



Prepared Remarks of
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***“Support for Gender Equality:
Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan”***

Brookings Institution
Washington, D.C.
February 17, 2021

Thank you for that kind introduction. I want to thank General Allen and Dr. Felbab-Brown, for inviting me to discuss SIGAR’s ninth lessons learned report, perhaps our most important to date.

The report, *Support for Gender Equality: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, is the first comprehensive, independent government analysis of U.S. efforts to support gender equality in Afghanistan. It examines U.S. efforts since 2002 to improve the lives and advance the rights of Afghan women and girls. We release it as the new Administration faces a critical issue – how the United States can continue to support Afghan women and girls at a time of great uncertainty about their nation’s future.

This key question is vitally important in the context of peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban, and the answer may determine whether the successes and investment in improving the lives of Afghan women and girls will be remembered as a lasting legacy or historical footnote.

SIGAR’s Lessons Learned Program and Report Background

I am very proud of this report and of SIGAR’s lessons learned program that produced it. As many of you know, it was General Allen, among others, who suggested to me that SIGAR initiate a lessons learned program, knowing that SIGAR was the only independent agency with the statutory authority to look at the whole-of-government effort in Afghanistan as well as the initiative and personnel on the ground to undertake such a task. And, as Embassy Kabul and the U.S. military presence has downsized over the last year, I am pleased to note that SIGAR is the only Office of Inspector General still in Afghanistan with the personnel to continue this task.

We undertook this project because advancing the status and rights of women and girls has been an important goal of the U.S. reconstruction effort since 2002. While it was not the reason the United States and its coalition partners went to war, promoting women's rights in Afghanistan became a rallying cry for the continuation of both civilian and military programs.

One need only watch recent Senate confirmation hearings for Secretary of State Blinken and Secretary of Defense Austin, where nearly every question asked about Afghanistan emphasized the need to protect the rights of Afghan women and girls, to realize the importance of this issue to U.S. policymakers.

Beyond looking at U.S. programs and interviewing over three dozen current and former U.S. and Afghan government officials and outside experts, we felt it necessary that this report highlight the voices of Afghans themselves — especially Afghans who live outside Kabul. Accordingly, SIGAR commissioned field interviews with 65 Afghans — both female and male — from 14 provinces. They represent a wide range of Afghan society and viewpoints — from parliamentarians to internally displaced persons. Their participation makes this report truly unique. The experiences they shared with us are particularly important as the story of women in Afghanistan is more complex than the simplistic portrait often painted of either mini-skirt wearing women in 1970's-era Kabul or passive victims forced to wear *burqas* and subjugated to the will of Islamic fundamentalists.

As we note in the report, such one-dimensional narratives can undermine even the most well intentioned efforts to ensure women and girls are afforded basic human rights. A task whose difficulty is best summed up with the realization that there are no words in Dari or Pashto for “gender” or “gender equality.”

U.S. Efforts to Support Afghan Women and Girls

The U.S. investment to support the rights of Afghan women and girls has been significant. SIGAR's analysis found that the U.S. government has disbursed at least \$787 million for activities primarily intended to support Afghan women and girls and almost certainly more, as roughly 100 additional U.S. programs included a gender component.

However, we found that those efforts yielded mixed results. Considerable investment across a range of sectors contributed to indisputable gains — especially in education and maternal healthcare. SIGAR found that there is broad demand within the Afghan population for these services, and U.S. agencies have responded with well-designed and effective programs.

Yet, SIGAR's examination of 24 U.S. gender-related programs also revealed serious shortcomings. Some programs were designed based on assumptions that proved to be ill suited to the Afghan context. We also found that establishing a correlation between program activities and related outcomes was not always possible, and insufficient monitoring and evaluation of program activities often made it impossible to assess program impact — a problem that SIGAR has regularly identified across the reconstruction effort as a whole.

Additionally, a frequent critique of aid programs in Afghanistan has been the failure to take local context, including cultural norms, into consideration. Moreover, while high-level political attention on gender issues in Afghanistan translated into significant funding for these efforts, the level of political attention may have led to reduced scrutiny of some programs.

Despite this, the importance of U.S. backing for Afghan women's rights should not be underestimated. Afghan women point to the vocal support by the United States and other international actors as a key factor in advancing their rights and participation in the public sphere.

But we cannot be naive about the challenges that women and girls in Afghanistan continue to face. Make no mistake — though they have greater access to health care and education, and work as legislators, judges, teachers, health workers, civil servants, journalists, and business and civil society leaders — Afghanistan still remains one of the most challenging places in the world to be a woman.

Moving Forward

These challenges notwithstanding, the question facing U.S. policymakers is how to protect the gains that have been made. As our report notes, the effort to promote women's rights in Afghanistan may be hampered by a narrative that the country can either have women's rights at the cost of peace, or peace at the cost of women's rights.

I do not believe gender equality is a zero-sum game. The U.S. can continue to play a role in shaping an outcome that preserves gains made by Afghan women and girls by advocating that Afghan women have a meaningful role in the Afghanistan peace negotiations and that any future agreement includes protections for them.

Clearly, U.S. policymakers should consider conditioning U.S. assistance to any future Afghan government on that government's demonstrated commitment to the protection of the rights of women and girls. Likewise, the U.S. government should also consider encouraging other international donors to impose similar conditionality on future assistance.

These actions deserve consideration in order to protect the investment the United States has made in the Afghan women who now serve their country as educators, politicians, entrepreneurs, and health workers. These women, in turn, have hopes that their own daughters will have opportunities that they could never have imagined two decades ago.

The U.S. investment in the women of Afghanistan is an investment in Afghanistan's future. We must not forget the bitter lesson we learned following our previous withdrawal from Afghanistan. Cutting off those whom you have previously encouraged to rise up can lead to tragedy not only for them, but for our nation as well.

In closing, I want to express my deep appreciation to the SIGAR team who produced this report, Kate Bateman, Samantha Hay, Mariam Jalalzada, Sarah Rababy, Matthew Rubin, Hayley Rose, Nikolai Condee-Padunov, Tracy Content, Vong Lim, Jason Davis, and lessons learned program director, Joseph Windrem.

Thank you.