiguous. On top of what we just discussed, other reporting seems to indicate that there are some senior Taliban leaders out there who will send their daughters to university. Which may mean that when things get personal, and it's your daughter, there's a bit more openness even among the Taliban. But of course, those same senior leaders also have to attend to the views of rank-and-file fighters who may be far more conservative. So, for the Taliban, it's complicated and it's difficult to tell where

they stand. Which again, creates a lot of anxiety for Afghans particularly right now as the talks move forward.

On top of all of this, as Ambassador Crocker, who's a former Ambassador to Afghanistan, put it in an interview with *The New York Times*, "Acute misogyny in Afghanistan goes way beyond the Taliban." So, of course, and we touched on this earlier, there are those enduring cultural barriers to deal with too. So, overall, lots of uncertainty around this issue, which is why we devote a section to it in the High-Risk List.

[Jennifer George-Nichol] Wow, there's clearly a lot to chew on there, Dan. I like to close out by asking our guests what today's topic should mean to the listeners, why Americans should care about the issue of women's rights in Afghanistan and the future of women's rights.

[Daniel Fisher] So, I think the facially accurate answer to that would be that obviously there are U.S. tax dollars at stake, but moving on and thinking about how our own society has developed and moved to a more inclusive society, things aren't perfect. Women today have a lot more say about how our society is structured, organized, and run and I think that the consensus is that the United States is a lot better off for that. And so, thinking about ways in which Afghan society, the Afghan economy, the Afghan government might improve, I think this is a theory that we're trying to implement in Afghanistan, as well.

So, clearly there are some key questions on how we engage or how the United States might engage on that post-peace agreement. But I think that it's because there's been so much U.S. assistance and because this has obviously been a factor in the United States' own development, I think those are all reasons to care.

[Jennifer George-Nichol] Absolutely, that's a great point, Dan. Thank you, this has been so much fun. Thanks for coming on the podcast, Dan.

[Daniel Fisher] Definitely, thanks for having me.

[Jennifer George-Nichol] This has been our latest episode of Operation Oversight, the official podcast for SIGAR. Thanks for joining us today. If you want to listen to previous episodes or check out the full High-Risk List, part of which was our topic of discussion today, you can find all of that at www.sigar.mil or you can check out our [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#) handles both of which are @SIGARHQ. Thanks so much for listening today, I'm Jen George-Nichol and we will see you next time on Operation Oversight.

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