



Human Security Lab

@HSECURITYLAB BRIEFING NOTE #2

APRIL 2022

Rethinking America’s Women, Peace & Security Agenda in Afghanistan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY. There is significant global concern about the status and rights of women and girls in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover in mid-August 2021. At the same time, some measures taken by the international community to pressure the Taliban on women’s rights have been ineffective thus far and themselves worsened the situation for the country’s women. Women’s rights should not be traded away for peace, but ongoing conflict, strife, and sanctions can also hit women the hardest. Thus, international actors face dilemmas on how to support women and girls’ most urgent needs without empowering the Taliban to further violate their rights. Based on the latest research about gender and conflict (as well as consultations with academic experts, practitioner organizations, and Afghan stakeholders), Human Security Lab recommends the US continue to isolate the Taliban diplomatically, but scale back its use of economic sanctions on behalf of women. Instead, it should focus on gender-inclusive programming aimed at wider initiatives that will empower women to advocate for themselves, including health-care, education, support for infrastructure and technology, and access to asylum for those eligible. The US can also continue to play a powerful role for women through third parties, incentivizing moderate Muslim-majority states, transnational Muslim scholars and Islamic aid organizations to advocate for women, and directly support female-led or women’s-rights-focused local civil society initiatives in Afghanistan.

KEY POINTS:

- The US, as a former conflict party, may be less effective in advocating for women’s rights than other potential actors, such as moderate Muslim-majority states, transnational religious scholars, or neutral states from the global south.
- The US can and should support women’s human rights by continuing to ensure gender-sensitive programming in areas such as health, education, infrastructure, and technology. Increasing internet access in rural areas could have an outsized impact.
- Any forms of pressure on the Taliban should avoid themselves harming women. While maintaining conditions on recognition, the US should cease indiscriminate sanctions, return Afghan assets, and use its own resources to assist women.
- The US can improve support for Afghan women by channeling small grants directly to local civil society organizations, rather than primarily through its traditional implementing partners and/or through bilateral aid to the current Afghan government.
- Until such time as it can provide bilateral support to a functioning, inclusive Afghan government, the US should support Afghan women’s rights by protecting and assisting them in executing their right to flee.
- More systematic data is needed to understand the needs of diverse Afghans and changing Afghan views on gender equality. Far more attention should be given to examining the views of a wider array of women and men, disaggregated by age, education, ethnicity, religiosity, political affiliation and geography.



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THE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY PARADOX.

Significant data shows a positive correlation between gender equality, development, security, and peace both within and among nation-states.¹ This has led the United States to adopt a 'women's rights promotion' foreign policy similar to the 'democracy promotion' policy of the early 2000s. Paradoxically, however, 'women's rights' and / or the 'protection of women' can also become a rallying cry for ongoing conflict and contestation among conflict parties, fueling the very conflicts that disproportionately harm women.² In such contexts, conflict parties' openly promoting or seeking to leverage women's rights can work against women's empowerment. While domestic



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human rights movements often benefit from international support, foreigners advocating for women's human rights in a violently divided society can also sometimes cause backlash, leading to violence against women, or renewed conflict.³ Conflict itself not only harms women directly but indirectly as well, hardening harmful gender norms and increasing gender-based violence.⁴

As a former conflict party, the US is in a particularly difficult position in openly advocating for Afghan women's rights. While both human rights NGOs and Afghan activists argue that continued US support for women's rights remains important, both practitioners and scholars we consulted overwhelmingly argued that if the US wishes to help Afghan women, the best thing it can do short-term is avoid flying the US flag over women's rights initiatives.⁵ Western-led and branded

women's projects can risk creating a backlash in which gender equity becomes associated with foreigners and Western imperialism.⁶ This can marginalize Afghan women's own skillful and courageous efforts to mobilize and organize themselves.⁷ Because discrimination against women and children is exacerbated by conflict-related violence and poverty, counterinsurgency itself at times inadvertently contributed to gendered harms.⁸

At the same time, Afghan women benefited tremendously in education and health prior to the withdrawal, and US support for Afghan women remains paramount. Instead of continuing to withhold economic support from the country in the name of women's rights, the US should focus on mitigating the negative consequences of its departure for women, and support a consistent, long-term vision for helping Afghans build upon past gains.

TO SUPPORT WOMEN, BUILD PEACE AND ENSURE HUMAN SECURITY.

Short-term, prioritizing women's basic needs is the best way to support women's 'rights.' This means addressing the humanitarian crisis by rethinking the ongoing sanctions regime and reversing the appropriation of the Afghan reserves; providing for basic infrastructure in a gender-sensitive way; empowering Afghan women's own efforts (and those of their male allies) to advocate for themselves and support peace; supporting them in promoting track-two diplomacy to ensure a more inclusive government and avert intra-Afghan conflict; assisting them to flee; and channeling advocacy through third parties with more legitimacy, such as Muslim-majority states or Islamic scholars.

Use Freed-Up Afghan Reserves to Support Afghans, Not Americans.

On February 11, 2022, President Biden issued an executive order proposing \$7 billion in frozen Afghan reserves be placed in trust, with half ostensibly to be used for humanitarian aid to the Afghan people, and the other half remaining frozen pending American court rulings as to whether it could be used to pay Taliban legal debts to the families of 9/11 victims. This controversial policy aims to resolve a dilemma between unfreezing the reserves (thereby allowing the Taliban to control them) or continue hobbling the Afghan economy to pressure the Taliban on women's rights. The paradox is that the sanctions regime has left much of the country on the brink of famine, with women and younger children hit hardest by food insecurity.⁹

¹ Robert Ulrich Nagel. 2020. "Gendered Preferences: How Women's Inclusion in Society Shapes Negotiation Occurrence in Intrastate Conflicts." *Journal of Peace Research* 58(3): 433-448.

² Meredith Loken, et al., 2018. "Deploying Justice: Strategic Accountability for Wartime Sexual Violence." *International Studies Quarterly* 62(4): 751-64.

³ Mona Lena Krook. 2015. "Empowerment Versus Backlash: Gender Quotas and Critical Mass Theory." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 3(1): 184-188.

⁴ Valerie M. Hudson and Hilary Matfess. 2017. "In Plain Sight: The Neglected Linkage Between Brideprice and Violent Conflict." *International Security* 42(1): 7-40.

⁵ Sultan Barakat and Gareth Wardwell. 2002. "Exploited By Whom? An Alternative Perspective on Humanitarian Assistance to Afghan Women." *Third World Quarterly* 23 (5): 909-930.

⁶ Midgley, Clare. 2017. *Gender and Imperialism*. Manchester University Press.

⁷ Wazhman Osman and Helena Zeweri. 2021. "Afghan Women Have a Long History of Taking Leadership and Fighting For Their Rights," *The Conversation*, October.

⁸ Jenevieve Mannell et. al., 2020. "A Qualitative Study of Women's Lived Experiences of Conflict and Domestic Violence in Afghanistan." *Violence Against Women*, 27(11): 1862-1878.

⁹ Becky Carter and Luke Kelly. 2021. "Social Inequalities and Famine and Severe Food Insecurity." K4D Helpdesk Report. *Institute of Development Studies*.

The quandary faced in Afghanistan is similar to that faced in any sanctions regime, as sanctions typically harm civilians, including women, more than they harm the governments they aim to influence.¹⁰

Addressing food insecurity is critical for women, who as one practitioner put it, cannot

easily fight for their rights when their children are starving; moreover food itself is a human right.¹¹ Yet either releasing the reserves, or substituting for good governance with humanitarian aid, comes with its own risks and challenges.

Afghan civil society activists we spoke to just prior to Biden's decision to split the reserves were divided on whether to remove the sanctions entirely and work with the Taliban or continue withholding them to pressure the regime. All those we spoke to, however, argued that the Afghan reserves belong to the Afghan people, not to the US or the Taliban – a view widely held in Afghanistan.¹²

If any portion is held back, it would be wiser and more appropriate to ensure it remain frozen and earning interest for a future, inclusive Afghan government.

At the same time, given the extraordinary humanitarian need in Afghanistan today, there is value in Biden's move to bypass the Taliban government and provide at least some of the reserves directly to the Afghan people rather than keep them frozen.

The US should consider avenues for transferring that wealth to Afghans in other ways than humanitarian aid, however. First, humanitarian aid is a short-term solution whereas Afghans need development aid to jumpstart the economy. Second, funneling money through international aid organizations will siphon much of it off to subcontractors and local elites: resources should instead be channeled directly to local NGOs. Third, existing aid disbursements in the form of food baskets are insufficient to prevent famine: food is available in much of the country and the problem is people cannot access cash to buy it.

Practitioners we spoke to insisted the goal should be finding ways to quickly put cash in families' hands. It seems sensible to channel

“Women cannot think about their rights when their children are starving.” - NGO practitioner

a portion of the reserves directly to the Afghan people through the United Nations Development Program's ABADEI People's Economy Fund or a similar mechanism.¹³ At the same time, the US should continue providing humanitarian aid from its own reserves to alleviate the crisis. Whether cash or in-kind food aid is most appropriate likely varies geographically, and some women prefer food which they can control rather than cash which risks appropriation by their husbands. When in-kind aid is given, rations should include more diversified goods in greater amounts.

Those Afghan activists we spoke to were adamant that, while the Afghan people should not be left to starve, the Taliban also should not be recognized or legitimated, and they ask the US keep up political pressure on the Taliban in support of human rights and inclusive government. This can be accomplished through means other than economic coercion. For example, withholding recognition of the Taliban until minimum human rights standards are met should continue, with targeted sanctions against Taliban individuals (such as no fly lists and weapons bans). But these measures need not be coupled with crippling and indiscriminate sanctions that deny Afghan civilians the right to food.¹⁴

Recommendations: The Biden administration should inform the judges in the 9/11 cases that it is in the national interest to treat the entire Afghan reserves as belonging to the Afghan people rather than a Taliban resource to be garnished. International recognition of the Taliban can and should be deferred, but Afghan civilians should not be left in the economic cross-fire nor robbed of their economic heritage.



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Identify Diverse Women's Needs, Build Local Women's Capacities.

Scholars, international practitioners, and Afghans themselves say that there is a great dearth of comprehensive knowledge about what the different women in Afghanistan need, want or are already doing to empower themselves.¹⁵ Much Western media, human rights, or humanitarian fact-finding occurs through conversations with civil society leaders, allowing Western-oriented local elites to speak for all women, and generally prioritizing educated women in urban areas or

¹⁰ Thomas Weiss et. al., 1997. *Political Gain and Civilian Pain: Humanitarian Impacts of Economic Sanctions*. NY: Rowman & Littlefield.

¹¹ Jamila Afghani and Yifat Susskind. 2022. "Afghan Women Aren't Liberated by Humanitarian Catastrophe," *Foreign Policy*, January.

¹² Ali Harb, 2022. "Theft: Advocates Decry US Decision to Withhold Afghan Funds," *Al-Jazeera*, February.

¹³ Scott Brookings. 2022. "How To Prevent Afghan Aid Money from Reaching Terrorists," *Foreign Policy*, January.

¹⁴ Ella Shagabudinova and Jeffrey Berejikian. 2015. "Deploying Sanctions While Protecting Human Rights: Are Humanitarian 'Smart' Sanctions Effective?" *Journal of Human Rights* 6(1): 59–74.

¹⁵ Mohammad Fazel Akbary, et. al., 2020. "Sociocultural Determinants of Attitudes Towards Domestic Among Women and Men in Afghanistan: Evidence from Afghanistan Demographic and Health Survey 2015." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*: 1-25

in the diaspora as key informants.¹⁶ This approach leaves information gaps about the needs of rural women, ethnic groups clustered outside of Kabul, or of women aligned with the Taliban. There is an urgent need for more comprehensive and accurate indicators of women's desires accounting for Afghanistan's geographical, ethnic, linguistic and socio-economic diversity. The US should continue initiatives

"The US should do more to help women and human rights defenders flee. Many women activists are trying to leave the country and are in danger in Afghanistan."

by Asia Foundation, and support others at Afghan think-tanks and universities, such as the Afghan Institute of Strategic Studies in Kabul or the Institute for War and Peace at Herat University, to conduct more representative surveys in-country to inform practice.¹⁷

Afghan women's rights activists to whom we spoke emphasized a continuum of challenges, many of which they perceive get too little attention in the Western media by international practitioners. For example, although the West is very focused on girls' access to school, these activists argue the bigger issue is the curriculum in both girls' and boys' classrooms: will it be comprehensive or 'extremist-focused'? Some Afghans requested the US provide and distribute shipments of text-books to classrooms throughout the country. Other issues such as domestic violence, early or forced marriage, maternal/reproductive health and ethnic discrepancies in aid distribution were

more frequently mentioned in these consultations than in the Western media coverage we analyzed [see Figure 1].

One area where Afghans feel especially unlistened to is the issue of safe exit from the country. Afghans we consulted argue that resources for flight and resettlement are critical. Women who have lost their male family members to the war and now face impoverishment without a mahram are in particular need of an exit for themselves and their children.

Notably, for all the US' frustration about the inability to force the Taliban to respect rights such as education, human rights such as the right to flee are largely within the US power to implement itself. A scholar in our working group argued: "There is a moral responsibility of the US to take care of everyone they took out of Kabul, including those distributed around the world. No one made it to a flight knowing where their final destination would be." The US could do more to expedite visas and provide economic support to those who have made it across a border.

To do this, the US could incentivize neighboring countries to loosen border restrictions and could itself loosen visa restrictions and provide more aid to refugee support. Importantly, assisting those still trapped in Afghanistan requires much better inter-agency coordination between USAID, which thinks of work with asylum-seekers as beyond its mandate due to its focus on populations within Afghanistan, and Department of State which focuses on populations outside the country. Would-be asylum-seekers still in Afghanistan – many of them women

Figure 1.
Neglected Women's Issues



"We are all advocating for schools to be open... However, it's not just about opening the school but it's about **what is being taught in school.**"

"Suppose the Taliban says that they will allow women to go to school and university. If there is no freedom for people, then they can easily for instance implement their own curriculum and a whole generation of women can stem from Taliban."

"**Domestic violence** is another concern here. Almost 90% of women have faced it and it has very little media coverage, no shelters."

Maternal and reproductive health of women is a concern... There is a huge data gap."

"When we speak of an inclusive government, it should be gender sensitive and inclusive of other ethnic groups/leaders. But we should also think about the **quality of leaders**. Those leaders were corrupt twenty years ago. We need to think about who to be included."

"All the projects are in Kabul—money is in Kabul. Women in provinces would like to participate and earn money as well. The provinces have an **imbalance of monetary allocation.**"

Tag cloud represents issue salience in the Western press regarding the situation in Afghanistan, as determined by a qualitative analysis of a sample of media coverage regarding the situation in Afghanistan since the US withdrawal. Tag size corresponds to frequency distribution of specific themes across the dataset. Analysis conducted in Nvivo 12; tag cloud is created using Flourish.

Quotes, by contrast, exemplify patterns from consultations with Afghan civil society activists and leaders about what the West is missing

¹⁶ Jennifer L. Fluri and Rachel Lehr. "Afghan Women's Civil Society Organizations and Sustaining Peace in Afghanistan," *Extended Final Report for the United States Institute for Peace*. Washington: USIP.

¹⁷ Lina Abirafeh. 2009. *Gender and International Aid in Afghanistan: The Politics and Effects of Intervention*. McFarland and Co. Publishers.

– are caught in an unnecessary bureaucratic limbo. Streamlining this red tape could save lives. Moreover, assisting Afghan women who wish to flee to the US will also assist those who stay in country, since those abroad can work and send home remittances to those who stay.

When it comes to wider initiatives such as education, Afghan women are highly mobilized, often in creative ways. For example, while the US has insisted that girls be in formal schools, Afghan women have organized networks of online educational programs to substitute and ensure that women and girls are literate and connected while awaiting Taliban reforms.¹⁸ The US could support women's own efforts by funding remote curricula and concentrating on equitable internet access throughout the country; or some combination of both.

This is but one example: the point is that policymakers should be listening better to Afghan women and identifying, illuminating, supporting and building on their own creative solutions. **Recommendations:** *Support groups in a position to conduct national public-opinion surveys and ensure such surveys include information relevant to human rights programming; ensure subcontractors and implementing partners base recommendations and programming on data that are representative across standard demographic factors; support implementing partners with programs that have gender-inclusive needs-assessment initiatives; identify and support Afghan women's and women's rights activists' own efforts with direct funding; invest in mechanisms to assist Afghan women and human rights defenders to safely flee the country and support them in resettlement.*

“Expanding internet access to rural areas would dramatically increase the ability of rural women to be heard, educated and engaged in their national conversation and support their education and empowerment in multi-sectoral ways.”

Focus on Gender-Inclusivity in General Initiatives.

Gender programming is often equated solely with women's human rights, but men and boys experience gendered insecurities as well; the poverty and instability stemming from conflict can lead to crises in masculinity when men are unable to provide for their families.¹⁹ Moreover, women are just as adversely affected by the wider milieu of insecurity as by explicit gender discrimination. Therefore, providing more general support for human rights, livelihoods, health, and infrastructure in a gender-inclusive way could be equally if not more helpful than overt pressure for women's rights.

For example, as noted above, in the absence of space for in-person education for women and girls under the Taliban, virtual education programming may be a useful tool. One way that the US

government might consider aiding in these efforts is providing of cell phones and cell phone credits to enhance online participant access, particularly among women.

Infrastructure projects that

could expand internet access to rural areas would support public opinion survey collection as well. This would dramatically increase the ability of rural women to be heard, educated and engaged in their national conversation and support their education, empowerment in multi-sectoral ways.²⁰

Similarly, instead of using Afghanistan's reserves to pay off the Taliban's legal debts, those monies could pay Afghanistan's bills that contribute to economic recovery (such as electricity imports from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) or be channeled through the World Bank Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund to pay salaries for teachers,

doctors, and sanitation workers. As several practitioners noted, reopening the economy will benefit women directly, since education and health are the largest sectors providing livelihoods for women.

The US can also support women by ensuring they are not falling through the cracks in more general initiatives. For example, women are in particular need of asylum and exit, but also face particular gendered hurdles in accessing this programs aimed to help ensure this right. It is notable that among those eligible for Special Immigrant Visas, according to data from the Association of Wartime Allies, 'The typical applicant is on average a 34-year old male, with a 23-year old wife.'²¹ Since many women were trained and employed by the US in their own right, this indicates that women are at



Photo Courtesy of Pen Path Volunteers

¹⁸ Firouzeh Akbarian, "The Teacher Defying the Taliban on Girls' Education," BBC, November 3, 2021.

¹⁹ OECD. 2019. "Engaging With Men and Masculinities in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States," *OECD Development Policy Papers*, No. 17. Paris: OECD Publishing.

²⁰ Haroun Hashimi, 2021. "What the Taliban's Rise to Power Means for the Mobility of Afghans," *Xcept*, December.

²¹ Kim Staffieri et al, *The Afghans Left Behind*, Association of Wartime Allies, February 2022.

a disadvantage in accessing the SIV program in their own right rather than as dependents. Informants also mentioned that some women evacuated as dependents may not have wished to leave at all. Thus, the evacuation program, which could in theory support women's right to flee, is itself in need of gender-inclusive review to ensure women do not fall through the cracks. **Recommendations:** *The US should invest in technology, infrastructure, and health sectors in ways that support women's access to information, employment, and resources. Such programs should be conceived and targeted in a gender-inclusive way and in consultation with Afghan women and their male allies; and should be equitably distributed across geographic locations and ethnicities. USAID and the State Department should work together to enhance opportunities for women and women's human rights defenders to seek and receive asylum.*

Engage Men, Third Parties and Taliban Authorities.

Afghan men are also mobilizing to support women's rights. For example, the Afghan NGO Pen Path organizes Afghan men and boys to support women's education, including by carrying protest signs village-to-village on bikes and gathering materials for mobile libraries. Such efforts should be sought out, supported, valorized, and highlighted, with the understanding that systems of inequality hurt men too; and with an emphasis on the socialization of men and boys and the unique challenges they face.

Schools are a key intervention site, but elders should be integrated in such processes because, in many contexts, they are arbiters of deciding who has reached 'manhood': one Afghan activist pointed out the US has erred in seeking to empower youth when it is elders who have the power to transform Afghan social norms. One international NGO, Men As Partners (MAP) that has operated in more than 30 countries globally, including conflict-affected settings such as Angola, Rwanda, and Uganda, assists men to play constructive roles in promoting gender equity. The US could support synergies between transnational men's NGOs and Afghan men for women and girls.

In combatting violent extremism, the US should be mindful that it is often masculinities rooted in anti-imperial ideas that motivate young men to join violent extremist groups.²² For this reason, a more gender-inclusive Afghan culture will be best balanced with conflict prevention if the US finds ways to support women and their male allies without appearing to overtly promote what is perceived or can be framed as a Western standard of gender equality. The US could encourage others with more credibility in the region to negotiate with the Taliban using concepts from Islamic doctrine. Examples of such third parties include the transnational community of Islamic scholars or diplomats from moderate Muslim-majority states, such as Qatar and Indonesia.

Scholars in our working group as well as certain Afghans we consulted did caution, however, that there are limits regarding Islam as a normative currency given tribal norms within Afghanistan, which often trump religion. Nonetheless, both the humanitarian and human rights advocates we consulted stated that they found invoking Islamic doctrine and/or their own identities as Muslims very

effective in negotiating with Taliban authorities. Experts stressed the need to translate human rights concepts into religious and culturally appropriate formats. Groups such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws specialize in empowering women and their male allies in using Islamic doctrine to promote human rights. Considering how to do this effectively should be a priority for a wider array of human rights advocates. **Recommendations:** *The US should look for opportunities to empower both women and Afghan men with a track record of leadership on behalf of women and girls, and fund programs to train local communities in ways to advocate with Taliban using religious concepts as well as human rights language. USAID could also increase funding to Islamic NGOs, such as Islamic Relief Worldwide, and to Afghan-run NGOs to empower programming in a culturally authentic way that respects local traditions and works within local structures. Western-based NGOs should prioritize deployment of Muslim aid personnel in Afghanistan and train non-Muslim personnel in Islamic culture/doctrine/concepts. The US State Department should encourage transnational Muslim scholars to engage the Taliban on human rights, including those of women; and encourage third party states to ensure participation of Afghan women in negotiations over the country's future.*



Photo Courtesy of Pen Path Volunteers

CONCLUSION: The current situation presents an opportunity for the international community and the US in particular to reassess its approach to gender programming in Afghanistan with a view toward striking the right balance between peace, security, and human rights including rights for women. While women's rights should not be sacrificed for peace, the United States abdicated much of its power and leverage when it withdrew from the Afghan theater and must reassess its strategy. Rather than continue overt confrontational gender diplomacy, the US should support and empower Afghan women, women's rights activists and their male allies. Most importantly, the US should take steps to mitigate rather than exacerbate the harm caused by its own withdrawal.

²² David Durie-Smith. 2018. "Hybrid Warriors and the Formation of New War Masculinities." *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 7(1): 1-16.

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