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BANS ON WOMEN WORKING, THEN AND NOW: The dilemmas of delivering humanitarian aid during the first and second Islamic Emirates



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Anyone who lived in Afghanistan during the first Islamic Emirate will find the current stand-off between the Taleban and NGOs – and now the United Nations – over the issue of women working familiar. There is the same clashing of principles: the Emirate’s position that women must largely be kept inside the home to avoid the risk of social disorder and sin, and the humanitarians’ that the equitable and effective delivery of aid is impossible without female workers. The choices on the humanitarian side also feel familiar, and all unattractive: comply, boycott or fudge. AAN’s Kate Clark has spoken to people who were working in the humanitarian sector in Afghanistan in the 1990s, and who continue to follow Afghanistan, to get their insights into the similarities and differences – and what, possibly, might help.

THE BAN

Three months after the Islamic Emirate ordered NGOs to stop employing Afghan women until further notice, it has extended the ban, to cover women working for the United Nations. In a [statement](#) on 5 April, the UN said the employment of both men and women was essential to its work and, moreover:

The ban is unlawful under international law and cannot be accepted by the United Nations.

It constitutes an unparalleled violation of women's rights, a flagrant breach of humanitarian principles, and a breach of international rules on the privileges and immunities of the United Nations, including those extended to all UN personnel.

The Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Roza Otunbayeva, is engaging the de facto authorities at the highest level possible to convey the Organization's protest and to seek an immediate reversal of the order. The UN is also engaging with Member States, the donor community, and humanitarian partners.

On 11 April, the UN [ordered](#) an operational review, during which, it would “conduct the necessary consultations, make required operational adjustments, and accelerate contingency planning for *all possible outcomes* [italics in original].” That review is due to end on 5 May and until then, “UN national personnel – women and men – have been instructed not to report to UN offices, with only limited and calibrated exceptions made for critical tasks.”

The Taliban's extension of the ban is a major escalation. The Secretary-General had [claimed](#), via his spokesperson on 4 April, that banning women from working for the UN was “frankly, inconceivable,” but it had been widely feared ever since the Emirate announced that women could no longer work for NGOs. That announcement, on 24 December 2022, had been delivered in the form of a letter from the Ministry of Economy to the NGO coordinating body, ACBAR¹ (contents

¹ ACBAR has 178 members, just over half national and just under half international. The number of NGOs in Afghanistan is far greater, with as many as 2,700 organisations registered.

tweeted and the letter translated by AAN from Dari to English) in footnote²). The letter cited “serious complaints regarding non-compliance with the Islamic hijab and other applicable laws and regulations.”

That 24 December 2022 announcement came as a body blow to female staff and the organisations they work for,³ especially as it came just days after a ban on girls going to university. While the move was a shock, it was hardly a surprise, given how restrictions had tightened over recent months. NGOs did, however, find the official explanation unexpected: officials, they said, had not previously raised problems with staff’s adherence to the Emirate’s dress code. Government spokesman Zabiullah Mujahed’s subsequent account to BBC Pashto on 31 December 2022 was that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) wanted to “preserve the dignity and chastity” of Afghan women and that, “because these institutions are not under the control of the Emirate, the risk for women is high and we have received dangerous reports” (reported by [BBC Persian](#)).

This report, written before the recent extension of the ban, focuses on how the Taleban and NGOs could or should deal with each other, but what is at stake applies just as much to UN agencies. The UN mission in Afghanistan is key to

² *The Ministry of Economy’s letter was as follows:*

To: the esteemed ACBAR organisation in Kabul

Subject: Termination of women’s employment in national and international NGOs.

As you are aware, the Ministry of Economy is responsible for coordinating and leading all the activities of national and international NGOs on behalf of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Recently, serious complaints regarding lack of compliance with the Islamic hijab and other related laws and regulations of the Emirate have been observed among women working for national and international NGOs.

In line with its ongoing responsibility and mandate to coordinate the Emirate’s laws and regulations in the activities of national and foreign NGOs, The Ministry of Economy instructs all respected organisations to halt the work of all female employees in their respective departments until further notice.

Non-compliance will result in the suspension of activity permits and licenses issued by this ministry to the [offending] organisation.

The above points are communicated for you to convey the same to your partner organisations for them to take transparent action in this regard and give the ministry assurances.

*Qari Den Muhammad Hanif
Minister of Economy*

³ See our report, which conveys the experiences of two women affected by the ban, [The Daily Hustle: How Afghan women working for NGOs are coping with the Taleban ban](#) from 26 January 2023 by Roxanna Shapour.

delivering humanitarian assistance in a country where the economy crashed after the Taliban captured power, and the needs are vast. The UN currently ships in about 40 million USD in donor funding a month to pay for humanitarian aid, which is delivered by NGOs in the country. That money is also vital to the wider economy, supporting the afghani, keeping inflation down and providing many people with incomes.



An official from the Emirate's Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority registers a woman seeking food aid in Herat.

Photo: Mohsen Karimi/AFP, 2 March 2023.

This report first outlines the NGO sector, including who makes decisions and NGOs' initial response to the ban. It then hears from eight people who were working in Afghanistan in the 1990s and now, in the hope that their experiences will help further our understanding of what the ban might mean not only for women in Afghanistan but also for the delivery of humanitarian aid to Afghans in need.

THE NGO SECTOR

NGOs in Afghanistan are as varied as birds in the forest, from tiny national and international outfits, to ones born out of international solidarity during the Soviet invasion that remain Afghanistan-focused, to large national NGOs with a countrywide footprint, to huge multinational organisations for whom Afghanistan is just one element in their portfolio. Many of the latter have also worked in Afghanistan for decades and are embedded in particular communities – they may also feel like and be seen locally as ‘insider-outsiders’.

Who makes decisions within NGOs also varies. NGO headquarters may be inside Afghanistan or in a foreign capital and, depending on the complexity of the organisation, the levels above a country director might be at odds with each other – over whether to focus on human rights or saving lives, for example. NGO leaders based in Afghanistan may have to answer to a whole range of actors, including beneficiaries, staff, their headquarters, UN agencies, donors and, in a different way, the Taliban government and their NGO peers; not all will carry the same clout when NGO leaders weigh up a decision on how to respond to the Taliban ban. Moreover, few NGOs have secure funding independent of the major donors – themselves few in number – which potentially gives donors an outsized role in policy decisions.⁴

Suspending activities

In the immediate aftermath of the ban, many NGOs suspended operations, saying employing Afghan women was a matter of necessity: “Our ability to deliver services rely on female staff at all levels of our organization,” said the [International Rescue Committee](#), and, “If we are not allowed to employ women, we are not able to deliver to those in need.” “Female aid workers are “essential,” said the [Danish Refugee Council](#), while [Islamic Relief](#) said, “It is not possible to carry out an effective humanitarian response, in accordance with humanitarian principles,

⁴ The United States, UK, Germany, Sweden, Japan and the European Union together disburse more than two-thirds of funds channelled globally to the humanitarian sector, according to the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) of the Overseas Development Institute, writing in 2016. This “concentration of funding,” according to the HPG, “leaves the sector highly vulnerable to the political interests of the countries that donate the money.” See ‘[Time to let go: Remaking humanitarian action for the modern era](#)’.

if women are prevented from working.” Mercy Corps said that without female staff, they could not effectively deliver humanitarian aid to “the most vulnerable populations and will be unable to reach women and girls – who are the most vulnerable in a country that has the highest number of people in emergency food insecurity in the world.”⁵

The scale and possible impact of the suspensions quickly became evident. A rapid [survey](#) of Afghan and international NGOs and UN agencies, published by the Humanitarian Access Working Group⁶ on 12 January 2023, found only 17 per cent of the 87 surveyed organisations were fully operational, while 68 per cent were partially operational and 15 per cent were closed.⁷

A second survey (13–30 January 2023) found small shifts but no big changes. Out of the 125 organisations that responded to the second survey, a slightly greater proportion (22 per cent) said they were, by then, fully operational, and slightly fewer said they were partially operational (65 per cent) or closed (14 per cent). Twenty organisations (or 16 per cent) had suspended more activities – 15 because they had found it impossible to continue operations without women staff and 5 because of a decision by their organisation.

Among the 45 organisations that had managed to resume some activities, 14 said they had restarted after negotiations with the local authorities, 14 after local community leaders had negotiated on their behalf, one after deciding to work with a male-only team, and 17 after making use of exemptions for health or education.

⁵ See also the 28 December [statement](#) by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee on Afghanistan on the necessity of women staff being able to continue to work and press statements by [Christian Aid](#), [Danish Refugee Council](#), [Médecins du Monde](#) and the [Swedish Committee for Afghanistan](#) (the latter seeking “clarity on the implementation of this ban and assessing its consequences,” rather than suspending activities).

⁶ The Humanitarian Access Group (HAG) is one of the primary platforms dedicated to the strategic and operational coordination and improvement of humanitarian access. In Afghanistan, it is currently co-led by the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC).

⁷ The surveyors received responses between 2 and 12 January 2023 from 87 organisations: 51 Afghan NGOs (including civil society organisations that are mostly women-led or focussed), 32 international NGOs and 4 UN agencies. According to those organising the survey, the aim was to get an understanding of the situation facing humanitarian agencies in general and also to ensure feedback from women-focused or -led Afghan NGOs, including civil society organisations.

Possible exemptions to the ban

Although not announced officially by the Emirate, exemptions for women working in health, nutrition and education were referred to by many NGOs in press statements, for example, [Save the Children](#) on 15 January 2023:



A midwife and nutrition counsellor weigh a baby at the Tangi Saidan clinic run by the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan in Daimirdad district of Wardak province.

Photo: Elise Blanchard/AFP, 6 October 2021.

While the majority of our programs remain on hold, we are restarting some activities – such as health, nutrition, and some education services – where we have received clear, reliable assurances from relevant authorities that our female staff will be safe and can work without obstruction.

However, with the overarching ban still in place, our other activities where we do not have reliable assurances that our female colleagues can return to work, remain on hold. The activities we’re working to restart will provide vital assistance, but these activities are only a small percentage of our full operations.

For the most part, the healthcare, nutrition and education exemptions apply only to women working directly in those sectors, and the activities they permit are continuing with far stricter requirements for women staff to have *mahrams* (a close male relative acting as a chaperone) than previously. In Kandahar province, female health workers still, in the main, cannot operate. Some NGOs in some places are gaining waivers for other activities locally, but these are typically verbal only. Such ‘plausible deniability’ for local officials protects the officials if their superiors ever accuse them of presiding over breaches of the ban – they can claim they were not responsible. It also leaves NGOs vulnerable to a change of mind by the authorities and accusations of rule-breaking and possible repercussions.

The picture emerging is not especially clear. NGOs have varied in their responses, and so have local officials, leading to patchy coverage. Former director of AREU [Orzala Nemat](#), writing on 24 January 2023, said there had been “no coherence among the major UN agencies, some of whom ask their local partners to resume their activities without women staff while others protest the ban and support advocacy efforts to reverse it completely.” It is thus difficult to get an overall sense of the extent and nature of the aid and access that has been lost.

DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES WITH THE 1990S

Three decades ago, when the Taleban were last in power (1996–2001), they restricted women’s work even more comprehensively.⁸ Women were banned explicitly from doing any work outside the home, except in the health sector and in other very limited circumstances.⁹ Currently, women are banned from working outside the home for NGOs, UN agencies, universities, all boys’ schools, girls’ secondary schools (which have been closed since 17 September 2021) and most government jobs (female staff have been told to stay at home, but are still being paid), but not for the private sector, girls’ primary schools, or embassies.

⁸ For a detailed and enlightening account of the bans during the first Emirate and the responses of NGOs, see Matthew Fielden and Sippi Azerbaijani-Moghadam, ‘[Female Employment in Afghanistan](#): A Study of Decree # 8’, Inter-Agency Task Force Study on Taliban Decree and Its Implications, 2001.

⁹ As an example of specific circumstances, the Taleban government employed a small number of women at Kabul airport to search female passengers following the hijack of an Ariana plane in February 2000.

The reason given for the bans then and now are the same, as are the objections – from the Taleban, the need to protect the population from sin, based on their understanding of sharia law, and from NGOs, the essential requirement to deliver aid effectively and without discrimination, based on their understanding of International Humanitarian Law.¹⁰ In both the 1990s and today, the population's humanitarian needs are vast and evident.

To tease out how the eras resemble and differ from each other, with perhaps lessons for how to deal with the current impasse, the author has spoken to eight people with experience of Afghanistan in both periods, who have spent at least one of those periods in a humanitarian role. Two interviewees were Afghan and six foreign; two were women and six men. Most asked to not be named, so it seemed more straightforward to keep all contributions anonymous. The interviews were conducted in January 2023. Their thoughts fell into four broad categories:

1. How Afghan society has changed;
2. How the Taleban have changed;
3. How NGOs and the wider aid scene have changed; and
4. Based on these changed circumstances and what worked/did not work in 1996-2001, what can or should be done now.

There was relative consensus on the first three themes and wide divergence on the last.

¹⁰ The four humanitarian principles are humanity, impartiality, independence and neutrality. One of the largest NGOs working in Afghanistan, the [Norwegian Refugee Council](#), explains them as follows:

Humanity: to prevent and alleviate suffering wherever it may be found. To protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being.

Impartiality: to carry out humanitarian action without discrimination, to relieve suffering, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

Independence: to remain independent from political, economic, military or other non-humanitarian objectives.

Neutrality: To abstain from taking sides in hostilities. To refrain from engagement in political, religious, racial or ideological debates and controversies.

HOW AFGHAN SOCIETY HAS CHANGED

The Taliban declared their first Islamic Emirate in 1996 in the nation's capital, a city where tens of thousands had been killed in the four previous years of bitter internecine fighting. Many more had fled and a third of the city lay in ruins. The Taliban takeover of Kabul and many other places came, said one interviewee living there at the time “partly as a relief,” until the group “started cracking down and lost the initial goodwill of the people.”¹¹ There were acts of resistance and lawbreaking – women taught girls clandestinely, teenage girls taught little ones, NGOs ran covert income-generating projects for widows – but, in general, this was a population, as another interviewee described it, “subjugated and living in fear.” Women's organisations did exist, recalled another, “but they weren't mobilising women or leading or being part of groups.”

At that time, Afghanistan had no independent media, no telephones,¹² and little communication with the outside world, apart from the one-way contact of listening to international radio stations such as the BBC and Voice of America.¹³ The state bureaucracy had been shattered by the war, leaving, said one interviewee, “an attenuated, skeletal government” for the Taliban to take over. Only a few functioning factories had been left intact by the fighting. Traders, however, always continued to operate, “sustaining the lives of Afghans through all these years,” said one interviewee, “and they continue to do so.”

¹¹ After the capture of Kabul, as the Taliban pushed northwards and encountered greater resistance, their takeovers of provinces and rule were accompanied by widespread war crimes, including the collective punishment of civilians they associated, because of their ethnicity, with Northern Alliance factions. For detail on this, the war crimes of the civil war and of the Taliban's first Emirate, see ‘The Afghanistan Justice Project, [Casting Shadows: War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity: 1978–2001: Documentation and analysis of major patterns of abuse in the war in Afghanistan](#)’, 2005.

¹² There were a few poor-quality, landline telephones in some cities for city-wide use only; the same model doubled up as a torture device, repurposed by various Afghan intelligence agencies to give detainees electric shocks. In the last years of the first Emirate, some AWCC call centres opened, but before that, the only place to make an international call in Kabul was the General Post Office. If international lines there stopped working, Afghans had to travel to Pakistan to call family abroad. Commanders and foreign organisations might also have satellite phones. The postal service continued to run.

¹³ Some foreign organisations – AP, AFP and Reuters news agencies, the BBC (until the bureau was closed by the Taliban), Voice of America (until the US government closed the bureau) and later, Al-Jazeera – had offices in Kabul and enjoyed relative freedom to report. State-owned media was highly controlled.

Today, as one interviewee said, the Taleban rule over a population that is “totally different, ... sophisticated and in contact with the world,” with high expectations and an understanding of their rights. People are far better educated, expect more from government and, through social media, mobile phones and the internet, are in touch with the wider world. “Even non-elites have access to mobile phones and TV,” commented one interviewee. “It doesn’t mean there are no people with the same attitudes in rural areas [as before], but very few people have not been changed at all or had no access to other ways of thinking.” Civil society organisations have also flourished since 2001. Significantly, in 2021, there was a functioning state for the Taleban to take over, as well as a private sector that was present “everywhere and in everything – education, health, as well as business,” as one interviewee put it.

Women, especially, have benefited from greater access to education, work and public roles. One interviewee, who himself recalled never having seen a bare-faced Afghan woman while working in Afghanistan in the 1990s, said the result was an “entire generation of well-educated, very outspoken, ferocious, young, professional women.” All this means that the middle class, according to another interviewee, has been transformed:

[They’re] more assertive than they were in the 1990s ... educated and relatively sceptical. There is less fear. They won’t bend and there’s open derision about some of the more ridiculous decisions and people [in power]. The middle-class carry some weight now, they have money, assets, business interests.... The discourse from the educated and businesspeople is: Let’s try and make things work and engage! And also: Thank God, there are no longer all these expats telling us what to do. There is more space for Afghan voices, now. They were so tired of consultants, agencies, and workshops. Now they’re looking for practical action, but it will take time.... Sassy Afghans won’t roll over [to the Taleban] as they did in the 1990s. There was a very different narrative then – more self-pitying. Now they say: It’s our country, as well.

The weariness with foreigners he described was rarely encountered during the first Emirate when they were largely regarded positively, often with curiosity, typically with a warm welcome and assumed to be potentially helpful and interesting. However, twenty years of foreign advisors and foreign soldiers had worn that goodwill down, even before the ugly scrambled rush for the exit in 2021. The many failures of the Republic – the widespread corruption and squandering of resources,

and the sight of its leaders running away as their government collapsed – have also coloured how many Afghans view those who backed the Republic, who gave away money so guilelessly and ‘guided’ government policies.



A Taliban fighter stands guard as women wait at a World Food Programme cash distribution centre in Kabul. WFP has recently called for urgent funds to support 19.9 million acutely food insecure Afghans. Photo: Hector Retamal/AFP, 29 November 2021.

How the Taliban have changed

In 1996, when the Taliban first captured Kabul, the movement was just two years old. Inexperienced in administration, it was even less practised in dealing with the rest of the world. There was, said one interviewee, “an air of almost naive innocence about them being at the helm.” At that time, said another interviewee, “it was [Supreme Leader] Mullah Omar from top to bottom. They all followed him. He changed the governors every three to six months, and anyone receiving word

that he'd been changed wouldn't question that order.¹⁴ The Taliban were one voice, one authority." Mullah Omar was also more accessible, including in a limited fashion to foreigners, than the current Amir ul-Mu'minin, Mullah Hibatullah.¹⁵

Restrictions on women and girls in the 1990s were more comprehensive – the ban on women working outside the health sector was complete, as was the ban on girls' education. Paradoxically, however, there was greater room for officials to quietly turn a blind eye to illegal activities. One interviewee recalled the education minister telling him, "We know you have these girls' schools, but you shouldn't tell us about them," as well as a provincial governor saying, "You'll receive a letter [banning girls' schools] from me and my director of education and you should take that letter and throw it in the wastepaper bin." Senior Taliban government officials, the interviewee said, approached his NGO for help in getting their daughters into school.¹⁶ How different the environment is today, he said:

Now it seems, this space is much less and shrinking all the time. Social media makes it more difficult to keep things under the radar and they're pretty good at tracing what's happening. For example, in Paktia [the quiet opening of girls' secondary schools in September 2022] first reached social media and then the official media and then the Kandaharis went in and closed them down.

Social media is not the only reason it is far easier for the Emirate to keep track of what is happening around the country. After an insurgency in which it ran a shadow administration for many years, the Emirate is more organised and

¹⁴ The interviewee cited the case of three governors "sent from Kandahar" who were unable to take up their posts because of local opposition, cases the author could not confirm. However, the reluctance of Balkh governor, local man Qudratullah Abu Hamza, to leave his post in September 2022 was reported on: see this [media report](#) which refers to Hamza having hundreds of armed men and saying in meetings with his close circle that he would not step down. Hamza was, however, successfully [replaced](#) in October 2022 by (the now late) Muhammad Daud Musamil (he was killed in a bomb blast on 9 March 2023).

¹⁵ The author, working in Afghanistan from 1999 to 2002, remembers Mullah Omar regularly meeting Kandahar-based United Nations humanitarian officials and also the then UN Secretary General's Personal Representative for Afghanistan, Francesc Vendrell, accompanied by team member Thomas Ruttig in his mission to bring about a negotiated end to the war. (They later became AAN's advisory board chair and co-founder respectively.)

¹⁶ The greater room for manoeuvre was not just seen in education. NGOs successfully 're-badged' many female staff as health workers. Some also ran under-the-radar programmes, for example, income generation projects for widows. All of this was risky, given the authorities could clamp down on violations at a moment's notice. For more on schooling, see AAN's January 2022 report, [Who Gets to Go to School? \(2\) The Taliban and education through time](#).

experienced in managing an administration and gathering intelligence. On regaining power, the movement shifted easily to deploying the apparatus and resources of the state. One interviewee said the current supreme leader “works in a different way than Mullah Omar, who was trying to micromanage the whole thing. He sits in Kandahar and has set up the ulema councils in the provinces in such a way that they can see whether his decrees and edicts are actually implemented – even if [local] people have a different position, for instance, on girls’ education and women’s role in society.”



An Afghan woman waits near a Taleban fighter at a UNHCR winter relief distribution centre to receive a blanket, a quilt and warm clothes.

Photo by Emmanuel Dunand/AFP, 12 November 1996.

The current Taleban movement has a polished diplomatic cohort honed through many years of negotiations in Doha and far greater military strength than in the 1990s. They do not face a sizeable armed opposition and can focus on governing and ensuring a monopoly of power. Perhaps most significantly, their belief in themselves and their right to rule is even greater than it was in the 1990s, as one interviewee described:

In 1996, they'd beaten a bunch of mujahedin in the takeover. Now, they've beaten the whole effing world, and that gives them a different view of things. They have self-legitimation. They have no doubts. How can they do anything wrong now? ... [They believe] they can do what they like: it's their country and they have a right to aid and it should be delivered as they wish.

Our interviewees reported some variation in their experiences dealing with today's Taliban authorities. They are “more self-consciously government-like [than the Republic], playing everything by the book,” said one. In his dealings with several ministries, including the Ministry of Economy, which is in charge of NGOs, he said, “There seems to be more concentration on bureaucracy and following the law [than under the Republic]. At least initially, it was quite encouraging – there did seem to be an open discussion [about projects].” Another was far more troubled about what she saw as a deteriorating situation:

There is less room for manoeuvre [than in the early days after the takeover]. It feels like they're tightening the grip, getting the levers of government in their hands, and exercising control by fear. People are frightened of speaking out. We've seen punishments of demonstrators. They have an utter contempt for the poor, believing poverty to be retribution for bad behaviour.

The make-up of the movement has changed in the last twenty years. Although still very much majority-Pashtun, there are now more Tajiks and Uzbeks than in the 1990s, although their presence in the higher ranks is limited. Far more Talebs, especially at senior levels, have lived outside Afghanistan, including in the Gulf and the major cities of Pakistan. In terms of life experience, this is a somewhat more varied group than the one that took power in the 1990s, which was made up almost entirely of former mujahedin mullahs and madrassa students from the villages of the Pashtun south – although that social cohort still features strongly.

This variation can lead to differences of opinion, for example, on girls' education (see our [report](#) from a year ago on the number of Taliban who had sent their girls to school) and priorities for the movement. There is a contrast, perhaps, between those, as one interviewee put it, who have “learned how the world works and want Afghans to be part of the world, able to make money and not be pariahs” and those who “have no real interest in anything outside the country, who just want a country they can govern and to turn everyone to their beliefs.”

How NGOs and the wider aid scene have changed

In the 1990s, the aid industry was tiny. The annual amount of international aid going to Afghanistan in those years, according to the [World Bank](#), was “in the range of \$200–300 million” or about 360–540 million dollars in today’s money. Currently, the UN is flying in about 40 million dollars every week, or 2 billion USD a year, to pay for humanitarian efforts, according to USIP economist [Bill Byrd](#) (with in-kind aid and other assistance, he writes, this adds up to about 3 billion USD a year, compared to an annual total of 8 billion plus USD of civilian and military assistance before 2021). In the 1990s, there were far fewer NGOs, particularly Afghan NGOs. In those years, according to the same World Bank report, aid went overwhelmingly to “humanitarian relief purposes, much of it in the form of food aid and other in-kind assistance,” and also de-mining, while “[k]ey development sectors like education and infrastructure ... accounted for only a small proportion of total assistance.” Although the magnitude of the aid has changed, the current focus on humanitarian needs appears much the same.

There were other key differences. Among foreign workers, interviewees noted, were many people who had worked in Afghanistan or in refugee camps back in the 1980s and early 1990s who had learned Dari or Pashto, travelled widely in the country and experienced working in the violent and unpredictable times of the civil war as well as in the rural areas where the Taleban were from. One interviewee recalled: “We’d been sitting in the villages in the 80s and 90s having discussions with mullahs and tribal leaders and mujahedin leaders. [That sort of aid worker] is not there anymore.” Some Afghan staff with experience going back to those earlier decades do remain, he said, but many “have gotten used to a privileged urban life: if you look at salaries, in the 80s and 90s, they were earning a tenth of what they are today. Afghans working for NGOs have been able to establish themselves in privileged, urban positions. They are also very opposed to the Taleban.”

In the years leading up to the 2021 change of regime, as the insurgency spread nationwide, working in areas affected by the fighting had become increasingly difficult, either because it had become objectively more dangerous for NGO staff or their security restrictions had tightened. Some Afghans working for international NGOs in those years who were based in cities may not have been able to get home to their villages if these were in Taleban-controlled areas because of their association with foreign organisations. Not all is lost, though, one interviewee

stressed: “NGOs with a long history have always been able to negotiate locally.” That is still possible, she said, “but it’s far more difficult now.”

Part of that difficulty lies in the way aid has been politicised over the past twenty years. There was always a strong political element in the aid given to Afghanistan, from the competitive Cold War support given by the West and the Soviet bloc in the years before the 1978 Saur Revolution as both sides tried to win Kabul over, to the military support and aid given to the warring parties during the Soviet occupation, to how that aid shrank after the fall of the pro-Moscow government in 1992 when Afghanistan had been ‘liberated’ from communism and was no longer of much interest to either Moscow or Washington.



Refugees outside the World Food Programme distribution point in Mashlak refugee camp, west of Herat city. 47,000 people were then living in miserable conditions, having fled drought and fighting. Photo: BK Bangash Pool/AFP, 11 February 2001.

In the 1990s, the Taliban’s most recent experience of aid would have been of Western military support to the mujahedin (of whom the Taliban were a part) and the aid given to populations outside Kabul government control and to Afghan

refugees in Pakistan. By contrast, over the last twenty years, the lived experience of Taleban members has been either of fighting, or working diplomatically, against a government supported by foreign military power and aid. The United States military and others also explicitly instrumentalised aid, particularly in the field of government services and income generation, in the (futile) belief that it would win over Afghan ‘hearts and minds’ from the insurgents. Humanitarians condemned the strategy fiercely, given how directly it contravened humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence. They feared, rightly, that it would tarnish them by association. Despite their outcries, the impression made on many Taleban was of aid deployed as an act of aggression, not surprising given that the US military explicitly referred to it as a weapon.¹⁷

This complicated relationship with aid changed the environment in which NGOs work, as three interviewees described:

[In the 1990s], the Taleban very much respected NGOs because we were giving services to the population that they [the Taleban] couldn't deliver. We were respected everywhere and not stopped from working.

The Taleban have always had a curious relationship with humanitarians. They see the value of aid, but also have a philosophical view that Allah will provide. So, they've never been very happy with aid. They're deeply suspicious of it and would like a way out of aid dependency.

[In the 1990s] the Taleban were very much dependent on NGOs. There was an ambivalence – they didn't like them, but realised they needed them. It's the same today, at least for the pragmatic ones. Although I do think that Hibatullah sincerely believes that NGOs and the UN, anything that smells of the West, could leave and it wouldn't make any difference, since Allah is the greatest giver.

¹⁷ For more on this, see Andrew Wilder and Stuart Gordon's 2009 report '[Money Can't Buy America Love](#)':

*Signs of just how important a weapon aid money is for the military are cropping up left and right, most prominently in the last tenet of the counterinsurgency mantra – “shape, clear, hold, and build.” An April 2009 U.S. Army handbook, *Commander's Guide to Money as a Weapons System*, provides operational guidance to military officers in war zones like Afghanistan to use money “to win the hearts and minds of the indigenous population to facilitate defeating the insurgents.” Wilder and Gordon conclude that “it's not working. And it might even be making things worse.” Nevertheless, the aid continued to flow in the forlorn hope it would win over the population.*

That ambivalence among Taleban towards NGOs – a mixture of respect, dislike of dependency, xenophobia (whether merited or not) and a suspicion of what the foreigners might do to ‘their’ women – combined in the 1990s with a desire to rid Afghan society of lingering communist influence: the Taleban fired all civil servants who had studied in the Eastern bloc, for example. Today, NGOs are seen as presenting an even greater threat, one that is more insidious and more intentional than in the past. The result is that the Taleban appear to want NGO services but not their presence or influence, while half-believing the Emirate does not really need them.



Care International staff register a widow to receive food rations in Kabul. At the time, Care was supporting more than 7,000 widows in the capital alone, providing not only food but also access to educational and vocational courses.

Photo: Shah Marai/AFP, 4 January 2010.

One aspect of foreign discourse is worth mentioning here as it was present during the first Emirate and has now pretty much disappeared, although not from pro-Taleban circles. During the 1990s, there was considerable soul-searching within the aid sector and among foreign commentators as to whether the Taleban were

merely implementing Afghan cultural norms. There has been a dearth of such questioning this time round, presumably because of the multitude of strong Afghan voices calling for women's rights and civic freedoms and the fact that, in the last two decades, so many women have been in paid work and taken on public roles, including in government and parliament, the media and courts, while a whole generation of girls has gone to school. However, one interviewee pointed out, such discourse lives on in the accusation by the Taleban and their backers that NGOs are working to spread 'Western values':

The debate [on cultural norms] isn't happening in international circles now, but it is on the Taleban side. They see the pressure on girls' education and women's rights as excuses [by the foreigners] to impose their culture. For example, one of the ministers said, "I don't accept you prostituting [our women and girls] in the name of education. Ours is the pure religion of Sayed al-Rasul [the Prophet Muhammad]. You can't impose these things on us. It's our decision whether women work or not, and which sectors they can work in."

Also worth stressing is that the Taleban's greater respect for NGOs in the 1990s did not mean the NGOs had much clout. One interviewee recalled NGO reactions when women were banned from offices:

It was early on, after the [1996] takeover. Everyone adapted and programmes continued. There was much more a feeling then of having no leverage, and that no one was speaking to the Taleban on behalf of NGOs except the UN. I also remember when in 1997 the Taleban changed the rules for hospitals overnight, sending all the women home [unless the hospitals were strictly segregated] and expecting female patients to go to a new women's hospital that was fully unprepared to take them. There was nothing NGOs could do but scramble and try to deal with the damage. Who would you complain to if you did complain? It was clear that the NGOs cared more about the fallout of these decisions than the Taleban did... There was also the dilemma that, as NGOs, we were basically helping the Taleban to keep their frontlines going. They didn't have to run the health system – the NGOs were doing it – and because of that, they could focus on the war.

It is worth considering the one confrontation between Taleban and NGOs where the Emirate backed down, an order originally made on 29 June 1998 that all international NGOs relocate their offices to the completely bombed-out site of Kabul Polytechnic, a site which the NGOs were, themselves, expected to

rehabilitate. The move appeared designed to contain and cut off international NGOs from almost all contact with the population and, if insisted upon, would probably have prompted most NGOs to leave – something that, eventually, turned out to be a bridge too far for the Emirate.

Another critical change in how NGOs now operate in Afghanistan lies in the amount of international attention they attract. The 1990s, said one interviewee, “was a time of petered-out interest in Afghanistan. It had become a backwater in terms of aid. There were only a handful of NGOs.” Working in aid in Afghanistan in 2023, by contrast, is to do so after twenty years of heavy international involvement, which means there is far greater outside interest in and scrutiny of what NGOs do.

For the West, what happens in Afghanistan and how aid is delivered says something about the West and its failure to keep the government it wanted in power. This magnifies the dilemmas, and the hard choices facing NGOs are distorted by the perception that what they are doing in Afghanistan reflects back on donor governments. “There’s a lot of black-and-white reporting about Afghanistan in Western countries now,” said the same interviewee, “focusing almost exclusively on [the bans involving] women’s work and women’s education, often with very little interest in the variations and details – as if part of our collective psyche needs this regime to be always and only terrible.”

By contrast, one aspect common to the 1990s and now is that, as Duffield, Gossman and Leader wrote in 2001 (before the 9/11 attacks), “Western governments” lack “political tools” for dealing with the Taliban, “other than non-recognition and ... UN sanctions.”¹⁸ There are differences only in what might be called the interface between the Taliban and the West. As in the 1990s, NGOs and UN agencies constitute practically the only Western/foreign presence in the country. However, in the 1990s, while they had field offices in-country, their headquarters were generally in neighbouring Pakistan. Now, in contrast, they are

¹⁸ The paper was the one and only report commissioned by the Strategic Monitoring Unit (SMU) before that organisation became the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU). It merits re-reading today. The authors reviewed an attempt by the UN to come up with a more coherent approach to working in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, the Strategic Framework for Afghanistan (SFA), which was formally announced in September 1998. The paper seeks to answer why “coherence remained elusive.” Rather than a “technical problem of co-ordination,” it argues, “the main conclusion is that intrinsic and unresolved differences remain over the nature and role of politics, assistance and rights.” Mark Duffield, Patricia Gossman and Nicholas Leader, [Review of the Strategic Framework for Afghanistan](#), October 2001.

in Kabul. Several interviewees referred to the huge difference this made, including this man:

NGOs are [now] more sensitive to pressure from the Taleban, who find it easier to put pressure on them. When we were in Pakistan, it was possible to have a louder voice, opposition, for instance, to the Taleban blockade against Hazarajat.¹⁹ NGOs made a public statement together which upset the Taleban very much.

Today, NGOs and the UN have ended up, vis-à-vis the Taleban, as proxies for the entire ‘international community’, with those on the ground fully exposed. They do not even have the pretext, if needed, that they are just following the orders of bosses in Islamabad or Peshawar. Given the Taleban’s outrage and upset that their government has not been recognised, this is not a happy position to be in. Moreover, donors have insisted that aid cannot be channelled through the Emirate, but must be disbursed via UN agencies to NGOs. There is an increasing danger, therefore, that the Taleban and the wider population will blame NGOs and the UN – whether deserved or not – for inflated costs, corruption, ineffectiveness and insufficiency.

GIVEN THESE CHANGED CIRCUMSTANCES AND WHAT WORKED/DID NOT WORK IN 1996–2001, WHAT CAN OR SHOULD BE DONE NOW?

All the choices before NGOs facing a ban on women working are unattractive: comply and use an all-male workforce; try to find ways around the ban, including carving out exemptions, locally or nationally; carry on with women working, hoping the ban will not be enforced or; boycott.

¹⁹ The major blockade of the Hazarajat lasted a year before, finally, Bamyan fell to the Taleban in September 1998. In later years, the Taleban also blocked food aid from going into enclaves held by two Shia Northern Alliance factions: Hezb-e Wahdat and Harakat-e Islami (in Dara-ye Suf and Balkhab districts of Samangan and Pul-e Khumri provinces respectively). This was despite the calamitous drought which had devastated harvests and livestock.

One interviewee described a strong sense of déjà vu, sitting in meetings again – more than twenty years later – discussing humanitarian access with Taleban officials. He felt the ambiguity from the Taleban’s side over the current ban has enabled a variety of NGO responses:

There are two things: the written rulings and instructions, and the actual enforcement. There’s always a gap between the two, and so you look for ways to cling to the [humanitarian] space you have. We’ve seen very public declarations [from the Taleban], but not a coherent approach to enforcement. Some NGOs took them at their word and said, “We can’t operate.” Others have said, “We can continue and still have women working, until we can’t because of [Taleban] actions. Only then will we stop.”

Lobbying and negotiation, he said, had in some cases softened the ban:

Individual agencies and NGOs have gone directly to the Taleban and asked, “How do we access widows and female-headed households?” There have been some discussions at central or local level and some solutions have been found. There’s now an unwritten exception [for women working] around health and nutrition. So you’re trying to navigate as you go along, look for solutions to fulfil the humanitarian imperative. But in some places, it’s still impossible to work.

He said that finding compromise had been made more difficult by social media and outside commentators, especially from the diaspora, who portrayed the only choice as a stark binary: either, comply with the ban or be responsible for Afghans starving, or, suspend all aid unless you want the Emirate to last forever.

The whole polemic around Afghanistan is so public and so toxic at the moment, any NGO trying to navigate [the ban] and deliver aid within the principles of International Humanitarian Law is accused of being an apologist or being business-minded.... Certain NGOs are managing to continue and navigate, but because everything is so public, it’s difficult. In the 1990s, social media didn’t exist. You could do things under the radar. Now, the debate is poisoned and very toxic, particularly among the diaspora.

The experience of working in aid in Afghanistan during earlier eras did feed into how interviewees explained their attempts to navigate what could or should be done now. For example, this interviewee said,

Already in the 90s, we were talking about a ‘principled pragmatism’, in contrast to a ‘principled rigidity’. Take the example of the [Taleban] edict banning girls from education in 1997. You had several UN agencies, ECHO and USAID who went all out at this conference in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan and said, “We won’t give a cent for education, nothing.” And [our NGO] was standing up and saying, “The edict is one thing – and we oppose that – but there are also the facts on the ground. There are girls’ schools running and the Taleban know about them and allow them.” But still [the UN and other donor agencies] kept this rigid stance.²⁰

If you say, “We’re stopping everything,” that’s principled rigidity. But you could also say, “We are suspending the parts of the programmes where women are discriminated against, but in others we won’t, for example, in health.” For [my NGO], there is now the example of teachers’ education programmes where women can no longer participate. We’ve closed it down, but we keep up a dialogue. The question is, Why are we [in Afghanistan]? Only to stand up for what we perceive as our principled approach, or is our main objective to assist the Afghan people? There is a difference between these two.

This interviewee took the position that while NGOs should not work in sectors and programmes where women are not allowed to participate, they should keep trying to seek workarounds and concessions and maintain a dialogue with the authorities – although he conceded this was a problem as long as dialogue with the Supreme Leader was not a possibility. He described one way that his NGO had found to work around the ban and keep female staff working (which will not be detailed here), but conceded that it carried risks; if hardliners found out, they could close the NGO down. He also said that the more urgently life-saving your NGO’s activities were, the sharper the choice:

If they refuse to allow women to work [in food aid], it’s a real dilemma [whether to suspend activities or not]. Because even if it’s only men doing the distribution, one must still assume that this food aid reaches families, including women and children. The humanitarian imperative means you have to accept quite a lot of things which you usually wouldn’t, in order to save lives.

²⁰ Another interviewee described how this principled rigidity was briefly relaxed when, in 1997–98, UNICEF agreed to provide school kits from its storage to an NGO to distribute among clandestine girls’ schools in Kabul – a request that was initially denied as part of the principled approach not to support education programmes as long as girls were formally excluded.

And there, I think, is a need for a very serious discussion within the assistance community. In the current debate, I see the concept of the humanitarian imperative very rarely mentioned.

Should the primacy of the humanitarian imperative, “that action should be taken to prevent or alleviate human suffering arising out of disaster or conflict, and that nothing should override this principle,”²¹ mean NGOs should swallow, as this interviewee put it, the “misogyny of the Taleban” and carry on at least with some activities?²² He was not sure.

Choosing to continue programmes despite the ban, in essence complying with it, carries the likelihood of harsh and long-term costs. Deploying only all-male teams to deliver life-saving aid could be cited to ‘prove’ it was possible to work without women, after all. Most aid workers believe having female workers is not just a matter of principle, but an actual necessity in a gender-segregated country like Afghanistan.²³ As one interviewee explained, “If you have women speaking to women in communities to identify needy families, men can’t do that [in the same way]. If you’re running a project on animal husbandry, where the animals are looked after by women, it’s impossible to do that without women workers.”

There is also the immediate human cost to female staff themselves, as well as the men who care about them, said one interviewee: “It is right for women to feel desperate. They are full of desperation, depression and anxiety. And it’s not easy for the menfolk either. All in all, it’s a catastrophe.” There is a strong sense of solidarity with both female colleagues and beneficiaries and a sense that equal access to work is a human right that should not be given up easily.

Grappling with the question of how to navigate the ban, this interviewee’s efforts to think through the dilemmas show how many NGO leaders have been racking

²¹ The definition is from [The Sphere Handbook: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response](#).

²² The interviewee gave the example of food aid to Ethiopia in the 1980s during the brutal rule of Haile Mariam Mengistu, despite the fact that his misrule was partly responsible for the famine, and that aid indirectly supported a regime that had killed tens, possibly hundreds of thousands of its citizens during the Red Terror of 1978–79.

²³ See also the comment by former director of AREU, [Orzala Nemat](#), in response to the ban that women play a significant role in the aid sector, critical in “needs assessment, design, delivery, and research, monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian aid in areas covering mother and child healthcare, food nutrition, primary education, support to family livelihoods, and women’s economic empowerment.”

their brains, often going around in circles, as they contemplate how on earth to move forward:

What should we do if only all-male teams are allowed? Should we say we won't distribute food to hungry people? There is no agreement among NGOs on this, nor among donors, nor UN agencies. Would the UN agree to male-only teams? Most NGOs are now returning to the programmes that they can do – winterisation, food distribution (because if they don't, it will rot). In other programmes, they need women in the teams but aren't sure it will be safe for them to work. So they're looking for workarounds, for example, using women in the community to do the interviews and monitoring, rather than their own staff. In some cases, women in the community could work in the field, but not in the offices – or if women continue working in the offices, the offices could be segregated – but that was the case before the ban [so it's not a solution]. It's all difficult. Once you've taken a stand and said you can't work anymore [because of the ban] and then you try to work again, you are 'hoisted on your own petard' [ie you sabotage your own position].

What makes the situation worse, she said, is that the environment is now so hostile to foreigners, there is almost nothing they can do to influence the Taleban.

I think the Taleban would be very happy to get rid of NGOs. We're seen as spies, intent on getting money, dealing in foreign concepts. They'd be happy to get rid of the UN as well. There is no real leverage or diplomatic pressure. And donors and the UN have found it difficult to find unity among themselves. Any strategy, apart from community-level up, is something the Taleban don't understand or are unwilling to engage with. I think we need to go back to basics. We need local Afghans to put pressure on [the authorities] about what they want.

None of the interviewees thought making aid – including non-humanitarian aid – conditional would encourage, let alone force, the Taleban to change their position. If anything, the leverage is being deployed in the other direction: against the NGOs. The Taleban are “counting on the world not wanting to let Afghans suffer,” said one interviewee, a conclusion elaborated on by another:

One of the discussions taking place with the Taleban is [sparked by their question]: Does this mean you'll let men starve? They understand that, yes, we're violating humanitarian law, but you [the NGOs] have the humanitarian

imperative. They feel they can push this further and further and that humanitarians will still try to deliver life-saving aid.

One interviewee said that for small NGOs, confrontation was, in any case, a non-starter: “Those with bigger budgets have more money and more clout. For small NGOs, the less we talk about [the ban], the better.” He suggested a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ strategy was best, that is, not even discussing any implementation of the ban with the authorities. Another interviewee in charge of a much bigger NGO cautioned, “Public condemnation is pointless.” Several were critical of what they thought was grandstanding by some aid actors, who characterised their interaction with the Taliban as “just stating positions at one another.”

One interviewee wondered whether more could have been gained if there had been greater discussion *before* aid agencies suspended operations:

Had the NGOs been fully united and had the UN and all international NGOs joined in, [suspending programmes] might have helped to open up some space, at least for negotiation. But given there’s been discord between INGOs and within the UN and among those involved in these discussions and conversations, I don’t think [the decision to suspend programmes] will bring about the result they hoped for. It won’t make things better. It’s also not helping people. I think it was probably done in a rush and without consultation. If they’d carried on working and consulted, and then decided to stop or suspend across the country by all organisations, [it would have been better], but it’s too late for that. Even some donors have taken different stands: some are more firmly behind the suspension, while others are not.

Calls for better coordination and unity among donors, NGOs and UN agencies are familiar from the era of the first Emirate – and every other era.²⁴ However, several interviewees also mentioned disunity on the Taliban side and whether that might open up some space to move forward on the question of women working. One interviewee who led NGOs in both eras, when asked what NGOs should do now, referred to this diversity of opinion among Taliban:

²⁴ An attempt was made in 1998 to achieve better coherence of UN work through the Strategic Framework for Afghanistan under the difficult circumstances of the first Emirate. Its less-than-successful attempt to reconcile aid, politics and human rights fell apart anyway after 2001, when the whole aid landscape changed (see footnote 19 for more on this).

Confrontation won't help. We will only empower the extremist voices, because they go for confrontation and then the other side [also] goes for confrontation.²⁵ Afghanistan is a country of shuras and concessions. Nothing can happen by force. We need to find ways to compromise. The moderates [in the Taleban] always say, "Give us time. If we start bloodshed, what's the difference between us and the mujahedin of the 1990s?" ... There is arm wrestling going on, but they are trying as much as possible not to make it bloody. They are hoping for a real opening by the spring; they openly talk about this.

This interviewee's estimation was that there were enough 'moderate' Taleban to provide him with hope. He suggested they should be privileged and supported (he did not say by whom) even if they were not yet publicly contradicting the 'extremists' within the Emirate. Another interviewee also pondered the same question: Might waiting for those different ideas and interests to develop within the Taleban movement open up space for compromise to emerge from within? He said:

If we're counting on an attitudinal shift towards women's rights and other liberties, that doesn't seem well-informed and a bit misguided. But there is more communication between various Taleban commanders and personalities and outsiders in neighbouring or Western countries now and there are elements within [the movement] that indicate there's, at least, some room for accommodation – how much power those people have, I have no idea. Could they swing things in a certain direction? I don't know because they're so different from what comes from the supreme leader – and what he says is implemented without question, even by those who portray a more moderate face to the outside world.

Another interviewee drew a different conclusion. Describing the current situation as "a total and utter mess," he criticised the many senior Talebs he thought were against the hardening of restrictions but had responded so passively:

Some Talebs think, "For God's sake, we can make money out of this aid; who cares if women work?" The number of Taleban seriously invested in the Islamisation project is limited. A number of Taleban military see no need for it – they've suffered enough. Now, they find the movement being taken over

²⁵ Elsewhere, this talked about the 'extremists' in both the Taleban and the 'international community'.

by religious people, the ulema shuras, when it had been a military movement. There is resentment from the governors – we fought, killed, died and now we’re going to be managed by these people who did nothing?



Women at the Ministry of Education’s central warehouse in Kabul pack school materials donated by UNICEF.

Photo: Massoud Hossaini/AFP, 25 February 2008.

For this interviewee, the question raised by the increasing restrictions and what he sees as the moderates’ reluctance to stand up to the leadership is existential – what sort of country will Afghanistan be if this goes on? Aid, he thought, was just keeping the country on “life support,” and so, “The sooner the plug is pulled, the better. Let the Taliban sort it out internally, and see if the more sensible or the hardliners prevail.”

Yet the prospect of donors radically decreasing support to Afghanistan in response to Taliban policies, especially concerning women, is an increasing worry for several interviewees, including this one:

Life's getting harder and harder. The edicts mean even more women losing their jobs – and there will be a further outflow [of educated, professional women]. We're encouraging our government not to make further cuts [to aid]. Already, several NGOs have lost contracts they'd been expecting.... There is such dire need. The last thing we need is donors washing their hands of Afghanistan.

What reduced budgets might mean on the ground was also a major concern to this interviewee, given that the scale of the need today is far greater than in the 1990s:

The population has more than doubled, which in itself translates into double the need. With [refugee] returns, you also have huge urbanisation. The Kabul population is now seven million. In the late 1990s, it was 700,000. There is a huge humanitarian problem, both urban and rural. Afghanistan was always natural-resource stretched, [unable] to provide for itself in terms of natural resources and agricultural production. As a country, the level of aid dependence is utterly shocking. There is even more aid dependence now [than in the 1990s]. The stakes are much higher.

You get the sense that Europe's in downturn, there is economic crisis, a huge shift in focus towards Ukraine, huge fatigue with the bottomless pit of aid going to the Sahel, Yemen, Afghanistan, wherever. Some donors are looking for excuses to cut money off, partly because they don't have the money they used to. There will be a drop in international assistance. The Taliban have given donors the perfect pretext for what they want to do anyway. It's terrifying – what it will cause here.

One of our interviewees, however, was not convinced the necessity for aid was as dire as some of his colleagues make out:

This talk of all Afghans starving is very much exaggerated. Afghanistan is a resilient country that knows how to support itself. No one is letting his neighbour have an empty stomach. Last winter in the middle of January, one of our drivers, a Hazara living in Kart-e Se in a mixed neighbourhood, said one of the women [in the area] went to the wakil-e guzar [neighbourhood head] and said that, for the last four days, they hadn't eaten anything, and had nothing to warm their rooms. He went to all the other homes – 210 in all – and said, "Give me at least 100 Afs to buy food for them," and he put together 30,000 Afs [about 300 USD] which was enough for her for one or two months. Her

husband was killed in an ISIS bombing and she has four small children. This is the Afghanistan you and I know. And then there is the Afghanistan of UNICEF and all the others.

Afghans will undoubtedly try to show solidarity with each other as long as they can, but still, if aid funding is cut sharply, there will be wide economic impacts. The sheer size of the humanitarian effort, economist Bill [Byrd](#) has concluded, has helped stabilise the macro-economy, supporting the afghani, covering the trade deficit between imports and exports and shoring up incomes.



Women wait in the office of the French NGO ACTED for winter sleeping kits made by IDPs under a ‘food for work’ scheme in Rustaq, Takhar province, a town then held by the Northern Alliance. The town was host to 80,000 people who had fled fighting and drought.

Photo: Jean-Claude Chapon/AFP, 22 October 2000.

That aid, writes Byrd, also inevitably “benefit[s] the Taliban regime at least indirectly because the economy is more stable and people are not starving” and because “this aid also means the Taliban can freely use their sizable resources from taxation — perhaps around \$2 billion a year — for other purposes.” He warns that Taleban actions against women and girls in education and NGOs “most likely mean that little if any development aid will be forthcoming in the near-term future. Hence humanitarian assistance will continue to comprise the lion’s share of international public financial flows into Afghanistan.” Humanitarian aid becomes ever more significant, and yet, giving it also becomes more difficult to reconcile with the politics of Western donors.

Finally, there were some concerns about opportunities lost before the situation had become so bad. One interviewee said she had tried to convene discussions

on the ethical and practical implications of any ban on women working *before* it was announced. That might have helped establish a better coordinated response. There was also soul-searching from another interviewee on aid delivery in general in the wake of the collapse of the Islamic Republic and the rise of the second Islamic Emirate. She talked about how the whole aid caravan threatens to blunder on following the same old pathways, despite the failures of aid in the Republic era, the change of regime and even the ban:

All these [old] habits and pathways keep being implemented, because no one's had a chance or taken the time to think them through or to undo them. I'd been joking about how UNDP will probably get involved in DDR again even under the current regime.²⁶

There's been no rethinking of all the methods and assumptions that the programmes of the last decades were built on, even after it all collapsed so dramatically. Not among donors and not among aid organisations. Everyone is just continuing, doing what they've been doing for decades... For a while, it even seemed the donor community was getting ready to swallow the unpalatability of the [Taleban] regime and deal with it. This would have left them in a position like they were under the previous regime, where they would have had to fill in for the Taleban [that is, make excuses for them] and tell their publics it was going to be OK. But the Taleban have unravelled that, by basically saying, "We're going to be who we are. Just deal with it."

So now [with the bans on women working and the doubling down on girls' schools], it seems the Taleban have given the donors too little to work with. But I think [the Taleban's] gamble is that the donors will come round anyway. They're trying to force their hand. And they may not be wrong. Let's see. It's still a possibility.

²⁶ The UN Development Programme (UNDP) supported four successive DDR – Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration – programmes after 2001, all of them failures and all counter-productive. When the United States' 'peace process' with the Taleban was gearing up, there was much talk again of the need for DDR in a 'post-peace' Afghanistan. For more on this, see the author's report from July 2018, [Graft and Remilitarisation: A look back at efforts to disarm, demobilise, reconcile and reintegrate](#).

CONCLUSION

The Emirate has been unmoved by the effects of the ban on women workers or what it might mean for the wider population. BBC Pashto asked spokesman Zabiullah Mujahed on 31 December 2022 to respond to a question by a female NGO worker, breadwinner for 12 people, on how she should feed her children:

First, we should consider that when a decree is given for reforms and the ruling of sharia is implemented, it's natural that some will suffer as a result. They should think of alternative ways [of making a living]. Second, it's very important how we get our livelihoods; it should be within the framework of Islamic sharia. For example, if someone argues that I steal, but I deliver food to children, we still can't allow them to steal. These are illegitimate ways and Muslim brothers and sisters should find sharia ways to get a livelihood.... Institutions that distribute humanitarian aid in Afghanistan must consider certain values. If they do not consider principles and values, then Afghans do not need such aid.

The arguments were the same in the 1990s. When the author asked a minister then how widows with no grown men in the family were expected to feed themselves and their children, she was told, “God will provide.” The familiarity of the discourse – from both Taleban and aid actors – masks the very many real differences between then and now.

Conditions are in some ways more difficult, but in others, somewhat easier. The Taleban are better organised and more cognizant of what is happening around the country, but have so far issued less all-encompassing rules: the fact that some women can still work legally in paid employment or in business, for the UN and in NGOs in sectors that are exempted from the ban, may bring some hope that women might be allowed to work for NGOs again. The Taleban have said the ban on women working with NGOs is temporary and they are working on plans to reopen both work and education ‘within sharia law’.²⁷ NGOs, however, are not holding their breath, given it is now eighteen months since such guidelines were

²⁷ For example, acting Minister of Mines and Petroleum Shahabuddin Delawar told [Tolonews](#) on 28 December 2022 that religious scholars had started looking for ways to let women work in NGOs: “The clerics are working to find a way to address the issue in accordance with sharia.”

promised on girls' secondary schools. Also, in the old Emirate, the 'provisional' ban on girls' education lasted until the Taleban were ousted from power, and there was never any indication that they were taking steps towards lifting it.



A family sits outside their tent in an IDP camp in Balkh province. After the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the situation in the camps deteriorated as many aid organisations temporarily suspended operations. Photo: Sayed Khodaiberdi Sadat/Anadolu Agency via AFP, 13 November 2021.

It is conceivable that the Afghan people, especially those forming the Taleban's rural constituency, could prove crucial: if they feel strongly enough about diminishing aid, might they force the Emirate to soften its position? Or will they feel that the NGOs, the UN agencies and the 'foreigners' are the source of their economic problems? If the ban continues, local Afghans might be the key to whether particular programmes continue, or not. In the 1990s, they were vital for negotiating with the local authorities to keep programmes running, and by all accounts are also playing that role today. We may see a winnowing of programmes, with those valued by local people standing a better chance of surviving the ban and suspensions.

In the absence of a rolling back on the ban, many NGOs will continue to try to carve out concessions on women working, sector by sector, district by district, but that will take time, is uncertain and will, at best, end up with a patchy, reduced coverage that is overall reduced. If, as in the 1990s, working women and their employers continue to rely only on verbal agreements with officials, locally or at the national level, it leaves them and their organisations vulnerable to changes of mind and future clampdowns by the authorities.

Many NGOs are extremely reluctant to just obey the ban and switch to male-only teams, not only because that would reduce the effectiveness and fairness of aid delivery. It would also be a setback, indeed would feel like a betrayal of female colleagues and Afghan women in general. Many humanitarians are also aware of the risk of creating precedents globally; if they did decide to carry on working with male-only teams, will other governments demand the same of them, for example the Houthi government in Yemen?

For now, the implications of the ban, the suspensions and the results of negotiations or exemptions are still becoming evident. This feels like a trial period for both NGOs and the Emirate. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) in its 2023 [Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan](#) (HRP), published on 9 March, has reinforced the idea that, at this time, operations are being monitored and could be re-assessed, depending on how the ban on women working with NGOs pans out. The HRP, which details the humanitarian needs of Afghans, the responses and hoped-for spending for the coming year, was developed before the ban went into force. Its publication was delayed because of it, but in the end, the “the strategy and planning have not been revised substantially” because of the ban. However, the HRP does say,

The Humanitarian Coordination Team (HCT) in collaboration with other humanitarian partners and basic human needs actors have developed a related monitoring and reporting framework to report back to the IASC [Inter-Agency Standing Committee] on the permissiveness of the access environment and sectoral and local authorisations, and humanitarian partners’ ability to operate within the IASC Mission recommendations / minimum criteria for operations under the impact of the ban. In the meantime, the humanitarian community continues to assess the impact of the ban across all sectors and engage with [de facto authorities] at the national, regional and provincial levels to overturn the ban.

It said that “based on the outcomes of this monitoring and related advocacy efforts,” the UN will review operations comprehensively and, if required, revise the plan.²⁸ What will now happen to the HRP, given that the ban on women working for NGOs has not been resolved, but exacerbated? The UN should have far more clout than the NGOs, but even so, this is an escalation that it may be just as ill-equipped to deal with, for all the reasons laid out in this report. It faces the same unhappy choices: comply, fudge, try to negotiate exemptions, or boycott.

NGOs are aware of the danger of the current situation becoming protracted, with no lifting or easing of the ban, and of the exceptional becoming normal. In that scenario, some NGOs will make the tough choice to work without women, despite knowing this will harm women beneficiaries and female colleagues. Others will try to soldier on with women working from home, or focus on places and sectors where they can work with women staff, or carry on with women working, despite the risks to both staff and organisations, in the hope the Emirate will not strictly or systematically enforce the ban. Some NGOs will scale back rather than leave the country, knowing that once operations stop, reopening offices becomes difficult. Some may leave altogether, especially if donors cut funding. As one interviewee said, “For a lot of the Western powers, [the current situation] suits them quite well. They’re eager to put Afghanistan into the rear-view mirror as the colossal mistake it was.”

As yet, there is neither a sign of an end to this impasse nor a sense of how it can be resolved without what may feel like major concessions from one or both sides. For the interviewees still working in the humanitarian field, their search to reconcile the competing pulls of aims, principles and imperatives is underpinned by strong feelings of loyalty to their female colleagues and solidarity with beneficiaries, especially women. For some NGOs, relationships with local communities go back decades; for them, principles are very much mixed in with the practical and the personal. One interviewee warned, however, that increasingly there seemed to be “a strongly ideological streak within the Taliban [that was] losing patience with fudging.”

She also cautioned against the desire to simplify and ‘resolve’ these dilemmas, describing them as “fundamental, complex and largely irresolvable,” or to defend

²⁸ See ‘[Two Security Council Resolutions and a Humanitarian Appeal: UN grapples with its role in Afghanistan](#)’ for AAN’s analysis of the HRP, and of the extension of UNAMA’s mandate, passed in a UN Security Resolution on 16 March 2023.

positions as the 'correct ones'. "Whatever choices NGOs and donors make," she said, "they will feel at least partially wrong. In a situation this complicated, a good choice doesn't really exist."

Cover photo:

Women queue up at a World Food Programme cash distribution centre guarded by Taleban fighters in Kabul.

Photo: Hector Retamal/AFP, 29 November 2021.

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