

# SIGAR

Special Inspector General for  
Afghanistan Reconstruction

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QUARTERLY REPORT TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS





## The National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2008 (Pub. L. No. 110-181) established the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR).

SIGAR's oversight mission, as defined by the legislation, is to provide for the independent and objective

- conduct and supervision of audits and investigations relating to the programs and operations funded with amounts appropriated or otherwise made available for the reconstruction of Afghanistan.
- leadership and coordination of, and recommendations on, policies designed to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the administration of the programs and operations, and to prevent and detect waste, fraud, and abuse in such programs and operations.
- means of keeping the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense fully and currently informed about problems and deficiencies relating to the administration of such programs and operation and the necessity for and progress on corrective action.

Afghanistan reconstruction includes any major contract, grant, agreement, or other funding mechanism entered into by any department or agency of the U.S. government that involves the use of amounts appropriated or otherwise made available for the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Source: Pub. L. No. 110-181, "National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2008," 1/28/2008.

(For a list of the congressionally mandated contents of this report, see Section 3.)

**Cover photo:**

Students fill a classroom at the UNICEF-funded Zarghuna Girls School in Kabul.  
(UN Photo by Eskinder Debebe)



SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR  
AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

I am pleased to submit to Congress, and to the Secretaries of State and Defense, SIGAR's 33rd quarterly report on the status of the U.S. reconstruction effort in Afghanistan.

Fifteen years after the United States and its allies intervened to expel the Taliban regime that was sheltering al-Qaeda, the international community this quarter reaffirmed its support for the civilian reconstruction of Afghanistan. On October 5, Afghanistan and the European Union co-hosted a conference in Brussels that brought together 75 countries and 26 international organizations and agencies. Donor nations stated their intent to provide \$15.2 billion between 2017 and 2020 in support of Afghanistan's development priorities. Decisions on future U.S. funding rest with the United States Congress, but Secretary of State John Kerry pledged to work with lawmakers to provide civilian assistance "at or very near" the current levels through 2020.

For its part in the Brussels proceedings, the Afghan government introduced the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework, the new five-year plan for attaining self-reliance. Kabul's representatives also announced a fresh set of deliverables for the Self-Reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework. Afghan government progress on the deliverables may influence donors' decisions on aid levels in the 2017–2020 period.

The commitments made at Brussels paralleled donor commitments made earlier this year at the NATO summit in Warsaw to maintain security assistance to Afghanistan at more than \$4 billion annually through 2020.

The United States will almost certainly continue to be the leading source of both military and civilian reconstruction aid to Afghanistan for years to come. With a total of \$115 billion already appropriated since fiscal year 2002, the need for close and effective oversight of funds, projects, and programs will continue.

The most immediate challenge to the U.S. reconstruction effort, and to the viability of the Afghan nation-state, remains the armed insurgency pursued by the Taliban and other factions. In September, the Afghan government concluded a peace agreement with one group of insurgents, the Gulbuddin faction of Hezb-e Islami, whose leader was designated a global terrorist by the United States for his participation in and support of terrorist acts by al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

Other insurgent groups, however, have continued to press hard against the Afghan government's hold on population centers. As in the fall of 2015, Taliban fighters briefly held portions of the northern provincial capital of Kunduz in early October. In southwestern Afghanistan, another Taliban offensive threatened Lashkar Gah, capital of long-contested, poppy-growing Helmand Province, as well as Farah, capital and namesake city of a neighboring province. In the north, insurgents attacked Maimane, capital of Faryab Province in mid-October. The fighting has prompted increased U.S. tactical support and air strikes to help government forces.

The *Washington Post* recently quoted an unnamed senior U.S. administration official characterizing the security situation in Afghanistan as an "eroding stalemate." The security section of this report discusses some worrisome facts that might support such a view: (1) Afghan army and police numbers remain below authorized-strength goals, (2) the security forces suffer from high levels of attrition, (3) the United States lacks visibility into most Afghan units' actual levels of training and effectiveness, (4) the security forces have questionable abilities to sustain and maintain units and materiel, and (5) the security forces continue to deploy commando and other highly skilled units on missions that should be undertaken by regular units.

The insurgency is the most immediate and visible threat to a viable central government in Afghanistan. The less-dramatic and slower-acting, but still existential, threat is the corroding effect of corruption, which diverts money from vital purposes, undermines security and public services, saps the economy, erodes public trust and support, and in varied ways nourishes the insurgency. Like the insurgency, corruption is an enemy that can be hard to pin down and difficult to defeat.

It was therefore appropriate that on September 14, SIGAR issued the first report from its Lessons Learned Program on the threat of corruption and the difficulties facing U.S. efforts to combat it. The report, *Corruption in Conflict*, examines U.S. government agencies' understanding of the risks of corruption in Afghanistan, the slow recognition of the threat and evolution of U.S. responses, and their varying effectiveness. Systemic corruption, aggravated by floods of aid money, undermined the U.S. mission in Afghanistan from the outset and, unless effectively checked, will continue to undermine progress and could ultimately result in mission failure.

*Corruption in Conflict* presents findings, lessons, and 11 recommendations for executive and legislative actions to avoid or mitigate corruption in Afghanistan and in other contingency operations, especially by making anticorruption a high priority in goals, plans, and operations. More details appear in Section 2 of this report.

The Lessons Learned Program also released a conference report, "Lessons from the Coalition: International Experiences from the Afghanistan Reconstruction," that summarized results of the joint SIGAR and United States Institute of Peace conference held at Institute headquarters in Washington, DC, earlier this year. Policy makers, donor-nation officials, and subject-matter experts discussed issues including conflicting goals and actors in the reconstruction effort, information sharing and donor coordination, the importance of obtaining local knowledge and securing local buy-in for programs, and the challenge of institutionalizing lessons from Afghanistan for the future.

Improving the lives and opportunities of Afghan women has been a policy goal of the United States from the outset of the reconstruction effort. This quarter, SIGAR sent a team of female SIGAR analysts to Afghanistan under the leadership of Sharon Woods, SIGAR's chief of staff, and Deborah Scroggins, director of our Research and Analysis Directorate, on a fact-finding mission. The team's objective was to report on the perspectives of prominent Afghan women on U.S.-funded programs supporting women, on how Afghan women are faring in general, and on the challenges women still face in that country.

The essay in Section 1 of this report presents views on women's progress and ongoing challenges drawn from more than 40 interviews of Afghan women—among them, Afghanistan's First Lady Rula Ghani—including public officials, members of the security forces, and opinion leaders. SIGAR plans to issue a more detailed Lessons Learned Program report in the future—based on these interviews and additional research and interviews with a broader spectrum of Afghan women—to reach conclusions about the status of women in Afghanistan and the effectiveness of U.S. programs since 2002.

SIGAR's Audits and Inspections, Special Projects, and Investigations directorates continue their work to fulfill SIGAR's mission. This quarter, SIGAR issued 23 audits, inspections, alert letters, and other products. SIGAR's work to date has identified about \$2 billion in savings for the U.S. taxpayer.

One alert letter expressed concern over a cooperative agreement between the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and Democracy International that has been extended for years, subjected to more than 30 modifications, and expanded tenfold in value to \$51 million—all while lacking clear justification for being awarded noncompetitively. A performance audit examined the sustainment challenges and risk to the significant U.S. investment in Afghanistan's road infrastructure, while another examined how USAID's lack of a geospatial-data policy and standards affected its ability to measure impacts of stabilization initiatives in Afghanistan.

SIGAR also completed six financial audits regarding U.S.-funded contracts, grants, and cooperative agreements to rebuild Afghanistan. The financial audits identified nearly \$85.2 million in questioned costs as a result of internal-control deficiencies and noncompliance issues. To date, SIGAR's financial audits have identified more than \$395 million in questioned costs.

This quarter, SIGAR published an alert letter after observing that many fire doors in 25 buildings on the newly constructed, U.S.-funded Ministry of Interior compound in Kabul were not certified—although some bore fake certification labels—to withstand fire despite contract requirements.

SIGAR also published four inspection reports. One of them examined USAID’s cooperative agreement with the International Organization for Migration to build a 100-bed hospital in Gardez, Paktiya Province. Another examined the construction and furnishing of a 20-bed hospital in the Salang District of Parwan Province.

SIGAR’s Office of Special Projects issued seven products on a range of issues including “ghost” personnel in the Afghan security forces, the creation of the new Anti-Corruption Justice Center in Kabul, the Afghan government’s assessment of pervasive corruption at the Ministry of Public Health, the limited anticorruption capacity of the Afghan High Office of Oversight, and reconstruction spending by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

SIGAR criminal investigations resulted in one indictment, two convictions, and two sentencings. SIGAR recouped more than \$800,000 in cost savings and recoveries for the U.S. government. SIGAR initiated 13 new investigations and closed 28, bringing the total number of ongoing investigations to 254.

This quarter, SIGAR’s suspension and debarment program referred 46 individuals and one company for suspension or debarment based on evidence gathered in Afghanistan and the United States. These referrals bring the total number of individuals and companies referred by SIGAR since 2008 to 803, involving 447 individuals and 356 companies.

My SIGAR colleagues and I continue to stand ready to work with Congress and other stakeholders to improve U.S. programs and projects and prevent the waste, fraud, and abuse of U.S. funds in Afghanistan.

Respectfully,

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John F. Sopko', is written over the typed name and title.

John F. Sopko  
Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes SIGAR's oversight work and updates developments in the three major sectors of Afghanistan's reconstruction effort from July 1 to September 30, 2016.\* It also includes an essay on the status of Afghan women across six key development sectors: security, political and economic participation, justice, health, and education. The essay is the product of a fact-finding mission in which SIGAR analysts interviewed notable female Afghan government officials and civil-society leaders in Kabul. During this reporting period, SIGAR published 23 audits, inspections, alert letters, and other products assessing U.S. efforts to build the Afghan security forces, improve governance, and facilitate economic and social development. These reports identified a number of problems, including a lack of accountability, failures of planning, deficiencies in internal controls, and noncompliance issues. SIGAR investigations resulted in one indictment, two convictions, and two sentencing. SIGAR recouped more than \$800,000 in cost savings and recoveries for the U.S. government. Additionally, SIGAR referred 46 individuals and one company for suspension or debarment based on evidence developed as part of investigations conducted by SIGAR in Afghanistan and the United States.

## SIGAR OVERVIEW

### AUDITS

This quarter, SIGAR produced one audit alert letter, two performance audits, six financial audits, and one inspection alert letter, and four inspection reports.

The **performance audits** found:

- USAID has spent more than \$2.3 billion funding stabilization initiatives in Afghanistan, which generally achieve their objectives. However, their ability to measure the impacts of these programs are limited by USAID's lack of geospatial-data policies and standards.
- The majority of road infrastructure in Afghanistan needs repair and maintenance despite the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) spending at least \$2.8 billion building and maintaining Afghanistan's road infrastructure, and more than \$154 million in road-related programs to improve the Afghan Ministry of Public Works' (MOPW) management of road infrastructure. MOPW's weak capacity, corruption, funding issues, and insecurity are the biggest challenges to progress.

The **financial audits** identified nearly \$85.2 million in questioned costs as a result of internal-control deficiencies and noncompliance issues. These deficiencies and noncompliance issues included, noncompliance with

the terms of delivery orders, failure to obtain prior authorization from a contracting officer before awarding subcontracts, receiving excess funding that was not supported by allowable expenditures or costs incurred, unreasonable subcontract and material costs, failure to provide supporting documentation for subcontractor- and professional-service costs as well as property and equipment used for projects, inadequate procedures to review and approve transactions with subsidiary companies, and failure to maintain adequate systems or records for reported expenses.

The **inspection reports** covered:

- a USAID-funded hospital in Gardez, Paktiya Province
- the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers-funded Special Mission Wing's 3rd Air Squadron at Kandahar Airfield
- the U.S. Forces-Afghanistan-funded women's dormitory at Herat University in Herat, Afghanistan
- a Bagram Regional Contracting Center-funded hospital in Salang District of Parwan Province

### SPECIAL PROJECTS

This quarter SIGAR's Office of Special Projects wrote five inquiry letters, highlighting concerns on a range of issues including:

- DOD's efforts to eliminate "ghost" personnel in the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces' systems, particularly in Helmand Province

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Two inquiries to DOD and State about the scope of their support efforts in developing the newly established Anti-Corruption Justice Center in Kabul
- Requesting a meeting between SIGAR Inspector General Sopko and the executive director of the Afghanistan Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee (MEC) to further discuss MEC's recent corruption-vulnerability assessment findings for the Afghan Ministry of Public Health (MOPH)
- USAID efforts to address and implement the MEC's MOPH corruption-vulnerability assessment findings with the MOPH

Additionally, Special Projects conducted a review assessing the effectiveness of the High Office of Oversight, an anticorruption body charged with registering, verifying and publishing the asset declarations of Afghanistan's top government officials, and issued one fact sheet on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's obligated funds towards the Afghan reconstruction effort.

## LESSONS LEARNED

During this reporting period, the Lessons Learned Program released two reports:

- Its first, full lessons-learned report assessing the extent to which U.S. efforts countered the pervasive corruption in Afghanistan's institutions from 2002–2014.
- A report from a lessons-learned conference at the United States Institute of Peace on September 28, 2016, "Lessons from the Coalition: International Experiences from the Afghanistan Reconstruction."

## INVESTIGATIONS

During the reporting period, SIGAR's criminal investigations resulted in one indictment, two convictions, and two sentencing. SIGAR recouped more than \$800,000 in cost savings and recoveries for the U.S. government. SIGAR initiated 13 new investigations and closed 28, bringing the total number of ongoing investigations to 254. SIGAR's suspension and debarment program referred 46 individuals and one company for suspension

or debarment based on evidence developed as part of investigations conducted by SIGAR in Afghanistan and the United States.

**Investigations highlights** include:

- A federal indictment filed against an Afghan contractor, charging him with conspiracy and bribery for his role bribing U.S. military members to influence their selection of his company for contract awards.
- Two British executives of a defense firm sentenced to period of incarceration and ordered to pay fines totaling over \$8,200 for bribing an employee at U.S.-based Ronco Consulting Corporation in order to enable them to win contracts with that company. This was in connection to an investigation earlier this year in which the director of operations for Ronco Consulting was sentenced to a year-long incarceration and a fine of \$193,665 for his part in those crimes.
- An investigation into nonpayment of \$14,905 to an Afghan national for subcontract geologic work completed under a USACE contract for the Kabul-Logar Transmission Line Project led to SIGAR recouping the full amount of money owed to the subcontractor from the prime contractor.
- A prime contractor paid a subcontractor an additional \$75,000 on the balance of a \$175,000 contract payment owed to the subcontractor, bringing the total recouped funds to \$100,000.
- The recovery of over \$300,000 of State Department money that funded a grant for Women for Afghan Women (WAW) due to ineligible costs, mainly for improper exchange rates and payment of fines in Afghan tax penalties.
- A U.S. contractor indicted for tax evasion for failing to file tax returns that adequately reflected financial data from his numerous business ventures in Afghanistan.

\* SIGAR may also report on products and events occurring after September 30, 2016, up to the publication date.

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“If I talk long enough with [Afghan women],  
they come up with the solutions. ...  
Anybody working in development, take  
time to sit down with the local population.  
Take time to listen to them. They know  
their situation better than anyone else.”

—*Afghan First Lady Rula Ghani*

# 1 AFGHAN WOMEN DISCUSS PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES



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A student takes notes during photojournalism training at the Directorate of Women's Affairs building in Farah City, Afghanistan. (U.S. Navy photo by HMC Josh Ives)

## NO SURRENDER: AFGHAN WOMEN ON THEIR PROGRESS AND THE CHALLENGES THAT REMAIN

Fifteen years after the United States ousted the Taliban regime, Afghanistan remains one of the worst places in the world to be a woman, according to the United Nations Development Programme.<sup>1</sup> Substantial progress has been made, but deep-rooted cultural traditions and a persistent insurgency continue to threaten the physical safety and health of Afghan women and hold them back from entering public life, particularly in the rural areas where some 75% of women live.<sup>2</sup> In many parts of the country, women still face significant barriers to receiving an education and working outside the home. Women and girls are often forced into marriage.<sup>3</sup> According to the human rights group Global Rights, violence against Afghan women in their homes is so widespread that practically every woman will experience it in her lifetime.<sup>4</sup>

The United States has allocated significant funding since 2002 to the goal of improving life and opportunities for Afghan women.<sup>5</sup> SIGAR analysis of audits, legislation, and known women's programs indicates the United States has committed at least \$1 billion for activities intended to improve conditions for Afghan women.<sup>6</sup> The United States has also obligated more than \$1 billion on programs for which the advancement of women was a component of the program, but the amount specifically for women was not quantifiable.<sup>7</sup>

SIGAR has followed these activities closely as part of its mandate to promote the economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of reconstruction programs and to prevent and detect waste, fraud, and abuse. A 2009 SIGAR audit examined the barriers to female participation in that year's August elections; in 2010, another audit reviewed USAID and State's programs to help women and girls in Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup> In 2013, Special Inspector General John F. Sopko testified before Congress on the implications of oversight challenges for Afghan women and girls.<sup>9</sup> In 2014, another audit found that although DOD, State, and USAID reported gains and improvements in the status of Afghan women in fiscal years 2011–2013, there was no comprehensive assessment available to confirm these gains directly resulted from U.S. efforts.<sup>10</sup> After USAID in 2014 launched Promote, a \$280 million

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program in Afghanistan, which the agency describes as the largest women’s-empowerment program in its history, SIGAR raised questions in 2015 regarding its funding, outreach, and future goals.<sup>11</sup> Finally, SIGAR plans to initiate a performance audit of Promote later this year.

This quarter, SIGAR Chief of Staff Sharon Woods and Director of Research and Analysis Deborah Scroggins led a team of female analysts to Kabul on a fact-finding mission to identify the major challenges facing Afghan women today. The objective was to report to Congress on the perspectives of prominent Afghan women on U.S.-funded programs supporting women and to better understand how Afghan women feel they are faring.

For this project, SIGAR spoke with more than 40 prominent Afghan women in late August and early September, including meeting twice with First Lady Rula Ghani, President Ashraf Ghani’s wife, who has emerged as a leading spokeswoman for Afghan women. Discussions dealt with what has—and has not—been accomplished in six sectors: the security forces, justice, politics, the economy, health, and education.

The interviewees included cabinet ministers, members of parliament, heads of civil-society organizations, and many other professionals. Some interviewees asked not to be named in this report; SIGAR is quoting or paraphrasing their comments anonymously.

Most of the women interviewed were highly educated, English-speaking, and mainly residing in the Kabul area, although several parliamentarians represented rural provinces. They do not represent a random sample of Afghan women, who mostly live outside of cities and some 75% of whom are illiterate.<sup>12</sup> Still, their insights reveal what those who have smashed through barriers and benefited most from U.S. policies and programs think about the changes that have taken place. This essay discusses their views and does not represent the views of SIGAR. A future SIGAR Lessons Learned Program report will draw upon these interviews and upon future interviews with a more representative sample of rural and urban Afghan women to reach conclusions about the effectiveness of U.S. gender programs since 2002.

## KEY THEMES OF SIGAR’S INTERVIEWS

Several key themes emerged from SIGAR’s interviews with Afghan women. Notably, most of the women agreed that security and corruption remain the biggest roadblocks to progress for Afghan women. Without improvements in both, little headway can be made to advance women in terms of the security forces, justice, politics, the economy, health, and education.

The main challenge facing Afghan women—Afghanistan’s lack of security—not only makes it dangerous for women to go to school, work outside the home, and access health services, but also perpetuates social attitudes that women are vulnerable and thus should not leave the home. The second most frequently cited challenge, pervasive corruption, hinders women’s

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**Women gather in Sheberghan**, northern Afghanistan, during a televised public debate to discuss violence against women. (UNAMA photo by Sayed Barez)

ability to compete with men in a male-dominated social environment and has allegedly led to funds intended for women's programs being misspent.

The women SIGAR interviewed offered other valuable insights that impact U.S. efforts to improve the status of women in Afghanistan.

These included:

- the necessity for the U.S. government to continue pressing the Afghan government to make opportunities available to Afghan women
- ensuring U.S.-funded programs seek more input from local Afghan women in their design phase and are sustainable in the long-term
- expanding the reach of programs to include more rural, not just urban, women
- better contextualizing and marketing U.S. programs in a more culturally resonant way for Afghans, such as promoting “mutual respect between men and women” instead of “women’s empowerment”
- tackling barriers in traditional culture, where they exist, by working with men and religious leaders, as well as women
- further improving legal protections for women in both the informal and formal justice systems.

Overall, the women SIGAR interviewed were grateful to the United States and the international community for their support of Afghan women. More than any specific programs or projects, they credited the constant pressure from the United States and its allies on successive Afghan governments for many of the gains they have made. “Fifty to sixty percent of the changes now are due to the courage of Afghan women, [because] they fought all the time. But if it were not for the women like you in the West, the door would not be open,” said Fatima Gailani, the former head of the Afghan Red Crescent Society, a major humanitarian organization.<sup>13</sup> Colonel Ghouti of the Afghan Border Police, who like many Afghans goes by one name, said that U.S. support has made the past 15 years the best ever for Afghan women.<sup>14</sup>

## AFGHANISTAN'S FIRST LADY TALKS ABOUT WOMEN'S ISSUES AND U.S. PROGRAMS

First Lady Rula Ghani is a change agent, but don't call her a feminist.

She has seized upon her role as First Lady of Afghanistan to speak up for Afghan women, children, and internally displaced persons (IDPs).<sup>15</sup> She has become the public face of the National Unity Government's (NUG) gender policies, delivering speeches such as a keynote address to the "Empowered Women, Prosperous Afghanistan" event on October 4 at the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan.

But she doesn't consider herself a feminist. "I think I fit here [in Afghanistan]", she told SIGAR. "I don't feel out of place."<sup>16</sup>

Mrs. Ghani's policy positions are not her only distinctive features in the largely tradition-guided culture of Afghanistan. A native of Lebanon, she met her future husband while pursuing a master's degree in political science at the American University in Beirut.<sup>17</sup>

Mrs. Ghani said her first priority for improving the status of Afghan women start with erasing the wounds of war. "Violence against women is a result of 40 years of war, lack of education, poverty, and drugs," she said. Her second priority is to create a secure environment in which women can freely pursue their activities, and her third is to ensure women's voices are heard. She said the NUG is tackling all three goals by reforming the justice system to pay particular attention to violence against women, emphasizing restoration of security and peace, increasing the number of women in decision-making posts, and creating a cabinet-level committee to address gender issues.

The First Lady believes that the status of Afghan women has improved since 2001, especially in urban areas where they have access to services such as health, education, legal aid, training and mentoring. But she admits that in the provinces,

especially in remote areas, the presence of women actively improving the status of women is minimal. She feels the biggest challenges still facing Afghan women are (1) regaining respect as human beings, (2) the implementation of existing laws, (3) lack of security, (4) the need for targeted training and mentoring, and (5) the need for a more women-friendly business environment.

Mrs. Ghani criticized U.S. gender programs on several counts. She said the United States, like most international actors, made a mistake in singling out "women's rights" instead of calling for "mutual respect between men and women." She is concerned that programs targeting educated, urban women have increased the gap between the provinces and the cities.

She also found fault with USAID's \$280 million Promote program, which she said was launched too early. She raised concerns that it could have relied more on women for its staffing and that much of its funding went to administrative costs. She said the program targeted women who had at least a high-school education and ignored the provinces. She questioned the wisdom of training women to

get jobs instead of building their own businesses, and raised doubts that Promote's beneficiaries would be able to find jobs once they were trained. Finally, she said that the part of Promote designed to build a cadre of activists and civil-society organizations focused on promoting more effective advocacy for women's equality and empowerment may have negative consequences due to the young age and political inexperience of the participants.<sup>18</sup>

Mrs. Ghani agreed with the other women SIGAR interviewed that Afghan women are hopeful about the future. "They are strong inside," the First Lady said. "They have not been broken."<sup>19</sup>



**First Lady Rula Ghani** attends a seminar on the Afghan Ministry of Interior's Strategic Implementation Plan for the Integrity of Female Police. (EUPOL photo)

## REFORMS HAVE HISTORICALLY PROVOKED BACKLASHES IN AFGHANISTAN

The current period is not the first time reformers have sought to release Afghan women from the strictures of tradition. Beginning in the early 20th century, Afghan rulers have repeatedly instituted reforms, several times provoking a severe backlash. Understanding this historical context is crucial for the success of future reform endeavors in Afghanistan.

In the 1920s, King Amanullah discouraged the wearing of the veil, the seclusion of women, and polygamy. His legal code also gave women the freedom of choice in marriage.<sup>20</sup> His wife, Queen Soraya, publicly campaigned for a radical change in women's roles and advocated for women's rights to education, employment, and divorce. As the scholar Shireen Khan Burki observed, "Calls for women's rights made publicly by a woman challenged embedded religious and cultural beliefs of a tribal society that did not view women as equals but only as property."<sup>21</sup> These measures on behalf of women became key elements in the propaganda campaign that led to the king's overthrow in 1929.<sup>22</sup>

From 1933 to 1973, King Zahir Shah established elementary schools for girls and the first women's college, and gave women the right to vote and run for office.<sup>23</sup> Reforms largely continued under the short rule of his cousin, Daoud Khan, from 1973 to 1978.<sup>24</sup> The communists who ruled from 1978 to 1992 aggressively promoted women's liberation in the cities of Kabul, Herat, and Mazar-e Sharif. As of 1988, women made up nearly 19% of government staff.<sup>25</sup> The U.S.-backed mujahedeen who fought the Soviet-backed government opposed these efforts, seeing them as foreign-imposed and un-Islamic. The mujahedeen's 1992 overthrow of President Mohammed Najibullah reversed women's status overnight.<sup>26</sup>

The Taliban who replaced the mujahedeen in 1996 made it illegal for women to study, work, or leave the home without being fully veiled and in the company of a male guardian.<sup>27</sup> Since the fall of the Taliban regime, the Afghan government has removed these restrictions and, together with the international community, encouraged the reemergence of women in politics, business, and civil society.<sup>28</sup> But reality has yet to conform to official policy.

Many of the women SIGAR interviewed looked back on the era of King Zahir Shah, and subsequent rule of Daoud Khan, as a golden age for women. However, some also fondly recalled the communist period, when women could work and study unveiled without harassment. Gailani said that while Zahir Shah's reforms did not extend far beyond the cities, the change "came naturally—it didn't come with force from the outside," whereas today the changes in women's status are perceived as "a package" from the West.<sup>29</sup> Journalist Najiba Ayubi, who directs the independent media organization The Killid Group, remembered growing up during the communist period: "We could walk around in the streets and no one could say anything. This is when I had the most freedom."<sup>30</sup> While all agreed that the Taliban period

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was the worst time for Afghan women, Dr. Dilbar Nazari, the Minister for Women's Affairs, said that even then, "Women never surrendered."<sup>31</sup>

But their consensus was that the reforms of previous regimes never touched as many women as those of the current government. First Lady Rula Ghani described attending a pageant in Jalalabad for International Women's Day along with one of President Ghani's uncles. Girls and women of different social classes gave speeches celebrating the achievements of women. Afterwards, she and her husband's uncle agreed that such a performance would never have taken place under the king, when only a tiny elite in the major cities were affected by his reforms.<sup>32</sup>

The numbers seem to agree with the First Lady's observation. In 2013, the Ministry of Education reported that 71% of girls were enrolled in primary school, 40% in lower secondary school, and 28% in upper secondary school.<sup>33</sup> (SIGAR cannot verify the ministry's numbers, but a USAID assessment recently found that the ministry's data collection system had made "substantial" progress in the last five years.<sup>34</sup>) By contrast, scholar Antonio Giustozzi found that between 1975 and 1985, during the communist era, female enrollment in primary school only grew from 8% to 14%, while in secondary schools it rose from 2% to 5%.<sup>35</sup>

As the example of those interviewed by SIGAR shows, Afghan women today are employed as civil servants, judges, teachers, doctors, pilots, soldiers, and police.<sup>36</sup> "Now you can really see women are at the forefront in bigger numbers than ever before," said Mahboub Seraj, president of the Organization of Research for Peace and Solidarity, a civil-society organization.<sup>37</sup> Afghanistan has signed the international Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and enacted a Law on Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) through presidential decree.<sup>38</sup> Wazhma Frogh, a gender advisor to the Ministry of Defense, summarized the situation by saying that no country has changed as much for women in 15 years as Afghanistan.<sup>39</sup> This is reflected in the current makeup of parliament, where 27% of the seats in the lower house and 28% in the upper house are reserved for women under the Afghan constitution, an unprecedented number for Afghanistan and many other countries.<sup>40</sup>

Many of the interviewees said they believed the current National Unity Government is more committed to women's rights than the previous government under President Hamid Karzai, but they said the United States still has a crucial role to play in keeping the Afghan government accountable on women's issues. Several expressed approval of the public role Mrs. Ghani plays, unlike Karzai's wife, who remained out of sight during his presidency. But they said that while President Ghani stands with them, there is only so much influence he and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah can have.<sup>41</sup>

For example, President Ghani fulfilled his campaign promise to nominate the first woman to the Supreme Court when he named Judge Anisa Rasooli. But the Afghan parliament failed to ratify Judge Rasooli's nomination. A judge

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

SIGAR interviewed believed this was because most members of parliament did not think a woman should have power over men. “The issue was, ‘Why should a woman judge?’” the judge told SIGAR.<sup>42</sup> Even many of the female parliamentarians failed to support Judge Rasooli. If all 69 female members of parliament had voted in favor, Judge Rasooli would have been confirmed; however, 23 of the 69 were absent the day of the vote, for unknown reasons.<sup>43</sup>

Ultimately the parliament and government reflect Afghan society, leading some of the women SIGAR interviewed to worry women’s issues will not remain a priority without international pressure. “It is still a male-dominated society and they are not ready to share the power,” said Massouda Jalal, a former Minister for Women’s Affairs.<sup>44</sup>

As in other periods in Afghanistan’s history, the recent progress has triggered some backlash. Wazhma Frogh said there is public support for women, but also “a lot of hatred.” She noted that women’s organizations and women’s activists are widely criticized and that reported cases of violence against women have risen in recent years.<sup>45</sup> Nearly every woman felt the international community made a mistake by not providing more training and public-awareness campaigns about women’s rights in Islam, to men as well as to women. Adela Raz, the deputy foreign minister for economic affairs, said, “These programs have raised the expectations of women, but they have left men behind. This has created tension between genders because men think that as women become more ‘aware,’ they will cut ties with tradition and their families.”<sup>46</sup>

Even the terms “women’s rights” and “women’s empowerment” and “gender” remain controversial in the Afghan cultural context. A government official commented, “‘Women’s empowerment’ makes it seem like women are going to take down the male-dominated system.”<sup>47</sup> Mrs. Ghani said she preferred the term “mutual respect between men and women” to “women’s rights.”<sup>48</sup>

## LACK OF SECURITY PREVENTS WOMEN FROM ADVANCING

The interviewees agreed that the biggest challenge facing Afghan women today is the lack of security. They referred not only to the ongoing armed conflict, which in 2015 and 2016 caused more civilian casualties than at any other time since the United Nations began documenting them in 2009,<sup>49</sup> but also to the danger women and girls face from criminal gangs and from harassment and worse in public spaces, schools, and the workplace.

“If women don’t have security, they cannot go to school and get educated, and they cannot find a job,” said General Nazifa Zaki, a member of parliament and a former Afghan National Police general. “Women who have an education and were working are now electing to stay home because of the security situation,” the general added. “In some cases women are making this decision for themselves, but in other cases the family is making it for them. It is the family’s—mainly the man’s—responsibility to ensure the women are safe. If they feel that going to school or a job may put the women in danger, then they won’t let them go.”<sup>50</sup>

About one-third of the country’s districts are either under insurgent control or influence, or at risk of coming under it, according to USFOR-A.<sup>51</sup> In these areas, the Taliban seek to punish women who work or study outside the home. A number of the women interviewed had their lives threatened or had relatives killed by the Taliban. For example, the Taliban killed the brother of Hamida Ahmadzai, a member of parliament from Logar Province, in retaliation for her work on women’s rights.<sup>52</sup> A member of parliament was kidnapped for 10 days by the Taliban. She was released after then-President Karzai exchanged prisoners for her, her bodyguard, and three others. Since then, she has been unable to work in her home province and must stay in Kabul.<sup>53</sup>

A female lieutenant colonel in the Afghan National Army said the Taliban especially targeted women in the army. Her brother warned her that if people know she was in the army, the family could be killed. Because of this, she no longer wears her uniform in public.<sup>54</sup> Najiba Ayubi of The Killid Group said women journalists face constant danger; many parents will not allow their daughters to become journalists because of the threat to their lives.<sup>55</sup> Wazhma Frogh said she used to travel to Ghazni three times a week for her work, but now it is impossible: “They would kill me.”<sup>56</sup>

Several women recalled the murder of Farkhunda Malikzada, a 27-year-old female student of Islam who was killed by an all-male mob in 2015 after being falsely accused of burning a Koran at a shrine.<sup>57</sup> Frogh pointed out that the men who beat Farkhunda to death were not Taliban. “These were young guys in jeans with iPhones. The hatred and the grudge they had against women is very powerful.”<sup>58</sup> A government official said that although she dresses very conservatively, she is still harassed in the streets and knows that men sometimes grope other women in public. Since the murder of Farkhunda, she said, no woman would dare to hit back at a man who harassed her.<sup>59</sup>

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## PROMOTE

In Afghanistan, USAID is currently undertaking the largest gender-based initiative in its history. The Promote partnership aims to assist more than 75,000 Afghan women in achieving leadership roles over five years in all parts of society, including business, academia, politics, and public policy. USAID has committed \$280 million to Promote, which is composed of six separate programs, several of which provide internships and leadership training to women in government and business. The first program was launched in September 2014. According to USAID, in the two years since, Promote programs have benefited 7,804 individuals, 118 civil-society organizations, and 178 businesses.<sup>60</sup> (See Section 3 for more information about Promote’s current activities.)

The women SIGAR interviewed were familiar with Promote, which USAID has sought to publicize widely. They applauded the effort to promote female leadership, but many were concerned about some aspects of the program. As with many other U.S. aid projects, they fear that despite what appears to be generous funding, a large portion will be absorbed by U.S. contractors, leaving little to actually reach Afghan women.

Several women said they worried that Promote would not lead to lasting jobs for its beneficiaries and would therefore leave them even more frustrated than before. Helena Malikyar, an Afghan-American scholar and journalist, noted that even well-educated men have trouble finding jobs in Afghanistan, where the unemployment rate is nearly 23%, and the government does not have the revenues to hire thousands of Afghan women.<sup>61</sup> “Nobody has thought about the job placement of these women,” said Malikyar, adding that this frequently happens with international training programs. “Right after [the trainees] finish, they think they are better than anyone else and they should get a very high-paying job. When they don’t get those positions, they become disgruntled citizens.” Malikyar and several other women also said that Promote and other U.S. gender initiatives tend to concentrate their



**Women’s leadership development** trainer Lida Heydayat speaks at a Promote graduation ceremony in Kabul. (USAID photo)

assistance on educated, English-speaking, urban women rather than reaching out to rural women.<sup>62</sup>

Many women also commented on the way Promote and other USAID programs in Afghanistan are designed. For example, the executive director of one women’s rights NGO in Kabul said that “USAID projects are often designed in New York City or D.C. As a result, they often don’t work the way USAID envisioned. As you know, once a project is planned and there is buy-in, it is hard to change. USAID doesn’t consult Afghan women until it is too late to make any changes.” She added that the Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society, another USAID program, “was driven by Afghans and was more effective as a result.”<sup>63</sup>

A member of the same NGO said USAID and their contractors tell Afghan women that they cannot change the projects once they have been planned. She also said some women’s access to donors is problematic: “The elite [women] challenge ideas, work for women, and are always contacted by donors to find out what is going on. The other group is made up of marginalized women. They are rural, not as educated, often working women, and donors do not talk to them enough. If you ask them if they know about Promote, they will say no.”<sup>64</sup>

SIGAR plans to initiate a performance audit of Promote within the next year.

## **CORRUPTION BLOCKS WOMEN'S ADVANCE**

The second biggest challenge the women identified was corruption. Najiba Ayubi said the media organization The Killid Group had extensively investigated corruption within the government. “The ongoing corruption is damaging everything,” she said. She described a system in which every position and every government service has its price. She and other women said the United States bears some responsibility for exacerbating corruption in Afghanistan. “The U.S. and the international community came in and gave money without asking a lot of questions and it created a lot of corrupted people.”<sup>65</sup> (SIGAR this quarter published a Lessons Learned Program report, *Corruption in Conflict*, on the U.S. response to corruption in Afghanistan. See Section 2 for more information.)

Partly because of corruption, Afghan women are often cut out of the political and economic system. “This is a big problem for women because men run the system, and it is hard for women to be part of this,” said Shinkai Karokhail, a member of parliament from Kabul Province. “Men bring people into the system that they want, and because of warlords who have a lot of power, they do not support women. Political parties also have big challenges. They have their own very tight power base. This occupies the entire system.”<sup>66</sup> When women do succeed in gaining power, interviewees said, they sometimes become just as corrupt as their male counterparts.<sup>67</sup>

USAID and other U.S. agencies have often relied on Afghan nongovernmental organizations (NGO) to implement their gender programs. However, Helena Malikyar, an Afghan-American scholar and journalist who has also worked on international aid projects, said many of the NGOs were not truly independent, but relied on donors for money and project ideas. She also said U.S. agencies fail to hold NGO implementers accountable for the funds they receive.

## **SECTOR CHALLENGES**

The interviewees also discussed progress and challenges and provided insights on improving the status of Afghan women across the six sectors of gender initiatives: security, justice, politics, the economy, health, and education.

### **Women in Security Forces Face Engrained Cultural Stigma and Harassment**

The Afghan women interviewed by SIGAR identified several barriers to recruiting, training and keeping women in the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). Namely, the women cited the cultural stigma associated with women serving in that capacity, the ubiquitous sexual harassment and abuse of these women, and the male opposition to

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**Afghan policewomen participate** in the first basic patrolmans' course for women in Kandahar, Afghanistan. (U.S. Army photo by Cpl. Mariah Best)

their participation that kept them from serving in their intended roles or being promoted.

In fiscal year 2016 alone, the United States budgeted \$93.5 million to increase the recruitment of women to the ANDSF.<sup>68</sup> The money has also gone to build facilities, provide training, and supply equipment for female members of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP).<sup>69</sup>

Under the Women's Participation Plan, about \$79.4 million has been obligated since 2014 to build facilities for female soldiers and police.<sup>70</sup> In a sex-segregated society such as Afghanistan where women are often not allowed to be in the presence of unrelated men, it is especially important to have female soldiers and police to interview and search women and their quarters, said General Nazifa Zaki, a parliamentarian and former ANP general:

Having female police officers is essential, just like it is essential to have female doctors. Afghan women can't file claims with men because they aren't supposed to talk to other men without their fathers, husbands, or brothers present. Additionally, women understand the issues other women face. If there are women in the police force, they can help to ensure that their male counterparts do not harass women, both verbally and sexually.<sup>71</sup>

Increasing the number of women in the ANDSF has long been a goal of the NATO missions in Afghanistan. In 2012, for example, the goal was for 10% of the ANA—about 19,500 positions—to be women and to have 5,000 women in the ANP.<sup>72</sup> However, the ANDSF has never come close to attaining those goals: the number of women in the ANA has rarely exceeded 1%.<sup>73</sup> In July 2015, the Resolute Support (RS) mission changed its annual numerical goal for women in the ANA to 485, “a more realistic goal based

upon training capacity.<sup>74</sup> But as of August 24, 2016, the RS mission reported having set the goal of 5,000 women in the ANA and 5,000 in the ANP, even though at that time the numbers of women serving were only 877 and 2,866, respectively.<sup>75</sup>

A female ANP colonel said danger is the main reason families would not let their daughters join the ANDSF; for example, her brother and several other relatives in the Afghan security services were killed.<sup>76</sup> Another woman with experience in the ANDSF said families did not want their daughters to be sexually harassed and abused, as was common in the ANA and the ANP. Another problem, she said, was that society believed that only women of bad character would join the police.<sup>77</sup> These sentiments are reflected by the Asia Foundation's 2015 *Survey of the Afghan People*, in which 58% of Afghans surveyed said they did not consider it acceptable for women to work in the army or police.<sup>78</sup>

In an effort to raise the capacity of women in the ANP, the United States recently funded 109 policewomen to complete training in Turkey. However, SIGAR has learned that there is resistance to placing them in positions appropriate to their training. "They face constant harassment," said one woman with knowledge of the program. "The men don't respect them [and] they are worried that these women will take their places."<sup>79</sup>

According to RS, common reasons women leave the ANDSF are opposition from male relatives, problems with male colleagues, low pay, family obligations, lack of promotion or meaningful assignment opportunities, and a lack of training and security.<sup>80</sup> The four women SIGAR interviewed in the security field all agreed that women in the ANDSF have difficulty being promoted, despite their skills and capabilities. Colonel Ghouti of the Afghan Border Police and Wazhma Frogh said women were usually kept in junior positions or assigned menial tasks. Colonel Ghouti said that while her male colleagues from the police academy have been promoted to the rank of general officer, she has not been promoted beyond colonel because she is a woman.<sup>81</sup>

Several of the women added that U.S. funds were not being spent as intended on ANDSF women's facilities. They said the funds either had not been spent to build women's facilities such as bathrooms, changing areas, and living quarters, or that facilities that had been built were being used by men. They also said although the U.S. Congress has allocated funding for female recruitment, the MOD claims to have no funds. SIGAR plans to investigate these complaints.<sup>82</sup>

## Justice System Still Biased Against Women

Women struggle to receive justice in Afghanistan, whether in the country's formal or informal justice systems. Despite U.S. support for the justice sector in Afghanistan, the women SIGAR interviewed raised concerns about the way Afghan law is interpreted concerning women, the lack of legal representation for women, increased violence against women but inadequate

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**Violence against women** is now more commonly addressed in Afghan media, including in this scene from Afghanistan's *Palwasha* TV series. (United Nations photo by Jawad Jalali)

investigation and prosecution of these crimes, and cultural barriers for women pursuing legal complaints against family members and others.

The United States has sought to support and improve both the informal and formal justice systems, spending more than \$1 billion to implement at least 66 rule-of-law programs as of May 2014.<sup>83</sup> According to Noah Coburn of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), research suggests that a large majority of Afghans eschew the formal justice system—which is seen as corrupt, expensive, and inefficient—in favor of informal dispute mechanisms.<sup>84</sup> While some critics have argued that the informal system especially penalizes women, Coburn found that the formal sector appeared no more capable of addressing human-rights issues than the informal sector. “In fact cases of women being prosecuted for ‘running away’ and other ‘moral crimes’ that have no legal basis were surprisingly common [in the formal sector],” he wrote.<sup>85</sup>

Some of the women interviewed by SIGAR felt that both systems of justice were unfair to women and relied on customs such as the Pashtun honor code known as *Pashtunwali* rather than actual Islamic law. For example, Fatima Gailani, who has a higher degree in Islamic law, said Afghan courts did not uphold women’s rights to divorce or inherit, as outlined in the Koran. “The pre-Islamic, existing systems are very strong. It is very difficult for a woman to win a case.”<sup>86</sup>

A senior judge, on the other hand, said the informal courts were far more biased against women than the formal courts. She pointed out that while the informal courts were composed almost entirely of men, and women were often not allowed to be present, the formal courts now had 285 female judges. She said that this was progress compared to the Taliban era, when there were no female judges, and also under President Najibullah, when

there were only 45.<sup>87</sup> A government official pointed out that Afghanistan lacks female lawyers and prosecutors.<sup>88</sup>

The senior judge recommended that the United States concentrate its aid on the formal court system.<sup>89</sup> Gailani, on the other hand, thought the United States could help make the system fairer to women by sponsoring young women to study Islamic law under internationally recognized scholars.<sup>90</sup>

Public awareness of crimes against women and gender-based violence has increased in recent years due to a spate of violent incidents and greater media attention to the issue. A majority of the 43 women interviewed for this essay raised the issue. Wazhma Frogh, a gender advisor to the Ministry of Defense, said violence against women was now being reported more often.<sup>91</sup> The senior judge said that a major problem for Afghan justice was that families often would not allow women to bring cases to court because they feared it would damage their reputations. She said that when a man married a woman, he often thought that she was now his property. “He thinks ‘Whatever I want to do, I can do it.’ They don’t think a woman is human.” This goes against human rights law and Islamic law, the judge said, adding that unfortunately, few men or women were aware of women’s rights.<sup>92</sup>

A parliamentarian from a central province said that even when women brought cases of domestic violence to court, they were not always taken seriously: “Judges do not follow up on cases of criminal activity against women, and this is the biggest challenge for all Afghan women.”<sup>93</sup>

## Women’s Political Participation Increasing But Faces Resistance

The Afghan women interviewed by SIGAR saw substantial progress in the area of women’s political participation, but they also spoke of challenges that needed addressing, such as the substantial security concerns for female politicians, opposition to women’s political participation, and the struggle to assert authority in a corrupt and male-dominated political establishment.

Afghan women today hold more positions of political power than at any other time in the country’s history. Currently, under the quota stipulated in the Afghan constitution, women occupy 18 seats of the 68-member upper house of parliament or *Meshrano Jirga*,<sup>94</sup> and 69 out of 249 seats in the lower house of parliament or *Wolesi Jirga*.<sup>95</sup> Four ministries and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission are led by women, and three women have been appointed as ambassadors. Furthermore, Afghanistan is one of only two South Asian countries with a national action plan in place for implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which promotes women as participants in leadership and peace building.<sup>96</sup>

However, enormous obstacles remain for women seeking public office, particularly due to security risks and pervasive cultural resistance to women entering political life. For instance, in 2012, Hanifa Safi and Najia Sediqi were both assassinated for acting as head of women’s affairs in

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**Female cabinet members** surround Chief Executive Abdullah and other Afghan and U.S. officials during a Promote program launch at U.S Embassy, Kabul. (USAID photo)

Laghman Province.<sup>97</sup> Governors, members of parliament, and other high-level female officials also face death threats and harassment, as well as occasional assassination attempts.<sup>98</sup>

According to a 2015 public opinion survey conducted by the Asia Foundation, support for equal representation of men and women in political leadership positions has declined in recent years, from a high of 51.1% in 2008 to 43.6% in 2015. The proportion of Afghans who say that political leadership positions should be mostly for men has increased, from 36.8% in 2006 to 42.3% in 2015. Attitudes toward women in political leadership positions vary mainly by gender and region. Women (52.9%) are more likely than men (32.9%) to support women's equal access to political leadership positions. Most Afghan men (56.3%) say that political leadership positions should be only for men; only 30.0% of women agree.<sup>99</sup> These figures may reflect a reaction to recent political gains for Afghan women.

The parliamentarians interviewed said women lawmakers have to struggle to be heard. Rangina Kargar, a member from Faryab Province, said when women talk in parliament, men interrupt.<sup>100</sup> Another member said women are excluded from important meetings and policymaking.<sup>101</sup> As an example of the women's relative powerlessness in parliament, another parliamentarian cited their continuing inability to endorse the EVAW law, which was enacted by presidential decree.<sup>102</sup> When a female lawmaker attempted to strengthen the law in 2013 by having parliament endorse it, the opposition was so vociferous that the speaker halted debate after 15 minutes and sent the bill back to parliamentary commissions.<sup>103</sup> The member interviewed by SIGAR said that even though the male members of parliament are educated, they have resisted passing the bill. "So imagine the challenges with uneducated men. The issue is the culture. Men want to control women here. They want to keep the power."<sup>104</sup>

Nevertheless, Shinkai Karokhail, a member from Kabul, said the female parliamentarians are having an impact. "There is strong advocacy today

by women in parliament and NGOs, which is why we have more women in government now. Even women in burqas from the country show up at political events and say ‘we are here.’ Their physical presence, even if they are covered, is a big revolution. Even if one woman appears on stage, it’s a chance for other women and it makes men accept women and change their mindset.” She explained that women now feel more comfortable talking to the chief of police in a province, or the district councilperson, and others. “It makes the men accept that women are a part of society.”<sup>105</sup>

While several women said the parliamentary quotas led to some unqualified women being elected over more qualified men, most agreed that for now the quotas are necessary to ensure that women are represented.

## Women Need Assistance to Increase Economic Participation

While still extremely limited, the participation of Afghan women in the economy is rising.

The number of Afghans who say the women in their family contribute to their household income has edged up, from 13.6% in 2009 to 22.6% in 2015, according to the Asia Foundation.<sup>106</sup> At the same time, the percentage of Afghans who support women working outside the home has been declining, from 70.9% in 2006 to 64% in 2015. Women (72.9%) are much more likely than men (53.8%) to agree that women should be allowed to work outside the home.<sup>107</sup>

The women SIGAR interviewed said Afghan women need help with problems such as finding job opportunities in a nepotistic and corrupt economic atmosphere, accessing markets for small businesses, and dealing with harassment in the workplace.

USAID has actively sought to encourage women’s participation in the economy. In addition to its Promote program, USAID seeks to provide women with job training and placement services, access to credit, and financial products designed specifically for women. USAID reports that through its programs, women have received more than 100,000 microfinance loans worth \$85.7 million. Furthermore, USAID reports that since 2011, it has “facilitated” \$1.86 million in private-sector loans to 575 businesswomen and supported 22 business and entrepreneurship workshops for 1,200 businesswomen from all 34 provinces.

Since 2012, USAID reports, more than 3,500 women have participated in USAID-sponsored job training aimed at mid-career/semiprofessional employees and job seekers, and that these women are being equipped with technical and business management skills in response to private-sector labor market needs. USAID says, as a result, more than 2,000 women have been placed in jobs or promoted with salary increases. USAID also has programs that train women in agricultural best practices, provide marketing services and loans, and facilitate access to lines of credit in support of women in agribusiness.<sup>108</sup>



**A carpetweaver works** in Herat, Afghanistan, at a carpet- and silk-weaving center funded by a World Bank program. (World Bank photo by Graham Crouch)

Many of the women SIGAR interviewed spoke of the need to open up economic opportunities for women, such as greater access to jobs and the markets. One of the conditions for further civilian assistance to Afghanistan at the Brussels Conference on October 5, 2016, was for the Afghan government to produce a plan for the economic empowerment of women.<sup>109</sup>

A member of parliament said several programs to help women have run into obstacles in her remote northern province, where women do all the farming and household work. She ran an NGO from 2002 to 2009 helping women market their handicrafts, but faced opposition from village mullahs and men in families who controlled the household finances. She said the Taliban are not present in her area, but she was still shot and severely wounded for arguing with men about women's rights. More recently, a bazaar has opened across the border in Tajikistan where women can sell their handicrafts. Since they have to stay home to work, they send their children to sell their products.<sup>110</sup>

A parliamentarian suggested that the government buy women's agricultural products and resell them to the community rather than importing many goods from neighboring countries. "This way, a man will see that his woman is working and getting money from the government, so that if he beats her, he will not receive the money from her work."<sup>111</sup> Shafiqqa Habibi, the director of the New Afghanistan Women Association, said there is a need for more formalized associations to help women pool resources, access credit, and market their products.<sup>112</sup>

## **Lack of Female Health Professionals, Facilities, and Funding Endangers Women's Health**

Advancements in women's health in Afghanistan are often reported as a major accomplishment in the reconstruction effort, but the women interviewed by SIGAR agreed that major health challenges still exist, particularly in rural areas, and especially with regard to maternal mortality, access to female doctors and health facilities, and the prohibitive cost of health services.

USAID has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on health services for Afghan women since 2001.<sup>113</sup> USAID reports that about 760,000 Afghan women and children receive health treatment monthly at USAID-supported facilities.<sup>114</sup> USAID is running the \$60 million Helping Mothers and Children Thrive program, which started in 2015 and is slated to continue to 2020. According to USAID, this program intends to build health-provider capacity, strengthen a "gender-sensitive approach" to family health care, increase access to women's health facilities in remote areas, and integrate family planning and gender equity in the health system.<sup>115</sup>

USAID also has spent \$5.4 million to fund the Afghanistan Demographic Health Survey from 2013 to 2016. According to the agency, the survey was the "first-ever nationwide effort to gather comprehensive demographic

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

and health information of [Afghanistan's] citizens."<sup>116</sup> Included in this data is information specifically relevant to women and children, such as fertility levels, marriage rates, awareness and use of family planning methods, breastfeeding practices, nutritional status of mothers and young children, childhood and maternal health and mortality, as well as information on domestic violence.<sup>117</sup>

One of the biggest threats to the lives of Afghan women is maternal mortality. According to USAID, in 2002, Afghanistan had one of the worst maternal-mortality rates in the world due to a lack of basic health care, equipment, and facilities.<sup>118</sup> The U.S. government, in partnership with the Afghan Ministry of Public Health (MOPH), implemented programs to directly address this issue. In 2008, USAID initiated a \$259.6 million Partnership Contracts for Health project that ran until 2015. Part of this program involved USAID and MOPH training midwives in five remote provinces.<sup>119</sup> As a result of this and other donor-funded programs, USAID claims that the number of midwives has increased from 467 during Taliban rule to at least 4,000 today.<sup>120</sup>

Despite such improvements, questions remain about the degree to which U.S. efforts have succeeded in reducing maternal-mortality rates. Some experts disagree with earlier statistics showing major improvements in this area; the facts will remain unclear at least until the full results of the Afghan Demographic Health Survey are released.<sup>121</sup> In SIGAR's interviews, many of the Afghan women raised continuing concerns about maternal mortality. A member of parliament from a rural area lamented the lack of female doctors: "Women are dying at home, especially during childbirth, because men do not want to take them to male doctors."<sup>122</sup> This sentiment was echoed by Rangina Kargar, another parliamentarian from remote Faryab Province. "It

is considered shameful when women have babies in a hospital instead of their homes, even though many women die in childbirth.”<sup>123</sup>

Several of the women interviewed also raised concerns about the lack of access to proper facilities and female doctors. A member of parliament from a rural area in northern Afghanistan remarked that for basic health-care services, “Some women are an eight or nine days’ walk away from the closest health clinic.”<sup>124</sup> Members of the Afghan Women’s Network also said that because security in the remote areas of Afghanistan is often worse than in the cities, it is more difficult for women to reach health-care facilities and services in these areas.<sup>125</sup> Discussing the concerns about clinics in the remote provinces, Minister of Women’s Affairs Dr. Dilbar Nazari said the clinics that do exist are far from some women’s homes and, “because of security, [women] can’t walk alone” to get to them.<sup>126</sup> These problems also affect practitioners’ ability to provide critical health services in remote areas. The director of an orthopedic organization said it was very difficult for her organization to provide health care for disabled people in the provinces.<sup>127</sup>

In addition, very few specialized facilities exist that are equipped to detect or treat breast and ovarian cancers. Fatima Gailani, the former head of the Afghan Red Crescent, said, in all of Afghanistan, “there are only three mammography machines, and they are ancient machines.” She said the Red Crescent humanitarian organization donated land in Kabul for a breast-cancer diagnostic center, but that so far no one has contributed the funds to build one.<sup>128</sup>

Unfortunately, the lack of security has hindered efforts to educate and employ more female health professionals. Shafiqah Habibi, director of the New Afghanistan Women Association, said that when security was good between 2002 and 2008, many female doctors, nurses, and midwives were trained and practiced. “Conservative families supported the programs because they needed doctors for their mothers, sisters, and daughters,” she explained. In the past few years, she said many clinics were built, but they lack female health professionals because families are afraid to allow their daughters and sisters to work in remote areas or go to school after the age of 12 because of the lack of security.<sup>129</sup> “As a result, there aren’t enough female health professionals to see women.”<sup>130</sup>

The cost of health care is another issue that significantly affects health-care access for Afghan women, even those who work outside of the home. A few of the women SIGAR interviewed discussed the need to go to Kabul or Pakistan or India for health services and that only women with money can afford to do so.<sup>131</sup> Because a woman’s male relatives take her salary, even in cities such as Kabul, many women cannot afford to go to a doctor.<sup>132</sup> A female ANA officer discussed the severity of the problem, based on her experience. “When my son was sick, a male general’s daughter was also sick. I applied to go to India to get treatment but they didn’t give [permission] to me. They gave me 100,000 afghani, but gave the man 500,000 and let

him go to India. I had no one to help me. I have no husband and my seven-year-old son died.”<sup>133</sup>

Another major health issue is the lack of treatment for victims of domestic violence against women and girls. USAID has contributed nearly \$5 million for a treatment protocol developed by the World Health Organization for a 2015–2020 project to train health practitioners how to handle cases of gender-based violence in all 34 Afghan provinces.<sup>134</sup> Dr. Sharifullah Haqmal, the Gender, Equity, and Human Rights and Human Resources Development Program Manager from the World Health Organization (WHO), said domestic violence is the main health concern of the WHO regarding Afghan women and girls. He said the WHO has tackled the issue of gender-based violence through public-awareness campaigns and treatment protocols, through advocating private-sector funding for programs fighting violence against women and girls, and by doing community outreach to ensure that women and men alike are aware of gender-based violence issues, solutions, and treatments for victims. Dr. Haqmal explained that the treatment protocol supports the Ministry of Public Health in executing this new approach to domestic violence throughout Afghanistan.<sup>135</sup>

## Still Too Few Girls in School Due to Lack of Security and Cultural Barriers

Afghan women and girls have made unmistakable gains in education, but according to the women interviewed by SIGAR, increased attention needs to be paid to training more female teachers, increasing the number and adequacy of female educational facilities, and tackling the remaining cultural hurdles that prevent women and girls from being educated at all levels.

Although school enrollment for girls—at more than 3.3 million—is now the highest it has ever been in Afghanistan, the country still has one of the lowest rates of schooling for girls and one of the highest rates of gender disparity in education in the world.<sup>136</sup> In addition, enrollment is not attendance. It is thought that only 64% of enrolled primary-school boys actually attend class, while only 48% of girls do. In secondary school, attendance rates are worse: 42% for boys and 23% for girls.<sup>137</sup>

USAID has several programs aimed at educating Afghan girls and women and, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, says it is helping to train nearly 25,000 female teachers.<sup>138</sup> USAID also supports the American University of Afghanistan, where about 30% of the student body is female, and is funding the Promote Scholarship Program, which plans to give scholarships to 720 Afghan girls over the next five years.<sup>139</sup> Many of the Afghan women whom SIGAR interviewed spoke highly of U.S. assistance with education programs. Highlighting the importance of education to future progress, Zarqa Yaftali of the Afghan Women’s Network said, “If the women of Afghanistan were more educated, we would have a very different country.”<sup>140</sup>

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

Some of the women expressed the view that the international community has put too much attention on literacy programs and primary education, and not enough on secondary and higher education, especially for women. Dr. Sima Samar, who taught “underground” schools during the Taliban era, argued that donors need to ensure that Afghans have sufficient schools and a rigorous curriculum beyond the sixth grade.<sup>141</sup>

Despite USAID’s efforts to train teachers, many women SIGAR spoke to expressed concerns with their training and qualifications. Helena Malikyar, a scholar and journalist whose son attends school in Kabul, said “I’ve seen teachers in some of the best schools in Kabul and their qualifications are really low. Kids who have come back from Pakistan or Iran see them making mistakes on the blackboard.”<sup>142</sup>

In the rural areas where most Afghans live, recruiting enough female teachers is hard when there is a combination of remoteness, danger, and low pay. Helena Malikyar commented that the salaries for teachers “are so ridiculously low, when you consider that a woman taking a teaching job will also be risking her life and her reputation to walk to school that could be miles away, it’s not worth it.”<sup>143</sup> Parliamentarians representing women from rural areas seconded this argument; one from a province bordering the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas of Pakistan added that security issues keep families from allowing their women to teach outside the home.<sup>144</sup>

Several women interviewed by SIGAR said attitudes toward women’s education had changed since 2001, with Afghans today more supportive of education for girls. However, the 2015 public opinion survey by the Asia Foundation found that support for women having equal access to education had fallen since 2006. That year, only 8% disagreed strongly or somewhat with the statement that women should have the same educational opportunities as men, while in 2015, 21% disagreed.<sup>145</sup>

Some of the members of parliament from rural provinces commented that men in their areas refuse to allow girls to be educated past a certain level

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because it would change the power dynamics in their homes and communities. One said, “Men just want [women] to be literate, and after that, they don’t want [education for women]. They do not want the girl to lose her religion.”<sup>146</sup> Minister of Higher Education Farida Momand seemed to echo that concern, saying that Afghans need to teach families to accept that women can get an education and work, adding that if in a conservative family the girl is educated and the boy is not, he will not let her go out and work.<sup>147</sup>

However, not all agreed that conservative families in more remote areas of Afghanistan are culturally resistant to girls being educated. Helena Malikiyar said that, in her experience, most people want their daughters to be educated, and she was surprised when people came to her in rural provinces such as Paktika and Ghazni asking her to open schools for girls in their villages. She said they have realized that their girls going to school adds value to their lives: “If they marry her off, they can get more money [in bride price].”<sup>148</sup>

Part of the problem with educating girls in Afghanistan is that many families do not approve of sending girls to school with boys after puberty. Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Affairs Adela Raz commented that the numbers of girls in school drop off after sixth grade. This is because girls have reached puberty by then and are no longer allowed to be around unrelated men. Numbers drop again after grade 12, often because girls are married by the age of 16. If they marry, their husbands often won’t allow them to continue their education.<sup>149</sup>

Some have suggested that the answer to this cultural aversion is to segregate schools by gender, although many of the Afghan women SIGAR interviewed agreed it would be difficult due to the lack of funding. Deputy Minister Raz recalled that with her own educational experience, her male relatives were more supportive of her going through with her higher education because she attended a women’s university in the United States.<sup>150</sup> However, a university professor said that her experience with all-girls education in Kabul was that it exacerbated the tension between men and women. “I believe co-education should happen at the school level so they get used to each other, accept each other as classmates, then later, as colleagues. The traditional view is if you teach them together it will cause moral issues, but there are ways to stop that.”<sup>151</sup>

The women were also concerned that girls have trouble reaching schools even if their families want them to attend. The parliamentarians from remote provinces expressed that generally, school facilities did exist in even rural and insecure areas, but they stressed that the quality of the facilities and the security situation often made using them difficult.<sup>152</sup> In Nangarhar, for example, a member of parliament said, “There is no water in the schools, there are no female toilets, and there are no supplies in the classrooms.”<sup>153</sup> Zarqa Yarftali, a member of the Afghan Women’s Network, explained that in some areas, the distance of schools, not having female

teachers, and the harassment on the streets cause parents to hold the girls back from school.<sup>154</sup> Additionally, a parliamentarian from a war-torn eastern province said that of the 15 districts in her province, only five have school facilities, and 13 are under Taliban control.<sup>155</sup>

Several women proposed supporting informal methods of education until more formal educational facilities were safe for students. Through the \$77.4 million program Increasing Access to Basic Education and Gender Equality, USAID is already seeking to improve access to education for out-of-school children, 75% of whom are girls.<sup>156</sup> General Nazifa Zaki, a member of parliament and former ANP general, said that teaching women and girls in homes is a good thing in the insecure areas of the country. “There should be support from the central government and other agencies to help women and girls transition to mainstream education once the security gets better,” she argued.<sup>157</sup>

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Despite the many challenges they face, the prominent women SIGAR interviewed were optimistic about the future for Afghan women. As Fatima Gailani, the former head of the Afghan Red Crescent Society, put it, “Today what we see for women in Afghanistan, it is fantastic.”<sup>158</sup> And Shafiqah Habibi, head of the Afghan Women’s Journalist Union, spoke for many when she said that Afghan women want to keep moving forward with the help of the international community. “The international community needs to keep the faith,” she said.<sup>159</sup>

SIGAR plans to follow up on these interviews, referring specific complaints about U.S.-funded programs to our investigations and audits directorates for further review and initiating a lessons-learned project that will examine the effectiveness of U.S. gender programs in Afghanistan since 2002 to draw conclusions about when and how such programs can work.

The U.S.-funded reconstruction has clearly made a huge difference in the lives of Afghan women and girls, and yet much remains to be done to ensure that the gains are sustainable and that women can build on them. The divide between rural and urban areas is clearly a serious concern that SIGAR will focus on in its survey of ordinary Afghan women for the lessons learned project. The Lessons Learned Program research will also address the question of whether programs to increase the recruitment of women for the ANDSF are feasible in a society like Afghanistan’s. In addition, a future SIGAR audit will examine the effectiveness of USAID’s Promote gender initiative.

SIGAR will continue to seek to enhance the prospects for Afghanistan’s reconstruction by helping agencies reinforce successful programs, correct or repurpose troubled efforts, and find new and more sustainable opportunities to promote the health, safety, education, and advancement of Afghan women.

“Corruption is an enormous threat both to the stewardship of U.S. tax dollars and to Afghanistan’s prospects for developing into a peaceful, modern nation-state.”

—*Special Inspector General John F. Sopko*