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Women and Girls in the Afghanistan Transition

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Introduction

The significant gains that Afghan women and girls have made since the 2001 U.S.-led military invasion and overthrow of the Taliban are endangered. Presidential elections and possible peace efforts with the Taliban raise uncertainties about whether the future leadership in Afghanistan will protect gender equality. Further, President Barack Obama's plan to completely draw down U.S. troops in the country by the end of 2016 risks withdrawing critical security protection, which has provided Afghan women and girls with increased safety and opportunities to participate in education, employment, the health system, politics, and civil society. With these political and security transitions underway, the United States should act now, in coordination with Afghanistan and its partners, to cement and extend the gains and prevent reversal.

The government of Afghanistan's accountability to all citizens and respect for its constitutional and international commitments, including gender equality, are crucial to overcoming the systemic gender discrimination that thrived under the Taliban's rule. Improving the status of Afghan women and girls is also important for the nation's political development and stabilization. Investing in girls' education and women's economic opportunities has a multiplier effect; it enhances development outcomes, including the health and education of children and the economic status of families and communities.¹ Strengthening the status of women also correlates with reduced rates of conflict and violence.² The relationship between gender equality and security creates a virtuous circle: greater security is critical for women and girls to participate on equal footing in public life; greater equality for women and girls correlates to a more secure and economically viable environment for the community as a whole. Promoting gender equality is, therefore, not only a significant human rights issue, but also an economic and security matter.

Backsliding on gender equality in Afghanistan would undermine the security, stability, and development of a country in which both the U.S. and Afghan governments have made significant investments. Americans and Afghans have sacrificed their lives in the fight to rid Afghanistan of the threats posed by terrorism and extremism. Given the link between security and gender equality, protecting and extending the strides that women and girls have made in Afghanistan are vital to its future prosperity and stability. Indeed, Afghans themselves overwhelmingly support greater opportunities for women and girls.³ Even as the U.S. government reduces its direct role in the country—and accordingly adjusts its leverage—it should support Afghan women and girls.

The U.S. government across party lines has addressed the rights of Afghan women as an important foreign policy objective. In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks, the State Department, then under President George W. Bush, issued a report documenting “The Taliban's War Against Women” as part of its campaign to gain support for the Taliban's ouster.⁴ Today, in the Obama administration, Secretary of State John Kerry has said that “investing in Afghan women is the surest way to guarantee that Afghanistan will sustain the gains of the last decade and never again become a safe haven for international terrorists.”⁵ This bipartisan consensus over the U.S. interests at stake in Afghanistan should form a solid foundation for continued U.S. commitment to safeguard

and build on the gains of Afghan women and girls even after the scheduled end of active U.S. combat operations in December 2014.

In light of these interests, to promote gender equality in Afghanistan, the United States should more effectively institutionalize and coordinate policy to support Afghan women and girls in U.S. diplomacy, defense, and development aid—particularly to improve women’s security and leadership. This is necessary to ensure that the advancement of gender equality is mainstreamed throughout U.S. policy toward Afghanistan; considered in discussions on the U.S. troop drawdown; and better leveraged across a range of actors, both internationally and within Afghanistan.

Historic Progress and Remaining Gaps

In 1996, when the Taliban rose to power in Afghanistan, it shuttered girls' schools and segregated many aspects of public life, including the workplace.⁶ During the five years prior to the 2001 U.S.-led military invasion, women were prevented from leaving their homes unless accompanied by a male relative escort.⁷ Following the Taliban's ouster, Afghan women pushed diligently to expand their rights. They are now an essential part of the post-Taliban order and have played a significant role in reconstructing the state and its institutions.

Since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, Afghanistan has experienced significant improvements in women's rights. Various gender restrictions on access to education, work, and health care have been lifted. Several million girls enrolled in school for the first time, and women returned to the public sphere, with many entering the workforce.⁸ Moreover, many women have assumed government posts and run for office. President Hamid Karzai made some efforts to support women's political participation, including the appointment of Dr. Habiba Sarabi as governor of Bamyan province in 2005, making her the first female provincial governor.⁹

Over the past decade, new laws were passed to further the protection of women's rights. The constitution adopted in 2004 states that all laws should be compatible with Islamic law, but also guarantees equal rights for women.¹⁰ Afghanistan joined the main international treaty to protect women's rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Moreover, shelters were established to assist women fleeing domestic violence. The adoption of the Law on the Elimination of Violence against Women in 2009 by presidential decree was another milestone, creating and strengthening protections against a broad range of abuses, including rape, forced and underage marriage, and denial of inheritance.¹¹

Although Afghanistan has experienced impressive gains in women's rights since 2001, these gains could easily erode, particularly if international aid assistance significantly diminishes and if the security situation deteriorates along with a reduced U.S. footprint. Even the advances that have been achieved thus far has come at great cost. Many women and girls who have stepped into the workforce, educational institutions, public office, and other aspects of public life are targeted with threats, harassment, physical attacks, and murder.¹² Additionally, Afghan women still face some of the worst literacy, poverty, maternal mortality, and life expectancy rates in the world. Significant gaps remain in achieving gender equality in Afghanistan in terms of the rule of law, education, health, political participation, security, and economic opportunity.

RULE OF LAW

As a formal matter, greater rights and equality for women and girls are reflected in Afghanistan's constitution as well as in laws, legislative gender quotas, and institutions established to address gender equality and gender-based violence. The 2001 Bonn Agreement, which was the first formal document establishing an Afghan government after the U.S. invasion, contained provisions guaranteeing

the participation of women in rebuilding institutions and the government of Afghanistan, including in the constitutional Loya Jirga. The constitution guarantees equal rights for all citizens, specifically referencing both men and women. It also called for the establishment of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission to monitor and protect rights. Other institutions that address gender equality include a Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) and a National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan.¹³ Further, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), provides human rights (including women's rights) monitoring, which assists Afghanistan with the promotion of rule of law.

Progress in securing women's legal rights since 2001 has been dramatic on paper, but implementation of gender equality has been uneven in practice. Although the number of female judges and lawyers has grown, there are no women represented on the nine-member Supreme Court, which has become increasingly stacked with conservatives. Women are also significantly underrepresented in the Afghan National Police (estimated at just over 1 percent) and the Afghan National Army (estimated at less than 0.5 percent).¹⁴ Besides rarely being put in positions of authority, women police officers are also harassed and sexually assaulted by male colleagues.

There have also been concerted efforts by conservative forces to roll back certain legal rights for women in areas ranging from political participation to gender-based violence. In one particularly egregious case, conservative Shia leaders sought to revise the Shia Personal Status law, which would have required that Shia women obtain their husbands' permission to leave home, forced them to surrender to their husbands' demands for sex, and dissuaded them from working outside their homes.¹⁵ Women's rights groups and donor governments convinced President Karzai to allow a modification to at least limit this rollback. Though pressure from conservative Shia leaders largely led to retention of these objectionable provisions, women's rights supporters were at least able to force a review of the law and raise the minimum marriage age for girls from nine years (which was the original proposal) to sixteen years of age (though not to eighteen years of age, which was their goal). Women's rights supporters were also able to improve aspects of the proposed law related to women's custody rights and the requirement that women obtain permission from their husbands before leaving the house. Though women's rights advocates were not able to remove the articles related to these issues altogether, by securing some changes, they were able to demonstrate that women's advocates were a force to be reckoned with in post-Taliban Afghanistan.¹⁶

Even so, efforts to reverse women's gains demonstrate the precarious nature of their rights in Afghanistan. Besides electing more women lawmakers, as well as male politicians willing to advance women's rights, training of women lawyers and judges will continue to be critical, as will recruitment and retention of women police officers.

EDUCATION

When the United States intervened in 2001, there were approximately 900,000 boys enrolled in public school and virtually no girls. Currently, with over 10 million children now enrolled in school, nearly 40 percent—over 3 million—are girls. Approximately 165,000 Afghan girls are in secondary school. From 2002 to 2011, primary school enrolment rates alone increased for girls from less than 40 percent to more than 80 percent, while girls' secondary school enrolment rates rose from 5 percent to over 34 percent.¹⁷ Over the course of the past five years alone, nearly 120,000 young women graduated from high school.¹⁸ An estimated 40,000 are currently enrolled in universities or technical

and vocational training institutes.¹⁹ Additionally, female literacy increased to nearly 15 percent nationwide, including to 30 percent among women and girls ages fifteen to twenty-four, and to almost 40 percent among young urban women.²⁰ Moreover, the number of teachers has increased from 20,000 in 2002 to 175,000 today.²¹ Notably, there have been fundamental shifts in attitudes of Afghans toward women—today, more than 80 percent of Afghans believe that women should have an education, compared to less than 60 percent in 2006.²²

Despite these gains, serious gaps remain, particularly in terms of security. Insurgents have attacked girls' schools, students, and staff. Though education is far more accessible than it was under the Taliban, more than half of all Afghan girls still do not attend school. Trained teachers and health care workers prefer working in safe urban centers, leaving millions of women and girls illiterate and vulnerable due to limited access to education and health services, particularly in rural areas, but also in districts where there is instability.²³

Female enrollment is estimated to be below 20 percent in institutions of higher learning and universities.²⁴ Education levels also vary considerably by region. In some districts, the percent of eligible girls attending school is in the single digits and female literacy has barely budged. In many of these low-enrollment areas, the Taliban effectively controls education, and girls are either not allowed to attend school or do so only under certain conditions, including using a Taliban-vetted curriculum. If the Taliban is able to reassert control over larger parts of the country, its control over education will increase, further threatening girls' access to education.

HEALTH

With donor support, the Afghan government has increased access to basic health services, for example by constructing new hospitals. Additionally, there is greater awareness about the importance of basic health and sanitation. Between 2001 and 2013, maternal mortality fell from 1,600 to 327 deaths per 100,000 births, and infant mortality decreased from 257 to 77 deaths per 1,000 live births.²⁵

The training of women as midwives has also improved health outcomes, while increasing employment opportunities and the status of women in their communities. U.S. support for the training of midwives has thus laid a foundation for marked improvement.²⁶ One program was the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)-supported Community Midwife Education program, which focused on the training of thousands of women as midwives in rural communities, including in areas where the antigovernment insurgency was robust.²⁷ The Community Midwife Education program is no longer funded by USAID. However, USAID now works with the Ministry of Public Health and relevant associations, such as the Afghan Midwives Association, through the Health Policy Project, which continues to increase the number of midwives in the country, improving maternal and newborn/infant health, especially in rural areas, where the project also increases women's access to health more broadly.

Experts credit improvements in health to a higher average age of marriage, wider use of contraceptives, lower fertility, and greater access to maternal care and education.²⁸ However, many Afghan girls are still forced to marry immediately after puberty and give birth before their bodies have fully developed, which leads to pregnancy-related deaths.

Moreover, urban centers have benefitted more than rural areas. Though Afghanistan's maternal mortality rate has declined, it is still among the highest in the world.²⁹ Facing potential reductions in

financial assistance (which are likely to accompany the drawdown of U.S. troops), the Afghan government may not be able to sustain many of the infrastructure improvements that have been made. Already, roads are crumbling and hospitals are struggling to adequately stock supplies.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Within government, the role of women has increased significantly. Women hold 3 out of 25 cabinet seats and 120 judicial positions.³⁰ The constitution (Article 83) provides that at least 2 women per province shall be elected members of the lower house (68 of 250 members). Women must also comprise 16 percent of the upper house, with the president appointing one third of its membership, half of whom must be women.

In the 2014 presidential election, women played an unusually public role and were far more visible and vocal than in previous elections.³¹ Women's turnout for the first round of the presidential election, held in April 2014, was estimated at 36 percent. One leading candidate had a female running mate, and the wife of another candidate addressed campaign rallies, signifying major milestones for a country in which the involvement of women in politics has historically been limited.³² More female candidates than ever before—around three hundred—ran for provincial council seats.³³ Moreover, three women ran for vice president and each of the leading presidential contenders declared their intention to support causes important to women.³⁴

The role of women in the political arena is, however, still marginal and could be easily undermined or reversed. Conservatives have taken advantage of reduced international engagement. In a July 2013 election law, conservative members of parliament (MPs) were able to successfully roll back the political quota for women in provincial councils from a 25 percent requirement to a 20 percent requirement. This has led to concerns that the constitutionally mandated political quota for women in the national parliament is vulnerable to similar reduction or elimination, particularly if potential peace negotiations with the Taliban occur and lead to women's rights being bartered away.

Although quotas increased the number of elected women in provincial councils and in the national parliament, they have not necessarily led to greater political legitimacy or support for legislation advancing women. Male politicians grumble that women can win with fewer votes, and some male MPs treat their female counterparts disrespectfully. Female MPs have been targeted by insurgents. Some provinces were unable to field enough female candidates to fill the quota until it was reduced to a 20 percent requirement.³⁵ Additionally, a number of female MPs who benefit from the male-dominated patronage system have little incentive to promote women's issues through legislation because they are financially backed by men, rather than being motivated politically by gender equality concerns.

At the local level, one success story, which has bolstered the role of rural women in development and decision-making, is the World Bank–sponsored National Solidarity Program (NSP). The United States supports the NSP through the Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund, a multi-donor fund run by the World Bank. Administered through Afghanistan's Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, the NSP is designed to empower rural communities to create and manage their own development projects, and emphasizes the inclusion of women and other vulnerable groups.³⁶ Under this program, communities elect leaders and representatives to form community development councils (CDCs).

The CDCs receive block grants run by the ministry, but have strings attached—“[t]he council has to be transparent and accountable in its decision-making, and women have to be part of the process, both in terms of voting for and serving on the council.”³⁷ Sometimes, CDCs are mixed-sex. However, women have also created all-female CDCs, which allow them to develop their own programs. Through successfully managing the CDCs and administering programs, women are challenging gender norms and breaking down misconceptions about women’s capacity to lead. The ability of women to lead within these organizations helps local women exchange ideas and express themselves, building confidence. The NSP, which is currently in its third phase, is expected to run through September 2015.³⁸

SECURITY AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Security is an issue for all Afghans, but even more so for women, who face attacks even in peacetime, including prevalent incidents of rape and domestic violence. Interpretations of certain laws that condone marital rape, child marriage, and domestic abuse go unchallenged, despite the legal framework making such actions illegal.³⁹ Moreover, the belief that women are not meant to work, leave home alone, or act outside the ambit of their husbands is customary in rural areas.⁴⁰

Afghanistan has made significant legal progress to combat violence against women. In particular, the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law was passed by presidential decree in 2009. It criminalizes “customs, traditions and practices causing violence against women and which are against the Islamic Sharia,” and includes forced and underage marriage, denial of inheritance, and rape (for the first time under Afghan law) as offenses.

However, many of these policies have not been fully implemented or have been implemented inconsistently, and the EVAW law has not yet been adopted by the parliament, though it was introduced in 2013. In fact, rather than strengthening the EVAW law by codifying it into legislation, some parliamentarians have sought not only to weaken gender equality laws and protections for violence against women, but also—with conservative members strongly opposing the EVAW law—called it un-Islamic. In early 2014, women succeeded in persuading President Karzai to rebuff proposed changes in parliament to the Criminal Prosecution Code, which would have undermined the ability of women to prosecute domestic abuse cases by disqualifying relatives of the accused from testifying.⁴¹ However, there are still challenges involved in implementing and enforcing the EVAW law, including claims based on religion and culture as well as a lack of women police generally, and specifically in family response units, which deal with domestic violence and female and child victims of crime. Furthermore, women and girls can be charged for “moral” crimes, such as “running away”—even if fleeing an abusive home—or sex outside of marriage, regardless of whether the woman was raped or forced into prostitution.⁴²

Only a small handful of gender-based violence cases proceed to court, as claims are often decided by predominantly male local councils.⁴³ Therefore, instead of finding support from police, judicial institutions, and government officials, women who try to flee abusive situations often face indifference or criminal sanctions for committing moral crimes. These situations expose two sources of injustice in the Afghan legal system: the rigorous enforcement of ambiguously defined moral crimes and the tepid enforcement of the EVAW law.⁴⁴ The double injustice leads to an anomaly in which women fleeing domestic violence and forced marriages can end up imprisoned, while the men responsible for these abuses typically escape prosecution.⁴⁵

With regards to the role of women in peace and security operations, Afghanistan is developing a National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace, and Security, effectuating its commitment under UN Security Council Resolution 1325. Provincial consultations on a draft of the NAP and consultations with community service organizations in Kabul were recently conducted. Once Afghanistan's final NAP is in place, implementation will need to be developed and resourced.

With the drawdown of international forces, the most critical threat to Afghan women is security. Persistent insecurity and violence threaten women's participation in politics, education, and the economy. Since 2013, insurgent threats against women have increased, and insurgent threats and attacks have undermined rural women's access to education and basic health services, as female teachers and health workers are reluctant to work outside of secure urban areas.⁴⁶

THE ECONOMY, ENTREPRENEURSHIP, AND DEVELOPMENT

Creating greater opportunities for Afghan women in the economy would raise living standards for their families and communities, and lead to lower fertility rates, which would, in time, shrink the youth bulge correlated with greater upheaval and instability.⁴⁷ Although attitudes on women's economic participation "appear to be steadily evolving, with more segments of the population becoming amenable to and supportive of women's economic participation," women are still underrepresented in the army, police, business, and other traditionally male-dominated sectors; overrepresented in the informal economy; and need better access to credit, financial services, financial management skills, business education, technical support, and mentoring opportunities.⁴⁸

Currently, 81 percent of men ages fifteen to sixty-four participate in the labor force, while only 16 percent of women ages fifteen to sixty-four do so.⁴⁹ Women are more likely to be unpaid.⁵⁰ Additionally, the hours women have available for paid, formal employment are limited. With fertility rates remaining high (at 5.1 children per woman) and limited external childcare access, childrearing and household chores take up the bulk of the day for many Afghan women.⁵¹

Women's participation in the workforce is much higher in rural areas than in cities and towns, "due to the predominance of agriculture as the majority employment sector and the role women play in production processes and household farming strategies."⁵² In fact, "while 79 percent of the male urban workforce is employed, only 21 percent of the female workforce is employed."⁵³ In 2008, 78 percent of unpaid family workers were women, and women doing non-farm work were paid about half of a man's wages on average.⁵⁴

The provision of training, inputs, market access, and other resources for job and business creation for rural women has increased their families' incomes, their children's access to education and improved nutrition, and the women's standing in their families and communities. Even in conservative rural areas, where the antigovernment insurgency has been most active, the men support these activities. These community-based programs, which provide rural women with the skills and financial support needed to enhance their businesses' productivity and access to markets, strengthen the entire agricultural economy and the country's security and stability. Investing in rural women, thus, yields a high return.⁵⁵

Although more than 75 percent of the Afghan population lives in rural areas, most of the aid and many of the advances made by women and girls since 2001 have disproportionately benefitted women living in urban areas, who are generally wealthier, better educated, and live in more secure areas that were more accessible to U.S. and other foreign aid workers.⁵⁶ The literacy rate in rural areas is only one third that of the rate in urban areas, and rural women have less access to information about

laws and their rights. Promoting the status of women and girls in rural communities is critical, not only as a matter of principle, but also because Afghanistan is a largely agrarian society and the advancement of rural women and girls—who already play an important role in agriculture and supporting rural communities—will accelerate and strengthen Afghanistan’s development, security, and stability.

However, Afghan women in urban areas also face challenges. Though “access to paid and formal employment is likely higher in cities, where higher numbers of women work as teachers, health workers, and public servants,” these women are in the minority.⁵⁷ In formal employment, the public sector is considered more socially acceptable for women than the private sector, yet women comprise only around 21 percent of government employees.⁵⁸

In terms of the private enterprise, the main barriers to entry for women are “a lack of financial decision-making power, limited mobility, time-consuming household chores and [childrearing], limited access to market-related knowledge, and more limited personal networks than men.”⁵⁹ Moreover, because women lack mobility, it is harder for them to expand their network of contacts to potential business relationships and other professional contacts beyond their immediate family members.⁶⁰

In terms of financial decision-making and independence, many women lack sufficient autonomy to make financial decisions on their own, even with their own money.⁶¹ In fact, “only 3 percent of Afghan women have a bank account (compared to 9 percent of men)[, which] compares to an average of 26 percent of women in South Asia generally.”⁶² In terms of micro-credit access, Afghanistan currently has over 400,000 micro-finance clients, 38 percent of whom are women.⁶³ Expanding access to finance and financial literacy would help women “become more respected members of their households, interact with other women, share information with each other, and have more decision-making power,” which can enhance their children’s education and nutrition, “as women often invest more of their income in household needs than men.”⁶⁴

Closing these gaps will require greater access to financing for women, continued evolution in attitudes toward women’s participation in the economy, and increased security.⁶⁵ At the moment, however, women who work with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the United Nations, or aid programs are sometimes accused of working for “infidels,” making them even more vulnerable to attacks by militants.

WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND MEDIA

Women’s leadership and voice in every aspect of society will be critical as Afghanistan moves forward. Women’s leadership skills should be promoted across the board—including in the sectors discussed above—as well as in independent institutions and in the media. This creates space for civil society and leads to greater government accountability. Beyond independent watchdog institutions, such as the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, women’s leadership is particularly important in civil society organizations and the media, including social media.

Civil society organizations run by and for women in Afghanistan play a critical role in advocacy and service delivery, despite working in a challenging economic and security environment. The Afghan Women’s Network, for example, serves as a prominent umbrella organization—of 103 women and children’s groups—with a focus on advocacy and networking. With the drawdown of international troops—and donors increasingly choosing to channel their support through the government—many of these civil society groups will not survive without continued funding.

Within the media, the growing number of female journalists provides opportunities for women to shape public discourse, opinion, and policy. One quarter of all national media personnel in Afghanistan were women in late 2012.⁶⁶ Mainstream media is playing an important role in fomenting debate about the role of women and girls in society. Radio and television shows are subtly—and not so subtly—changing conservative attitudes about sensitive subjects such as domestic abuse, child marriage, and the role of women outside the home. However, being a female journalist can be dangerous work; in the past ten years, ten female journalists were killed.⁶⁷

Cell phone access also plays a vital role in increasing women's access to the public sphere and the economy. According to a 2013 USAID report on cell phone access and usage in Afghanistan, 80 percent of Afghan women surveyed had regular or occasional access to mobile phones, 49 percent living in cities and 44 percent living in rural areas owned mobile phones, and 25 percent of women who owned a cell phone used it to access commercial and social services (including health and education). Notably, 86 percent of those who owned a phone, and 82 percent with shared access, believed “connectivity enhances Afghan women's lives, making them feel safer, better equipped to cope with emergencies, more independent, and better able to access the family members and friends who comprise their support networks.”⁶⁸

Unfortunately, 53 percent of those surveyed who did not own a mobile phone cite lack of permission from family members as a major obstacle, and 49 percent said the associated costs are prohibitive. In many cases, not owning a mobile phone is not an active choice—88 percent without access said that if cultural and cost barriers were lowered, they would acquire one.⁶⁹

To support women's leadership and voice more broadly in Afghanistan, USAID is launching a new Promoting Gender Equality in National Priority Programs (known as PROMOTE) partnership. PROMOTE was launched in July 2013 to “provide skills, training, leadership support, and networking opportunities to ensure that women rise to decision-making roles,” not just in the public sector, but also in the private sector and civil society.⁷⁰ This program is structured as a partnership with other international donors and seeks matching funds from them. PROMOTE will run for five years and specifically targets women ages eighteen to thirty who have at least a secondary education, and aims to build upon existing opportunities and institutions to increase the role of women in Afghanistan's development.

PROMOTE largely targets urban women in five regional areas, including Kabul (both inside and outside the capital), Khandahar, Herat, Jalalabad, and Mazar-i-Sharif. The development hypothesis behind PROMOTE is that although Afghan women and girls have experienced gains in education, health, and standard of living, these gains could be lost unless a significant cohort of women is able to take the next step by becoming leaders and decision-makers in the government, the private sector, and civil society. PROMOTE is thus divided into four components: women in the economy, women's rights groups and coalitions, women in government, and women's leadership and development.⁷¹ “It is essential that beneficiaries of this program become effective advocates for Afghan women on a range of vital issues such as gender based violence; women, peace and security; child marriage; and trafficking in persons.”⁷²

Participants in PROMOTE are expected to work toward and advocate for rights and opportunities for all women, particularly the rural and urban poor, rather than simply take advantage of the personal opportunities provided by PROMOTE for themselves. More vulnerable women—such as those who have not completed primary education, but could seek nontraditional employment options—are a secondary target group.

Policy Recommendations

The United States should more effectively harness and entrench policies and resources that support the advancement of women and girls in Afghanistan in order to secure and extend the gains attained through U.S. intervention. This effort can best be accomplished by undertaking the following structural and substantive steps:

- A National Security Council (NSC)–led interagency group should be tasked with White House–level coordination of U.S. policy on Afghan women and girls across agencies through at least the December 2016 conclusion of the U.S. military presence, which will continue in an advisory role following the end of active U.S. combat operations in December 2014.
- The special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) should co-chair the interagency Afghan Gender Task Force with the ambassador-at-large for global women’s issues (GWI) to formulate proposals and implement the broad policy goals agreed on through the NSC process; to institutionalize the U.S. commitment on Afghan women beyond the State Department’s Office of Global Women’s Issues; and to entrench these issues among career staff beyond the U.S. military presence.
- Both structures should prioritize two goals: improve security and inclusion of Afghan women in peace efforts and target development assistance to support rights, decision-making, and sustainable development outcomes for Afghan women and girls.

DESIGNATE NSC COORDINATORS

The U.S. national security adviser should designate the NSC senior directors responsible for Afghanistan and for human rights to manage U.S. interests in and support for Afghan women and girls amid the ongoing transition. These officials should ensure that coordination of U.S. policy on Afghan women and girls from across the government informs and is informed by the White House posture during this period of transition through the end of the U.S. military presence, scheduled to continue through the close of 2016. The NSC’s Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights Directorate already oversees women’s human rights issues and has a director for human rights and gender matters. It is not uncommon for a functional directorate such as this to co-convene meetings with regional directorates, when such coordination is helpful. The goal of establishing an NSC-led cooperative coordination arrangement would be to mobilize higher-level attention and greater leverage over U.S. policy toward Afghan women and girls than is typically possible when coordination among agencies is sought by one of the agencies themselves.

Moreover, such an arrangement would not require additional staffing and resources, instead build on existing arrangements and structures. An NSC-led interagency process already coordinates im-

plementation of the U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security, which executes the goals of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 to strengthen conflict resolution and peace processes through the inclusion of women.⁷³

NSC-led coordination on Afghan women and girls should include staff from the State Department's Office of the Ambassador-at-Large for GWI, SRAP Office, and International Organizations Affairs Bureau; USAID's senior coordinator for gender equality and women's empowerment and Office of Afghanistan and Pakistan Affairs; and other relevant offices across agencies, including at the Defense Department.⁷⁴

TASK SRAP AND THE AMBASSADOR-AT-LARGE FOR GWI TO CO-CHAIR THE AFGHAN GENDER TASK FORCE

The State Department–led Afghan Gender Task Force, currently chaired by the ambassador-at-large for GWI and chief of mission for the U.S. embassy in Kabul, has been an important, successful model of interagency cooperation, with input from—among other agencies—the Defense Department and USAID (with representatives based in both Washington and Kabul). It has prepared proposals for U.S. policy positions leading to the 2012 Tokyo Framework and the 2014 Afghan presidential elections.

The Afghan Gender Task Force should add SRAP (or other high-level official overseeing the State Department's Afghanistan work, in the event SRAP is dissolved as part of the U.S. military drawdown there) as a co-chair to better institutionalize gender equality in U.S. policy on Afghanistan, particularly with the accelerated timetable for a reduced U.S. footprint in the country. The task force should continue to work closely with the U.S. embassy in Kabul, including the embassy's own interagency gender working group, and should formulate proposals, implement broad policy goals, and channel ideas and information between the field and the White House, as needed, across various sectors. Unlike the NSC, which is inherently crisis-driven and often operates under short time horizons, the State Department–led task force should look over the horizon to identify ways to institutionalize the U.S. commitment to these issues among career staff beyond American military operations. The U.S. government's bilateral approach and institutional architecture to coordinate Afghanistan policy will evolve as the drawdown continues; however, the United States should maintain a focus on integrating gender into country-specific and regional work.

Both the NSC- and State Department–led structures should prioritize two substantive policy goals: improve gender-inclusive peace and security efforts, and target development assistance to support rights, decision-making, and sustainable development outcomes for Afghan women and girls, both for those at the leadership level as well as the more vulnerable.

IMPROVE SECURITY AND INCLUSION OF AFGHAN WOMEN IN PEACE EFFORTS

Finalize and implement the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA). The United States should prioritize working with a new Afghan president, as soon as he takes office, to reach agreement on the BSA. Though President Karzai refused to sign the BSA he negotiated with President Obama, the leading candidates in Afghanistan's presidential election said they would sign it, which would allow American forces to remain there past 2014 and is essential for security in the country. Given the im-

can forces to remain there past 2014 and is essential for security in the country. Given the importance of security for women and girls to have mobility to work, seek education, vote and run for office, and generally participate in public life, finalizing and implementing the BSA is essential.

Increase funding to bolster integration of women into the Afghan National Security Forces. U.S. military assistance that is earmarked to support the integration of Afghan women into the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) should be doubled from \$25 million to at least \$50 million. The 2014 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA)—signed by President Obama in December 2013—requires that no less than \$25 million of the Defense Department’s fiscal year 2014 Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF) should be used for “programs and activities to support the recruitment, retention, integration, training, and treatment of women in the Afghan National Security Forces.”⁷⁵ Though the \$25 million floor set for funding to support the integration of Afghan women into the ANSF is a good start, this represents less than 1 percent of the total ASFF (which totals \$5.8 billion for fiscal year 2014).

Increasing the role of women in the ANSF will become increasingly important as the United States withdraws its own troops. It will not only improve security for Afghan women, but also achieve broader stabilization and development goals for the country, given the link between empowering women and these broader objectives. In fact, around 13,000 women were trained to support the recent presidential elections in Afghanistan, which was an important step in boosting the number of women in the ANSF.⁷⁶ But greater U.S. support is still necessary to enhance the Afghan government’s efforts to implement its Master Ministerial Development Plan for the Afghan National Army Gender Integration. The United States should use the money saved from withdrawing its own troops in Afghanistan by investing in this plan, to support the Afghan’s own efforts in increasing women’s participation in the ANSF. The amount of funding earmarked in the 2014 NDAA should be at least doubled in the 2015 NDAA, so that, ideally, the percentage of funds invested in women is closer to 1 percent of the ASFF budget. Though still a modest percentage of the ASFF budget, hitting the 1 percent mark would send a signal to the Afghan government that the United States views the integration of women in the ANSF as essential to improving security.

Coordinate international donors to support Afghanistan’s preparation and development of a National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security. The United States should coordinate international donors to provide funding for Afghanistan’s preparation and implementation of its own NAP on Women, Peace, and Security. In addition to supporting Afghanistan’s effort to pave the way for recruitment and retention of women in the ANSF, a coalition of donors could bolster greater inclusion of women in all aspects of the country’s efforts to build and institutionalize peace, reconciliation, and reintegration. Moreover, the United States should use the Afghan NAP to inform the review of the United States’ own NAP in 2015 and should consider producing a bilateral action plan with Afghanistan to address their mutual interest in women, peace, and security. Though the NSC chose not to select priority countries in implementing the United States’ NAP, given U.S. interests in ensuring women’s gains in the Afghan transition as U.S. forces draw down, developing a bilateral action plan is warranted as part of America’s mutual commitment to both equality and security.

Encourage Afghanistan to enhance the role of women in any peace efforts with the Taliban. To promote security for women in Afghanistan, the U.S. government should push the Afghan government to

strengthen the role of women in shaping the postconflict security and peace-building effort. The 2014 NDAA states that any political settlement or peace negotiations in Afghanistan must include acceptance of the Afghan constitution, including protections for women and minorities. Given concerns that the Afghan constitution could be reopened and women's rights bargained away in negotiations with the Taliban, women need more meaningful inclusion in any reconciliation efforts. Regarding the reintegration of the Taliban, women should be involved in the conversation and planning process as the Afghan government discusses and develops plans for reintegrating Taliban fighters and sympathizers back into civil society.⁷⁷ The Afghan government oversees the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP), which is administered by the High Peace Council and enables insurgents who choose to give up violent combat to undergo training, receive funding, and integrate back into society. As a component of U.S. implementation of its NAP, the State Department has pointed to the inclusion of Afghan women in the High Peace Council as an important goal for implementation of the NAP.⁷⁸ However, there are only nine women out of seventy members on the council, and they "have not played a meaningful role in decision-making or direct talks with the Taliban."⁷⁹

At the provincial level, provincial peace councils are involved in screening candidates for reconciliation. A provincial quota requires that at least three of the twenty to thirty-five members serving on the councils are women. Currently, no provincial councils have more than three female members. Such low female representation dampens the participation of women in peace negotiations. Nonetheless, women and girls are most severely affected by war and instability and are most vulnerable to revictimization in peacetime. The APRP should increase women's participation at the provincial and village levels by raising the minimum number of women required to serve. These councils should also implement something similar to a unanimous voting veto to increase the ability of women to prevent inappropriate proposals from insurgents.⁸⁰

With a new Afghan president taking office, the U.S. government should insist on greater and more meaningful inclusion of women in both the High Peace Council and provincial peace councils, consistent with the Resolution 1325 commitments of both countries. If the Taliban is permitted to set the terms of peace negotiations by insisting that women be excluded, any likely settlement will be insufficient, as it would merely reflect "men with guns forgiv[ing] other men with guns for crimes committed against women,"⁸¹ which is not sustainable and paves the way for further women's rights violations.⁸²

TARGET DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE TOWARD WOMEN'S RIGHTS, DECISION-MAKING, AND SUSTAINABLE OUTCOMES

Support rights-oriented development strategies that enhance the role of women as decision-makers and leaders. To ensure the gains that have been secured are not lost, the United State should support strategies that bolster the role of Afghan women as decision-makers and leaders, by adequately funding USAID's PROMOTE initiative, implementation of which has been delayed. Additionally, USAID and other donors should ensure that Afghan women are involved in the implementation and monitoring of programs. In fact, U.S. government funders, such as USAID, could take into account the extent to which potential contractors and grant recipient entities involve women in their own leadership structures. USAID and other donors could also encourage contractors to subcontract to women-owned or women-led subcontractors and vendors.⁸³

Although the United States and other donors are increasingly channeling funding through the Afghan government in an effort to support Afghanistan's transition and self-sufficiency, Afghan women—particularly women with demonstrable records in promoting the rights and status of women—need to have a direct stake in the PROMOTE program for it to be successful. Empowering women with a direct role in implementing and monitoring PROMOTE will lead to more sustainable outcomes for women more broadly, as well as for their families, communities, and, ultimately, the country. As the United States and other countries are drawing down their presences in Afghanistan, investment in such sustainable strategies that can lead to Afghanistan's greater self-sufficiency are particularly important.⁸⁴

Reverse the downward trend line in support for education, particularly girls' education. USAID should reverse the downward trend in funding for both basic and higher education, particularly girls' education. Continued support for girls' education is the best economic development policy for the country. Observers have voiced concern that though funding is directed to PROMOTE, it is being withdrawn from other programs, such as primary school programs for girls and vocational schools that combat youth unemployment.⁸⁵ Indeed, USAID spent \$104.1 million on Afghan education in 2011, \$68.7 million in 2012, and \$38.1 million in 2013, indicating shrinking resources for education.⁸⁶ This could potentially result in neglecting educational and economic opportunities for women who do not fit within PROMOTE's target audience of women ages eighteen to thirty with at least a secondary education. Though it is not clear that funding for the PROMOTE program is related to the decrease in USAID spending for Afghan education, going forward, USAID should increase investment in education, even as it launches the PROMOTE program. New U.S. funds to support Afghan education should be identified through the savings gained from withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan. Reducing funding in Afghan education risks backtracking on gains made over the past decade, which would undermine the very security efforts that were at the center of the U.S. military strategy, particularly given the link between girls' education and stabilization.

Moreover, investment in girls' education has demonstrably led to other positive development outcomes, such as better employment opportunities as they become adults and then better health outcomes for their children.⁸⁷ Additionally, the education of girls helps reduce the incidence of child marriage, which often leads to abusive relationships and limits the life expectancy and economic opportunities of girls and women.⁸⁸ Support for primary education should be sustained, and greater attention should be focused toward secondary education for girls, which has been neglected.⁸⁹ Thus, USAID should take steps to ensure funding for the basic education of girls is restored within the context of the shift to direct funding through the Afghan government.

With the drawdown of U.S. troops, Congress will likely shift its attention and funding away from Afghanistan.⁹⁰ But that would be a mistake. For Afghanistan to become a prosperous, stable country, the United States and its partners will need to provide long-term support for development. As President Obama recently noted, in outlining his timeframe for the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, "Now, even as our troops come home, the international community will continue to support Afghans as they build their country for years to come. But our relationship will not be defined by war—it will be shaped by our financial and development assistance, as well as our diplomatic support."⁹¹ Given the connection between education and development, one of the most effective ways for the United States to support Afghans in building their country is to restore greater U.S. support for Afghan education, particularly girls education, using the savings yielded from ending ac-

tive U.S. combat operations in Afghanistan by the close of 2014 (and, over time, from concluding the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan by the end of 2016). Having invested American lives and treasure in Afghanistan, the United States should not reduce assistance for educational opportunities that will pave the way for a prosperous and stable country.

Support rural women. Though women in and around urban areas who are poised to move into leadership positions are the primary target group of USAID's PROMOTE program, USAID should continue to identify ways to address the needs of rural and more vulnerable women through other initiatives, including its sector-specific programs. Based on USAID's gender equality and female empowerment policy, the sector-specific programs should include a gender focus to ensure that the needs of women and girls are met. A gender focus should include programs that reach the most vulnerable who have not benefited to the same extent as more affluent, better-educated women and girls living in safer areas more accessible to U.S. and other foreign aid workers. Sector-specific funding can be earmarked for programs that reach women, including rural, multiply-disadvantaged women (such as those with disabilities or those who are extremely poor), and other vulnerable women.

Working in consultation with other donors, USAID should support, replicate, and scale-up existing structures that have proven successful in empowering rural women in particular (such as the National Solidarity Program), training women (such as the midwifery program), and creating jobs and other income-generating opportunities for women.

Support women entrepreneurs through financial access, training, and mentorship. The United States, with the support of other international donors, should support the creation of small and-medium enterprises (SMEs) funding mechanism through the World Bank. Further, U.S. government experts should continue working with the micro-finance sector to ensure that the less-sound micro-finance institutions are weeded out, and that the most sound and creditworthy clients are supported. Mentorship programs should be created, for example through the Afghan Ministry of Finance, to champion women already in the entrepreneurship sector working on startups. Women starting enterprises need international contracts and, more importantly, links to regional markets. Support should also be continued for consultant services for Afghan entrepreneurs seeking to become increasingly sophisticated. For example, SME owners in consulting firms can help micro-finance entrepreneurs in their own quest for growth. In this way, homegrown entrepreneurs train other entrepreneurs.

Ensure women's participation in monitoring and evaluation. USAID and other donors should ensure the direct participation of Afghan women in the oversight, monitoring, and evaluation of program funding. With the emerging—yet limited—role of women in public life, women still only have a partial ability to hold the Afghan government accountable. Women-owned and -led vendors should be considered for contracts to undertake monitoring and evaluation. Additionally, USAID is developing gender-specific monitoring and evaluation methodology, and should share this methodology with donors and recipients.

Foreign donors are now increasingly channeling assistance through the Afghan government, with the aim of “improv[ing] ministers' ability to handle funds, after years of watching the money pass through a virtual parallel administration run by foreign aid organisations.”⁹² However, transparent procedures should accompany funding provided to the government to ensure accountability. A clas-

sic example of the shortcoming inherent in the transition is captured in one account, in which an observer noted, “USAID says go to the [education] ministry, the ministry says they have no money, go to USAID.”⁹³

In terms of accountability for USAID’s PROMOTE initiative specifically, John F. Sopko, special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, has argued that because PROMOTE is meant to work within existing structures and with assistance from outside contractors to monitor implementations—rather than rely on the presence of U.S. troops—USAID’s ability to oversee the program will be limited.⁹⁴ Due to security concerns given the U.S. drawdown, contractors will be less likely to venture to remote, rural areas, resulting in less monitoring in these areas.

In light of this challenge, USAID already committed \$200 million “for a new ‘remote monitoring program’ that officials hope can fill in the gaps in program oversight expected to emerge if physical access to project sites declines when international security forces withdraw.”⁹⁵ Mobile devices and other technologies are low cost for users and easily accessible. Their use for monitoring and evaluation of aid helps to hold partner organization on the ground accountable, while also ensuring faster and easier data collection for recipients of international aid. Mobile devices or other widely available technologies also enhance opportunities to develop democratized communication and information sharing within recipient institutions, as the ease of communication facilitates exchanges of information up and down the hierarchy.⁹⁶ This builds “ownership of the information for staff and beneficiaries alike.”⁹⁷ Support for such virtual monitoring and evaluation should be structured to promote democratization of communication, information sharing, and decision-making—particularly regarding the role and direct involvement of women.

Conclusion

With the withdrawal of U.S. troops now set for the end of 2016, the Obama administration should move swiftly to assist Afghan women and girls in cementing and building on the gains they have won since the 2001 fall of the Taliban. Promoting gender equality in Afghanistan is a matter of principle, but it is also in the United States' national interest. The advancement of women and girls correlates with stability, security, and development, which is particularly important, given the interest the United States and Afghanistan share in fighting terrorism and extremism in Afghanistan. The United States should use its remaining leverage with Afghanistan and other partners to improve the current security situation, which would widen opportunities further for Afghan women and girls to participate in public life. With other donors, the United States should also support sustainable development outcomes for Afghan women and girls that advance their rights and include them as decision-makers in rural as well as urban communities. With eighteen months left before the full withdrawal of U.S. troops, the United States has time to bolster gender equality in Afghanistan, but such policies require buy-in and coordination at the highest levels of the U.S. government.

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