‘Now, There is Nothing Safe’: A Roadmap for Investing in Afghan Women and Girls

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Cover Photo Caption: Women walk along a road at the Khwaja Koza Gar area in Herat, Afghanistan on February 4, 2022. Photo by WAKIL KOHSAR/AFP via Getty Images.
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Introduction

The Taliban takeover in the summer of 2021 profoundly altered the trajectory of Afghanistan. While the impact has been felt across the country, no population has been more affected than Afghan women and girls. Over the last two decades, Afghan women changed the status quo and created a new, more empowered reality for themselves. They did so with support and encouragement from the United States, other NATO countries, and many other UN member states.

Since 2001, Afghan women have struggled against great odds to advance their rights and exercise their agency. Significant numbers of Afghan women went to school. They entered professions including journalism, politics, health care, law enforcement, and business. They developed networks to support one another, created non-governmental organizations, and led the growth of a robust civil society.

However, the U.S. withdrawal and subsequent seizure of power by the Taliban profoundly altered the lives of women and girls, especially in Afghanistan’s major population centers. As Kabul fell, it became painfully clear that there was no contingency plan on the part of the United States and its allies to continue meaningful support for the rights and needs of Afghan women. This failure was particularly acute for women leaders who had championed these rights, often with the backing of the United States and its allies.

Efforts to evacuate Afghans who had fought alongside the United States and other NATO militaries were not matched by a similar effort for women leaders—many of whom were under direct threat from the Taliban. In this absence, a coalition of private actors stepped in to get some of the most prominent and at-risk women out of the country. Some of these Afghan women leaders have made it to Canada or other final destinations. Others continue to languish in transit countries. Yet many more at-risk women remain behind in Afghanistan—often because they had no way out.

The truth of the matter is that refuge abroad is not an option for most Afghan women and girls. The Taliban assault on their rights is only one of the challenges they now face. The collapse of the Afghan economy and the ensuing humanitarian crisis have taken the greatest toll on Afghan women and girls. The lack of food, jobs, and even the most basic services like health and education has created a situation bordering on the catastrophic. Millions of Afghan women and girls are internally displaced. International actors—particularly the United States—need to provide tangible support for Afghan women and girls. That support must go beyond the rhetorical and prioritize access to aid and essential services. It should also aim to meet the needs and advance the rights of women and girls.

Recommendations

The United States must expand its criteria for who qualifies for resettlement by increasing the capacity to accept referrals and by creating a new Priority 2 (P-2) designation for Afghan women-at-risk through the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP).

The United States and other donor countries must provide more robust financial support to countries like Pakistan where large numbers of Afghan refugees are fleeing to and already residing.
They should place a particular focus on ensuring that Afghan women and girls have access to healthcare, including sexual and reproductive health services, and work permits. Donor governments should incentivize host countries to allow female Afghan refugees to enter and integrate into the social and economic fabric of society.

Donor countries should fund the $4.43 billion needed for the United Nations 2022 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), ensuring that a significant portion of those funds assist internally displaced people (IDPs), and that female humanitarian staff are part of the frontline response. The United States should contribute significantly more than 7 percent of this request.

As part of its contribution to the HRP, the United States should immediately fund the $163 million requested for education. Education initiatives should include support for community-based education (CBE) targeting Afghan girls. This will ensure that, despite Taliban restrictions and other obstacles, more Afghan girls will have the opportunity to learn.

Donor countries and the UN should financially support local humanitarian organizations, especially those that are women-led. This will allow humanitarian aid to reach more Afghan women. As the UN negotiates humanitarian access with the Taliban, it must consistently pressure the Taliban to allow and support women’s organizations to continue their efforts unhindered.

Foreign delegations that meet with the Taliban should include women at a senior level. The international community should continue to aggressively encourage the Taliban to create an inclusive government with the meaningful political participation of Afghan women.

Donor countries should support women’s civil society and the women’s movement in Afghanistan and in the diaspora. Funding directly to Afghan women-led organizations needs to be adequate, multi-year, and flexible.

Donors, international institutions, and international NGOs should pressure the Taliban to recommit that all girls will be able to return to school. International actors need to negotiate with the Taliban province by province on this matter. They should also work with the Taliban to address the shortage of female teachers, restricted mobility for girls, and a lack of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities.

The United Nations Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) should fully operationalize its recent mandate renewal by maintaining a strong focus on human rights, including addressing gender-based violence (GBV) by improving reporting and prosecutions. Donors should fund GBV shelters currently operating and prepare to fund the creation of new shelters throughout the country, ensuring the privacy and security of the survivors.

**Research Overview**

Refugees International traveled to Albania at the end of December 2021 to interview Afghan women leaders who had evacuated with their families as the Taliban seized power in August 2021. These leaders shared information about their lives and work in Afghanistan. They described their experiences under Taliban rule, how they managed to escape the country, and what they knew of the current situation in Afghanistan. These women also shared their thoughts on the way forward for Afghan women within the country and those in the diaspora. This report
is informed by the interviews with these Afghan women, supplemented by desk research and Refugees International’s own analysis. The report shares near-term concerns about the rights and well-being of Afghan women and girls and potential solutions as informed by Afghan women.

**Evacuation of High-Profile Afghan Women**

As the Taliban seized Kabul, American and allied focused on efforts to evacuate those Afghans who would be at risk because of their support for the U.S. and NATO war effort. The evacuation operation grew to include those Afghans working for organizations that received direct American funding. While the August 2021 U.S. airlift managed to evacuate tens of thousands of Afghans, it was carried out under deeply challenging conditions. As a result, many Afghans who qualified for evacuation under the U.S. Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) and other programs did not make it out.

However, thousands of Afghans under direct threat from the Taliban were not eligible for evacuation by the U.S. military. Afghan women leaders were among the most vulnerable of those who did not qualify. Their ranks included female politicians, human rights defenders, activists, journalists, and even athletes in Afghanistan who were all in grave danger. The risks to their physical safety were direct consequences of the Taliban’s ascent to power and the activities to which the women were committed. In response, international civil society groups, private citizens, and concerned individuals stepped up to bring some of these at-risk women and their families to safety.

One such private evacuation effort was organized by a small coalition of Afghan and American individuals and NGOs, including Belquis Ahmadi, Horia Mosadiq, the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security (GIWPS), Mina’s List, and Vital Voices, in a unique collaboration with the U.S. State Department’s Office of Global Women’s Issues. Secretary Hillary Clinton played a critical role in this effort. Members of this coalition, known collectively as the “White Scarves,” had worked with Afghan women for years and were committed to the safety of those in their networks. This coalition evacuated 305 high profile women and 717 of their family members to Albania between August and October 2021. The coalition has organized interim resettlement care in Albania for the women leaders and their families. Private funds supported evacuations and temporary relocation, while foreign assistance funds from S/GWI are supporting temporary relocation services in Albania and resettlement.

Alongside the evacuation to Albania, similar efforts were underway elsewhere to relocate Afghan women to safety. For example, a small group of British women managed to get 103 Afghan women at risk—most of whom were female judges, lawyers, or prosecutors—and their families to Greece. Many of them worked in the criminal justice system and were involved in arresting and imprisoning men who the new Taliban authorities have exonerated. Other countries that agreed to receive evacuees included Qatar, Switzerland, France, Canada, Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Mexico, Uganda, Rwanda, and Australia.

Many of the women leaders evacuated to temporary transit countries are still in these locations. For example, most of the women temporarily relocated to Albania remain there as they apply for resettlement or other forms of international protection in a variety of countries. The overwhelming majority of Afghan women in Albania are awaiting approval and resettlement to Canada. Notably, less than 8 percent of these women and their families are attempting to resettle in the United States. Many more would like to apply for resettlement in the United States, but there is no clear pathway for them to do so – apart from a few exceptions.
It should be noted that senior leadership in the U.S. State Department, including the office of the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts (CARE) and the U.S. Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights, are exploring ways to expand options for at-risk Afghan women and girls to access U.S. resettlement and asylum programs. But these pathways have yet to take shape.

Resettlement of Afghan Women At-Risk

The women and their families who private groups and organizations evacuated to Albania are out of harm’s way. The same cannot be said for most IDPs, asylum seekers, and refugees in countries neighboring Afghanistan. The women in Albania are anxious and uneasy about the time it is taking to process their cases. But most will likely be resettled to Canada. Hopefully a handful will be approved to travel to the United States. However, the women voiced extreme concern about the family and friends they left behind.

One woman who left her husband in Kabul assuming he could reunite with her in the future told Refugees International, “the reality is starting to hit me. Leaving him means I might not see him again. I was given only a few hours to get in a vehicle leaving Afghanistan. If I had had more information, I might have made different decisions. I would’ve insisted that he join me. Yes, my husband is a man, but my husband is also at risk because of the work I did. The Taliban threaten him daily.”

Even among high-profile, at-risk Afghan women, just a small portion have been evacuated. Based on an internal analysis by the Women, Peace and Security NGO Working Group, only 6 to 8 percent of identified women leaders, politicians, journalists, human rights defenders, activists, and female judges had been evacuated by November 2021. One of the biggest challenges is providing safe passage for those women who want and need to leave the country. However, for those that do make their way to a neighboring country, the United States and other countries should provide visas, asylum, and/or resettlement.

Improving and expanding the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) is the most logical way to do this and could serve as a model for other resettlement countries. One women’s organization based in the United States that helped evacuate Afghan women recently explained that, “currently, the two primary U.S. resettlement schemes designed to support at-risk Afghans are the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) and the Priority-2 (P-2) program. Neither of these programs specifically target Afghan women, severely limiting the options for women who are looking to get out of Afghanistan.”

The Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program—which allows some Afghans who worked with the U.S. military or U.S. government entities in Afghanistan to apply for resettlement—is currently the primary pathway for Afghans to access safety in the United States. A staggering majority of SIV applicants are men. Most Afghan women cannot apply for an SIV themselves and must rely on their male family members. Instead, the United States needs to expand its criteria for who qualifies for resettlement. It can do so by surging capacity to referrals from a variety of designated organizations and develop a new P-2 designation to help Afghan women at-risk, such as those who Refugees International met with in Albania.
Humanitarian and Economic Crisis

Displacement

The Taliban specifically targeted most of the Afghan women in Albania and continue to target people throughout the country, putting their lives at risk. But the broader political, economic, and humanitarian situation inside the country has also forced Afghans to flee their homes. At least 735,000 Afghans were forcibly displaced within Afghanistan between January 2021 and the first week of March 2022. Almost 150,000 of these displaced people are women, and notably, nearly 60 percent are children. These internally displaced people make up a small portion of the 24.4 million Afghans currently in need of humanitarian assistance.

Huge numbers of Afghans have also escaped the country and crossed international borders. Reports indicate that during just the four months from October 2021 through January 2022, more than 1 million Afghans from the southwest of the country fled into Iran. Significant numbers of Afghans are also traveling overland to seek refuge in Pakistan. Yet the prospects for safety and integration in Iran or Pakistan are bleak. Iran and Pakistan have both taken a hardline stance towards those who enter without the proper paperwork, and there are already millions of registered and unregistered Afghan refugees living in those countries. Pakistan recently deported at least 500 Afghans from just one province. Donors must help address issues countries in the region are citing for refusing Afghan refugees, provide more robust financial support to these countries, and incentivize the integration of Afghan refugees in host countries.

Economic Collapse and Humanitarian Crisis

Afghans are fleeing their homes for a variety of reasons including targeted persecution, the steady rollback of rights, and the lack of opportunities under Taliban control. But displacement is also occurring because of the dire humanitarian and economic crisis quickly unfolding throughout the country. The humanitarian needs in Afghanistan are enormous. As of mid-December 2021, only 2 percent of Afghans had enough food. The United Nations Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), which details the humanitarian needs in the country, calls for $4.4 billion over the course of 2022 to stave off the worst of the crisis. Afghanistan’s current level of humanitarian need is inextricably linked to the status of the economy—an economy that has been unraveling at warp speed.

Afghan women in Albania spoke about the unprecedented needs throughout Afghanistan. One woman from Kabul told Refugees International, “From what I know, the worst of the humanitarian situation is in the more rural areas. But even in Kabul, no one has money, and with no money, how do you buy food?” She continued to explain, “our country has a lot to offer. No one wants to survive on humanitarian aid, but that’s what we need right now. We need food assistance, even in the cities, and we need cash.”

Afghan women and girls disproportionately feel the effects of this near economic collapse. The tremendously high levels of food insecurity leave mothers without food because they are feeding their children first. The lack of food and cash is also compelling parents to marry off their female children, thus reducing the number of family members to feed. In some cases, parents are forcing their daughters as young as eight years old to marry, hoping for some payment in return. A young
Afghan woman in Albania commented, “Eight years old?! And there are girls even younger. For a girl like that, her life is effectively over. We are still a conservative culture, and it is unique to find families where women have a lot of choice. For these girls, their husbands will become like their masters."

Resorting to negative coping mechanisms like forced and early marriage has likely only become more common over the course of the harsh winter.

After food, heat, and healthcare are two of the other most pressing humanitarian needs. People cannot afford wood or coal to heat their homes. An older Afghan woman in Albania told Refugees International, “I don’t know how much the rest of the world knows about Afghanistan, but we have really tough winters. It’s cold, it’s snowy, and if you’re poor, you are left freezing during the winter.” NGOs and UN agencies are distributing blankets and other necessities, but the need far outweighs the supply and the capacity.

Healthcare is also an urgent necessity. As of September 2021, only 17 percent of the county’s health clinics were functional. Aid agencies warn that number is even lower now given the lack of payments to civil servants like doctors and difficulties importing medicine. For Afghan women and girls, this lack of healthcare is especially disastrous. Maternal healthcare was already limited in Afghanistan before the Taliban takeover. Now, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that the current humanitarian situation could lead to up to 58,000 additional maternal deaths and 5.1 million unintended pregnancies between now and 2025.

One of the evacuees in Albania told Refugees International that her sister is a gynecologist in a major city in Afghanistan. She explained that the Taliban have allowed some female doctors to keep treating patients. Women usually receive healthcare services from other women. But she explained:

...although some female doctors can keep working like my sister, she and the other female doctors she knows are afraid of being harassed or beaten by the Taliban during their commutes to work. And the power dynamics have completely changed in the hospital. My sister no longer has any decision-making authority. Men—even if they are more junior—are in charge. I have no idea how she keeps doing her job. She is not getting paid. There are barely any medical supplies or medicine—the shelves are empty.

There are some relatively straightforward solutions to address the growing humanitarian needs in Afghanistan. These include getting cash and food to struggling families. But accessing that cash—especially cash with purchasing power—relies on the functioning of the Afghan banking system, which remains on the verge of collapse. Pulling Afghanistan out of its downward economic spiral and addressing the reasons why the economy is in freefall is critical.

U.S. policies are huge contributing factors to Afghanistan’s current economic state. Indeed, some argue that they are the main reasons for Afghanistan’s failing economy. These include the U.S. government’s decision to freeze Afghan assets and the continued use of sanctions. The United States needs to make immediate economic policy changes and release its “chokehold” on the Afghan economy.
Role of Afghan Women and Local Groups in the Humanitarian Response

As the United Nations and other aid agencies ramp up to respond to the humanitarian crisis, they are facing significant challenges. Taliban restrictions on the role of Afghan women in the response is undermining the ability of relief groups to meet the needs of women and girls. While the Taliban are making some exceptions and allowing female humanitarian staff to work, they are just that—exceptions.

Women delivering humanitarian aid is critical in Afghanistan because it is the only way to ensure that assistance can reliably reach women in need. Humanitarian organizations have been negotiating province by province for permission for female humanitarians to resume their jobs. So far, this piecemeal approach has been successful. However, it is not sustainable. Donors and the UN need to pressure the Taliban to issue a clear, country-wide directive ensuring that women can hold paid positions and publicly work as part of the humanitarian response. That is the surest way to avoid unnecessary deaths of Afghan women and girls.

Several of the women in Albania were adamant about this point. One woman said, “women cannot be erased from the society, especially when it comes to humanitarian aid. They have to be present. That shouldn’t even have to be negotiated.” Another woman who has fought for women’s rights in Afghanistan for decades told Refugees International, “we have lost so much in Afghanistan, but we can’t lose more women, especially to starvation and some of these terrible situations.” Yet another explained, “[the Taliban] know that Afghanistan is a country where women help women. How are Afghan women going to survive this crisis without the assistance of other women?”

The humanitarian response cannot be conducted by the UN and international NGOs alone. Donor countries and the UN should financially support local organizations. The UN should demand that the Taliban provide safe access to local organizations to assist populations in need. If the UN needs to negotiate, talks should place a premium on supporting and allowing women’s organizations to work unhindered.

Furthermore, donors need to immediately provide more funding to Afghanistan. Alarmingly, 87 percent of the UN’s 2022 humanitarian appeal for Afghanistan is not funded. The United States is especially responsible for the situation that Afghanistan is in right now. Therefore, the United States should provide generous funding for the humanitarian response. The $308 million that the United States has committed is not enough for a country in which more than 39 million people do not have enough food. This pledge is only 7 percent of the overall humanitarian budget. The United States needs to give more and quickly.

Women’s Rights

The rights of women and girls in Afghanistan are arguably the most contentious sticking points between the Taliban and most of the world’s governments. For the Afghan women in Albania, the rollback of women’s rights is the most terrifying and distressing effects of the Taliban’s rise to power. To date, no country officially recognizes the Taliban as Afghanistan’s legitimate govern-
ment. There are several explanations for this. But for many states, the Taliban’s past record on women’s rights and their current patriarchal form of governing is reason enough to bar them from international recognition.

The Taliban’s denial of basic rights for Afghan women and girls is well publicized. Since taking control of Kabul, the Taliban have dramatically restricted Afghan women’s ability to continue their professional work. Furthermore, if that work relates to journalism, political participation, women’s empowerment, or gender-based violence (GBV) reporting and response, the situation for these women is even worse. Not only have the Taliban largely prohibited this work, but they have also targeted women precisely because they have been involved in these activities. The women evacuated to Albania are most concerned about two additional categories of human rights violations by the Taliban: 1) the denial of women’s political participation, and 2) restrictions on women and girls’ education.

**Leadership and Political Participation**

The Taliban have clearly communicated their disdain for and hostility towards women involved in the public sphere. They have targeted female Afghan political figures, even trying to assassinate several well-known leaders. Taliban persecution of Afghan women leaders are precisely the reasons that the women in Albania were compelled to flee in the first place. As soon as the militant group took control of Kabul, they codified the exclusion of women into their new de facto government. There are zero women in the government set up by the Taliban. In fact, senior government positions are only held by Pashtun men. This is unacceptable on its face. It will also have more ominous consequences.

Without an inclusive government, Afghan women will be unable to challenge the laws and policies of the Taliban. There will be little to no means by which they can exercise any self-determination, especially in light of the harsh Taliban responses to female protestors. Recent disappearances of female protestors are stark reminders of the Taliban’s repudiation of women voicing their political opinions. Although four of these women were reportedly released on February 13, 2022, the fact that they were disappeared at all has had a chilling effect on female activists.

As a woman in Albania who held a senior position in the former government told Refugees International, “In the previous government, more than 25 percent of government positions were held by women. It certainly wasn’t easy and there was corruption in Ghani’s government, but at least we were at the table, and we could try to do something about it. I know I shouldn’t be shocked by Taliban decisions, but really, no women at all? That is both an immoral and a stupid decision.”

The Taliban need the essential benefits that come with the political participation of women, including more sustainable peace and better economic outcomes. An extended period of peace, an economic upswing, and buy-in from different groups in Afghanistan are key to the Taliban’s political survival. Afghanistan now ranks 170th out of 170 countries on indicators measuring women’s inclusion, justice, and security. This must change no matter who is in charge.

The women leaders in Albania hold a wide and diverse range of views about how to deal with the Taliban. However, most agreed on two points. First, female-led Afghan civil society has grown dramatically over the last 20 years and will not be diminished, even by Taliban restrictions. Afghan women will continue to operate and work on issues they care about. They will be creative, but they also need outside support. Second, the Afghan women in Albania shared the belief that
the international community has an important role to play in influencing the Taliban’s approach to governance. International actors should test the proposition.

The first step is to lead by example. As Afghan journalist, women’s rights activist, and manager of a domestic violence shelter in Kabul Mahboubha Seraj recently instructed the UN Security Council, “stop sending all-male delegations. Sending foreign women is not enough. We must start the process of inclusive government for and by Afghans. A diverse representation of Afghan women—especially civil society—must be part of all ongoing negotiations with the Taliban.”

Second, donors must support women’s civil society and the women’s movement in Afghanistan. Women’s rights organizations drive progress and accountability. Yet globally, 99 percent of foreign aid still does not reach women’s rights and feminist organizations. Afghanistan is no exception. Funding directly to Afghan women-led organizations needs to be adequate, multi-year, and flexible. The time is well overdue to strategically and immediately invest in women’s civil society organizations in Afghanistan.

Third, countries around the world should provide financial and other support for Afghan women in the diaspora who want to lead. The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security’s “Onward for Afghan Women” initiative is an innovative way to continue to support the female leaders of Afghanistan, even as they have been forced to flee. Its mission is to elevate and equip “Afghan women leaders with opportunities to continue their advocacy on behalf of Afghan women and girls.” Other asylum countries should replicate initiatives like this to prepare Afghan women in the diaspora to re-enter leadership in Afghanistan.

**Education**

Every interviewee in Albania ranked the denial of girls’ education as one of the most egregious and harmful violations of human rights in Afghanistan. Even the friends, family, and peers of the Afghan women in Albania who remain in the urban areas in Afghanistan cannot attend school. New rules ushered in by the Taliban have prohibited girls from attending secondary school classes except for in a few provinces. This is both a violation of the fundamental human rights of girls in Afghanistan, but it also robs them of hope and motivation. Denying education to half the population limits the ability for the country to function now and in the future. According to Afghan women in Albania, the lack of education combined with the issues around expectations noted above, are leading many girls and young women to become severely depressed.

Furthermore, any hopes Afghan girls had of returning to school in the near future have been dashed in recent days. Early in the year, the Taliban announced that they would allow women and girls throughout the country to resume formal schooling in March 2022. But in an abrupt change of course on March 23—the very day the Taliban had promised girls’ schools would reopen—they reversed their decision. Instead, the Taliban announced that classrooms for girls above sixth grade will remain closed until they agree on a plan to reopen them in line with their own interpretation of Islamic law.

Prior to this latest decision, the Afghan women in Albania were skeptical of Taliban promises. Now, they have no confidence in Taliban guarantees. Even if the Taliban changes course again and one day allows secondary-school age girls back into formal classrooms, young Afghan women in Albania are particularly concerned about the curriculum that will be taught. One Afghan high school student in Albania told Refugees International:
So maybe they’ll let us go back to school, but what are we going to learn? Are we only going to be allowed to study the Quran? What about science and history and politics and literature from around the world? At least my family prioritizes education, and at home I have lots of books. But I think my family is unique because my father was a journalist before the Taliban assassinated him in November. My favorite book is War and Peace by Tolstoy.

Furthermore, Afghan women in Albania and in the wider diaspora are not confident that girls will be able to attend school any time soon given the shortage of female teachers. Any Taliban assurance that girls will return to school is contingent upon girls learning in sex-segregated classrooms. Yet only a third of teachers are female. The proportion is even lower in rural areas and above primary level. And of that very low number, only 10-15 percent are qualified to teach. In fact, very few female teachers in Afghanistan are themselves educated.

As the founder of the School of Leadership Afghanistan (SOLA), Shabana Basij-Rasikh highlighted that the lack of female teachers “becomes a Catch-22. If you don’t have female teachers, you don’t have female students in school. And, if you don’t have female students graduating high school, you don’t have the local production of female teachers.” To prepare for the possibility of the Taliban allowing girls to return to the classroom—from primary school through secondary school—the international community should prioritize several actions.

Donors, international institutions, and international NGOs must put significant pressure on the Taliban to recommit to a firm date at which point all girls will be able to return to school. This latest Taliban about-face regarding girls’ education is a significant blow to Taliban credibility. But international actors must remain steadfast in their own commitment to move the needle forward on this issue. They should work with sympathetic Taliban leadership to remove barriers, apart from the general Taliban policies, that prevent girls from accessing education. These obstacles include the shortage of female teachers, but also restricted mobility and a lack of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities. International actors can do this by negotiating with the Taliban province by province.

As now U.S. Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls and Human Rights Rina Amiri said prior to assuming her current position, the fragmentation of the Taliban can be “exploited and taken advantage of on a very pragmatic level to extend education throughout the country.” In other words, the Taliban are not a monolithic group. They have internal divisions, do not all share the same views, and are distracted with their own infighting. Therefore, the United States and other international actors could negotiate with different factions of the Taliban on the issue of girls’ education.

Despite the Taliban’s latest decision to keep girls’ secondary schools closed, donors should inject funds into the public education system to keep it standing. One of the reasons why it is functioning so poorly is because most teachers have not been paid in months. Donors can follow the example of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) that recently began paying stipends for some public school teachers. This can help ensure that when girls are finally allowed to return to school, there is a school system to which they can return.

Donors should also fully fund the Afghanistan HRP’s appeal for $162 million to support educational initiatives. These will help to reach underserved populations, including displaced girls within Afghanistan. One initiative should be to expand community-based education (CBE). CBE is a type
of informal learning the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) defines as “classes established in community buildings or houses, sometimes mosques,” with approximately 25-30 students. CBE can temporarily fill gaps for displaced populations, especially in emergency contexts where opportunities are scarce and insecurity is high. CBE allows Afghan girls to engage with their peers and participate in collective learning activities during a time of crisis and fear. At this critical and volatile time in Afghanistan, donors should be eager to expand CBE, which is of even greater importance now that formal secondary schools for girls will remain closed for the foreseeable future.

Gender-Based Violence

There is much less armed conflict in Afghanistan today than before the Taliban took control. During the last six months under Taliban rule, conflict-related civilian casualties decreased by 90 percent. Despite this, the risks to personal safety for some Afghan women and girls and other marginalized groups have arguably gotten worse. One of the most prevalent risks that Afghan women face is gender-based violence (GBV).

Rates of GBV—especially intimate partner violence (IPV)—have always been high in Afghanistan. But as is true in most humanitarian emergencies—in addition to child marriage—the risk of other forms of GBV is increasing as well. Already, before August 2021, 9 out of 10 Afghan women and girls experienced IPV. These rates have increased. At the same time, GBV response mechanisms including counseling, shelters, medical care, and legal recourse—mechanisms that the U.S. government invested in—have become virtually non-existent.

Afghan women in Albania explained that family members are often the perpetrators of GBV. So, women and girls need confidential ways to report it outside of the family. Yet, the police no longer have gender focal points or female police officers. Instead, women and girls are expected to report GBV to the Taliban, which is unrealistic and for many Afghans, untenable.

One woman who is the head of a network of safehouses for survivors of GBV in Afghanistan told Refugees International, “The Taliban have closed the majority of the safe houses across the country. They even came to occupy my office. Can you imagine? Uneducated young men with weapons sitting at my desk? The network I developed was about creating safe spaces. Now, there is nothing safe.”

There are a handful of women’s shelters still operating in Kabul, but indeed most survivors of domestic violence have nowhere to turn in today’s Afghanistan. Donors must fund these select shelters and be prepared to provide financial support to others as they hopefully re-open. Donors should also fully fund the $49 million appeal for GBV programming as laid out in the HRP.

Moreover, the United Nations Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) should maintain a strong focus on human rights, as spelled out in its recent mandate renewal. The current mandate is indeed promising as it asserts that the Mission will “integrate gender mainstreming as a cross-cutting issue throughout the implementation of its mandate, support and promote gender equality, women’s and girls’ empowerment and the full protection of their human rights,” and will “monitor and report specifically on violations, abuses and reprisals committed against women.”

Under the umbrella of its human rights monitoring, UNAMA should work together with the Taliban
to improve the reporting and prosecutions of GBV. UNAMA can do this by basing its work on the rules of Islam, which condemns violence against women and girls. Islamic law also ensures that courts will hear domestic violence cases. UNAMA should appeal to the Taliban using these Islamic values.

Using an Islamic framework could be helpful to reinforce other important rights including girls’ education, women’s choice in marriage, and women’s participation as leaders, businesswomen, and judges. The international community must be creative and must always prioritize women’s rights when engaging with the Taliban. Afghan women and girls arguably have the most to lose under this new Afghan leadership.

**Conclusion**

Afghan women and girls are facing a myriad of challenges, risks, and prohibitions denying them of the rights, opportunities, and safety that they deserve. Both inside and outside of Afghanistan, these threats are apparent. The economy continues to deteriorate, and the humanitarian situation has become a full-blown emergency. The Taliban have made some recent declarations that are promising. But they are incremental concessions in an overall exclusionary posture.

Afghanistan’s overlapping crises have created a daunting situation in Afghanistan: one from which some donors and countries are beginning to back away. Ultimately, the Taliban’s actions have created Afghanistan’s current reality. Yet, the United States bears significant responsibility for several of challenges Afghanistan is currently confronting. The United States, donors, and international institutions can make headway. But the first step is for the United States needs to show meaningful and sustained commitment to Afghan women and girls.
About the Author

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About Refugees International

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance, human rights, and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We do not accept any government or UN funding, ensuring the independence and credibility of our work.