

# SIGAR

Special Inspector General for  
Afghanistan Reconstruction

JUL 30  
2022

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.

As required by the National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2018 (Pub. L. No. 115-91), this quarterly report has been prepared in accordance with the Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation issued by the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency.

Source: Pub. L. No. 110-181, National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2008, 1/28/2008; Pub. L. No. 115-91, National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2018, 12/12/2017.

(For a list of the Congressionally mandated contents of this report, see Appendix A.)

**Cover Photo:**

This Afghan girl's family is among thousands whose homes were wrecked by a severe earthquake. (UNDP Afghanistan photo)



SPECIAL INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR  
AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

To Congress, the Secretaries of State and Defense, and the American people, I am pleased to submit SIGAR's 56th quarterly report on the status of reconstruction in Afghanistan.

The Taliban this quarter issued new decrees restricting Afghan women, including one requiring them to cover their faces and bodies while outside the home and another requiring female television presenters to cover their faces while on air. As discussed in Section One of this report, the new measures come on top of the Taliban's refusal to reopen secondary schools for girls and recall the Taliban's repressive rule in the 1990s.

During the reporting period, SIGAR released two interim evaluation reports. One evaluation, directed by Congress, examined the collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) last summer. SIGAR found that the most important near-term factor in the collapse of the ANDSF was the U.S. decision to withdraw the U.S. military and its contractors from Afghanistan as called for in the February 2020 agreement with the Taliban. Other factors included the change in the U.S. military's level of support to the ANDSF; the ANDSF's inability to achieve self-sustainment; Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's frequent changes of ANDSF leaders and appointment of loyalists; the Afghan government's failure to take responsibility for security by implementing a national security strategy; and the Taliban military campaign's effective exploitation of ANDSF weaknesses.

The other evaluation assessed the validity of allegations that senior Afghan officials stole funds as the Afghan government collapsed. Although SIGAR found that some cash was taken from the grounds of the presidential palace and loaded onto helicopters, evidence indicates that the amount did not exceed \$1 million and may have been closer to \$500,000. Most of this money was believed to have come from several Afghan government operating budgets normally managed at the palace.

SIGAR continues to conduct interviews and analysis for another four evaluations directed by Congress, including assessments of the fall of the Afghan government, the current status of U.S. funding for Afghanistan reconstruction, on-budget U.S. assistance to Afghanistan, and the risks to the Afghan people. Final reports on all the evaluations will be issued before the end of 2022.

SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program issued its twelfth report, *Police in Conflict*, an in-depth examination of the 20-year U.S. and international mission to reconstruct the Afghan police. The report highlights the difficulty of fighting a heavily armed insurgency while trying to develop indigenous law enforcement and civilian policing capabilities.

SIGAR issued three performance audit reports this quarter. SIGAR found in the first report that the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) did not complete or maintain required documentation on eight of 11 terminated funds awards in Afghanistan. In the second report, SIGAR determined that the Department of Defense (DOD) has not fully implemented SIGAR recommendations

from a 2013 audit intended to prevent U.S. contracting funds from going to persons or entities opposing the United States. SIGAR found in the third report that DOD did not use the Afghan Personnel and Pay System as intended to pay ANDSF salaries, bringing into question the accuracy of \$232 million in 2018–2021 salary payments.

SIGAR completed eight financial audits of U.S.-funded projects to rebuild Afghanistan that identified \$280,373 in questioned costs as a result of internal-control deficiencies and noncompliance issues. These financial audits identified a range of deficiencies in internal-control processes by USAID contractors in Afghanistan including Davis Management Group, Roots for Peace, Chemonics International, and DAI. SIGAR found no instances of noncompliance in audits of Norwegian People's Aid, ITF Enhancing Human Security, and Management Systems International Inc.

During the reporting period, SIGAR's criminal investigations resulted in one guilty plea, one sentencing, and \$33,222 in recovered funds for the U.S. government. SIGAR initiated four new cases and closed eight, bringing the total number of ongoing investigations to 39.

My colleagues and I look forward to working together with Congress and other stakeholders to learn lessons from the long U.S. involvement in Afghanistan that may prove relevant to other U.S. foreign assistance programs already underway as well as in the future.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John F. Sopko', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

John F. Sopko



سره سر مفتش ویژه برای بازسازی افغانستان

اداره ستر مفتش د پيار غاوني لپاره د خانگري ستر مفتش اداره

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND HIGHER EDUCATION

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**This report summarizes SIGAR’s oversight work and updates developments in four major areas of reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan from April 1 to June 30, 2022.\***

**During this reporting period, SIGAR issued 15 audits, evaluations, and other products assessing U.S. reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. In this period, SIGAR criminal investigations resulted in one guilty plea, one sentencing, and the recovery of \$33,222 in funds for the U.S. government.**

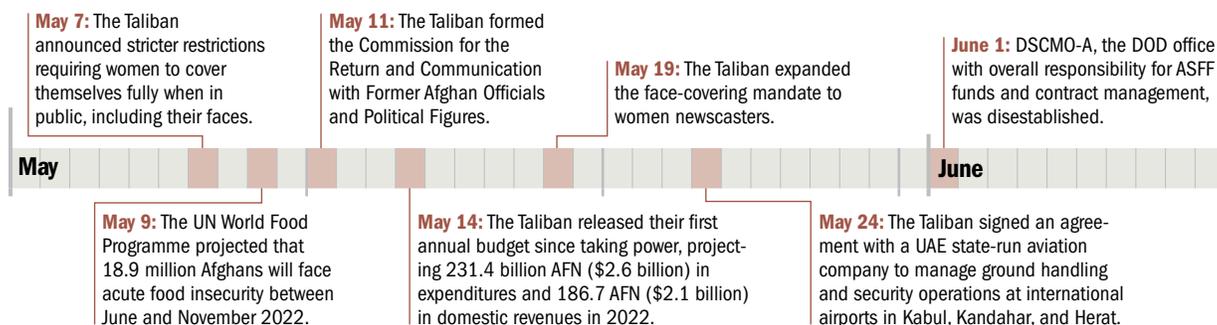
## SIGAR OVERVIEW

### AUDITS AND INSPECTIONS

This quarter, SIGAR issued three performance audit reports, two interim evaluations, and eight financial audit reports.

- The first **performance audit report** examined USAID’s termination of awards supporting reconstruction in Afghanistan between 2014 and 2020. SIGAR identified record-keeping deficiencies, but no impact on programmatic outcomes.
- The second report found that DOD fully implemented five of seven 2013 SIGAR recommendations to prevent payments to enemies of the United States, partially implemented one, and did not implement one, leaving DOD vulnerable to the diversion of contract funds.
- The third report found insufficient DOD accountability and oversight of the funds it provided to the Afghan government to pay the salaries of Ministry of Defense personnel.
- The first interim **evaluation** analyzed the allegations of theft of funds against President Ghani and other Afghan officials during the August 2021 collapse. SIGAR determined the total funds taken did not exceed \$1 million.
- The second interim evaluation assessed the factors that contributed to the collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces in August 2021. SIGAR identified six primary factors contributing to the collapse, the principal one being the decision to withdraw the U.S. military and support contractors in accordance with the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement.

### KEY EVENTS, MAY–JULY 2022



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The eight **financial audit reports** identified \$280,373 in questioned costs as a result of internal control deficiencies and noncompliance issues.

## INVESTIGATIONS

During the reporting period, SIGAR investigations resulted in one guilty plea, one sentencing, and the recovery of \$33,222 in funds for the U.S. government. SIGAR initiated four new cases and closed eight, bringing the total number of ongoing investigations to 39.

**Investigations** highlights include one guilty plea to false claims by Paul Daigle for his involvement in a scheme to defraud the U.S. government by filling contract-labor positions with unsuitable employees. As a result, false invoices were created and submitted to the U.S. government for payment. A second investigation led to the sentencing of Kenneth O. Coates to one year of supervised probation after pleading guilty to one count of major fraud against the United States for his

conspiracy to hire unqualified language interpreters to be deployed alongside U.S. military personnel. SIGAR further identified \$33,222 in refunds Reed International, a DOD contractor, had not remitted to the United States.

## LESSONS LEARNED

During the reporting period, Lessons Learned issued its twelfth report, *Police in Conflict*, an in-depth examination of the 20-year U.S. and international mission to reconstruct the Afghan police. The report highlights the difficulty of fighting a heavily armed insurgency while trying to develop indigenous law enforcement and civilian policing capabilities.

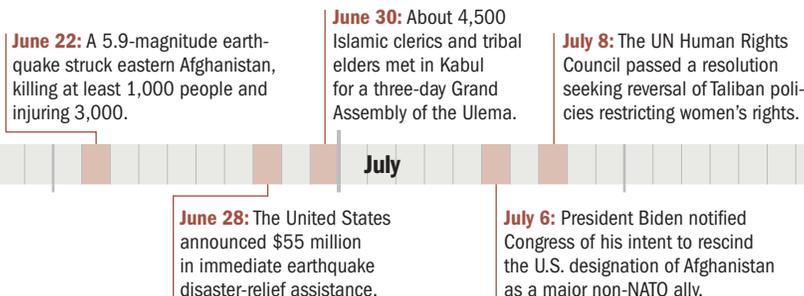
## RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

SIGAR's Research and Analysis Directorate issued its 56th *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*.

\* As provided in its authorizing statute, SIGAR may also report on products and events issued or occurring after June 30, 2022, up to the publication date of this report.

Note: The United States has not yet made a decision as to whether to recognize the Taliban or any other entity as the government of Afghanistan or as part of such a government. Accordingly, references in this report to a "Taliban-controlled government," "interim government," Taliban "governance," "Taliban regime," a "former Afghan government," or similar phrases are not intended to prejudge or convey any U.S. government view or decision on recognition of the Taliban or any other entity as the government of Afghanistan.

Source: State, response to SIGAR vetting, 7/22/2022.





**SIGAR has conducted or commissioned** audit, inspection, special project, and/or investigation work in 30 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces as of June 30, 2022. (SIGAR image)

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“What is happening right now in Afghanistan is the most serious women’s rights crisis in the world today, and the most serious women’s rights crisis since 1996, when the Taliban took over the last time. There is no time to lose.”

— *Heather Barr, Director, Human Rights Watch*

# 1 TALIBAN REPRESSION OF WOMEN



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**Photo on previous page**

An Afghan television news anchor bows her head while complying with a Taliban order that women news presenters must cover their faces while on air. (AP photo by Ebrahim Noroozi)

## TALIBAN REPRESSION OF WOMEN AND GIRLS GROWS

Despite continuing demands from the United States and the broader international community, the Taliban appear to be adopting many of the same restrictions on Afghan women's autonomy and freedom of movement that led to international condemnation in the 1990s.

Immediately after their takeover in August 2021, the Taliban sought to assuage widespread concern about the fate of Afghan women under their rule.<sup>1</sup> In an early press conference, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said:

The Islamic Emirate is committed to the rights of women within the framework of *sharia* [Islamic law]. Our sisters, our men have the same rights; they will be able to benefit from their rights. They can have activities in different sectors and different areas on the basis of our rules and regulations: educational, health, and other areas. They are going to be working with us, shoulder to shoulder with us.<sup>2</sup>

However, the group never committed to respecting international human rights standards, as outlined in the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Instead, they insisted that women's rights would be observed within the framework of their interpretation of Islam.<sup>3</sup> Over the past 10 months, successive Taliban decrees have indicated that this interpretation entails excluding women from public life in Afghanistan, as in their 1996–2001 rule.

Current and previous Taliban practices differ somewhat, but both have invited serious concerns about the status of women's rights. On July 8, the United Nations Human Rights Council (OHCHR) passed a resolution on the situation of human rights and women and girls in Afghanistan, condemning the Taliban's gender-based violations and affirming its commitment to the "full and equal enjoyment of all human rights by women, girls, and children."<sup>4</sup> The resolution further demands an end to restrictive policies that make women effectively "invisible" in society as they lose access to education, health care, freedom of dress, and freedom of movement.<sup>5</sup> The Council has highlighted the issue for urgent debate, and will further address Taliban abuses during the OHCHR's 51st session in September.<sup>6</sup> Following

# TALIBAN REPRESSION OF WOMEN

the UN resolution, UNAMA released on July 20 a report on human rights in Afghanistan. That report concluded, “Women and girls comprise half the population of Afghanistan. The de facto authorities’ continued restriction of their enjoyment of their rights and freedoms has effectively marginalized and rendered women voiceless and unseen. Harnessing their potential ... is critical if the de facto authorities are to move Afghanistan out of the ongoing economic and humanitarian crises and commence nation building.”<sup>7</sup>

## GIRLS’ EDUCATION LIMITED

Following the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the group’s Ministry of Education promised that girls’ secondary schools (grades 7–12) would reopen at the start of the spring semester in March 2022; boys’ schools had reopened almost immediately after the fall of the Ghani administration.<sup>8</sup> However, the Taliban abruptly shifted course on March 23, citing a need for additional planning time to designate gender-separated facilities.<sup>9</sup>

Although secondary schools for girls above 6th grade have generally been closed since August 2021, the ban has been enforced unevenly due to differing norms among geographic areas. The Taliban have blamed a lack of female teachers and of facilities to segregate students by gender as reasons for the delay, but the decision may also signify a clerical shift towards a more conservative interpretation of sharia law, as well as the upholding of traditional rural Pashtun cultural norms.<sup>10</sup>

Some senior Taliban representatives have argued there is no religious justification for keeping girls out of secondary school, but the views of a small group of ultra-conservative religious clerics have largely influenced the position of Supreme Leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada.<sup>11</sup> In remarks on July 1, Akhundzada affirmed the importance that sharia law will hold in governance, while also stating the need for unity.<sup>12</sup> Despite intra-Taliban differences and some Taliban representatives calling for girls’ access to education, spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid publicly stated, “there is no division whatsoever within the Emirate.”<sup>13</sup>

Days after the Ministry of Education announcement in March, women and girls protested in Kabul, demanding their right to education.<sup>14</sup> The Taliban abducted and held protest leaders, but later released them.<sup>15</sup> Alongside protests calling for a response from the international community, the UN Security Council issued a statement affirming the right to education for all Afghans. UN Secretary-General António Guterres called the Taliban decision not to open girls’ schools a “profound disappointment,” and urged the Taliban to reopen them immediately.<sup>16</sup>

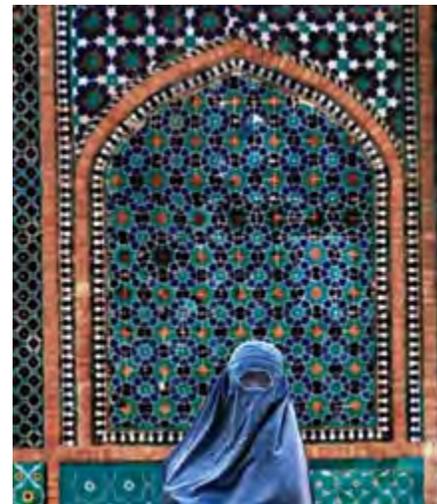
When the decision to ban girls from school was not reversed in March, the U.S. cancelled talks with Taliban representatives in Qatar regarding \$7 billion in Afghan central bank assets currently held in the United States.<sup>17</sup> A few days later, U.S. Senators Jeanne Shaheen and Susan Collins were

# TALIBAN REPRESSION OF WOMEN

lead signatories to a bipartisan letter to President Biden urging him to take action against the Taliban in response to the school closures, noting “the United States must lead the international community in supporting these women in their continued struggle for human rights and basic freedoms.”<sup>18</sup> The Senators suggested reinstating travel bans under the UN Security Council sanctions regime, working with U.S. allies to maintain focus on the needs of Afghan women and girls, and engaging with Afghan women as partners to address the needs of all Afghans.<sup>19</sup>

Following the lead of the U.S. and broader international community, the World Bank froze \$600 million in funds designated for education, health, and agriculture projects in Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the Taliban have imposed increasingly regressive policies limiting the freedoms and rights of women in society.

As this report went to press, the Taliban have not signaled whether or when girls’ secondary schools may reopen. On June 30, approximately 4,500 Taliban religious clerics and tribal leaders convened for a consultative meeting, the first since the August 2021 takeover, to discuss issues of national unity.<sup>21</sup> Taliban leadership did not allow women to participate directly, announcing instead that women’s interests would be represented through male delegates.<sup>22</sup> While a few participants voiced interest in reopening girls’ secondary schools, the issue of women’s rights to education and plans regarding girls’ schools were not explicitly discussed or addressed in the meeting’s 11-point resolution.<sup>23</sup> However, Taliban spokesman Bilal Karimi stated, “The Islamic Emirate respects the wishes and views of the Islamic clerics,” but added, “The Islamic Emirate will take serious steps in this regard.”<sup>24</sup> Karimi’s remarks suggest the issue of education will be viewed through the conservative religious lens favored by Haibatullah Akhundzada.



**A woman wearing** a common blue burqa.  
(UNAMA News photo)

## WOMEN MANDATED TO COVER

Following the March decision to close girls’ secondary schools, the Taliban’s Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice decreed on May 7 that women must cover themselves completely when in public.<sup>25</sup> The decree said that while women were not specifically mandated to wear the Afghan all-covering burqa if they were required to go outside, the burqa was preferable to a loose-fitting hijab or covering.<sup>26</sup> The decree went on to say the “best” hijab is not to leave the house at all.<sup>27</sup> It further stipulated that the male relatives of women who failed to cover their faces in public would be subject to punishments including jail time or dismissal from government jobs.<sup>28</sup>

UNAMA expressed concern at this directive, warning that Taliban engagement with the international community would likely be further strained.<sup>29</sup> On May 12, a statement from the Group of Seven (G7) nations condemned the Taliban’s restrictive policies on women and girls, and

# TALIBAN REPRESSION OF WOMEN

declared full support for equal rights in line with international law.<sup>30</sup> While no punitive measures were enacted, the statement noted that the Taliban's actions further isolate Afghanistan from the international community.<sup>31</sup>

The UN Security Council met with Special Representative to Afghanistan Deborah Lyons to discuss the decree.<sup>32</sup> But before the Security Council published its response on May 24, the Taliban issued a new mandate on May 19 requiring women in media to cover their faces while broadcasting.<sup>33</sup> Women media members initially defied the amended decree and appeared on May 21 without face coverings.<sup>34</sup>

Following Taliban warnings that they would lose their jobs for noncompliance, the women presenters covered their faces on-air the next day. Male employees of Kabul-based TOLONews also covered their faces in solidarity with their female colleagues. The news station said it would follow Taliban mandates, but contended that virtual representations of women should not fall under the hijab decree.<sup>35</sup> The Information and Culture Ministry, however, said the decree is “final and non-negotiable.”<sup>36</sup>

## WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS RESTRICTED

In conjunction with the mandate to cover, the Taliban are limiting women's freedom of movement. In March, the group banned women from air and long-distance travel without the accompaniment of a male guardian (known as a *mahram*).<sup>37</sup> Unable to board a plane, cross borders, or travel more than 48 miles from home without a male chaperone, women are now more likely to adhere to the Taliban admonition that they remain in their houses.<sup>38</sup> Further media reports indicate women face harassment for using public transit without a male chaperone.<sup>39</sup> Human Rights Watch has noted that these restrictions also hinder women seeking necessary health care, limit a woman's ability to flee an abuser, and lower the number of employable adults in a household.<sup>40</sup>

## IMPACTS ON WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT AND HEALTH

The Taliban have redefined the types of employment deemed appropriate for women according to their interpretation of Islamic law, constraining the already small female labor force in Afghanistan.<sup>41</sup> Women's participation in the workforce had slowly increased from 14% of the working-age population in 1998 to 22% by 2019.<sup>42</sup> Even under the previous Afghan governments, a dearth of health-care workers and female teachers remained a significant barrier to achieving development goals.<sup>43</sup> With access to education limited and with women pressured to stay home, it is unlikely these metrics will improve under the Taliban. According to a January 2022 report by the UK's International Labour Organization, female employment losses were expected to increase by 21% by mid-2022.<sup>44</sup>

# TALIBAN REPRESSION OF WOMEN



**31 new midwives** graduate from the UN-sponsored Community Midwifery Education Program in Kandahar after 24 months of training. (UNFPA Afghanistan photo)

The Taliban have recognized the urgent need for more women to be trained in midwifery given the country's high maternal-mortality rate, and have asked the international community to continue assistance to the health sector to increase training and employment opportunities for women.<sup>45</sup> However, a significant portion of international aid has been suspended due to the de facto government's ban on female secondary education and other violations of women's rights.<sup>46</sup>

Without an influx of donor assistance, Afghanistan's health system is collapsing. In January 2022, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned, "Unless urgent action is taken, the country faces an imminent humanitarian catastrophe."<sup>47</sup> Medical staff have not been receiving salaries, and medical supplies and equipment are insufficient.<sup>48</sup> While some UN emergency aid has resumed to clinics and health care centers around the country, the sector still faces inconsistencies in quality of care and availability of health services.<sup>49</sup>

The human cost of limiting women's education and employment opportunities became increasingly apparent following a deadly earthquake in eastern Afghanistan on June 22, 2022. Local media reporting suggests women affected by the quake were unable to receive medical care due to an insufficient number of female physicians.<sup>50</sup> Save the Children expressed concern for 118,000 children who likely needed medical care following the earthquake.<sup>51</sup>

Although the Taliban recognize the urgent need for female health-care providers, especially in rural areas, the international community remains reluctant to commit to the long-term funding necessary to restructure Afghanistan's health-care sector without the guarantee of certain rights for women and girls. At a June 23 UN Security Council meeting, Deputy Special

"Unless urgent action is taken, the country faces an imminent humanitarian catastrophe."

*WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus*

Source: NPR, "No pay for staff. No patient supplies. No heat. This is health care in Afghanistan," 12/21/2021.

# TALIBAN REPRESSION OF WOMEN



**The Empowerment Center for Women** in Kabul provides skills to returnee and internally displaced women. (UNAMA News photo)

Representative of the Secretary-General, Ramiz Alakbarov noted, “women are collectively being written out of society in a way that is unique in the world.”<sup>52</sup> Martin Griffiths, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, also acknowledged the high level of human suffering in Afghanistan and the deep need for additional humanitarian aid.<sup>53</sup> U.S. representative Trina Saha said in her remarks to the UN that the international community’s normalization of relations with the Taliban remains conditional on women’s inclusion in society.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to a lack of health-care workers and teachers, a Reporters Without Borders investigation found that fewer than 100 women journalists are still employed in privately owned radio and TV stations in Kabul, compared to about 700 prior to the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021.<sup>55</sup> According to the reporters’ organization, virtually all women journalists outside of Kabul have stopped working due to the attrition of independent media outlets under the Taliban.<sup>56</sup> Female workers in agriculture and manufacturing have faced similar barriers to employment, as Taliban restrictions have kept women at home even as the economic crisis has reduced demand for carpets, embroidery, and other goods that can be made at home.<sup>57</sup>

With women and girls largely excluded from employment opportunities and access to education, local media report more forced marriages, including the marriage of underage girls.<sup>58</sup> UNAMA’s June human-rights report noted several instances of women and girls being beaten and jailed by Taliban authorities for resisting forced marriage, despite a December decree allowing women the right to refuse marriage.<sup>59</sup> UNAMA said domestic violence victims face a similar lack of legal protection, as the Taliban

have not processed any charges of rape, assault and battery, forced marriage, or child marriage through a formal court system.<sup>60</sup>

## CONDITIONS UNDER TALIBAN RULE 1996–2001

The recent spate of mandates directed at women evokes the even more repressive measures women faced in 1990s Afghanistan. During the Taliban's 1996–2001 rule, women were not allowed to attend primary or secondary school, leave the house at all without a male guardian, hold jobs, or enter public spaces without the covering of a burqa.<sup>61</sup>

Some Afghan women had previously dressed in a burqa while outside the home, but use of the garment was not broadly enforced by the government until Taliban rule.<sup>62</sup> Once burqa wearing was enforced, women and their families faced fines, threats, and physical violence for noncompliance.<sup>63</sup> In addition, women's access to health care was limited as the Taliban confined them to their homes, one factor contributing to the second-highest maternal mortality rate in the world at the time.<sup>64</sup> Women's health care was further hindered by a lack of female physicians and strict rules delineating conduct between male physicians and female patients.<sup>65</sup> A 1998 report by Physicians for Human Rights analyzing the Taliban's impact on women's health found that 71% of Afghan women surveyed reported a decline in their health in two years of Taliban rule, 77% reported poor access to health services, and an additional 20% reported no access to health services.<sup>66</sup> The overall findings of the study suggest women suffered high levels of poor health and an overall decline in physical condition under Taliban rule.<sup>67</sup>

## U.S. INTERVENTION AND RECONSTRUCTION

Following the Taliban's fall to U.S., Coalition, and anti-Taliban Afghan forces in 2001, the United States made advancing the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan a reconstruction priority. Between 2003 and 2010, Congress appropriated \$627 million for gender-focused programming.<sup>68</sup> In 2011, the Obama Administration adopted a National Action Plan that expressed support for UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security, and included a commitment to advance Afghan women's inclusion in peace-building, and increase women's participation in governance.<sup>69</sup>

SIGAR found that USAID, State, and DOD disbursed \$787.4 million to programs focused on women and girls from 2002 to 2020.<sup>70</sup> The actual figure is likely much higher, as many programs had gender-related components not reflected in this composite figure.<sup>71</sup>

Thanks in part to the U.S. intervention, women's health care, education, and job opportunities improved between 2002 and 2021, as maternal mortality rates decreased, the number of girls attending school increased, and women's economic participation steadily improved between 2007 and

2017.<sup>72</sup> However, significant barriers remained due to uneven urban and rural access to resources, low numbers of female health-care providers and female teachers, and the risk of retaliation against women participating in traditionally male-dominated fields.<sup>73</sup>

The U.S. strategy on women and girls in Afghanistan throughout reconstruction has been criticized by some rights advocates for its inconsistent implementation and failure to hold the former Afghan government accountable for policies that negatively impacted women.<sup>74</sup> U.S. efforts to promote women's rights were also hampered by ingrained traditional social norms and political and economic divides between urban centers and rural areas.<sup>75</sup> In addition, women generally faced a hostile environment, regardless of donor-funded gender development programming, because of the ongoing Taliban insurgency.<sup>76</sup> While the opportunities available to Afghan women slowly increased under the Islamic Republic as compared to the preceding years of Taliban rule, women's rights and gender-mainstreaming efforts in Afghanistan failed to achieve the structural change the U.S. and international partners had envisioned.

## LOOKING FORWARD

The rights, roles, and responsibilities of women have been a subject of political debate in Afghanistan for the past century. The shifting policies of successive Afghan governments have been shaped by urban/rural divides, differing ethnic and tribal identities, and varying degrees and strains of religiosity.<sup>77</sup> The result has traditionally been a push and pull between patriarchal tribal traditions, various interpretations of Islam, and social development efforts.<sup>78</sup> But, the Taliban have stood out in this history for the vehemence of their determination to limit women's access to education, freedom of movement, and employment opportunities.<sup>79</sup>

As the Taliban continue to formulate and impose policies that negatively impact the wellbeing of women and girls in Afghanistan, the international community will confront the efficacy of their current engagement strategy of applying political pressure and withholding certain funds. In June 2022, UN Special Representative to Afghanistan Deborah Lyons left her post in Kabul after two years with a plea to the international community: "I leave convinced that the best hope lies in an engagement strategy that demonstrates to the de facto authorities that a system that excludes women, minorities, and talented people will not endure."<sup>80</sup>

Sadly, neither increasing international isolation, nor worsening economic and health crises, nor the growing desperation of ordinary Afghans seem to have deterred the Taliban from reinstating many of their repressive policies of the 1990s.

# TALIBAN REPRESSION OF WOMEN

## ESSAY ENDNOTES

- 1 State Department, "Joint Statement on the Situation of Women and Girls in Afghanistan," 8/18/2021. <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-situation-of-women-and-girls-in-afghanistan/>
- 2 Zabihullah Mujahid, "First Official Taliban Press Conference," 8/17/2021, transcript in Al Jazeera, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/transcript-of-talibans-first-press-conference-in-kabul>
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“As the U.S. government continues adding to the billions of dollars that it has already spent on the Afghan government and people since 2002, U.S. taxpayers deserve objective information concerning where their money is going and to whom it is being given.”

— *Inspector General John F. Sopko, SIGAR*