

# **Can Foreign Development Aid Help Create a more Gender Equal Afghanistan?**

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**Research Question: How has foreign development aid to Afghanistan been successful in improving gender inequality in the country?**

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

The country **Afghanistan** is known for its detrimental humanitarian and economic crisis. Millions suffer from malnutrition, lack of education and jobs, and breached human rights (AseelFoundation,2023). The situation worsened following the withdrawal of US troops between February 2020 and August 2021 (Council on Foreign Relations,2023). The Taliban, who had previously been in power, were able to regain control over the country. They then issued numerous restrictions and rules, many of these targeted women and girls—removing girls’ rights to education, gender segregation at workplaces, strict dress codes on women, banning women from some public services like gyms, and only being allowed to leave the house if a man accompanies them (EuropeanCouncil,2023).

Afghanistan is an underdeveloped country and relies heavily on foreign aid to meet basic needs of its people. In fact, 75% of the country’s government spending, 75% of public spending, and nearly 45% of its GDP is funded by foreign aid (Hurley,2022; Boghani,2021). It is the number one receiver of foreign aid from the US (Haines,2023) and in the top 10 receivers globally (wristband,2017). Afghanistan can be described as “underdeveloped”, a multi-faceted term that refers to a country being unadvanced wherein number of measurements such as GDP, the Human Development Index (HDI), and the Gini index. They can be used to quantify the degree and domain of development. Afghanistan is ranked lowest on many development measures. For instance, the *World Economic Forum* placed Afghanistan last out of 146 countries in economic participation, education attainment, and gender equality (World Economic Forum,2022).

Foreign development aid is aid provided by external parties, such as Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs), Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) or states. Unlike immediate aid designed for rapid intervention in saving those in desperate need, development aid works to solve underlying societal issues which hinder a countries development. Foreign development aid facilitates the implementation of crucial social infrastructures such as education, healthcare, financial management and public administration (HumanitarianCoalition,2021).

For over two decades, the UK has aided Afghanistan to meet the strategic objective of building a viable Afghan state. A primary goal has been to improve gender equality, considered as one of the fundamental development measures (Gopinath,2022). **This essay aims to evaluate the effectiveness of UK's foreign development aid to Afghanistan in improving gender inequality in the country.** Two theoretical frameworks, Galtung's Conflict Triangle and Sen's Capabilities Approach are employed as a lens to analyze the effectiveness and implications of the UKs development aid. *The Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI)* (ICAI,2023) is the primary data source used for the investigation as it provides a comprehensive understanding of the UK's development aid in Afghanistan. The details of the data and other resources used in the investigation, as well as the theoretical frameworks, are discussed in more detail in the next section.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 Data**

The ICAI is the main source used to evaluate the foreign aid provided by the UK to Afghanistan. The ICAI is an organization that inspects and evaluates the UK's aid spending. They carry out independent and credible reviews to ensure that the UK spends the funds effectively. They hold the UK government accountable by informing the parliament and making their findings public.

The ICAI report for UK's foreign aid to Afghanistan is information-rich with statistics and deep evaluation, covering all aspects of UK's aid. It includes spending, surveys, interviews, and more specifics which help in understanding what the UK did and the impact it made. The report is objective, critical, and comprehensive; it is argued with evidence and includes government responses, further scrutiny, and a review.

The situation in Afghanistan is ongoing and continues to change. The report covers efforts as early as 2012 up until 2022, meaning some information may be out of date. This will be kept in mind in the essay. The source is relevant to answer the research question and can then be evaluated and analyzed using theoretical frameworks.

Other sources were used in the analysis, including Ingrid Robeyns' paper on The Capabilities Approach in Practice (Robeyns,2006), which provides a rich analysis of the capabilities approach and how it can be used in the real world, thereby deepening the understanding of a complex theory. Various articles by the Guardian and the UN have also

been valuable in understanding struggles for women in the country and providing statistics and information relevant to the research.

## 2.2 Theoretical Frameworks

One of the theoretical frameworks employed in this essay is **Galtung's Conflict triangle**, articulated by Johan Galtung. Galtung's triangle is an understanding of how conflict manifests. Conflict, meaning disagreement between entities, is a broad term, and can be applied to many issues—gender inequality being one of them. Galtung's triangle can be used to analyze gender inequality as a conflict and why it may manifest in this way. The triangle is made up of two levels, the manifest and latent levels. The manifest level represents real violence and conflict visible in society. The latent level represents structural issues such as attitudes and inequalities which *cause* the manifest level conflicts (Dutta,2020; Hernandez,2019). When foreign aid is brought into the equation, Galtung's triangle can help in understanding the implications of targeting the different areas of the triangle.

**The capabilities approach**, the second theory employed in this essay, was articulated by Amartya Sen in the 1980's (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy,2023). The capabilities approach emphasizes the importance of well-being and quality of life. It considers what an individual achieves, which he calls *functioning*. The functioning can be achieved when a resource is given. However, in the same way, it can also be achieved when individuals have opportunity and freedom around the resource, which he calls *capabilities*. The difference is that capabilities allow people to take their own initiative and follow personal goals to eventually achieve a functioning. Functionings as an outcome can impose a specific notion of what a good life is because individuals are not given the opportunity to realize and pursue the

functioning themselves (Robeyns,2006). But when people can lead the life they want, it can initiate an individual's own future development and in time, hopefully larger scale development. (Sen,2023; Alkire,2016; Kirsch,2017)

Galtung's conflict triangle was chosen because it provides a framework to analyze why some conflicts manifest, and impact of foreign aid involvement. The capabilities approach provides a framework focusing on the individual and community level. They are both appropriate for the analysis because they serve as a lens to evaluate the extent of development and change the UK aid made to Afghanistan.

### **3. Findings**

#### **3.1 Importance of Women in Afghan Society and Impact on Economic Development**

Gender inequality is a significant hindrance to economic development for a country.

Economic growth has two main determinants: the size of the workforce, and the growth in productivity (Stone,2017). The size of the workforce is restricted in Afghanistan due to women, who make up around half of the population, being restricted from education and workforce. According to the executive director of *UN women*, up to \$1bn dollars is lost from the restrictions on women (Kumar and Noori,2022). With only a small proportion of women able to work in Afghanistan, there is direct negative impact on the country's development. Removing female nurses from their jobs for example, would not only reduce the income of women's household, but also create an understaffing in hospitals, making it even harder for people to get proper healthcare. According to the *Guardian*, healthcare worker identified as Abdul stated "I had seven women in my team and, since the Taliban takeover, none of them has been allowed back to work. They were the backbone of the department, and to be honest, they were more hardworking than the men." (Kumar and Noori,2022). His statement illustrates the critical and desperate need for women to be working.

Labor productivity is also hindered due to gender discrimination. Labor productivity, defined as the output of a worker per hour, is influenced by factors like workers' skills and technological advancement (Reserve Bank of Australia,2023). A ban on education for girls and women means a misallocation of potential talent and knowledge of women (Silva and Klasen,2021). It will result in reducing the supply of skilled labor, which adversely affect labor productivity. Being unemployed and not having an income also means one cannot



spend money, which reduces economic activity, leading to less income for businesses and tax revenues for the government. These revenues could have been allocated to invest in infrastructure (which also has a positive relationship to economic growth) and resources to nurture innovation and technological advancement, which would also enhance economic development.

### **3.2 Efforts to Improve Gender Inequality in Afghanistan**

According to ICAI, the UK supported the development of education and services through programs like Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund and NGOs. Projects were set up to promote girls' education, community-based teaching and working to facilitate girls' access to schools. Stipends were given to families to encourage girls to attend school as well as 16,000 teachers being trained. Monitors suggested that there was success in encouraging girls to attend school. However, there was no mechanism to bring such a program to a wider scale. Furthermore, no evidence suggested that the effect would be lasting once the foreign NGOs withdrew.

Gender-based violence (GBV) response programs were also offered. 118 healthcare facilities and 1200 healthcare workers were provided by the program, as well as a family support hotline. The program worked to engage with religious and community leaders in different areas. In addition, a program was piloted towards boys and men to educate them on women's equality in an attempt to change social norms. There seemed to be a direct and genuine impact in reducing GBV, according to an evaluation of the model of services used. However, due to limited capacity, the services would not continue if foreign ended.

The UK also advocated for changes in national policies, laws and institutions which inherently perpetuate gender discrimination. Although various national policies were made, the Afghan government's commitment was weak due to the lack of political leadership, resource limitations and low institutional capacity. A penal code was implemented towards discrimination and harm against women, but there was no evidence of the laws being enforced.

### 3.3 Applying Theories

#### Galtung's Conflict Triangle

Galtung's triangle is a lens that breaks down the surfaced conflicts and where they stem from. The restriction by the Taliban, resulted in millions of women prevented from education and jobs, is placed on the manifest level as it is an action. These restrictions led to further manifest level phenomenon of lower economic development, in forms of increased poverty (due to lack of an income), lack of sufficient public services (e.g., healthcare), and overall slow economic growth. These manifest level issues are routed in latent level ones, namely, the internalized mindsets of women's role in society. There is long tradition in the country that women are the caretakers and chore doers of the household who should cater to the man's needs (CulturalAtlas,2019). Due to this, it is believed by the Taliban that women do not need education past a certain point. Because the Taliban hold traditional views on family structure, they employ rules banning women from work and education to keep these in check.

To combat the lacked provision of schools by the Taliban, development aid initiatives were taken by the UK to encourage girls to return to school. Program evaluations found that they

were successful at bringing girls to school, however there was no mechanism to take this to a consistent and continuous scale. This is evident in the statement by a professor at the Afghanistan University from the ICAI report, “What did the world achieve in Afghanistan other than buildings? If they had succeeded in building an education system, that could be considered a long-term achievement. They have not been able to do so.”

What the example above illustrates is that focusing on the manifest level can result in only short-term development outcome. This is because the deeper rooted causes (latent level), that are preventing girls from attending school, are left untouched. The establishment of schools through aid enables girls to access education. However, once the flow of aid ceases, there will be no sustainable mechanism in place to ensure the continuity of these schools, potentially resulting in the loss of all progress and development achieved thus far. Lack of resources, appropriate governance, and will, are factors that impact development, according to Kirsch (Kirsch,2017). Without consensus that government spending should support the provision of education to girls, a lasting system can never be made to impact gender inequality. In addition, consensus may be hard to reach due to norms and expectations of women in society. Many conservative and traditional communities do not want their daughters to get education because of the normalized role of women.

Some UK efforts can be thought to be tackling the latent level issues. This includes the programs of educating men and boys on GBV. Efforts to end GBV is crucial in directly impacting women’s productivity and therefore development (UNWomen,2022). It seemed promising to target deeply rooted mindsets in society and to create a long-lasting positive impact on gender equality, however, the program was met with limited success. The reasons may be that interventions were not suited in the Afghani context, and this may be because

they enforced western ideologies. Afghanistan has their own traditions and culture which cannot be simply changed. For example, the attempt to change policies did not fail solely due to lack of resources, but also because of little desire to even do so by policy makers.

According to the ICAI, there was clear disagreement from conservative government over international efforts, and the foreign aid was seen by many as an “occupying force”. If aid providers are thought of as intruders, it will have a weak impact on making larger scale reforms for development. This was evident in the statement by minister of education in the ICAI report, “The male-dominated political environment was the first and by far most important impediment in implementing reform programs. Most of the reform programs proposed by donors faced challenges from within the political system.”. The UK could have provided programs that were considerate of contextuality to a greater extent for successfully promoting change. This could have resulted in more success of development aid. This may not be perfect because of unpredictability but would serve as a more considerate of context and higher likelihood of successful adjustment method.

Perhaps the reason why even the targeting of the latent level was ineffective was because Galtung’s conflict triangle does not consider the individuality of people. Granted that the triangle allows for deeper routed issues to be identified, it does not consider individuality of people and context needed for finding the most effective way to improve the situation.

Because of this, there is considerable uncertainty and unpredictability when tackling structural issues. Since there are no guidelines into what is appropriate for what context, it cannot be known what to do for a specific issue. Simply bringing Western ideologies into communities for example, may not have been a good fit in the Afghan context, which is clearly indicated in the ICAI report. While some efforts like GBV programs had success, many efforts such as promoting social norm change were met with failure due to efforts being

inappropriate in the Afghan context. In addition, according to the ICAI, what worked in some cities, did not in others, showing how complex each individual community is. Because social norms are extremely challenging to tackle due to individuality, the UK was met with significant unsuccess. In the end, Galtung's triangle is a tool to identifying structural issues; however, it lacks provision of methods to tackle them with consideration of contextuality vital in creating impactful reforms.

### Sen's Capabilities Approach

Sen's capabilities approach can also be employed as a lens to analyze the effectiveness of development aid in Afghanistan. The capabilities approach emphasizes a focus on giving people the capability to engage in opportunities in the way they choose to. The provision of capabilities can lead to functionings being achieved but by own free will, resulting in personal initiative for development. A resource can be provided by an external party, in this case from the UK, to help achieve capabilities and so their functionings, and in the long term, utility to help enhance development within the country.

The UK provided a range of services to empower women such as schools and GBV response programs. These were resources in which Afghans had the *capabilities* of using. They could choose to use it or not. Although unspecified, there is likelihood that girls wanted to attend school with their own free will. They could take their *own* initiative because they were given the opportunity from the resource (access to school). An article by *Human Rights Watch* supports that there was will from young girls to go to school: "Taliban waited until the moment girls joyfully returned to school before ordering them home. Girls went home weeping, but still hoped to go back." (Fetrat,2022).

According to Sen, it is important to focus on the capability and not the functioning because individuals can decide for themselves what they want to do to achieve a life that they value. A focus on functionings could result in driving people into a specific lifestyle which is thought by foreign aid providers to be fulfilling but not necessary thought by Afghans. Because of diversity of people, one's perception of a fulfilling life will vary.

The education given to girls achieves the functioning of being educated and may encourage dreams of being and doing more, such as continuing education or getting a job which in time, may provide utility for development. The provision of education also allowed for many individuals to attain literacy. According to a study done by Sabina Alkire in Pakistan (Robeyns,2006) on small scale development which had a focus on gender inequality, the improving of literacy resulted in women learning how to solve their own problems, to speak up on abuse and create happiness. The improvement of education may have contributed into helping women seek help against GBV in Afghanistan too. The capability of having support services (healthcare facilities and support hotline) contributes to improving the well-being of women which can help improve productivity and participation (UNWomen,2021). The ICAI deemed the GBV response program model to be successful in Afghanistan however did not have the means to take it to a national level.

In theory, the provision of education and GBV response programs should allow more women into the job market and make them productive members of society to facilitate economic development. However, the structural issues in the country prevent this from happening. Capabilities should allow individuals to take their own initiative into achieving a functioning, however, some are prevented from even getting the capabilities. This occurs with daughters of religious and traditional families who hold norms of women not needing much education.

This prevents these girls from attending school meaning they do not have the capability. To tackle this, the UK sought to promote social norm change. However, in the conservative and traditional communities and Afghan context, there was much failure. In this case, the UK targeted functionings (of being someone who believed in equal rights for women) instead of capabilities where someone can choose to take initiative to change their views. Targeting functionings was unsuccessful because Afghans already hold views of women's roles in society that cannot be easily influenced. Even if the UK targeted capabilities with this, they would likely fail, especially with older individuals whose beliefs are set. It may not have been feasible, at least for some generations, to try and promote social norms change. The susceptible individuals are the youth (Foulkes, et al,2018) which is why educating them on their human rights is the most important for creating social norm change.

The weakness of Sens capabilities approach is how intricate and complex it is. Because of how focused it is on the individual level; it is hard to take it to a wider scale. For example, although 31,000 individual BGV survivors were able to access programs (given capability), a survey to Afghan women found that in 2019, 75% of women answered no to having a place to go to solve their problems. This percentage had gone down by 3% since 2014 showing slow progress in creating a wide scale system for women. The population of women in Afghanistan is over 20 million (Countrymeters,2023), and 87% of them experience violence (Glinski,2021). Because of the attention to giving capabilities to individual women, a significantly smaller number of women gained access compared to the population. There may be some situations when the capabilities approach is too unrealistic to achieve (Robeyns,2006). Limited recourses, as well as political and cultural conditions, make it difficult for Afghan women to gain a capability. These capabilities are the driving force of

**development** in the future but with the hindrances for women to receive equal rights to education, jobs as well as other issues such as preventing of GBV, process is slow.



## 4. CONCLUSION

### 4.1 Afghanistan's Future Development

With half the country excluded from education, continued violence on Afghans, and in general, a devastating situation, it is thought that the country is a lost cause, and has been for years (TimesGazette,2021; Jones,2021). However, Afghan's do not believe this, and they continue to fight for women's rights with the help of international organizations.

Through the lens of Galtung's conflict triangle, it was found that aid targeted at manifest level issues of the triangle were effective in the short-term but would not be realistic for the long-term which was the goal of the UK. To initiate long-term development, systemic issues in the latent level of the triangle had to be tackled. This was met with unsuccess for the UK as the context of Afghanistan was not considered when trying to promote social norm change. Sens capabilities approach considers the individuality of Afghan people and promotes the idea of giving people the ability to take their own initiative for development. The theory, however, does not consider that individuals may be restricted from freedom to even engage in a capability due to factors like present social norms. This resulted in the UK being met with unsuccess to make prominent change.

The foreign development aid provided to Afghanistan to promote social norm change was met with some short-term success, however no long-term developmental changes. This is because of the difficulty of impacting structural issues like gender inequality which stem from social norms. Changes in social norms is a process which takes decades to achieve. It is not something that shows significant effects in only a few years, which is why the results

from the ICAI are expected. What is important is to continue to give capabilities and opportunities to young girls to learn and want change in their society. It is important that they have will for change because this is what drives it. Continuing to teach young girls about their rights would hopefully in the future, normalize their human rights. Younger generations already want school, education, and jobs. What stands between them is the government and current social norms.

The youth of Afghanistan (under age 25) already make up 60% of the population which reflects a huge number of people fighting for peace and human rights (Amal,2022). Their continued efforts of spreading knowledge, amplifying voices against injustice and oppression and joint efforts with human rights organizations will give them a chance to create change in Afghanistan's future. With continued perseverance against the Taliban and some cultural norms, there is hope that change will be made. If girls were given capabilities to education and jobs in the future, there would be much potential for women's utility and therefore development for Afghanistan. Gender equality is the important step to move the country out of its current state and push it towards a better future.

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