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PARTICIPANTS:

Introduction:

JOHN R. ALLEN
President
The Brookings Institution

Keynote:

JOHN F. SOPKO
Special Inspector General
Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR)

Panelists:

MODERATOR: VANDA FELBAB-BROWN
Senior Fellow and Director, Initiative on Nonstate Armed Actors
The Brookings Institution

BELQIS BARRAI
Gender Integration Manager, Independent Consultant

KATE E. BATEMAN
Gender Project Lead, Lessons Learned Program,
SIGAR

PASHTANA DURRANI
Founder and Executive Director, LEARN

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P R O C E E D I N G S

GENERAL ALLEN: Well, good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I'm John Allen. I'm the president of the Brookings Institution. And it is a great pleasure to welcome you all today, this important event, “Women in Afghanistan and the Role of U.S. Support.”

Today, Afghanistan is at a critical juncture, as the Biden administration seeks to determine its policy objectives in the country. Almost a year ago, at the end of February 2020, the Trump administration signed a deal with the Taliban to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan in May 2021.

This was in exchange for the Taliban agreeing to counterterrorism commitments, reducing violence, severing its ties with al-Qaida, guaranteeing no terrorists attacks against the United States and its allies, and guaranteeing that they would not originate from Afghanistan.

And I'll hasten to add that virtually none of these obligations by the Taliban have a distinct, transparent, measurable outcome while U.S. commitments were concrete. The Taliban also committed itself to beginning separate so-called intra-Afghan peace negotiations with the Afghan government about a future Afghanistan in which Taliban seeks to have a prominent role with their stated objective being it's transformation over time into an Islamic Emirate.

A year later, the Taliban Afghan government negotiations that finally began in the September of 2020 timeframe remained stalled in only the initial phases. The comprehensive cease fire that the Afghan government had hoped would follow remains elusive and very high violence continues in 2020 and through January 2021, killing hundreds of innocent Afghans and members of the Afghan National Security Forces.

Targeted assassinations of civil society members, judges, and also specific targeting of Afghan women have devastated Kabul and other places within the country. At the same time, the Taliban have not severed its connections to al-Qaida.

Just this week, an airstrike in the Helmand Province killed members of a joint al-Qaida-Taliban planning cell preparing for terror operations in that province. Important to today's event, a massive question mark now hangs over the fate of Afghan women and their rights, as the Biden administration assesses whether to maintain U.S. forces in Afghanistan beyond May 2021, a force which

currently stands at 2500.

Current options are limited and so optimal. And a rapid withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan undercuts the entire international mission to the country and would severely destabilize the Afghan government worsening, in my mind, the dangers most Afghan women continue to face in terms of insecurity and violence, and the lack of services and job opportunities, this much is clear.

And while the Taliban have seemed to soften their rhetoric towards women, we should treat that with the same skepticism as their commitment to sever their ties to al-Qaida. Indeed, women in Afghanistan face many challenges to their rights and to their opportunities.

And they face these challenges from men of all types including not just those in the Taliban, but also government officials, government corruption, and predatory and rapacious behavior associated with government-linked power brokers and warlords.

Furthermore, an open-ended U.S. military commitment to maintain forces until a good peace deal is reached, an outcome that could easily take years, may force the Taliban to walk away from the negotiations. And this is a risk, frankly, that both sides must weigh very heavily.

Regardless of which path the Biden administration takes, how Afghanistan and its political order is ultimately redesigned is left almost entirely up to negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government, and other Afghan officials, power brokers, and hopefully representatives from the Afghan civil society.

Now, in my mind, very sadly, the Trump administration aggregated its responsibility to Afghan women, and, more broadly, to the international community when it left the fate of Afghan women in the intra-Afghan peace negotiations without establishing a U.S. and international expectation for how the ultimate peace plan would guarantee the safety and the rights of Afghan women which were obtained at such a great price to this point.

It would be difficult to overstate how terribly women have suffered at the hands of the Taliban and how much, in relative terms, the conditions for them have improved during the period of the U.S. and NATO involvement.

Here, in my view, the United States maintains a strong policy focus on women's rights in

the country, and it has to do so just as it did during the NATO period. And though the final outcome is up to the Afghan people, the U.S. and the international community must play a central role in ensuring the safety and the prosperity of Afghan women going forward.

As has been said in Afghanistan, "Women hold up half the sky," and we must not abandon them at this most pressing hour.

So, with that, I am delighted to introduce the Special Investigator General for Afghan Reconstruction John F. Sopko, who is joining us today to deploy his work, his most recent report from the Office of the Special Investigator General for Afghan Research -- Afghan Reconstruction -- a report entitled, "Support for Gender Equality."

And, John, this is some of your very best work, and I have to thank you sincerely for that. Mr. Sopko was appointed by the Obama administration in 2012, and he has spent eight years on Afghanistan reconstruction. And through that work and his tireless leadership, has recovered more than $3.8 billion on behalf of the U.S. government.

He's a leading expert on Afghanistan, a long, long, career in the law. He was 30 years a prosecutor, congressional counsel, and a senior federal advisor. John, it's wonderful to have you with us today. And I'll turn the floor over to you in just a moment for your opening remarks.

But I want to remind everyone we're very much live. We're going to be recorded. And for those who want to add questions to our list today, please contact us at events@brookings.edu.

So, with that, John, welcome. Thank you so much for being with us today and using us as the platform to deploy this very important report. The floor is yours, sir. And you're muted, sir. John, you're muted.

MR. SOPKO: Well, I may be the special inspector general, but I'm not a technician. So, I apologize for that. Thank you very much for those kind comments, General Allen. It's always a pleasure to be here.

And I want to thank you, as well as Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown for inviting us to release the report today and to discuss what I think may be one of the most important reports we have released, the report which is entitled, "Support for Gender Equality: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan,"

is the first comprehensive and independent U.S. government analysis of all of our efforts to support gender equality in Afghanistan.

It examines all of our efforts since 2002 to improve the lives and advance the rights of Afghan women and girls. Why is this report important? I think, General, you have alluded to it.

Today, the NATO defense ministers are meeting about their role, continuing role. And as we release it today, we know the new Biden administration is conducting its own review of U.S. policy in Afghanistan, which I am certain will include the critical issue of how the United States can continue to support Afghan women and girls at such a time of great uncertainty about their country's future.

This key question is vitally important in the context of peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. And the answer may determine whether there are successes, and there have been successes. And investment in improving the lives of Afghan women and girls will remembered as a lasting legacy or just another historical footnote in this poor country called Afghanistan.

As you can probably tell already from my presentation, I am very proud of this report. And I am even prouder of the Lessons Learned Program, which produced it. And as many of the audience may not know, it was you, General Allen, among others, who suggested to me a number of years ago, that SIGAR initiate a Lessons Learned Program.

I think you knew that SIGAR was the only independent agency with the statutory authority to look at the whole government effort in Afghanistan and reconstruction, as well as the initiative and the personnel on the ground to do so.

Apropos of that, is the U.S. embassy personnel and U.S. military presence have been downsized over the last year. I'm pleased to say that SIGAR is the only office (inaudible) general, still operating on the ground, in Afghanistan, with the personnel to continue this mission.

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

One need only watch the recent U.S. Senate confirmation hearings for Secretary of State

Blinken and Secretary of Defense Austin to realize the importance of this issue to U.S. policymakers, especially, the Congress where nearly every question about Afghanistan asked and emphasized the need to protect the rights of women and girls there.

Turning to the report itself, beyond looking at just U.S. programs and interviewing over three dozen current and former U.S. and Afghan government officials and outside experts, we, at SIGAR, felt it was necessary that this report highlights the voices of Afghans themselves, especially Afghans who live outside Kabul.

And I'm glad to see, as part of the presentation today, we have two very special guests who will be at the panel following us. Accordingly, SIGAR itself commissioned field interviews and we interviewed 65 Afghans, both male and female, located in provinces throughout the country.

They represent a wide range of Afghan society and viewpoints from parliamentarians to internally displaced persons. And I think their participation in this report truly makes it unique.

The experiences hey shared with us are particularly important as the story of women in Afghanistan is more complex than a simplistic portrait often painted of either mini-skirted wearing women in 1970s era Kabul, or passive victims forced to wear burkas and subjugated to the will of Islamic fundamentalists.

As we note in the report -- and this is very important -- that such one-dimensional narratives can undermine even the most well-intentioned efforts to ensure women and girls are afforded basic human rights, a task whose difficulty is best summarized up of the realization that there are no words in Dhurrie or Pashtu for gender or gender equality.

Now, as the report shows, the U.S. investment to support the rights of Afghan women and girls has been significant. SIGAR's analysis found that the U.S. government had disbursed at least $787 million for activity primarily intended to support Afghan women. And, almost certainly, more money was spent as roughly 100 additional U.S. programs included a gender component of some kind.

Unfortunately, we found that those efforts yielded mixed results. On the one hand, considerable investment across a range of sectors contributed to indisputable gains, especially, in education and maternal healthcare.

SIGAR found that there was broad demand from the Afghans themselves for these services, and U.S. agencies responded with well-designed and effective programs. Yet, SIGAR's examination of the 24 major programs in dealing with women and girls revealed some serious shortcomings.

Some programs were designed and based on assumptions that proved to be ill-suited to the Afghan context. We also found that establishing a correlation between program activities and related outcomes were not always possible, and insufficient monitoring and evaluation of program activities often made it impossible to assess program impact.

Now this is something that we have found throughout the whole reconstruction field in our work over the last 10 years. Additionally, as our report notes, a frequent critique of aid programs in Afghanistan has been the failure to take local context including cultural norms into consideration.

Moreover, while high-level political attention on gender issues by Congress and three different administrations translated into significant funding to these efforts, the level of political attention may also have led to reduced scrutiny of many programs.

But despite this, the report found that the importance of U.S. backing for Afghan women's rights should not be underestimated in and of itself. Afghan women repeatedly told our staff that the vocal support by the United States and the international actors was a key factor in advancing their rights and their participation in public life.

But despite these successes, our report reminds us we cannot be naïve about the challenges that the women and girls of Afghanistan continue to face to this day. And, General, you alluded to the problems.

It's not just the Taliban, it's also the warlords and its corrupt government officials and many other problems. Make no mistake, though they have achieved greater access to healthcare and education and work as legislators, judges, teachers, health workers, civil servants, journalists, and business and civil society leaders, Afghanistan still remains one of the most challenging places in the world to be a women.

These challenges, notwithstanding the question now facing U.S. policymakers, ,is how to

protect those gains that we have made. And, as our report notes, the effort to promote women's rights in Afghanistan may also be hampered by anew narrative, a narrative that the country can either have women's rights at the cost of peace, or peace at the cost of women's rights.

I do not believe gender equality is a zero sum game, nor does this report find it so. The U.S. can and should continue to play a role in shaping an outcome that preserves gains made by Afghan women and girls by advocating now and continually advocating that Afghan women have a meaningful role in the peace process and not just window dressing and that any future agreement includes strong protections for them.

Clearly, U.S. policymakers should consider conditioning U.S. assistance to any future Afghan government whether it includes the Taliban or not on that government's demonstrated commitment to the protection of the rights of women's and girls.

Likewise, the U.S. government should also consider strongly encouraging the other donors to include like and similar conditions. These actions deserve consideration in order to protect the investment the United States has made in the Afghan women, who now serve throughout the country as educators, politicians, entrepreneurs, and healthcare workers.

These women, in turn, we must remember have hopes that their daughters will have opportunities that they could never have imagined two decades ago. So, remember, the U.S. investment in the women of Afghanistan is an investment in Afghanistan's future.

We should forget the bitter lesson we learned from our previous withdrawal from Afghanistan. Cutting our support to those whom we have previously encouraged to rise up can lead to tragedy not only for them but for us.

So let me close by saying, there is a link to the report at www.sigar.mil, where you can see the full report, as well as an interactive version of the report.

But before turning it over to questions, General, I want to personally express my deep appreciation to the SIGAR team who produced the report: to Kate Bateman, who is here today, who led this effort for over the last two years, did a tremendous job; to Samantha Hay; to Miriam Jalalzada; to Sarah Rababy; Matthew Rubin; Hayley Rose; Nikolai Condee-Padunov; Tracy Content; Vong Lim; Jason

Davis; and, of course, Joe Windrem, who is the Lesson Learned Program director.

Without them -- and I know it was a team effort -- without them, this report would not have been possible. So thank you very much for the opportunity to be here today, and I look forward to the rest of the program.

GENERAL ALLEN: Well, John, thank you very much. Those remarks were terrific. I think they are right on target, right spot on. As you say, we're having the defense ministers' conversation right now at NATO, and really important subjects are afoot with them.

And, John, you and I first crossed paths in, I think, 2012 --

MR. SOPKO: Yes.

GENERAL ALLEN: -- in Afghanistan. And I want to thank you, in all of those years since then, for the great work that you have done. And that work has not only saved our country a lot, with respect to the manner in which we have undertaken reconstruction, that's also recovered a lot.

But in this Lessons Learned project, which you have undertaken and personally led, we won't make these mistakes again because these lessons learned, are extraordinarily important. And this report may be some of the very best work that you have ever done.

So I want to thank your team also. Because it's not just good for us in the United States; it's going to be good right now in this critical moment for the women of Afghanistan. And I want to thank you for that.

Now I have got several questions, and then we'll turn it over to Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown, who will be having a conversation with a panel. But, you know, many observers, John, fear that what will happen if the Taliban assume a significant role in the Afghan government.

We know that they have said they want to see the government trend ultimately towards being an Islamic Emirate. But we don't know what that means in the context of how women will ultimately be treated within that society.

As you have gone through this work, and as Kate and others have put this report together, what are your thoughts on? What is your assessment of what the future of the Afghan women will look like in this peace process during the process and after?

MR. SOPKO: that is the ultimate question, and we don't have a firm answer.

GENERAL ALLEN: Sure.

MR. SOPKO: I mean Kate will tell you, you know, what we learned and all of that. I know you and Dr. Felbab-Brown did an excellent article last year, in which you talked about some of those main issues, actually, it's very simpatico between the two of us.

But I am very concerned, you know, not only have I not met a women in Afghanistan who trusts the Taliban, I haven't met many men who trust the Taliban in Afghanistan. Now I have only talked to people in Kabul or the major cities. But, overall, there is a great concern.

You know, the Taliban talks that they have changed, but have they? A lot of their rhetoric still is conditioned on “we believe in rights for women.” But under Islamic law or under Sharia, what does that mean? They haven't defined it.

And the sad thing is in this -- you call it a peace agreement, I call it a withdrawal agreement -- that was signed a year ago, and you make reference to, there is no reference to protecting human rights or protecting the realm of democracy that was created, or protecting the Constitution, or protecting women.

So we walk into this, and the Afghans walk into this with trepidation. So I can't give you a definitive answer, maybe Kate can give you more. There have been people talking out in the countryside to Afghan women and men in areas that the Taliban have controlled but it's mixed results.

Some Taliban are really enforcing it; some are violating human rights. The U.N. has identified a number of instances of that; others it hasn't been as bad. We just don't know and that is (inaudible) we're in.

GENERAL ALLEN: John, we have had mixed success when we have dealt with the Taliban, and Taliban leadership have sought to convey that they actually can control the Taliban. And my own experience as the commander there was you had those who sought to exert the appearance of leadership and then you found that Taliban elements in the field didn't feel so constraint as to follow that leadership, or even to have their own programs completely apart from how the, if you will, the Bashar or Shurak might have actually dealt with them or the Kuwait Ashura might have dealt with them.

So the issue I think becomes, as we move forward with a peace agreement, how might the United States -- and you addressed this slightly -- how might the United States and the international community actually demonstrate a real and unambiguous commitment in the aftermath of this process to preserving the rights of women and protecting women going forward?

What options and tools does the United States and the international community have to do that, John?

MR. SOPKO: Well, first of all, what they really need to do is we need to be advocating and advocating repeatedly, repeatedly in every meeting the need to protect these rights, and also protect the constitution of Afghanistan and protect not only the women and girls, but you know, certain liberties for everybody there.

The biggest tool we really have, other than just the advocacy, is the fact that both the Taliban and the Afghan government need and want external monetary support.

GENERAL ALLEN: Right.

MR. SOPKO: And this is a point I have been making. And I think, General, the first time you and I met we talked about this, conditionality, smart conditionality, putting conditions on it.

Right now -- and just so I have my figures straight -- I think the World Bank estimates that the Afghan government right now raises about $2.6 billion. Just to pay for the military every year, it's $9 to $10 billion -- or is it $9 to $10 billion total?

So there is a shortfall; they need assistance. The Taliban say they want continued support from the foreign governments. It should be a strict condition. If you don't follow these rules, if you don't protect the women and girls, you don't get the money and we walk away.

You know conditionality, as you and I have had this conversation, is being brave enough to say no, and being brave enough to pull it back. So I hope we do that, and I hope our allies keep that in mind. That's one of the things we recommend.

The other thing is if we do continue, we have I think 17 various recommendations, all of them should improve the rights of women, or at least maintain it. I mean we definitely cannot ignore the gains we made in education and health.

And so that needs to be funded, but that's got to be conditioned on them -- respected by them, I mean the Taliban and the corrupt government officials respecting the rights of women and girls.

GENERAL ALLEN: John, you have talked about our allies. And I have used the term "international community." Often that becomes very quickly a conversation about NATO. But there are other countries that have equities in the outcome, a genuine peace, and a peace where Afghan women play a role in the future, a constructive role, an important role.

Can you talk a little bit about the larger community, the larger international community that has interests, that have an interest in Afghanistan that the United States ought to be leveraging -- and I think China, for example, or Russia?

Could you talk a little bit about your views in that regard?

MR. SOPKO: Well, you know, our report doesn't discuss it in great details beyond it. But, I mean, reality is Afghanistan doesn't sit in a void. It's surrounded by countries that all have some concern about the future of Afghanistan.

You know, unfortunately, our relations with most of those countries -- by ours I mean the United States -- is not the most positive. So, you know, China is very interested in what happens down there. It's worried about terrorism.

Well, you know, I don't need to go over a chapter and verse about the last administration's dealing with China. It's not as if they ended up being very cooperative with us on this issue.

Russia, borders, you have the stands in between, but Russia is a strong player. Again, our relationship hasn't been great and I don't know if it will be great.

Iran, well, we don't even talk to them. So the players around there are all interested. But how do we -- and, again, we didn't discuss this and this isn't something that's in my purview. But, obviously, the diplomatic issue is extremely important.

And, you know, I think, John, you and I talked about this. This issue is not going to be won on the battlefield. It's going to be diplomacy. But we have to make it a priority for our diplomats that they can deal with these other countries who have an interest in peace in that part of the world.

GENERAL ALLEN: What is your advice? If you were to be asked for your advice about the American presence -- and I'll finish -- on going forward? Is there a strong rationale for retaining a military presence for some period of time? And what's the risks? What are the risks if we pull that military presence out?

MR. SOPKO: Well, as an inspector general, we haven't done it, so I can't say I speak as the inspector general. But everybody we have talked to has said is if there is a quick withdrawal, if the troops leave suddenly, Afghanistan will be in deep trouble militarily. If the funding is cut, I have said this before, all of the experts tell us the government will probably collapse. So they need that funding.

I told you the delta is extremely big and they need it. So I'm cautious about a sudden withdrawal. But, again, I didn't participate, nobody in my staff were even briefed. They wouldn't even brief us on the peace negotiation and I think a lot of people in Congress weren't even briefed on it for a long time.

So I don't know if there are any secret codicils to that that maybe cover it. But I am very concerned. I think this violence that we have seen over the last year, over the last couple of years, but particularly over the last year, really causes us all some concern about whether the Afghan military and police can hold their own.

And I think, in part, I think morale has been effected by some of the actions that our country has taken and some of the statements that were made by senior U.S. government officials about Afghanistan. I mean I hate to use the term, a phrase that John Kerry once said, "You want to be the last GI to die in Vietnam."

But, I mean, do you want to be the last Afghan soldier to die fighting for a corrupt regime and the U.S. is walking out the door?

Morale is an important thing to consider; nobody talks about that. But when you make a statement or tweet something out it has an impact.

GENERAL ALLEN: Right.

MR. SOPKO: You know? People criticize me for issuing my report saying, “Oh, you're hurting the morale.” But, I mean, I write audit reports and lessons learned reports. It's a precarious

situation I think we face, General. And you probably know better than I do, having worked over there, as ISAF commander, morale can be destroyed --

GENERAL ALLEN: Yes.

MR. SOPKO: -- by not only statements but policies that aren't coordinated with the host government.

GENERAL ALLEN: Well, your views obviously carry an awful lot of weight. And your reports have done so much, I think, to season our thinking today, but also the thinking of our future leadership.

And one of the reasons that I asked the question about our troops is, what a lot of people need to understand, and the audience should understand today, and you've touched on it several times, as I have, as well, it's not just American troops that are in Afghanistan.

You know, we went in with a large international contingent to operate on behalf of the Afghan people and to stabilize the Afghan government for a future of representative government. And the presence of those troops creates the environment of confidence amongst the Afghan people.

But it also creates a confidence among our allies to continue the very important support that you talked about -- continue to support the program for women and girl, and continue to support civil society.

And so pulling out 2500 troops might sound like a small decision, it's really a huge decision. Because when the Americans go, the rest of the allies will go. And when the rest of the allies go, the international support will go.

So these things are extraordinarily important. And one of the points that I made to Hamid Karzai, when I would see him on a regular basis in the palace, was that Afghanistan, if it ever seeks to transition from being a conflict society to a developing society one half of the population has got to be involved.

He has got to get the women involved in the development of the society and protect that part of the population that holds up half of the sky. That could only happen, in my mind, and I know in your mind, as well, if we stay, and if we are to sustain that kind of support.

MR. SOPKO: Yeah.

GENERAL ALLEN: So, John, I want to thank you for your work. I want to thank you for the great efforts that the special investigator general for Afghanistan Reconstruction has done for so many years, not just the office, but your personal leadership.

And thank you for being with us today. And I'll offer you the floor for any final comments before I transition to the Dr. Felbab-Brown.

MR. SOPKO: No, I just want to thank you for your leadership, not only as a great general on the field, but also since taking over Brookings. These are the kind of issues -- and it gives us an opportunity to have this type of discussion so that Congress and the government administration -- or it doesn't matter what political party -- can actually flesh out some of the key issues that they need to make decisions on. So thank you.

GENERAL ALLEN: Thank you. There are a few issues right now more important than the future of women in Afghanistan. So thank you, John.

And over to you, Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown, and thank you for your great work on this area, and please lead us in this next panel.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well, thank you very much, General Allen. It's always a delight to share a panel event with you. And I am enormously grateful to your commitment to Afghanistan and to women in Afghanistan, which has indeed been inspirational.

And it was a great pleasure to author the paper that Mr. Sopko mentioned with you on the fate of women's rights in Afghanistan, an issue that we are all discussing today. And I look very much forward to moving to our panel and particularly to great representatives of women from Afghanistan, as well as Kate, whom I'll introduce just in a moment.

Let me also thank Mr. Sopko for his work for speaking truth to power and diligently looking at wide range of issues regarding counterinsurgency and stabilization effort including the latest paper that I just report on Afghan women and U.S. assistance efforts.

One of the issues I appreciate about the report, and that I think is really fundamental about discussing effectively and helping effectively to protect and promote women's rights and progress in

Afghanistan is to focus on complexity and focus on nuance, move beyond black and white portrayals of, on the one hand, the tremendous brutality that women in Afghanistan face and have endured and the challenges they continually face and seemingly the simplicity of progress.

As we have heard today repeatedly, the progress has been very important but also highly unequal. And the challenges and complexities come from many directions. In a very simple complexity or line of complexity is of course the divide between rural spaces and urban spaces, and particularly several large urban areas such as Kabul, and Jalalabad, Kunduz, Yawan, Mazar, Herat, where women have been able to avail themselves of the constitutional rights, legal rights and economic opportunities to a far greater extent than women in other parts of the country, certainly, in the rural areas but also in other towns and other cities, like, Tarinkot or Kalang.

Another line, of course, is between areas that are ruled by the Taliban, increasingly a wider space, and areas that are not. With different types of challenges and complexities emerging there, by and large, access to rights and economic and other opportunities in areas controlled by Taliban is much lesser than in areas that's controlled by the government.

But, again, there is great variation, as was already indicated, based on particular Taliban commanders shadow or district governors and there were wide other set of issues, how predatory and rapacious are the power brokers associated with the government in the particular area, what kind of ethnic tribal minority a woman might belong to.

Often areas with the Taliban, the Taliban operates are known still for very brutal punishments for issues such as adultery. Yet, there are very many women in Afghanistan who are in prison as a result of the legal judicial process that Afghanistan embarked on after 2002 for so-called moral crimes, such as running away from abusive husbands or defending themselves against physical brutality from their husbands, fathers, or brothers; yet, they'll end up being imprisoned.

While they exact brutality and limit the rights of women in many ways, Taliban courts also often far better guarantee inheritance rights to women and property rights under Sharia than legal courts in Afghanistan which often are very slow and corrupt with male relatives being clad in a better position to corrupt the court to get judicial outcomes favorable to them that disinherit women and take money away

from them.

We have heard also about the dichotomy of war or peace versus women's rights and indeed the complexities of that. And, of course, war is experienced in very different ways and in different consequences in the rural or urban spaces.

All of those whose relatives and friends are killed, of course, tremendously suffer a great trauma in multiple ways, and we are seeing really an egregious and awful assassination campaign in Kabul and several other places that have also targeted women, judges, and others.

But often it is in the rural areas where the daily suffering, the daily deaths and injuries are far higher than in urban spaces, and where it is the rural women that experience the loss of male relatives as a result of fighting.

And when male relatives are lost that might mean that a woman and her children, particularly female offspring, then lose all access to any kind of social economic opportunities.

Not surprisingly, many women in the rural areas are already unable to access the nominal legal rights that exist are very eager to see a cessation of hostility and end to fighting, even perhaps under a Taliban rule.

They might really be experiencing a Taliban rule, and sometimes even a brutal and predictable Taliban rule might be easier to develop coping mechanisms for than unpredictable rapacious and capricious rule and brutality perpetrated by power brokers associated with the Afghan government.

So very many complexities that I am now going to ask our panel to address and explore. But, perhaps, find a line before I introduce our panel is that it seems fundamental for us, for the international community, to really focus on the agency of Afghan women.

And as we talk about how we guarantee Afghan's women's rights, how we preserve them, we need to increasingly and equally be asking, how do we, how do Afghan women embrace their agency and their actions? What is it that they want us to do, how they want us to be of assistance as to what is their agency?

And the agency of Afghan women is extraordinarily impressive, as is their endurance and survival and has been on display not just since 2002 -- since 2001 in the U.S. intervention, but way

before.

So, with that, let me introduce our panelists now: First, is Kate Bateman, who is the project lead in the Lessons Learned Program, in the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

Kate is also the lead author of the report that has just several minutes ago went live on U.S. Support for Women and Gender Rights in Afghanistan. Kate has worked on other reports produced by the SIGAR's office such as on anti-corruption, counter-narcotics, the integration of ex-combatants, and her analysis has appeared in a variety of prominent publications.

She has previously served in intelligence and policy positions in the U.S. Departments of State in Washington, D.C., in Afghanistan, and in Sri Lanka.

Next, I am really thrilled to introduce two enormously brave, impressive Afghan women, who, in my view, represent the power and agency of Afghan women that I have spoken about. And I am particularly grateful for their participation. As this takes place very late at night, enormously kind for them to be willing to join us at this hour.

But I am also very grateful and impressed that we have the opportunity to talk with them even though they are outside of Kabul. This is rare these days, as insecurity has increased and the Taliban has been ascendant on the battlefield, more and more are civil society actors, as for less international actors have collapsed onto Kabul.

And so, Pashtana Duranni and Belqis Barrai are two Afghan women, who are still operating and engaging in projects outside of Kabul.

Belqis is an engineer by training and she focuses on women development issues and has done so for many years promoting and helping to implement projects funded by USAID. For example, she has been a regional integration manager for Rural Development in Southern Afghanistan, where she has closely worked in Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul, and Oruzgan

Much of her work has focused on issues such as promoting sustainable economic growth for rural Afghan women, an absolutely fundamental issue that gives meaning or takes away meaning from the nominal rights that women can enjoy under the existing Afghan constitution.

Pashtana Dhurrani is yet another very impressive person, a social and political activist, educator, as well as writer, such as for outlets, like, the Kabul Times and the Afghan Times, among others.

Pashtana runs a non-profit organization called LEARN, in which she helps educate boys and girls in southern Afghanistan, as well, on a whole variety of issues including taboo but absolutely fundamentally issues, such as menstrual hygiene. And she also engages with the adults, for example, training teachers in digital literacy.

She is the global youth representative for Amnesty International and has been awarded the Malala Fund Education Champion Award, and she is also a member of UNDPs GF Student Committee.

Thanks to all three of you for joining us today. I am enormously eager to hear your voice, Kate. I'll turn to you first and ask you to give us perhaps little bit more, flesh little bit more details of the report, some of the key takeaways analytically and in terms of recommendations.

MS. BATEMAN: Sure, thank you so much for the kind introduction. And thank you to the Brookings Institution, and especially also to my fellow panelists, Belqis and Pashtana, for sharing your perspectives and some ground truth with us.

I'd like to start just by setting the context of U.S. efforts. As Mr. Sopko and General Allen have discussed, promoting women's rights was not the reason, in the first place, for the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan. But it has been a major goal of the reconstruction effort through three administrations and we see that in the nearly $800 million that Mr. Sopko mentioned has been put towards this goal.

And the U.S. has tried to advance women's rights in Afghanistan for two main reasons: I think, first, because it's the right thing to do; and, two, because policymakers have believed that doing so, that ensuring half of the population has greater opportunity at placing public life that this would mean a more stable and secure Afghanistan which is in the U.S. interest.

The reconstruction effort itself and the reordering of the Afghan state opened a door to donors including the U.S. to do what we could to support women and girls. And there has been this high level U.S. political tension to the issue and that resulted in a high level of resources.

No other country in the world has seen this level of U.S. resources to elevate women's status. And I don't think that where U.S. efforts fell short, it has been for lack of money.

Sometimes we talk about the development effort as if it happened in a vacuum. And I think Vanda's comments underscore this as well, that these development efforts have happened amidst an ongoing ware, one in which the U.S. is a party to the conflict. And that's why we devote a chapter in the report to the war's impact on women.

I think it's important also to at least acknowledge that many Afghan women, their views of the United States are probably not shaped only by U.S. development work, rather the way in which they and their families have experienced the war itself. And, in addition, insecurity from the war has constrained our development efforts in some areas.

So that leads us to the question: What have women's gains been since 2001? One of the key contributions of the report is that we have pulled together a lot of data on these gains and they are substantial, especially, in health, education and establishing a legal framework for rights and protections for women.

I encourage you all to look at the report's main findings for a summary of these gains. And the report also has five chapters that go into much more detail on the gains and the barriers, as well, in five sectors: health, education, political participation, access to justice, and economic participation.

Within those chapters, we also discussed women and the media and then we have a separate look at women in the security forces, in the army and police. So we also take a very honest look at how the gains have been uneven. As Vanda said, rural women and girls have seen far less improvement in their situation. For example, more than four times as many women died of pregnancy and birth-related causes in rural areas than in urban areas, as of 2014.

And I'll shift to say a few things about what we propose that the U.S. should do, and we put forward 17 recommendations I'll just touch on four of them. First, in terms of the peace negotiations, we need consistent and clear diplomacy to stay engaged and have a unified voice with our partners.

Some Afghan women we talked to felt there had been some equivocation and some mixed messaging from the U.S. in the last two years in terms of having a bit more hands off approach in

our -- in terms of leaving up to intra-Afghan negotiations this important issue.

We also urge that the U.S. be a strong voice for women participating in all aspects of the talks, not just at the formal table, but in side meetings, in backdoor meetings, there are many different venues.

And then negotiators are consulting with a range of civil society actors, who can then bring to the table the views of Afghans outside Kabul. The U.S. needs to advocate that any future agreement protects the civil and human rights of all Afghans. An important piece of this pressure, as Mr. Sopko mentioned, can be conditionality on future aid.

We also point out that women's rights are not just a women's issue. The world should be watching to see that Afghan male negotiators defend women's rights, that female negotiators are playing a meaningful rule on all issue. Because they are at the table, after all, as representatives of all Afghans.

And, second, we advocate that the U.S. should focus on healthcare and education. These programs have been effective and innovative. The report goes into much more detail on them. We looked closely at a subset of 24 programs out of the more than 100 state and USAID programs that we identified.

But these healthcare and education programs have been effective. They have sought to meet an enormous need, but there is still much greater need. And the Afghan population widely supports these efforts.

So we think that the U.S. should build on what has been proven to work, especially, if aid levels further decline. And, best case scenario, if there is a reduction in violence then the U.S. should be prepared to take advantage of doors opening in terms of reaching areas that have been less accessible.

Third, agencies should prioritize and fund strong monitoring and evaluation. And one of the reasons we identify for greater success in maternal health and education programs was that they had -- many of them included ongoing assessments that fed into program design, that enabled agencies in implementing implementers to adapt and adjust and that they had strong impact evaluations.

We found several examples where good M&E led to this learning and made the program even more successful. USAID's community-based education efforts have been a real bright spot in this

respect.

Fourth, we recommend that U.S. agencies put a greater focus on working with Afghan men and boys, as partners on gender equality issues. And some U.S. programs did, again, you know, innovative things to put that principle into practice and with good effect. But we could certainly be doing this more widely.

And, lastly, I'd like to share a quote from one of the interviews that we commissioned. This is from a woman in Kunar Province. And she said, "If a woman wants to work, first, she will face challenges and disagreement at home. When she convinces her family members after arguing with them for several days, then she will have to face opposition from the community's members, religious leaders, then local elders. There are always going to be people in the community who don't think working or being outside of the house is a good thing for women. This is a man's world and we have to fight to be in it."

And I chose that quote, in part, because it almost, you know, it made me think, well, 30-40 years ago, parts of this could be applied to the United States for sure, maybe parts of it could still be applied to America.

But I think it reminds us that gender equality is a multigenerational effort. It absolutely requires the involvement of men. And it is, most importantly, perhaps, it's Afghan women, themselves, who have done the hardest work and shown the most courage.

And I will stop there, and I will look forward to more discussion.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Thank you very much, Kate. It's a great quote including because it shows that offers the challenges to Afghan women that come from very many quarters beyond the Taliban. And for many women, including in urban spaces, it is really male relatives who determine whether the woman can access education at what level beyond puberty or not, and if she has education whether she can implement the education to access the workforce.

And we also see that those issues continue to be highly contested with recent surveys showing many men who are not Taliban, who are in urban spaces increasingly resentful at the number of women in workforce, as they suffer unemployment themselves, and complain about the scope of rights that women have.

So, very important quote to highlight how much the challenges run. But the issue of work, so fundamental for any kind of empowerment and for giving new meaning to empowerment is something that, Belqis, you have been dealing with for many years.

And you have been dealing with it in the context of rural Afghanistan, southern rural Afghanistan, where the social pressures are often far greater. Belqis, over to you please.

Well, it is possible that we have lost Belqis, who is in Southern Afghanistan, in a difficult place. I will not say where she is in order to protect her safety. But I know that there have been challenges with the Wi-Fi signal. So I hope that we will get Belqis back in a few minutes.

And, meanwhile, perhaps I can turn to you, Pashtana, to speak also about your perspectives, particularly, as you, too, have been organizing a lot of tremendous activities in Southern rural Afghanistan in very faraway places that often do not see much of a presence of Western projects, let alone, Western researchers or assessors.

So enormously grateful to you, Pashtana, and over to you please.

MS. DYRANNI: Thank you, Kate, and wonderful that I just want to start with the fact that when we talk about Afghan women, when we talk about peace negotiations and especially want to talk about the current political situation, the whole narrative is to find a victim who has become a hero in Afghanistan, and has overcome all of those challenges, and has been to, like, schools and institutions in far off areas during the Taliban regime; and then has, like, you know, got through that and has then got, like, you know, a voter base and then got political participation.

I wouldn't name people, our women who would be -- who fit the story. But I feel like it's time that we start with the fact that not every woman has to become a victim in order to get that attention or that space. And, you know, in public spaces or in organizations, or in government.

And, most importantly, if we talk about today, if we talk about work and, most importantly, if we talk about southern Afghanistan, I feel like it's time for USAID, for the U.S. government, and for the international community to start focusing on education.

But, at the same time, if you are funding educational programs maybe start asking questions, if the girls that aren't enrolling in schools, what are their reasons of not staying within schools?

What is being done that they are not staying in schools? What is the reason of the dropout?

A second thing is, if there is an issue with not having a clinic, what is the alternative way for clinic, or the maternal healthcare. Like, you know, we talk about, a lot about the gains, and women rights, and work rights, but we don't talk about the fact that Helmand is facing, you know, the highest mortality rate right now, and we are losing women every day.

And that doesn't mean that we lose just one woman, the mother of children. You lose one woman, or a sister of that same woman who has to be married to the same guy, where the mother was married to, and then at the same time that young girl has to look after the children, and at the same time she gets impregnated for the second or the third year and that's early child marriage and early child pregnancy.

So if the international community is donating and funding such programs, why are they not asking questions? And, most importantly, about political participation, we, at the moment, we don't have our provincial elections. We haven't had them, like, you know, in the past 6 to 7 years.

Why is the international community not asking questions for that? And, most importantly, what is the reason if women are not getting elected, or what is the reason that rural women are not getting elected?

And, most importantly, if we are focusing on, like, you know, funding of Afghanistan, we're focusing on women rights, on gender equality, maybe it's time to focus on alternative ways. Because the ways that we have already been working for two decades maybe they are not working and that's the reason that 33 provinces, especially the rural areas, they have been left out.

Like, I come from a district called Maruf and that area has been left out for two decades. We have 43 infrastructure schools and not a single teacher, and the salaries are allotted by the Nordic countries every year. And they get the salaries, but there is not a single teacher.

And we have to focus on alternative ways to learn through digital literacy. And, at the same time, when the international community talks about CSOs involved, or civil society involved, they don't involve the actual civil society that is working on the ground.

They involve the elite ones, or the ones that are funded by, you know, the people in

Kabul who are related to the elite families, or the people in the government. Maybe it's time to actually involve people on ground.

And, most importantly, if the U.S. is, like, you know, trying to actually reach people out of Kabul and actually gain on their trust or, like, you know, focus on people that have been left out, especially women, it's time for U.S. to start focusing on programs larger than, like, you know, Promote, just to name one.

And, you know, things like that don't work in Afghanistan's context. Maybe start working and focusing on things, like, we don't have -- uneducated woman -- maybe focus on uneducated woman and their literacy and alternative ways to employ them; maybe focus on M&E and develop routine checkups on those areas are, like Spin Buldak, like Zhari, like Maywan, and maybe start focusing on funding innovative projects that can sustain themselves.

And at the end of this whole remarks thing, I would focus on one thing, stop treating Afghanistan as a project. Afghanistan is not a project; women rights are not a project. Women are not a project.

We are just as equal as -- involved in Afghanistan as everyone else is, and maybe it's time that we focus on sustaining women rights and empower women who have been on the ground, who have work on the ground, and who know that even if when U.S. withdraws -- maybe not today, maybe after 10 years, 20 years, let's say -- maybe by then we have a sustainable system for ourselves and we don't rely a lot, as Mr. Sopko said, on fines, on monetary fines, because enough is enough.

It has been two decades and we still rely everything on the international community. And maybe that's the reason that our women are so left out of the whole thing, because they still depend on the government and the government that has asked -- as the Taliban that, like, there is no difference between the two.

So we need to have the sustainability in mind, and we need to stop treating everything like a project within Afghanistan. We need to move forward from that.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: A very powerful and strong statement, thank you so much, Pashtana.

We are just doing all we can to see if we can get Belqis back online and hear her very important perspectives on efforts to develop economic opportunities for women in the rural areas in Afghanistan. So, as soon as we manage, if we manage, hopefully, I will bring her into the conversation.

But, meanwhile, let me stay with you, Pashtana, please. So we heard in the prior remarks about the threat that Taliban poses certainly to the level of -- certainly to rights and protections, as they currently exist under the Afghan constitution, something the Taliban wants to change in negotiations. Although it's not -- there is no explicit detailed articulation of what changes would take place.

But you operate in wide patch of the country including rural areas. Can you give us some examples of what life is for women in areas with strong Taliban presence such as in a rural Helmand or rural Kandahar?

What kind of practical material differences does it mean to live in Lashkargah, for example, versus living in (inaudible), please?

MS. DURRANI: So I would, like, you know, I remember going to, like, you know, Spin Buldak with this one lady back in the day, like, a year ago, she had cancer and she was from Lashkargah. So it was taxi and she was sitting by my side. And, like, she was going to Qatar for, like, her surgery probably.

And, you know, the other women was with her and she asked me if I had some money to give her because she couldn't afford going through the border to Qatar. And it was around 500 Afs. And so we started talking and we talked. And I asked her, like, you know, what's the reason, like, you are going to Qatar instead of, like, you know, all of these good hospitals that we have here?

And she tells me that getting into these hospitals would cost me more rather than going to Qatar. And that made me realize that our rural woman in Lashkargah is so scared of going to a hospital in Kandahar, in the city, would rather go to a country that is hostile to refugees and Afghans, rather than going to the main city and the hospital.

For the reason that I am giving you this utterly irrelevant example is because this is how women are actually within Afghanistan. Now I'm going to give you another example of -- (crosstalk)

MR. FELBAB-BROWN: If I could just clarify, what was she afraid of? Was she afraid of

having to pay at checkpoints to warlords, or was she afraid of the Taliban were to kill her if she traveled on the road? Did she give you any details?

MS. DURANNI: It was all about, like, you know, getting into a hospital, paying for extra money because the hospital is public. You are not supposed to pay anything. But within our hospitals it's so corrupt that you have to pay, one way or the other.

The second thing that she was most afraid of that we don't have that capacity, let's be honest, 20 years, all of these doctors, all of that investment. If you don't have key people doctors, even today, that can handle cases like that, a normal case, like, TB, or a normal case, like, lower ranges of chemotherapy. Right?

The second thing, the second example I would give you is of Barani. She is my third cousin. She lives in Maruf. She is probably now 19. She was married off when she was 15, and she was married to an Afghanistan National Army officer.

And so her husband died on the ground and on the battlefield, and he was brought back, and he was buried, and then after that she kept on getting threats from her own family. And she kept on, like, you know, getting beaten up, her children and herself, within her in-laws.

So she went to the city. She came to the tribal leaders and she kept on living at our house. The one reason was, she lived under the Taliban, like, Taliban regime. So she cannot go on and ask someone else to provide her with the justice.

But, at the same time, the men are so powerful she cannot challenge them back. So there is these two narratives, you know. You live under the Taliban control. You cannot ask questions back. That's one side. But if you come to the city, you still cannot ask the government to help you. Because the first thing the government is going to tell you is, like, you come from a Taliban controlled area. What are you doing here?

The second thing is, you are a woman. They are probably going to grope you. I am being very honest right now. That's what happens when you go to public offices.

The third thing is, her only option was going to an institute which is, like, thousands of years old to Alingar to get her case resolved to stop her from getting beaten up daily so that she could go

back with her orphan to the same village which was under the Taliban control.

So do you get the whole narrative of being under the Taliban control, and at the same time, not have being able to access that one institute that has been made for you?

Because, at the end of the day, they're also corrupt. So it's, like, you know, both ways you are going down anyways. So, yeah, that's how it goes for women in Southern Afghanistan.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: So if I can ask you a little bit about the issue of schooling that Kate raised, and just about all of our interrogators highlighted. You know, there is a big answer today as to whether the Taliban envisions a rule like in the 1990s, extremely backwards, doctrinal brutal that literally locked women inside household compounds, if not brutally beaten or executed on the streets.

And what we hear consistently from Taliban interrogators, certainly, at the level of leadership is that they understand that they cannot and don't want act like in the 1990s. That said, as we also heard to the execution of any kind of edicts and references from combatants.

But, nonetheless, it appears that rather consistently we are seeing the Taliban allowing girls to participate in schooling, at least to puberty.

We are, perhaps, seeing -- or at least until puberty, I should say -- we are at least seeing less determination to direct or destroy schools even if, of course, insecurity and Taliban-instigated fighting, just as fighting instigated by the government or others that prevents children from going to school because people are afraid to go to school in the context of violence.

But we also hear narratives that the Taliban, for example, makes sure that teachers are at school; that it cracks downs on corruption; that if teachers have more than one job that the teacher actually shows up in school and the Taliban prevents that level of corruption even if Taliban representatives restrict what kind of classes, what kind of text is being taught.

Please give us your perspective on how those perceptions, or at least those anecdotes that we hear are consistent or different from what you have seen with respect to education and Taliban's current enforcement of Taliban's current rule on the ground.

MS. DURANNI: So, okay, I'm on mute. So I'm going to give you a very irrelevant example again. Last year, it was women's day and there were a few women who have been in the

government now for, like, you know, two decades so they schooled during the Taliban time and in the underground schools.

And, you know, because I was 3-years-old when the Americans came, so I don't remember anything. I wouldn't claim that I have been through that hell. So they kept on talking and these are two deputy ministers. And one is, like, you know, the spokesman for the president.

And the one says that if the Taliban come, at least women won't be getting raped. And what happened during the Mujahedeen time. And I had this, you know, this -- in my mind, it was all about, like, you know, Taliban are the bad people. So how come they're saying that women won't get raped?

But if you see the narrative, if you go around, if you ask the public, there is one thing about Taliban you get fast justice with them. You get fair justice with them. Like, you know, under the Sharia, or what they call, the Sharia,

And also, yes, within narratives where schools are open. They have made sure that teachers do go there. Like, you know, you have to be honest about certain things. Like, on one hand, we have the government that has infrastructures. And that is, like, literally, stealing teachers' salary from the teachers and is using it for their own mega projects; and then there is, on other hand, the Taliban, who are literally cutting women's noses, but at the same time they are making sure that teachers do stand in schools. Right?

So you have to accept that reality. Yes, even I have heard at the moment that even within my district right now the Taliban have agreed to open schools for girls but until they hit puberty. But after that, they cannot, you know, go to school, or go to a public space.

So that is one reality and that has happened. But, at the same time, like, you know, you do see a lot of, like, you know, traditionally, within our communities girls don't go to schools a lot. And I would be very honest about the fact that many people say that it's of no use to go to school for a girl. And that's the reason that a lot of girls don't go to school.

So, again, the narrative is different. But, at the same time, like, in Helmand, Taliban have been burning down schools and they have been, like, you know, torturing teachers. They have been

stopping people who have even smartphones to teach girls, or to teach students.

But, at the same time, in Maruf, and again we have heard that there is, like, you know, this narrative where Taliban do agree on letting men teach women, like, you know, (inaudible), or, like, you know, within the public space. So, yeah, it goes on in different geographies.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Thank you very much. And understanding this nuance is really fundamental in being able to implement and design efforts to promote women's rights and minimize, or at least reduce the challenges for Afghan women and men, as well as for the international community.

I would also posit that much broader engagement and focus on Afghan men so they become promoters of Afghan women is really fundamental and often lacking in our efforts that appropriately focus on women, but perhaps not completely wisely solely focused on Afghan women.

Kate, let me come to you. There are very many questions from the audience as to what the international community, the United States can do to guarantee women's rights in Afghanistan and be heard.

General Allen, Mr. Sopko, you speak about conditionality, strict conditionality. There are also questions that we haven't yet heard and that I very much welcome your thoughts which is:

How can the international community and the United States better deal with the corruption misbehavior that government-linked personalities inflect on Afghan women?

There is a whole set of questions to that effect -- how to better protect human rights against government officials or those linked with government officials.

Another question that I am seeing is: How can the United States better deal with the corruption that so hurt Afghan women?

So, on the government side, how can we do better than we have been doing in the past 20 years? And, particularly, if the United States does not stay engaged in Afghanistan for another 5 or 20 years?

MS. BATEMAN: Yes, it's a huge question. I think I want to mention that it was something that came up in the field interviews that we commission which are, of course, not nationally representative. But everyone we spoke to said you should -- if you can, you have to do this because,

especially in rural areas, women just don't have the channels to, you know, get their views across, women and men.

But we found both women and men interestingly, you know, did. Many people distinguished between the U.S. military presence and the civilian side. And then when they talked about the development efforts they would often be very positive about, you know, we know that U.S. efforts have made a big difference for women and girls. And they often mentioned education as the biggest component of that.

And several people have pointed a finger at, you know, said, we, Afghans, ourselves, have prevented some of that assistance from, like, being, you know, fairly reaching people that our own corruption has, you know, interfered with your efforts.

And so it was interesting to see that. And, I mean, as far as what we can do about it, we also have a Lessons Learned report on U.S. anti-corruption efforts which is now a few years old, but still relevant to this question.

And I think, of course, conditionality is one of the tools. Again, we have not used it, you know, perhaps, as narrowly as we might have, as, you know, as targeted -- in a very targeted way.

And, you know, the pressure to -- SIGAR has talked many times about the pressure to spend budgets is the structural incentives for U.S. agencies spending money in Afghanistan is often not to withhold $50 million or withhold $100,000. Because the incentive is to spend so that you get the same amount the next year.

So there is some structural things in our own house that we could -- you know, in the U.S. side that we could do to put more incentives in place to actually carry out conditionality and more tools to carry it out.

We saw one example within the security forces where, I believe, this was two or three years ago, there was money withheld because of a lack of the biometric, you know, data to confirm the numbers of service members in the ANA, in the Afghan National Army, and some amount was withhold so that we were not funding -- you know, paying the salaries of so-called ghost soldiers.

So conditionality could be better employed I think. But then it's also about support

Afghan actors themselves in civil society to be watchdogs, to be empowered and have the funding and support to hold their own government accountable. So I think some of those longer term efforts are just about the U.S. keeping this on the agenda, as well, in our interactions with the Afghan government and helping to empower civil society to take their own -- you know, to help shift the norms, really, in Afghanistan.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: So, unfortunately, I am very unhappy that we have not been able to get Belqis online. But, indeed, is the fate of cell signal. And Wi-Fi signal in Afghanistan is this for us, even in Washington, D.C., in the Zoom era, we, too, suffer from Wi-Fi challenges at various times. But, nonetheless, Belqis' tremendous contributions on the ground are enormous even if she is not able to share them with us today.

But let me stay with you, Kate, and then I'll ask the same question to Pashtana. So one of the areas I was really keen to hear Belqis about was particularly generating jobs. A topic that we have raised is fundamental jobs for women.

Does your report look at that at all, and particularly jobs outside of the public sector? So women have been able to access jobs in government, which is tremendous. The presence of women including young women in Afghan government, role is unprecedented often because there is explicit quota for female jobholders.

That is, of course, not the case in the private sector where similar quotas cannot be equally accessed and the social pressures are much harder. What thoughts or lessons, either of you, starting with you, Kate, have on job opportunities for women?

MS. BATEMAN: Yeah. I'm glad you asked this question. I think it's right up there with the importance of health and education. But we did look at the private sector and we found, as you said, greater successes in terms of the trends and the portion of women -- or the portion of jobs that women have secured have been greater on the -- the gains are greater in the public sector certainly.

But in the private sector, there are more women-owned businesses than 20 years ago, but the absolute number, you know, has grown. And that's great. And that means thousands of, you know, women's lives and their families have been changed.

And I don't want to discount that. But, at the same time, the, you know, size of the increase -- I mean, proportionally, the size of the increase is still very, very small. And women business owners, you might say, remain a small elite group.

And then, the other side of this is in manufacturing, women remain a majority of the labor force in manufacturing. I think it's 65% was the figure a few years ago; that the problem is that manufacturing includes the lowest paying -- some of the lowest paying and least secure jobs, meaning, you know, most volatile. And so there haven't, you know, we don't see that as an engine of -- you know, that hasn't seemed to be an engine of economic empowerment in the last 20 years.

I also wanted to mention the overall -- we have the figure in the report, but the overall, the poverty rate in Afghanistan has actually slightly increased compared to, I think, 2006-07. So, overall, the availability of jobs is actually shrinking.

And what? And you have 400,000 Afghans joining the labor force every year. What does that mean in a country where a man is expected to be the breadwinner and his honor -- you know, if the woman is -- if women are staying as a symbol of the honor of the family and nation, like, a man's honor is also linked to his ability to provide for his family.

So after only so many jobs available, there are already, you know, many social and cultural norms restricting what jobs are available to women.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Oh, absolutely. And we haven't touched on a fundamental issue, which is COVID that has dramatically increased poverty and economic distrust, which will be translating in far later effects on women than on men in very many ways.

But it also emphasized the challenge of fewer jobs, meaning, greater competition and potentially significant consequences in terms of the willingness of Afghan men to allow women to compete for jobs.

But, Pashtana, you know, quickly to you with that same question of economic empowerment. And I will also give you one additional, the last question, before thanking the whole panel. And the last question, in addition to the economic jobs and opportunities for you is:

From your perspective, as a very impressive, accomplished, young Afghan woman, what

is the best role that the international community can have the United States, perhaps, directly can have in supporting progress for women, please?

MS. DURANNI: Thank you so much. So I will start with the economic opportunities. As Kate said, that there are, like, you know, and unemployment rate has, like, you know, been higher than now than it was back in the day, like, before -- in 2015 or 2014.

So I would also want to highlight on the fact that, you know, and there are few certain things that you want to highlight as in: Are you a young girl?

That I see a lot of private sector companies, they do like to take in women more and, or, at least, like, you know, have ratio which is equality within Kabul or Kandahar, like, there is a lot of what -- or, like, you know, when you go to organizations you meet people, there is always women in leadership positions.

So that is one thing that we should be, like, you know, like, actually talking about and appreciating that that has happened over the course of years, over the course of a different policies or quota that have been implemented through the international community.

So that is something to be appreciated and celebrated. Of course, there is a lot to be done. But this is, like, you know, the starting or, like, you know, the initial stage.

And the second thing is, I feel like, you know, with SMEs, as Belqis said yesterday, is we need to focus on empowering women within our own context. I mean, like, yes, it's a good thing to empower women with the fact that, you know, the money comes for women.

But how about you empower women within her own context as a community members, or a social leader, because that's what we are. We are a very social and communal communities in Afghanistan where we know we go to each other's houses; we go to each other's, you know, funerals; we go to each other's weddings, everything is communal.

So how about we make employment communal for women so that it's accepted more, it's more welcomed within Afghanistan? And it has happened before and it can happen again. And there are a lot of projects that have been working and that have been successful.

But I would strongly, like, you know, talk about the fact that we need to stop focusing on

the fact that women empowerment is not an issue here. Everyone wants to, like, you know, have that, be the breadwinner, or everyone wants to share the burden.

We need to stop with the fact that we need to empower women. We need to stop making Afghan women, like, you know, from being a victim to heroes. We need to stop doing that. We need to just live our general lives.

We need to have our normal jobs. We need to have our normal salaries. That's how Afghanistan is going to sustain. We don't need high-end projects. We don't need a lot of money. We need just sustainability and stop treating everything like projects.

And on your second questions, as you said, what U.S. can do is, like, for U.S. and the international community, my recommendation as an educator is, like, probably focused more on education, not only girls' education on a very low area, like, primary or elementary education.

But how about you introduce programs with skills apart from embroidery, apart from making chutneys or, like, you know, pickers? How about practical skills? This is time for Afghanistan to, like, try agriculture-wise other department, and department-wise.

And I'd say, a third thing is, most importantly, let's focus on communities as communities. Let's focus on empowering leaders within our communities; let's start empowering civil society from rural areas; let's stop handpicking people from elite or high-end surface, who come from abroad, take our places, and then -- I sound a lot like conservatives right now, sorry for that.

That they are taking our jobs, no, I don't mean like that. But what I mean is, like, you know, what Afghans need right now is to take charge of their own, start taking responsibility, and start showing up for their work, start showing for their works that they are assigned to.

Because this is our time and we need to stop, like, you know, if we need to have that equal quota within the peace talks, we need to start showing up; we need to start serving our own country. And that's the most important thing we can do as people, as nation, and as young women in Afghanistan right now.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well, thank you so much for the very powerful words and empowering words, you know, the theme of agency of Afghan people, of Afghan women is, perhaps, the

most important theme, from my perspective, to emphasize steadily.

And thank very much, also many thanks very much, also to Kate, to Mr. Sopko, and to General Allen for your analyses, your excellent comments, and your dedication to Afghanistan.

And, finally, very many thanks to the audience. I channeled or bundled many of the questions that came into broad avenues that we discussed. Thank you for the participation and we look forward to seeing you at Brookings at further events.

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CERTIFICATE OF NOTARY PUBLIC

I, Carleton J. Anderson, III do hereby certify that the forgoing electronic file when originally transmitted was reduced to text at my direction; that said transcript is a true record of the proceedings therein referenced; that I am neither counsel for, related to, nor employed by any of the parties to the action in which these proceedings were taken; and, furthermore, that I am neither a relative or employee of any attorney or counsel employed by the parties hereto, nor financially or otherwise interested in the outcome of this action.

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