

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT  
Online Event

**“The Future of Women and Girls in Afghanistan”**

DATE

**Thursday, September 30, 2021 at 1:00 p.m. ET**

FEATURING

**Ilze Brands-Kehris**

*Assistant Secretary-General, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*

**Lauren Rumble**

*Principal Advisor, Gender, and Chief of Gender and Rights Section, Programme Division, UNICEF*

**Shaharзад Akbar**

*Former Chairperson, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission*

**Uzra Zeya**

*Undersecretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, United States Department of State*

CSIS EXPERTS

**John J. Hamre**

*President and CEO, and Langone Chair in American Leadership, CSIS*

**Marti Flacks**

*Director and Senior Fellow, Human Rights Initiative, CSIS*

**J. Stephen Morrison**

*Senior Vice President and Director, Global Health Policy Center, CSIS*

*Transcript By  
Superior Transcriptions LLC  
[www.superiortranscriptions.com](http://www.superiortranscriptions.com)*

J. Stephen Morrison:

Welcome, and good afternoon or morning or evening, depending where you are. I'm J. Stephen Morrison, senior vice president at the Center for Strategic and International Studies here in Washington, D.C., where I direct the CSIS Global Health Policy Center.

I'm thrilled today to join with my colleague, Marti Flacks, director of the CSIS Human Rights Initiative, in hosting this extraordinarily timely conversation, "The Future of Women and Girls in Afghanistan."

In a few minutes, I will offer some framing remarks and introduce our speakers for the roundtable. Marti Flacks will moderate that roundtable. First, I'd like to invite my boss and dear friend, Dr. John Hamre, president and CEO of CSIS, to offer his welcome. Over to you, Dr. Hamre.

John J. Hamre:

Steve, thank you, and I'm – my role today is ornamental only. I'm going to listen because there's such talented people on this line and I will learn. I want to say thank you and welcome to all of our listeners and a special thanks to this remarkable group of professionals that are doing such important work at this crucial time.

You know, all of us are in some stage of grieving about what has happened in Afghanistan and there's – you know, there's all kinds of, you know, anger and finger pointing and all that. That's not the purpose of our session today. Our session today is to look forward. Our job is not done.

Our job is still in front of us, and we're going to explore that today about what we can now do to help women and children, girls, in Afghanistan, who are facing a very uncertain future and all of us have an obligation at this point to now be creative in what we can do.

So I do want to thank everyone for joining today for this really important discussion. A special thank you to Dr. Rumble. She's here – I'm so grateful – as a stand-in for Henrietta Fore. Henrietta is the executive director of UNICEF.

But Henrietta has people stationed all over the world and right now she has a serious crisis that is facing her in Somalia and so she asked to take leave of her own personal presence. But typical of Henrietta, she said, I'll give you somebody even better, and that's Dr. Lauren Rumble. We're really pleased to have her here.

So, but Steve, let me turn it back to you. We've got such a remarkable group of talented people for this call, talented women for this conference. I really should – I really look forward to hearing everybody. Thank you.

Mr. Morrison: Thank you, Dr. Hamre.

I want to acknowledge the staff here at CSIS who worked really assiduously to make this all possible: Amith Mandavilli, Mackenzie Burke, and on our production team, Margaret Rogers and Dhanesh Mahtani. Special thanks to them.

This week and the last have been tough moments of unpacking U.S. miscalculations regarding the collapse of the Ghani government and the rush to power of the Taliban, how and why that happened, and what that now means, looking forward. And a large part of that exercise has been a painful examination of what the U.S. government achieved or did not achieve in its 20-year trillion-dollar effort to build a functioning government and security forces.

Part of that also is trying to explain the intelligence failures and lack of careful preparations for what transpired in August. Part of that conversation is also occurring here today with respect to women and girls. While we have failed in governance and security in Afghanistan, the United States and other donors and NGOs did achieve fragile successes in investing in the empowerment of women and girls, their education, civic participation, and employment.

Major gains were achieved in access by women and girls to health services. Maternal mortality was cut in half, life expectancy rose dramatically, along with child survival and nutrition. Control of polio advanced, its foundation a workforce of women vaccinators operating across conflicted dangerous parts of the country.

The painful challenge before us today is will those gains, those early fragile successes achieved over two decades, now be erased and an era of regression set in. It's an extraordinary and unprecedented situation to have a government which we so loathe and have such difficulty imagining cooperating with now suddenly in power and in a position to engineer a regression if it chooses to.

We've faced similar situations in places like North Korea or Zimbabwe under Mugabe's tyranny, but nothing quite like the Taliban's return to power 20 years after being ousted by the U.S. and its allies following 9/11.

Today, we'll be asking some tough questions. What is the strategy and what influence does the United States, the West, U.N. agencies, international financial institutions, have? What leverage does the United States, now absent, still retain? We have to be tough minded and realistic. The Taliban government in power is a pariah. It is sanctioned. We cannot work through it, and our influence remains uncertain at this moment.

We're caught in another bind. There's the threat of economic collapse, closure of the health system, and a runaway humanitarian disaster. How to navigate these emergency challenges while keeping the rights and interests of women and girls front and center.

There's another bind. How is the United States and other partners to operate in a sustained basis to support the rights of women and girls in health, education, food security, civic participation, that reaches beyond emergency measures? Can effective and reliable mechanisms be created and sustained outside Taliban control for the delivery of resources and programs – in support of programs?

Finally, there's a third piece to this puzzle. Does what the United States and like-minded Western powers and international institutions strongly prefer align at all with those powers in the region whose influence over what happens in Afghanistan is rising – Pakistan, Qatar, Iran, China, Russia, among others?

I want to quickly introduce our esteemed speakers and hand off to Marti Flacks, who will moderate the conversation. We're joined by Shaharзад Akbar, former chairperson for the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. She's also former deputy of the National Security Council for Peace and Civilian Protection, and former senior adviser to the Afghan president on High Development Councils. Welcome, Shaharзад.

We're joined also by Uzra Zeya, Undersecretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights at the U.S. Department of State. She has a long and distinguished career as a professional diplomat and nonprofit leader with deep knowledge of South Asia and the Middle East. She was sworn into her position in July.

We're joined also by Ilze Brands-Kehris, Assistant Secretary General for Human Rights, U.N. High Commission on Human Rights, with extensive experience in conflict prevention and human rights with a specialization in minority rights.

As Dr. Hamre explained, Henrietta Fore has just had to withdraw on account of an emergency and Dr. Lauren Rumble has kindly joined – agreed to join us. She is a UNICEF Principal Advisor, Gender, and Chief of Gender and Rights Section of the program division of UNICEF. She's worked across a range of countries, many quite conflicted, in her 15 years as a leader on child and women's rights advocacy.

At this point, I'm delighted to hand off the program to my colleague, Marti Flacks, Senior Fellow and Director of the CSIS Human Rights Initiative. She

brings a wealth of expertise to today's topics with 10 years of service on the National Security Council and the Department of State.

Over to you, Marti. Thank you.

Marti Flacks: Thank you so much, Steve, and thank you to all of our panelists for taking the time to be here today for what I think will be a really enlightening and important conversation, and I hope it is a conversation.

I want to start, however, to give each of you a chance to comment on some of the questions that Steve framed and, in particular, your views on what the strategy ought to be, from your perspective, in terms of the rights of women and girls, given the situation in Afghanistan.

So let me start, Chairwoman Akbar, with you.

Shaharзад Akbar: Thank you, Marti. I'm really honored to be among these amazing speakers and to be speaking to all of you.

We know the situation on Afghanistan and there is a full attempt by the Taliban at complete erasure of women from the public space, limitations on women's and girls' education, limitations on women's employments and ability to work and limitations on their movements.

The situation, looking at it right now, the biggest fear and concern is that it will continue to get worse without paying attention and putting in leverages for pressure both domestically and internationally. Domestically, a source of hope is the fact that Afghanistan is a transformed society. It's not the society that it was when the first time Taliban took over, and one of the earliest signs of this is the resistance, the active resistance, of women, the protests continuing despite Taliban calling these protests illegal, despite the violence against protesters. Even today, there were women protesting in Kabul against Taliban's limitations on women's rights.

There are also Afghan media on the ground that are trying to continue to increase access to information and to truth, although they face a lot of pressures. It's also the fact that Afghanistan's legal framework really developed in the past 20 years and has a level of sophistication that it didn't have before.

Of course, it seems like Taliban want to completely dismantle this legal structure. But creating this legal structure produced a process in which there was an active discussion about the rights of women and interactions between rights of women and international conventions and Islamic law and Afghan culture. And that conversation and that discourse, I think, created a situation in society where there are expectations and Taliban will – in

changing the legal framework will face some resistance because there has been this process in place in the past 20 years.

Also, of course, Afghanistan has international commitments, and this is where I'm not very clear. How can we – how can we utilize these international commitments? Colleagues from U.N. with more experience from U.N. can perhaps speak on this, but Afghanistan is a signatory to CEDAW, to Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.

Afghanistan is also a signatory to many other conventions that protects the rights of children, that protects people from torture, protects freedom of expression. So as a state – Taliban cannot ignore the fact that as a state Afghanistan is a signatory to these conventions and that international obligations that it creates and what can that – how can we leverage that – can we leverage that in order to protect the rights of women and girls?

This is the fact internally in Afghanistan and, of course, also regionally, there seems to be more – at least more discourse about discomfort about Taliban's limitations on women and girls. We heard from Qatari officials about the fact that women should have the right to employment, the right to education. Others in the region, you know, will they speak up and when? But I think it's also the fact that there will be a lot of pressure from them from Afghan women and Afghan human rights activists, even in diaspora, that didn't exist before.

In terms of other levers of pressure and the ways that international engagement can be utilized, of course, it's going to be difficult. There are difficult choices ahead of us. There is the fact that the humanitarian situation is dire and Afghans are starving right now, and that's something that we need to attend to as quickly as possible and as effectively as possible, and how does that then influence our engagement with Taliban and the level of influence that we have for protection of women and girls, as it was raised earlier by Stephen. That's something that I think we'll need to continue to explore.

Ms. Flacks: Thank you so much for that.

And let me turn to Undersecretary Zeya for the same question, how the U.S. is seeing these same issues, what you see as your objectives and points of leverage in this situation.

Uzra Zeya: Thank you so much. And I just want to say at the outset, thanks – thank you to CSIS for organizing this conversation and underscore just how vitally important this topic is today.

I want to begin by saying the United States government is a champion of the human rights and empowerment of women and girls around the world. President Biden reaffirmed his own commitment in Executive Order 14020 establishing the White House Gender Policy Council, which he signed into action on International Women's Day.

We all know that the meaningful participation and contribution of women to public life is vital to a country's security, stability, and prosperity, and ensuring that its gains reach all members of society, including in Afghanistan.

And today, as Shaharзад eloquently described, Afghan women and girls find themselves facing severe challenges and are understandably fearful as they attempt to navigate a new Afghanistan in which the Taliban seeks to impose a new order.

We were deeply concerned by the Taliban's appointments to the country's so-called caretaker government. They were exclusively men, included very few members of minority groups, and were, largely, comprised of Taliban affiliates. We were equally disturbed by reports of the Taliban harassing women-led civil society and humanitarian organizations, that some women have been told not to go to work in some provinces, and that women are, literally, being pushed out of their university educations.

While boys have been invited back to school, the same is not true for Afghan girls, and we all know the Ministry of Women's Affairs has not been allowed to continue its important work. These actions show zero respect for women and girls. They also seriously undermine women and girls' enjoyment of their human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly, and movement, as well as the right to work and access to education.

So with our international partners, the United States government is taking steps to support Afghan women and girls to take their rightful place in Afghan society and realize their potential as equal partners in the country's future.

First, we are pressing the Taliban and Afghan leaders to form a government that is representative of those it purports to govern, including women, that respects the rights and dignity of all Afghans and that adheres to Afghanistan's international obligations, which Shaharзад described.

Second, we are working with partners to sustain global focus on these issues, including in international organizations. The United States and more than 60 other countries issued a joint statement at the U.N. Human Rights Council in August expressing our concern about Afghan women and girls,

particularly restrictions on their education, their work, and freedom of movement.

We also supported the U.N. Human Rights Council's special session on the human rights situation in Afghanistan, and we continue to call the U.N. Security Council's attention to it.

Third, the United States is committed to sustaining humanitarian assistance for the people of Afghanistan, including women and girls. On September 13th, we announced nearly \$64 million in new humanitarian assistance for the Afghan people, bringing the total to nearly \$330 million for this fiscal year and nearly \$4 billion in humanitarian assistance since 2002. This new funding will help address the protection concerns of women, children, and members of minority groups, among others.

We also will continue to work with our partners to press the Taliban to adhere to its commitments on unimpeded humanitarian access, including freedom of movement and security for all humanitarian workers, particularly female staff.

Finally, we've been clear that the Taliban must respect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of everyone in Afghanistan if it's serious about seeking international legitimacy. We insist that those who undermine or abuse the human rights of any Afghan woman as enshrined under international human rights law or in the Afghan constitution are brought to justice.

The United States is committed to preserving the hard-fought gains made by all Afghans, especially women and girls, in the past 20 years. So I'm really looking forward to this conversation about how we all and international partners can work to do so together. Thank you.

Ms. Flacks: Thank you very much, Undersecretary Zeya.

I want to turn to Assistant Secretary General Brands-Kehris to comment on where the U.N. human rights system is in terms of its objective and expectations from Afghanistan.

Ilze Brands-Kehris: Thank you very much. I'm glad already. First of all, I want to thank CSIS as well. I think it's – we know that there are lots of discussions going on because it is, of course, a very important topic that we are all aware of. But I think this has a particular focus and the forward looking focus that is where we really need the discussion to find how we go ahead. So very grateful to be here with you.



Some of the things that were said are already exactly along the lines that I was intending to say. The reminder – really, the very basic reminder, and I'm very grateful to Shaharзад to have started off with that, we all know that women's rights, girls' rights, are human rights, and we also know that human rights are universal, interdependent, and indivisible – we keep saying that as though it's a ritualistic thing we say, but those words have meaning and we really should remember that – and that means that they are nonnegotiable.

So here, again, to the point that Uzra just made as well and Shaharзад that it's – we know that the Taliban even not recognized as the government but the de facto authorities, the Taliban are bound by the international obligations that Afghanistan is bound by. So, really, that key message that we really should keep at the basis of our engagement.

We are – OHCHR, the High Commissioner, myself – alarmed, of course, after how within weeks, really, of making those initial statements and assurances of upholding women's and girls' rights that we see that the Taliban is reneging on a lot of those commitments already, the exclusion that we see in various spheres. There have been mixed signals. We don't go into that. We all know that and we've been following very closely. But also, the point that was made on how the last 20 years, the progress that was made.

So it is a different society, which means that it cannot be taken away. And also for us from the international community side and all of those outside of Afghanistan who have to stand in solidarity with Afghan women and girls, we cannot let these women and girls down. We have to be there. This is something that we cannot have as a topic du jour that we then pass on to the next crisis with.

So, of course, we know that we know we're talking about the same rights, the full and equal access to basic services, of course, health care, education, but also other services, the full and equal participation, as it was mentioned already, both in the workforce and all sectors of the economy. But, obviously, participation in public life is also one that we need to remember very strongly now when the focus is, rightly, on education.

But let's remember that we are talking about rights in all these spheres and that means participation in decision-making. It means being part of the leadership and, obviously, the issue of the inclusive government, including women, not a token woman just to say that we are showing off, but really taking seriously the right to participation and, of course, with particular attention to minority groups be they ethnic or religious as well and, by the way, women from minority groups also, as we know, who are particularly vulnerable and excluded.

The freedom of movement, of course, and participation in civic space, the importance of civic space, the very strong Afghani women leaders that we have seen and the ability of them to work in a safe space. And obviously, the freedom from violence, the freedom from insecurity, and, in general, discrimination.

So we do believe the international community, of course, has a key role in engaging with the Taliban, but persuading, making, using all of the levers that we have, and then the member states as well as the organizations. And I think this is where the discussion needs to be. How do we engage, remaining principled – not just in words, not just reminding of those obligations, but how can we really make sure that that is the reality and the signal comes across, that when we have – when we have – and the linkage to – the humanitarian aspects were mentioned. Of course, the imminent threat of the collapse of the economy and the financial system.

But how do we make sure that all of us, and that goes for all of us within the U.N., also speak with one voice so that it's not human rights in addition or not only sort of as a conditionality. Well, you do the human rights and you get some humanitarian assistance.

No. The point is, it has to be a human rights-based approach also to humanitarian assistance as well as to development so that we really are clear on how we approach this and what policies are there.

So much more to discuss how we actually do this, how we advocate, who has the influence to actually be able to do it. But we're, certainly, very fully on board in being part of it and I look forward to hearing from you advice as well as other insights. Thank you very much.

Ms. Flacks:           Fantastic. Thank you so much.

And, finally, I want to turn to Dr. Rumble to see what you have to add as an organization that is operational on the ground already facing these issues day to day in terms of your work with children. What's your perspective on what our objectives should be here?

Lauren Rumble:      Thank you so much. It's such a pleasure to be here, and I really want to thank our host, CSIS, for convening this extraordinary group of speakers. I've really enjoyed listening to all of you, representing a Human Rights Commission, government, and U.N. agency.

And that's, in a way, the most significant point. We are united in our diverse roles and responsibilities ensuring that women and girls have immediate access to life-saving support and protections, that we deliver principled humanitarian assistance for all Afghans. That's a shared commitment to

support women and girls' rights, safety, and well-being. And now more than ever is the time for us to work together to plan internationally and on the ground in Afghanistan, forward looking, as Ilze emphasized.

And whilst the unfolding situation is unprecedented, UNICEF has actually been in Afghanistan for more than 70 years, working across the country to provide critical humanitarian and development interventions, whether we're trucking water or building new systems, and strengthening laws and policies.

With our partners, we're staying and delivering principled humanitarian assistance as we speak because of that history. Currently, we have a nationwide presence with 13 offices across the country, and we're really fortunate to be able to live the humanitarian imperative to stay and deliver critical services to those who need it most.

We are, of course, adapting to the ever-changing situation in Afghanistan, and we're listening to the voices of women and children and what their priorities are to make sure we're responsive to the evolving needs. But we're not compromising on our child rights mandate, protecting and advancing the rights of all women and girls, ensuring their inclusive access to essential services, and keeping them safe from violence and exploitation. Those are key pillars of our response.

I want to share with you just three top priorities for women and girls as they are right now. First and foremost, keeping girls and women safe from violence and making sure that those at risk can easily access the help they need.

Unfortunately, as in all humanitarian crises, women and girls' safety is compromised. We know that gender-based violence is a very real risk. So we need to work quickly to ensure safe spaces for women and girls, easing restrictions on their movement, and helping girls and women at risk to easily access the services they need, and that means supporting frontline workers, including social workers, health workers, and others, those who are on the front lines of contacting women and girls to identify, respond, and prevent gender-based violence.

With fewer health facilities operational and less female health workers reporting to work, women and girls are increasingly hesitant to seek care, and that's why we're investing in mobile health clinics and we're committed to ensuring women and girls have safe access to age-appropriate health information and services.

We need to, of course, stop the violence before it starts and violence prevention must be integral across the entire system of humanitarian

coordination and response. We're working across our own programs, whether it's health, nutrition, social protection, or water, sanitation, and hygiene, to really proactively identify potential safety risks like lighting in our water and sanitation facilities so that women and girls can take concrete action to mitigate these risks from our end and theirs.

A second priority is, of course, listening to girls and women, and I believe all the speakers have emphasized this in one way or another. It means actively resourcing women- and girl-led networks and organizations. It means creating mechanisms for their voices to be heard offline and online, and I'll talk more about concrete examples of that a little later.

Women and girls are agents of change, of innovators, and are leaders in their own right. I, myself, was really lucky to visit Afghanistan last year and I was so struck by the determination of girls to complete their education, even with scant resources. They're eager to contribute to society and be part of a more equal and prosperous world.

Third, we know that girls' education must remain a top priority for all of us. We welcomed news that secondary schools in Afghanistan will reopen after closing due to COVID-19. But we need assurances that all girls, girls of all ages, including those over 12 years, can go to school unconditionally. They cannot and must not be left behind.

It's critical that these girls, especially older girls, can resume their education without any further delays, and what they're learning is relevant to their future professional trajectory. It's their right and it's also an investment in future peace, growth, and stability.

Thank you so much.

Ms. Flacks:

Thank you so much, Dr. Rumble, and to all of you for those really helpful framing remarks and, really, setting the stage for a very clear conversation about what we can expect out of the situation.

And now I want to sort of shift to how we get there and, really, where the rubber meets the road in terms of international engagement with the Taliban on this situation. And I was really struck by, Shaharзад, you said at first and it was echoed by others, how important it is to listen to the voices and the activism of people on the ground and how much expectations have changed on the ground over the last 20 years.

And I want to pick up on this question of expectations to really understand your perspectives on what we should be looking for. You know, the Taliban that's in power today is more sophisticated, more media savvy, than it was

20 years ago. It has more experience engaging with the international community than it did 20 years ago.

And so we've seen them do a bit of a shuffle and take some what I would call half steps to sort of mollify the international community regarding women's rights and girls' rights, so letting – as a number of you said, letting elementary school girls go back to school, but only in segregated classrooms and only with women teachers, even though we know there's a shortage of women teachers, saying, of course, women will go back to school eventually at higher levels when the situation is right, maybe trying to wait out the international community a little bit on that, letting some women go back to work in what they would describe as women's occupations.

Where do we draw the line in terms of our realistic expectations, on the ground? We know the situation in Afghanistan is going to look different than the situation in other countries. But what are our minimum basic expectations? What is not negotiable in this situation?

And, in particular, I'm interested both on the education and health side but also on the civil and political rights side. I think, Assistant Secretary Brands-Kehris, you made the point about not having a token woman in government but really having representation. What can we really expect? What should we be pushing for concretely in terms of our expectations? Maybe I'll start, Chairwoman Akbar, with you, but I'm happy for all of you or any of you to come in on this.

Ms. Akbar:

Thank you, Marti. I mean, in terms of what can we expect realistically from the Taliban if we let Taliban be, if we don't continuously pressure them, we can expect them that they will completely revive what was going on in the '90s. We can expect that, and we won't see women's – girls return to school – to high school and secondary school.

We can expect to see that the only areas where they would see women having employment is teachers and doctors. That's the ceiling – most teachers, doctors, nurses. That's the ceiling that they will set. And I'm saying this because we need to understand where Taliban are coming from.

Taliban are coming from an ideology, and the ideology that does not agree women have a space in social and political life. In their views, the best place for women is their homes. That's the safest place. That's the best place for a woman to be. And a woman should not walk out of her house unless absolutely necessary, and in that case, as well, she should be accompanied by a man.

That's what they believe in and they have never really tried to fully hide that. When they kept saying "within Islamic framework," that's what they meant.

Whether we try to unpack that or not, that's exactly what they meant. And you know, yes, sometimes, especially in the process – the U.S.-Taliban peace process or negotiations – they would say some things that were very vague and ambiguous and that really concerned Afghan women but that seemed to reassure international partners for some reason, you know, saying, oh, we have changed.

But we will see – but we are, as Afghans, looking at the areas under your control – and Taliban did have areas under their control and influence – and what we heard from areas under their control and influence was that women domestic victims of violence had to stay home and live with the violence. That was the only option. It's not an option for a woman to leave her abusive husband. She has to live with him and with her family. It's not an option for a woman to go to high school. It's not an option for a woman to have a public life. It's not an option for a woman to have a job outside the house. That's what life looked like for a woman in Taliban-controlled areas in the past 20 years.

So I think if we let Taliban be, that's what the future can look like. That's what we can realistically expect. And so we shouldn't – we should continue to push and we should continue to stand with Afghan women who are saying no, I deserve more than this, and what they deserve is the rights enshrined in our constitution.

We need to remember that the Afghan constitution was a process. It wasn't a translation of some French constitution. It was built on earlier Afghan constitution. It was a process of wide consultation, widest ever in the history of Afghanistan around the constitution, including consultations with Afghans outside Afghanistan and even in Pakistan. It brought in religious scholars, quote/unquote, "warlords," civil society activists, women and men, and we came up with a text, with a framework, that defined and tried to balance human rights, obligations, and standards – international standards – and our understanding of our religion and our culture.

And I think that should be the basis for us for our engagement with Taliban. We should say we are asking you to respect the constitution that Afghans built, and if you want to change it, engage in another conversation to change it with everyone, including with women, with civil society, including with women and men in diaspora, and that includes political rights for women, social rights for women, and ability for a woman to run for office, to become pilots or astronauts or join the army or police.

Ms. Flacks:

Thanks for that. Absolutely. And so how do we – to Undersecretary Zeya, maybe I'll come to you. How do we bridge that enormous gap between what we know the Taliban would do if left on their own and what international

human rights standards for women suggest? Where is that common ground or where is the opportunity to – where can we expect to land?

Ms. Zeya: Well, I would say, Marti, just to build on Shaharзад's comments and Ilze's reference to speaking with one voice, I think it's critical that the international community remain united in its expectations for the Taliban and we believe they are, and, specifically, with respect to the rights of women and girls.

Secretary Blinken has emphasized that the legitimacy and the support that the Taliban is seeking from the international community will depend on its conduct in five key areas, and first and foremost is respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, particularly for women and girls, for children, for members of minority groups, and refraining from carrying out acts of retribution.

You know, we are also insisting that they allow foreign nationals and Afghans, including women at risk, to travel outside the country safely if they wish, that they prevent terrorist groups from using Afghanistan as a base for external operations that threaten other country, that they allow unhindered humanitarian access, and as I explained before, this also requires upholding the security of women humanitarian workers and their access to work itself, and finally, forming, as I mentioned before, genuinely inclusive government that meets the basic needs and reflects the aspirations of all the Afghan people.

So as Secretary Blinken has said, this is not a favor to the international community. All of these steps are basic requirements for a stable and secure Afghanistan.

Ms. Flacks: Thank you for that.

To Dr. Rumble or Assistant Secretary General, do either of you want to come in on this question?

Ms. Rumble: I'm happy to. I mean, I think what we're really seeing now is the importance of putting women and children first, and that can mean working with a range of partners, with the civil society actors and the Taliban directly.

For example, we actually have a work plan with the Taliban on primary educational needs of girls and boys in certain areas under their control even before the takeover, and we were able to then leverage that work plan to promote every girl's right to an equal chance to learn.

So we're really calling for now the return of all girls to school, and that when girls are going to school together with boys that they benefit from quality

learning. We want to ensure not just bare minimum foundational literacy and numeracy skills, but actually the skills they need to contribute to a more prosperous Afghanistan. And we are also talking to them about the sort of unequivocal evidence from around the world that shows that education is good not just for girls themselves and their families, but as the country becomes crippled by poverty, one of the most pressing needs of young people and families right now to really contribute to society and, ultimately, be an economic force for change in a new Afghanistan.

Ms. Flacks: Secretary –

Ms. Brands-Kehris: Well, I will comment very briefly, maybe, also and maybe a little bit off script. But since we're supposed to think together, the one thing is, of course, again, no half measures, no negotiation on human rights. They are – there are principles. And, of course, men, including Taliban leaders, cannot decide for women. I mean, that's obvious. If we turn it the other way around, this is such a clear, clear thing.

But beyond the rights and the aspects of rights that we already were mentioning, I think that there is really – I mean, so it's clear that we cannot – the international community cannot negotiate about women's rights, like, well, this is something that we negotiate about and you give us a little of this and then we can give you a little of that. I mean, clearly, that should not be the approach.

So we need the principled approach. But we have, of course, a dilemma that we cannot avoid having to tackle because what we want is to make sure that the rights are respected in practice. This is not an intellectual game and it's not sort of just standing and posturing.

So how do we really achieve that? And how do we deal with the point – we don't expect the Taliban – as Shaharзад said from the very beginning very clearly and eloquently, we don't expect them to turn into soft fluffy lambs. You know, this is not – that would not be a realistic goal.

So dealing with – so how do we deal with that dilemma, that staying principled, not negotiating? Not losing gains is our goal, but then at the same time, you know, how do we make sure that there also are incentives so that we are welcoming, even if there are gradual steps that actually are better than if we don't have those at all, you know, and really to have that and have a strategy – staying united but having a strategy that can sort of push a little, because even a bit in that direction – we all know that human rights, just like democracy, is a process, in any case, for all of us. We're somewhere along the line but there, obviously, is no real utopia for any one of us.



This is, arguably, at the lower end of it. So we don't – but we still need to push ahead. So how do we deal with this, that we also are practical? Yes, we stay principled but let's be practical and maybe, you know, should welcome when there are some steps in the right direction and saying, yes, this is the right direction, but we need more of it? And how do you – and, again, how does the international community stay united when giving that message as well?

Ms. Flacks:

Absolutely. It's such an important point. And I think, just to follow up on that, the next question is with regard to that leverage where do we find it, right? So you referenced a really important aspect, which is legitimacy and recognition, which we know is important to the Taliban and we know that they're seeking.

Beyond that, you know, we have, essentially, financial purse strings that the international community can pull and how do we deploy those purse strings, really, in a way that does – that is effective in trying to convince them to change behavior but doesn't cause the kind of economic collapse and humanitarian disaster that is sort of the elephant in the room, right. How do we sort of pull the strings of the few pieces of leverage that we have in a way that still protects the very women and girls and all members of the Afghan society that we want to?

And I would love to hear from any of you on how do we get that balance right. What is the balance that we need to take to avoid sort of undermining the economic and security situation but also being able to use that leverage? And, alternatively, is there a risk that we actually give away that leverage too quickly in order to avoid the kind of economic collapse that we're starting to see in Afghanistan? Happy for any of you to come in on that.

Undersecretary Zeya, did you want to come in?

Ms. Zeya:

Sure. Sure. I'm happy to weigh in on this tough question.

I mean, first of all, I think it is vitally important, as I said at the outset, that our humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people remain absolutely unimpeded, and this is why the United States moved very quickly, you know, with respect to issuing necessary general licenses for this to continue under this dramatically changed situation.

This humanitarian assistance provides Afghans with critically needed food, health care, nutrition, medical supplies, hygiene, and other urgently needed relief. As I mentioned before, it is also addressing the protection concerns of women, children, and minorities, including by helping more children, including girls, go back to school, something that we all want to see happen. So I think it's critical that this not be used as a bargaining chip and that we

recognize the enduring commitment of the international community to the Afghan people.

In other areas, though, however, you know, I think that the criteria that I outlined, which is not merely a U.S. construct but I think it's one that is shared by many in the international community, I think it's very important that we move forward together and, as Secretary Blinken and President Biden have said, that we judge the Taliban by their actions and not by their words.

Ms. Flacks: Thank you for that.

Dr. Rumble, maybe I'll come to you because you sit at that intersection of humanitarian assistance and also development assistance. And how are you thinking about those two components of your work in terms of where you're willing to put money and resources in to stem immediate needs and where you're willing to hold off in terms of trying to create pressure?

Ms. Rumble: Thank you for that. I think Undersecretary General called it a tough question. It is, indeed. But, you know, for a humanitarian agency like ours, the path is very clear. Women and children's rights and their immediate needs are top priority and that means that we're calling for no politicization or conditionalities around humanitarian assistance. Children and women really cannot wait.

Even before the current situation, we knew that maternal mortality was appalling in Afghanistan. Six hundred and thirty-eight women were dying for every hundred thousand live births, compared to 68 just in neighboring Pakistan. And now with the current crisis they're really on the brink.

So we need to make sure that in our negotiations, in our conversations to build a better place for women and children to grow up in Afghanistan, there are the safe spaces, the humanitarian corridors, the need for women and girls to access just dignity kits – menstrual health and hygiene supplies, for example – which we're developing by tens – we're distributing by tens of thousands, is not compromised.

So it's a very clear line for us and we really hope others can join us and really push for flexible unearmarked multi-use funding at this urgent time so that we can act with both speed and flexibility to the ever-evolving needs on the ground.

Ms. Flacks: Thanks for that. And to the – to any of you who want to come in on this, I'm curious where that line is between the sort of urgent humanitarian lifesaving need that, I think, no one wants to see politicized and everyone believes needs to be delivered versus some of the more sustained assistance that –

you know, that can be potentially either manipulated by the Taliban or sends a signal that we are engaging. And I'm wondering about things like the education sector, maybe some parts of the health sector. Where do you draw the line in terms of what you provide and what you sort of hold back?

Ms. Akbar:

If I may insert, Marti. I think – I mean, I think the discussion is not about engagement or nonengagement. The discussion is about how to engage, right. We have to engage. It's the lives of people.. It's the future of 35 million. And they didn't get here by themselves.

They get here because of the decisions made by different governments, including the U.S. government, and different humanitarian organizations as well and the U.N. All of us. I, as the chairperson for the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and as a leader of a state institution, think about this every day. What did I not do enough for us to be in this situation? Why are we in this dire humanitarian situation after 20 years of aid? Why?

So, I mean, the question – so we should all – we all have to take responsibility for what's happening and part of that responsibility is that we have to continue to engage because it's about the lives of people, the lives of people who are at the situation that they are because of our collective mistakes and our collective failures.

And so it's – I don't think it's about nonengagement, but it's also about how to engage, and I fully understand. I mean, humanitarian aid is urgent and it must be delivered and there shouldn't be, you know, any form of conditionality attached to that. But even in that, how we deliver humanitarian aid matters.

Symbolism matters. If it's only men, I was really actually – I was really actually upset to see that – and I have a lot of respect for the World Health Organization, of course. But when I saw the delegation visiting Afghanistan that there were no women in, why? I think more women should be visiting Afghanistan now on behalf of the U.N. I think more women should be engaging in key positions and I think U.N., for instance, should be bringing in more Afghan women who are qualified to be speaking to Taliban from a U.N. platform.

And I think when the governments engage with Taliban, they should put – they should put women forward. They should put women forward as ambassadors. They should put women forward as interlocutors so that Taliban see – actually see this and they have to.

And in delivering humanitarian aid, there should be continuous consultations with women how should this aid be delivered. Women civil

society activists need to be consulted. Minority groups need to be consulted. You can't just go and talk to the de facto Taliban authorities and then deliver assistance according to their whims.

I mean, of course, they are your own principles. But I think there should be symbolism and signaling constantly to Taliban that in delivering this aid we want to involve Afghan women and we want to hear from them and we want them to set the priorities, and we want them to have a say on how this is being delivered. And we'll continue to employ them and we'll continue to engage them, and you just have to make peace with that if you want this to continue.

So I think – I think there are things that we can do. I was just – I haven't – I don't get to read the details. I just saw this image on Twitter, this news about, you know, people meeting – ambassadors meeting the so-called foreign minister of Taliban, and I had a thousand questions. I was, like, did any of these ambassadors raise the issue of the human rights situation?

Did any of them raise the women's rights situation? Did any of them raise the issue of the fact that journalists are being beaten up and tortured, that woman protesters faced violence today? Did any of them do this or not? Because they should be doing that because that's what we asked them to do with the former government as well.

We asked them whenever you're meeting President Ghani, talk about women's political participation. There aren't enough women in the cabinet. Talk about restrictions on press. Talk about civilian casualties. And that's how it should continue and it should even be intensified.

Ms. Flacks:

Thanks. I'm going to throw a question on top of that, just picking up where you left off, and I'll come to you, Assistant Secretary General, either on the previous question or this one, which is, what do we do with other actors who have influence in this situation?

We know that the foreign actors that have the most influence and leverage over the Taliban are not the United States, the U.N., some of our key allies. It is Pakistan, Qatar, Russia, China. What do you see as their interests with regard to the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan?

Do you think they will be helpful in these strategies? Will they be indifferent to them? Will they be spoilers in these strategies? How are you thinking in your context about engaging with those countries that have – that have more influence over the Taliban?

Ms. Zeya:

I'm sorry. Was that question to me, Marti? I'm sorry.

Ms. Brands-  
Kehris:

To whom was it?

Ms. Flacks:

I'm sorry. I was going to start with the assistant – Assistant Secretary General Brands-Kehris and then I will come around.

Ms. Zeya:

OK. OK. Sure.

Ms. Brands-  
Kehris:

Thank you. Sorry, I missed that.

Yes, I think that is a key question because, of course, we have to be ready for a very complex approach. It's not just a matter – we already mentioned the messaging that we should all be on the same page. But, of course, how do we ensure that we actually do that and are we on the same page and, of course, with all these different actors. And, obviously, a lot of work has to be done both bilaterally and multilaterally and I'm sure much of that is going on.

But I do think that there is something – when you mentioned in the – the countries in the list you had, of course, Pakistan, obviously, and other regional countries, Qatar. You mentioned Russia and China. And I think there it's interesting to see that we have – first of all, in the Security Council, of course, with the Permanent Five, it's interesting. We were looking – from a human rights perspective, as we know, there is a very strong opposition very often to bringing on board human rights questions. We end up having even to fight for the human rights mandates within peace missions. But, luckily, there are very strong supporters who manage to get that in there. So the mandate is there for monitoring, reporting, and so on.

And by the way, this, of course, was just – the technical rollover of UNAMA was one small instance of that. But, of course, we all are preparing for what will happen six months from now when that mandate is up, and I think the work we do now is very important for that.

But I think there the interesting thing is from a human rights perspective that with this world's attention to women and girls, in a sense, it should be able to provide that kind of consolidated stance on it because even among those, China and Russia, who may not be happy often about having human rights on the Security Council and say that that should be handled in Geneva, the issue of women and girls, you know, being educated or girls being able to go to school, for instance, and women's rights, you know, to employment and so on is something that, really, should unite and be something that, really, all could come on board on and, certainly, also.

And I think that is a little bit what we hear. The question is, of course, how can we really work to have that commonality and the approach once the approach on the ground is very different, as we have seen, because there, of

course, all the other interests of the member states come in and, as we know, China and Russia, who have engaged on the ground in very different ways, so the calculations are still different. But still, there is something that we can work on there that I think is very important. And, obviously, the whole effect on both neighborhood and the world it's for all of us to do that.

And just one small thing I wanted to add, because I know we're also running out of time soon, but it's the issue of, you know, delivering the humanitarian and where are the lines – the humanitarian – and also development, because I do think that the argument there and looking at the financial economic crisis that one can sort of push that off to later and then we just do the immediate humanitarian and then we do the rest later. Of course, there are some steps that need to be addressed now.

But I agree completely with Shaharзад. The issue is not whether we do that. The issue is how do we do it. How do we make sure that that is a principled and a human rights-based approach to it? And part of that, of course, also has to do with through whom is that delivered.

It doesn't necessarily have to go and doesn't have uncertainty at the U.N. when maybe looking at these things, too. As we know, among the Taliban leaders so many of them were on the sanctions list, where it actually is not – you know, you cannot go and deliver through a ministry where you have a minister who's on a sanctions list, in any case, but apart from the moral issue of how to do it.

However, you know, there's the other – I'm coming to my final point, which is really civil society. I think that that is such an important part, not just that – and we talked a lot about the very strong and wonderful women leaders and that we have in Afghanistan now and that we all are really privileged to get to know better these days.

But it's also, really, how do we support civil society to play their extremely important role, more broadly? And that goes for civil society outside of Afghanistan, but, of course, extremely importantly, what can we do to support civil society to keep them both safe and the safe civic space part of it but to, really, also empower and make sure that we engage with them in a way that actually provides a role for them that is – really goes in the direction that all of us are talking about?

Thanks.

Ms. Flacks:

Thank you for that.

I know we're just left with a few minutes. I did want to turn back, though, to Undersecretary Zeya. I would just love to hear from you how you all are engaging with some of those key players from the region on this issue.

Ms. Zeya: Certainly, Marti.

I would just underscore that Secretary Blinken has convened and taken part in a series of bilateral and multilateral engagements, especially coming out of the U.N. General Assembly High-Level Week where, you know, we met with the G-20 and the P-5 and the GCC regional partners to really reinforce this idea of the international community's expectations of the Taliban and of any potential government in Afghanistan.

And I think, as Ilze underscored, even with the differences in respect for universal human rights or even debates over the significance of universal human rights, we have seen from these engagements that the international community remains united in its expectations for the Taliban specifically regarding the rights of women and girls.

So, you know, two takeaways here. I think we have a – we have an obligation to use every tool at our disposal, whether it's diplomacy, economic assistance, other forms of programmatic assistance and support to do whatever we can in coordination with other countries to support women and girls in Afghanistan.

And I just want to add one more point. Given the fragility of the situation that we now know Afghan women and girls are in, Secretary Blinken will be naming a senior official for Afghan women and girls at the State Department to focus entirely on the ongoing effort both from the United States government and in coordination with other countries to move this effort forward.

Ms. Flacks: Thank you so much for that.

And we're at time, so I'll just conclude. I'm going to turn things back to Steve in just a moment. But I just want to thank our panelists for a really interesting conversation and some important takeaways, and I want to especially emphasize how great it is to hear the international consensus emerging around the principles that we're using to approach this problem.

I hope that can translate into sustained coordinated pressure and action, and also just the importance of listening to and being responsive to the needs of Afghan women and girls and all of civil society on the ground, which all of you emphasized very powerfully.

Finally, I'll just say we'll do our part here at CSIS and I know you all will as well to keep this issue on the radar, to not wait out those who would like this to fall off the radar so they can do what they will but, really, keep this on the agenda of all of our international foreign policy priorities and as well as in the minds of the public. So I appreciate the work that all four of you are doing to continue to make that happen.

Steve, let me turn to you for any concluding remarks.

Mr. Morrison: Thank you. I want to reiterate the thanks we all have to Chairperson Akbar, to Undersecretary Zeya, to Assistant Secretary General Brands-Kehris, and to Dr. Rumble. It's been a – it's a very powerful moment right now. It's a historic test that we're facing, and we heard a lot from you that aligned quite closely together.

I was very encouraged to hear the announcement from Undersecretary Zeya following on Secretary Blinken's testimony in the Senate about appointing this dedicated senior person on this agenda at the State Department. Robert King played this role in the Obama administration for seven years. He's just published a book on this. He had dramatic impact across four or five key sectors, and there is a very powerful and recent precedent about the utility of this type of approach.

There is great urgency. We've heard the appeal for unity and infusing the message at all levels. This is a big moment for, obviously, U.N. agencies, other multilaterals, and the nongovernmental sector. They stayed. They showed courage. They are going to be the front edge of engagement, both domestic NGOs and international. This is an enormous test of what is possible, and they are center stage there.

Henrietta Fore deserves a special shout out for her leadership and remarkable courage at UNICEF. She's been on that post since January of 2018. She'll be stepping down in the coming weeks. She's done a marvelous job and shown just incredible stamina and courage in many places but especially in this regard right here and now.

One last word. I mean, there's a lot of discussion in the health sector. I work in the health sectors. I have to close with one last remark, that emergency assistance will not keep the health sector alive over the long term. There needs to be some kind of mechanism. It could be a joint one between UNICEF and WHO or with NGO cooperations. There needs to be some mechanism created to sustain the health sector.

I know there's plans for the 2,300 centers to focus on 573 or (5)75 that sustain and reach 70 percent of the country. But time is really running out. The most recent announcements of Dr. Tedros and others were very



alarming at the degree to which the interruptions of supply chains, interruptions of salaries, fear among women to access services, fear of women to go to work, is leading to the implosion of this sector, and we need to really move fast and come up with some creative joint solution that would permit long-term sustained funding for the health sector that doesn't fall into the trap, obviously, of being captured by the Taliban. It's a hard challenge, but it's one that I think we really need to put a focus on.

Thank you all. I do hope we'll see much more high-level statesmanship – statespersonship – on this issue at the G-20, at the U.N. Security Council, at every opportunity.

So thank you all, and this has been a marvelous program. Thanks to Marti Flacks for a wonderful job in moving the conversation forward and partnering on this.