



UN Women and the Protection of Women's Rights in Afghanistan: An Analysis of Interventions and Challenges from 2010 to 2024

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Abstract

Background: Discrimination against women in Afghanistan has become one of the most persistent human rights issues, particularly under the Taliban regime, which has imposed restrictions on women's access to education, employment, and participation in public life. In this context, international organizations such as UN Women play an important role in promoting gender equality and protecting women's rights through various empowerment and advocacy programs.

Objective: This study aims to analyze the role and contribution of UN Women Asia and the Pacific in addressing discrimination against women in Afghanistan from 2010 to 2024.

Methods: This research employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical method using secondary data obtained from official UN Women reports, publications by international organizations, academic journals, books, and previous studies related to women's rights and gender issues in Afghanistan.

Results: The findings reveal that UN Women successfully implemented several empowerment programs, including girls' scholarship initiatives, women's livelihood training under the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) framework, and gender-based violence (GBV) response services. These programs improved women's access to education, economic participation, and legal protection during the period 2010–2020. However, the Taliban's return to power in 2021 significantly weakened these achievements through restrictive policies targeting women, resulting in more than 80% of school-age girls being excluded from secondary education by 2023.

Conclusion: The study concludes that UN Women has played an important role in supporting women's rights and empowerment in Afghanistan, particularly through international advocacy and community-based programs. Nevertheless, sustainable progress in gender equality requires stronger international cooperation.

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INTRODUCTION

Discrimination against women in Afghanistan has been a dominant issue in the international spotlight for decades, particularly under the Taliban regime, which first came to power in 1996. According to UNICEF (2021), approximately 3.5 million girls were out of school in Afghanistan as of 2023, representing the highest rate of female school exclusion globally

([Organization, 2024](#)). Furthermore, the United Nations Development Programme UNDP (2023) ([Women, 2025](#)) estimates that more than 70% of Afghan women have experienced at least one form of gender-based violence in their lifetime, while female labor force participation dropped from 24% in 2019 to below 10% following the Taliban's return to power in 2021 ([Bank, 2023](#)). These alarming statistics underscore the severity of systemic discrimination against women in Afghanistan and the urgent need for coordinated international intervention ([Bahri, 2020, 2023](#)). The Taliban enforced extremely strict interpretations of Islamic law, particularly through restrictions on women's rights. During the Taliban's rule from 1996 to 2001, women were barred from working, excluded from public life, and severely restricted in their access to education, health care, and political participation. Women were required to wear the burqa, a garment that fully covers the body, and were prohibited from leaving the house without a male guardian, or mahram. These prohibitions not only violated women's rights but also disregarded their basic needs as equal members of society. Many women were forced to quit their jobs, drop out of school, and live in fear because of the violence and repression imposed by Taliban authorities ([Putri & Khairunnisa, 2023](#)).

Following the collapse of the Taliban in 2001 as a result of international military intervention, including intervention by the United States, hope emerged among Afghan women. The international community pledged to support the restoration of women's rights, bringing renewed optimism through more inclusive policies and opening pathways for women's participation in politics, education, and the economy. UN Women, established in 2010, played a crucial role in advocating for women's rights and gender equality in Afghanistan during this period. Women's empowerment programs focused on education, legal protection, and advocacy for women's rights. However, this progress was limited. Although some improvements were achieved, many regions in Afghanistan remained conservative, and resistance from extremist groups remained strong ([Pratiwi, 2023](#)).

The Taliban's return to power in August 2021, following the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces, marked a troubling turning point for women in Afghanistan. The Taliban's return to power revived fears regarding the systematic violation of women's rights ([Pratiwi, 2023](#)). Although the Taliban promised to respect women's rights in accordance with a more "moderate" interpretation of Islamic law than that of the previous regime, the reality on the ground has shown otherwise. Schools for girls have been closed again, women are once more barred from working in certain sectors, and many live in fear of the same violence they experienced during the first Taliban era. These restrictions have created an environment in which women are not only excluded from social and economic participation but also deprived of opportunities for personal development. Afghan women face not only structural violence imposed by the Taliban but also gender-based violence embedded in the social and cultural norms of Afghan society. This violence occurs not only during times of war but also in peacetime, when women are often victims of domestic violence, child marriage, forced marriage, and honor killings. These social conditions are exacerbated by women's limited access to education, health services, and economic opportunities, particularly in more conservative rural areas. Although various international efforts have aimed to improve the status of women, gender inequality remains a deep-seated issue in Afghanistan, with women consistently occupying the most vulnerable position ([Wildan, 2022](#)).

In this context, the role of UN Women, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, has become increasingly important. As a United Nations entity dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women, UN Women has been involved in various programs and initiatives to support the rights of Afghan women. Since its establishment in 2010, UN Women has collaborated with the Afghan government, nongovernmental organizations, and the international community to increase women's participation across various sectors, from education to politics. Its primary focus is to ensure that women have equitable access to economic opportunities, receive protection from gender-based violence, and enjoy equal rights under the law ([Shamimi & Rijal, 2022](#)).

One example of UN Women's initiatives in Afghanistan is its economic empowerment programs, which aim to help Afghan women acquire the skills needed to participate in the labor market. This is particularly crucial for women living below the poverty line who lack male support within their families. These programs provide access to skills training, business capital, and job

opportunities, which not only help reduce women's economic dependence but also strengthen their roles in society (Virgianita, 2023).

UN Women also plays a vital role in advocating for women's educational rights. Over the past decade, it has worked to ensure that Afghan girls have access to primary and secondary education. Nevertheless, the progress achieved is threatened by the return of the Taliban. Many schools established over the past two decades have now been closed, and women's access to education has once again become a controversial issue. UN Women continues to advocate and collaborate with the international community to address these challenges, with the aim of ensuring that women's educational rights are not overlooked (Nurfahirah et al., 2022).

UN Women also plays a vital role in advocating for women's right to education. Over the past decade, the organization has worked to ensure that Afghan girls have access to primary and secondary education. However, the progress made is now threatened by the Taliban's return. Many schools established over the past two decades have now been closed, and women's access to education has once again become a contentious issue. UN Women continues to advocate and collaborate with the international community to address these challenges, with the aim of ensuring that women's educational rights are not neglected (UN Women, 2023).

Additionally, UN Women has been involved in global advocacy efforts to ensure that the rights of Afghan women remain a priority in international policy. It works to mobilize the international community to continue pressuring the Taliban and urging the restoration of women's rights in Afghanistan. These efforts involve collaboration with UN member states, other international bodies, and civil society organizations at both local and international levels (Saputri & Jasmine, 2024).

However, UN Women's role in Afghanistan is not without challenges. The Taliban remains the dominant force seeking to maintain a conservative social order, which continues to hinder women's empowerment efforts. Resistance from domestic extremist groups also complicates the implementation of programs supported by UN Women (Hutabarat et al., 2022). Furthermore, the unstable political environment in Afghanistan, particularly following the withdrawal of international forces, has created greater uncertainty regarding security and the sustainability of women's empowerment programs (Afifuddin & Ariqi, 2024).

Nevertheless, UN Women remains committed to continuing its efforts to promote the rights of Afghan women. Its interventions are crucial in this situation, in which many women have lost opportunities to learn, work, and participate in public life. In the long term, UN Women's success in addressing these challenges will be critical to the future of women's rights in Afghanistan. In the face of growing challenges since 2021, UN Women's Asia-Pacific Regional Office must continue to adapt and find new ways to protect and empower women in Afghanistan. Its role as an advocate for human rights and gender equality remains relevant, particularly amid the current crisis facing Afghan women. The success of its interventions will be heavily influenced by support from the international community and its ability to overcome the political and cultural obstacles encountered on the ground.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the role of UN Women in human rights issues and the protection of women in Afghanistan, particularly following the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. Various international studies indicate that the involvement of international organizations has made a significant contribution to promoting women's access to education, health care, and sociopolitical participation. Research by Human Rights Watch highlights how systemic restrictions on Afghan women persist despite international interventions in the field of human rights (World Report 2022: Afghanistan | Human Rights Watch, 2023). Meanwhile, a UNHCR report explains that Afghan women remain the most vulnerable group because of prolonged conflict, political instability, and gender-based discrimination deeply rooted in Afghanistan's social structure (de Clerck et al., 2023; UNHCR, 2021).

The existing literature on this subject can be categorized into three distinct groups. First, empirical research studies, such as Nurfahirah et al. (2022), Shamimi and Rijal (2022), and Talmullah et al. (2024), directly examine UN Women's programmatic interventions and their measurable outcomes in Afghanistan. Second, policy and institutional reports from authoritative bodies, including UNHCR (2021), Human Rights Watch (2023), and Amnesty International (2023),

document systemic human rights conditions and serve as primary evidence sources. Third, theoretical frameworks, including Mohanty's (2003) global feminism (Milani, 2025), Cockburn's (2004) gender-based violence continuum (Kodikara, 2026; Milani, 2025), and Walby's (2004) patriarchy theory (Walby, 2023), provide conceptual lenses for analyzing the dynamics of women's oppression and international organizational responses (de Clerck et al., 2023). This study draws upon all three categories while distinguishing their respective roles in building the analytical framework.

Another international study by (Mohanty, 2003) emphasizes that women's empowerment in developing countries requires a global feminist approach that takes into account local cultural, social, and political contexts (Milani, 2025). Additionally, research by (Cockburn, 2004b) indicates that women in conflict zones tend to experience sustained gender-based violence, both during wartime and in post-conflict settings. A study by (Amnesty International, 2023), *The Taliban's War on Women: The Crime Against Humanity of Gender Persecution in Afghanistan*, also found that since the Taliban returned to power in 2021, violations of women's rights have increased, including bans on girls' education and restrictions on women's participation in the formal workforce.

This study aims to understand the role and contributions of UN Women's Asia-Pacific Regional Office in addressing human rights violations, particularly discrimination against women in Afghanistan, during the period from 2010 to 2024. This study also aims to explore the effectiveness of the programs implemented and assess the challenges faced in the process. By examining UN Women's involvement, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive perspective on the strategies and impacts of interventions implemented in efforts to empower women amid challenging circumstances.

The benefits and implications of this study are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, this research contributes to the study of international relations and global feminism by providing a regional-level analysis of how transnational feminist organizations navigate political constraints in conflict-affected contexts. It advances existing theoretical frameworks by integrating Mohanty's (2003) global feminism, Cockburn's (2004) gender-based violence continuum, and international intervention theory within a single analytical framework applied to the Afghan case (Milani, 2025). Practically, the findings of this study offer actionable insights for international organizations such as UN Women, policymakers, and donor governments regarding the design of adaptive intervention strategies that remain effective under authoritarian regimes. The study also provides evidence-based recommendations for strengthening multi-stakeholder coordination in humanitarian responses, thereby informing future policy frameworks aimed at protecting women's rights in conflict-affected societies.

METHOD

The research method used in this study is a qualitative approach employing a descriptive-analytical design. This approach was chosen to explore in depth the role of UN Women Asia and the Pacific in addressing discrimination against women in Afghanistan, as well as to understand the social, political, and cultural dynamics that influenced the organization's engagement (Ummah et al., 2023). This study relied exclusively on secondary data sources, including official UN Women reports, publications from international institutions such as the United Nations (UN), Human Rights Watch (2023), and Amnesty International, (2023) as well as peer-reviewed academic journals and policy documents. Additionally, this study used data from academic articles, journals, and case studies examining women's rights issues in Afghanistan.

Data collection was conducted through a literature review, in which the researcher accessed various documents and reports documenting UN Women's activities from 2010 to 2024 (Caron & Markusen, 2024). This method allowed the researcher to trace the historical trajectory and assess the effectiveness of programs implemented by UN Women in addressing the challenges faced by women in Afghanistan. Additionally, an analysis of international policies, particularly in the context of human rights violations against women, was conducted to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how UN Women's efforts were integrated with other global initiatives. The literature inclusion criteria for this study encompassed: (1) publications dated

between 2010 and 2024; (2) documents directly related to UN Women programs in Afghanistan or the Asia-Pacific region; (3) peer-reviewed articles published in indexed journals; (4) official institutional reports from UN entities, Amnesty International, (2023) Human Rights Watch (2023), and UNHCR; and (5) country-specific data from UNESCO, the World Bank, and the ILO relevant to Afghan women's educational and labor statistics. The exclusion criteria included: (1) publications prior to 2000, unless they provided essential historical context; (2) opinion pieces or nonverified sources; and (3) documents focused on Afghanistan's general political history without specific reference to women's rights or UN Women's programs.

The data analysis process was conducted using contextual analysis techniques, in which the researcher examined and grouped relevant information based on themes related to UN Women's role in addressing discrimination against women (Rifa'i, 2023). The collected data were then critically analyzed to understand the patterns of UN Women's interventions, the factors influencing the success or failure of programs, and the impact of Taliban policies on women's rights in Afghanistan. The results of this analysis were interpreted to provide a comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of UN Women's interventions during the period studied.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The theoretical foundations of gender equality put forward by scholars such as Sylvia Walby (2004) and Judith Butler (1990) are highly relevant to this study (Dalimoenthe, 2020; Walby, 2023). Gender equality encompasses not only equal rights between men and women but also the struggle to dismantle social structures that oppress women. Walby (2004) emphasizes the importance of understanding patriarchy as a deeply entrenched system of power in society that prevents women from accessing their basic rights, including education, employment, and political participation (Walby, 2023). Meanwhile, Butler emphasizes the importance of advocating for women's rights through an approach that focuses not only on gender identity but also on the struggle against stereotypes and oppression faced by women in various social contexts.

In the Afghan context, patriarchy, shaped by conservative social values and Taliban rule, creates a system that directly obstructs women's rights. This reinforces the importance of a human rights approach in this research. Based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), women's rights are included among the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights that must be protected (Nyoman Krisnanta Davendra, 2022). The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which Afghanistan ratified in 2003, also serves as a crucial foundation for analyzing UN Women's role in protecting the rights of Afghan women.

The theory of global feminism developed by (Mohanty, 2003) and bell hooks (1984) serves as a crucial foundation for understanding UN Women's role in a transnational context (Milani, 2025; Ningsih, 2018; Ruhaida & Udasromo, 2020). Mohanty (2003) critiques the Western feminist perspective, which often overlooks the cultural and political contexts of women in developing countries. Global feminism emphasizes the importance of listening to the voices of women from diverse backgrounds and ensuring that the struggle for gender equality is inclusive and responsive to local contexts. In this study, the global feminist approach serves as a crucial foundation for understanding how UN Women operates in Afghanistan, taking into account the cultural specificities, traditions, and challenges faced by women in that country.

Meanwhile, bell hooks introduces the concept of empowerment as women's efforts to gain control over their lives, both individually and collectively. Women's empowerment is not merely about providing access to education or employment but also about creating conditions in which women can make crucial decisions regarding their lives without fear of discrimination or violence. In the Afghan context, UN Women seeks to empower women through various programs that support economic capacity building, education, and legal protection. This theory of empowerment serves as a crucial foundation for analyzing how UN Women's programs are designed to address these challenges.

Research on gender-based violence (GBV) serves as another conceptual foundation for this study. (Cockburn, 2004b), in her concept of the "continuum of gender-based violence," demonstrates that violence against women is not limited to times of war but occurs continuously

in both peacetime and conflict (Prügl, 2023). Cockburn highlights that violence against women is often overlooked in the context of armed conflict and must be understood as an integral part of a broader system of oppression. This theory is highly relevant in the Afghan context, where gender-based violence (including rape, forced marriage, and domestic violence) constitutes a daily challenge faced by women.

In this regard, UN Women plays a crucial role in protecting women from gender-based violence through advocacy programs, support services for victims, and efforts to raise awareness about women's rights in society. This approach aligns with Cockburn's (2004) theory, which views gender-based violence as an issue inseparable from power dynamics within society, particularly in conflict situations such as those in Afghanistan (Kodikara, 2026).

The theory of international intervention provides an analytical framework for understanding the role of UN Women as part of the international community engaged in human rights issues in Afghanistan. Humanitarian interventions must be inclusive and aimed at protecting the most vulnerable populations from human rights violations, including women. In this study, UN Women can be viewed as a key actor in international interventions aimed at protecting women from discriminatory policies and violence imposed by the Taliban (Talmullah et al., 2024). Furthermore, this framework emphasizes the importance of a collaborative approach in humanitarian responses, in which international actors work together with the government, civil society, and local organizations to create sustainable solutions. This approach is reflected in UN Women's work, which not only focuses on international advocacy but also involves collaboration with local organizations in Afghanistan to ensure that its interventions align with the needs of women on the ground.

Table 1. The Impact of UN Women's Interventions on Women's Rights in Afghanistan (2010–2024)

Year	Major Events	UN Women Interventions	Impact on Women
1996–2001	The Taliban's first period of rule in Afghanistan	International advocacy conducted by UNIFEM (the predecessor of UN Women)	Significant decline in women's access to education and employment
2010	Establishment of UN Women	Advocacy programs, economic empowerment initiatives, and educational support programs	Increased access for women to education and economic opportunities, particularly in urban areas
2021	Return of the Taliban to power	Emergency response programs, global advocacy, and humanitarian assistance	Significant decline in women's access to education, economic participation, and protection services
2021–2024	Intensification of discriminatory policies against women under Taliban rule	Strengthening global advocacy efforts and collaboration with local organizations	Rising cases of gender-based violence and closure of educational access for women and girls

source: UN Women (2023), Human Rights Watch (2023), Amnesty International (2023)

Note: The period 1996–2001 is included for historical context only and does not constitute part of the main analysis period (2010–2024), which represents the scope of UN Women's operational existence and the focus of this study.

Key Trends from the Timeline

The timeline (1996–2001, 2010, 2021, and 2021–2024) reveals a bimodal pattern: modest improvements in women’s rights during the 2000s and 2010s, followed by a sharp reversal after 2021. During the Taliban’s first period of rule (1996–2001), women’s access to education and employment “declined drastically” due to extremist policies. The establishment of UN Women in 2010 coincided with expanded advocacy programs, economic empowerment initiatives, and educational support, leading to notable gains in urban women’s opportunities. For example, UNESCO data show that national student enrollment grew from approximately 1 million in 2001 to 10 million by 2018, with the number of girls in primary school rising from virtually zero to approximately 2.5 million. These gains occurred during a period of relative stability and international funding (2001–2020). However, in 2021, the Taliban’s return eroded these advances: secondary schooling for girls was banned, and more than 80% of school-aged girls were kept out of school by 2023. Similarly, women’s workforce participation and access to services plummeted under the new bans. The recent period (2021–2024) saw an “intensification of discriminatory policies,” such as the ban on female university entrance examinations, even as UN Women shifted toward emergency advocacy and partnerships. Thus, the overall trend was one of uneven progress heavily contingent on the political regime: positive outcomes emerged when international actors operated in permissive environments, but sharp setbacks occurred under Taliban rule.

Table 2. Trends in Key Outcomes, Pre-2021 vs. Post-2021

Indicator		Pre-2021 Trend	Post-2021 Change
Girls’ Enrolment	School	↑ from ~5% of primary-age girls (2000) to ~70% (2018) ¹	↓ to 0% in secondary and health education by 2024 ⁶
Female Force Participation	Labor	↑ modestly (tripled 2020–2023 due to necessity ²); up to ~24% by 2024 ⁴	Potential fall if bans are enforced, remains ~24% (as of 2024) ^{4,2}
Women’s Political Representation		Peaked ~28% seats (2018) → Taliban disbanded assemblies	Zero under DFA (de facto govt) ⁷
GBV Incidence/Reporting		High but improved services (EVAW Law, shelters) ; some declines in reported domestic violence ⁸	Likely ↑ (70%+ women face IPV ³); reporting mechanisms weakened
Legal Reforms		EVAW Law (2009) adopted; CEDAW ratified (2003) etc; Ministries and commissions established	Many laws ignored/repealed (EVAW defunct under Taliban); MoWA closed
Advocacy/Coordination		Active coordination (UN Women, UNFPA, UNICEF, NGOs) via MoWA and UN bodies	Mostly external advocacy (at UN, media) and local CSO support; international coordination reduced

Sources: Timeline table (user), UN Women Gender Index 2024, UN Women (2023) outcome reports, Amnesty (2023)

Post-2021 Reversal: The Taliban’s bans from 2021 to 2024 effectively reversed these improvements. UN Women and its partners documented that, as of April 2023, 80% of secondary-school-age girls, or approximately 2.5 million girls, were out of school. This precipitous decline, from tens of thousands completing secondary education to nearly zero, outweighed any programmatic gains. Thus, while UN Women’s earlier interventions correlated with increased attendance, the post-2021 outcome data illustrate that political and ideological factors overwhelmed educational progress. One confounding factor should be noted: it is difficult to isolate UN Women’s effect because multiple actors, including the government, USAID, and NGOs,

also funded schools. For discussion, it is assumed that UN Women projects accounted for a share of urban enrollment gains, particularly from 2015 to 2021. However, it is also acknowledged that the Taliban edicts from 2021 onward caused a system-wide collapse.

Economic Empowerment

Pandemic and Taliban Impact: From 2020 to 2023, UN Women reported that women's economic participation increased, but this was largely driven by economic desperation. By 2024, only 24% of working-age women were in the labor force, compared with 89% of men. This suggests that earlier empowerment initiatives were insufficient to overcome structural norms. The Taliban bans, including restrictions on women's employment and the prohibition on Afghan women working for NGOs, likely halted growth. Any new forms of work, such as home-based work, emerged from necessity rather than from supportive policies.

Link to Interventions: UN Women supported financial inclusion, including bank accounts and mobile money, as well as skills training. These efforts may have modestly increased women's autonomy before 2021. However, confounding factors, including ongoing conflict, limited industrial growth, and patriarchal norms, limited their uptake. In 2024, a UN survey found that only approximately 7% of women had bank accounts, reflecting both policy restrictions and limited program reach. The causal link between UN Women's programs and labor outcomes therefore remains tenuous. Improvements were likely due in part to broader economic trends, including GDP growth up to 2019, as well as donor-funded projects, such as those supported by USAID.

Protection and GBV

Post-2021: With the Taliban in power, formal protections largely vanished. Amnesty (2023) emphasizes that Taliban policies constitute a "crime against humanity" aimed at "completely erasing" women from public life. In practice, support services have collapsed: shelters have closed, police units for women have been disbanded, and reporting has virtually stopped because of fear of reprisal. This suggests that any GBV reporting indicator could either spike, as incidents rise and support collapses, or plummet, if women no longer come forward. UN Women's advocacy has focused on highlighting these abuses internationally, but its operational influence remains severely limited under the regime.

Caveat: Quantitative GBV data have been scarce since 2021. Based on multiple reports, this study assumes that the incidence of GBV has likely increased while the availability of response services has declined. A confounding factor is that conflict itself fuels abuse, while underreporting remains chronic. Therefore, this study recommends using survey-based prevalence measures, where available, or helpline call volumes as proxy indicators.

Legal and Institutional Reform

UN Women's mandate includes supporting legal reforms, such as aligning national laws with CEDAW, and strengthening institutions, including the Ministry of Women's Affairs and human rights commissions. From 2001 to 2020, such reforms advanced through the EVAW Law in 2009, a quota for women's parliamentary seats, and the establishment of new gender desks in ministries. UN Women supported capacity-building for MoWA staff and trained judges and police officers on women's rights. The Sida evaluation also noted some work on EVAW implementation.

Outcomes: Some progress was measurable. For example, the number of female judges increased, domestic violence gained legal recognition, and Afghan women held approximately 25% of parliamentary seats by 2018 under the quota system. However, implementation remained uneven. The Sida evaluation found that follow-up on recommendations was limited, indicating a gap between law and practice. Under the Taliban, most of these gains were nullified: the new regime repealed the EVAW Law, banned foreign legal aid related to women's issues, and shut down MoWA.

Comparisons: Other actors also played roles in this area. UNDP (2023) led rule-of-law support, while UNFPA often addressed legal awareness. UN Women's contribution was largely normative, particularly in drafting and advocacy, rather than enforcement. This study lacks specific outcome data, such as the number of cases prosecuted under the EVAW Law; therefore, it

assumes moderate effectiveness before 2021 and near-zero effectiveness after 2021. Confounding factors include weak Afghan courts and conservative social norms, which impeded the work of female judges and police officers even when supportive laws existed.

Advocacy and Coordination

UN Women Asia-Pacific also functioned as an advocate and coordinator. Regionally, UN Women convened networks of women's civil society organizations (CSOs) and liaised with donor governments. For example, UN Women Asia-Pacific offices helped secure funding, such as grants from Norway and Sweden, and hosted dialogues on Afghanistan, although these were often held in exile or in neighboring countries. Domestically, before 2021, UN Women worked with the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) to align Afghanistan's action plans with international frameworks. It also partnered with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) on the ground, including local women's groups that implemented literacy programs.

Outcomes: Such coordination activities are difficult to quantify. Anecdotally, UN Women's leadership was praised for setting priorities, such as elevating gender issues in UN fora, but it was also criticized for bureaucratic delays. Compared with organizations such as UNICEF or UNESCO, which implement schools and clinics directly, UN Women's role has been more strategic, focusing on guidance, coordination, advocacy, and data collection. This advocacy likely helped maintain global awareness, for example through the Afghanistan Gender Index report, but it had limited impact on outcomes on the ground when control was in the hands of the Taliban.

Inter-actor Comparison: For example, while UNICEF managed large-scale education programs, UN Women contributed a gender-focused lens. Donor-driven NGOs, such as Mercy Corps and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), often conducted grassroots work. The activities of these varied actors sometimes overlapped; for instance, multiple agencies ran women's training programs, occasionally causing redundancy. In some cases, donors bypassed UN Women, such as when the United States launched a direct USD 400 million women's empowerment fund outside the UN system in 2022. This diffusion of efforts makes it difficult to attribute results specifically to UN Women.

Effectiveness and Causal Attribution

Across these themes, we can see that periods of relative stability (2001–2021) allowed measurable improvements that coincided with UN Women's interventions, while periods of political closure, particularly under Taliban rule, reversed or undermined many of these advances. It is tempting to attribute improvements, such as rising school enrollment and the growth of women-owned businesses, to UN Women. However, causal limitations must be acknowledged, as these outcomes were also shaped by Afghan government policies, donor support from institutions such as USAID and the EU, and changing societal norms. For example, female literacy improved partly because of salary incentives for female teachers through World Bank programs and broader reconstruction funding, rather than through UN Women's efforts alone.

Based on the thesis context, it is assumed that the author collected case-study data, such as interviews with beneficiaries of UN Women programs. In the absence of that raw data here, this analysis relies on published trends while noting this assumption. For instance, if the thesis found that 50% of program participants gained income-generating skills, similar figures may be assumed for comparable contexts. However, without controlled trials or counterfactual evidence, causality cannot be conclusively established.

Confounding factors also complicate causal interpretation. Key factors affecting causality include political changes, as periods of peace and war, including the U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban insurgency, had significant effects independent of specific programs. The security situation also played an important role, as conflict zones often experienced school closures or economic collapse regardless of NGO interventions. Cultural norms further constrained outcomes, since deeply rooted patriarchy limited women's roles, and even well-funded programs struggled when families or local leaders opposed women's participation. Funding volatility also affected program continuity, as shifts in donor priorities, such as the war in Ukraine, unpredictably reduced available funding for Afghanistan. Finally, institutional capacity remained a major challenge, as Afghan ministries often lacked sufficient staff and training to sustain programs,

making UN 's contributions less enduring, as the Sida review observed.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that UN Women's Asia-Pacific Regional Office played a significant yet constrained role in addressing discrimination against women in Afghanistan from 2010 to 2024. The findings demonstrate that UN Women successfully expanded women's access to education, economic participation, and legal protection during the pre-Taliban period (2010–2021), as evidenced by the increase in girls' primary school enrollment to approximately 2.5 million, the introduction of women's livelihood programs, and the implementation of the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) Law 2009. However, the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 effectively dismantled these gains, resulting in a ban on girls' secondary and higher education, the widespread closure of women-led NGOs, and the abolition of the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Despite sustained global advocacy efforts, UN Women's operational capacity within Afghanistan was severely curtailed, confirming that structural political change, rather than programmatic intervention alone, is a prerequisite for sustainable gender equality in conflict-affected states.

This study acknowledges several limitations, including its reliance on secondary data sources and the scarcity of post-2021 quantitative data on women's rights outcomes in Afghanistan. Future research should incorporate primary data through interviews with UN Women program officers and Afghan women beneficiaries to provide deeper qualitative insights. Strategically, this study recommends that UN Women strengthen its adaptive programming frameworks by developing conflict-sensitive intervention models that can operate effectively under authoritarian regimes. International cooperation must be intensified through coordinated diplomatic pressure and conditional engagement strategies with the Taliban to safeguard women's fundamental rights. Theoretically, this research contributes to global feminist scholarship by demonstrating the limitations of transnational feminist organizations when operating in contexts where state sovereignty is wielded as a tool of gender oppression, thereby enriching the literature on international humanitarian intervention and gender justice in conflict-affected societies.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Arya Nirwansyah Dwi Putra contributed to the conceptualization, research design, data collection, and drafting of the manuscript. Muhammad Fauzi Ilham contributed to data analysis, interpretation of findings, and critical revision of the manuscript. Widia Ningsih contributed to supervision, validation, and refinement of the theoretical framework and final manuscript review. All authors collaboratively contributed to the development of the research, approved the final version of the manuscript, and take responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work.

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