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Learning from the Failures and Institutionalized Ideology of Colonial Feminist Education Programs in Afghanistan

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Abstract

From the interwar period (1918-1939) to the present, the United States has been involved in the Middle East not only in a military capacity, but as a creator and funder of educational programs in the region, especially for women, most frequently in Afghanistan. Although there is existing literature which examines the numerous and complex political effects of US intervention via such educational programs, this paper analyzes how previous US educational programs in the wider Middle East create a historical basis for colonial feminism which drove these programs and still persists today. This ideology is one that ultimately harms the women targeted, in this case Afghan women, in that it constructs these women as requiring Western salvation from their native cultures while simultaneously disregarding their voices and agency. Due to its self-interested nature, colonial feminism in these education programs has allowed for and excused ideologies that undermine Afghan women’s rights, such as the mujahedeen and the Taliban. Additionally, colonial feminist educational programs distort or ignore sociopolitical and cultural factors that affect women. In Afghanistan, these include internal colonization, gender politics as they relate to political legitimacy, and the problematization of “the veil” by the US, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11. The paper critiques past and present US educational programs using this lens to advocate a move away from the historical, socio-politically destructive colonial feminist approach by putting Afghan women’s voices and agency first in future programs.

Keywords: Afghanistan, education, gender politics, Westernization, colonial feminism
Introduction

Although there is much debate and research surrounding the US military involvement in Afghanistan and the Middle East, far less attention is given to US historical and current involvement in educational programs in the region. This is surprising, as US educational programs have played significant roles in the attempted Westernization and in some cases, the subsequent sociopolitical destabilization of these countries. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in Afghanistan, where US educational programs have fostered the rise of fundamentalist Islamist movements and paved the way for US military intervention.

This intervention was in large part justified with the argument that Afghan women need to be “saved” from fundamentalist Islam and “given” rights and freedom by the West, usually via educational programs. Indeed, women’s rights have always been thoroughly entangled with US educational programs in the region, whether those programs seek to educate women or to advance US policy goals, both of which undermine women’s rights as they have in Afghanistan.

In order to understand the influence and importance of modern-day US educational programs in Afghanistan and for Afghan women, an analysis of the United States’ historical involvement in education in the Middle East is needed, both during the interwar period (1920-1939) and from the Cold War period (1947-1996) to present day. This historical analysis will include a feminist anthropologist lens which argues that many of these educational programs utilize or otherwise benefit from “colonial feminism.” This philosophy, coined by Islam scholar Leila Ahmed in 1992, seeks to construct the generalized “Muslim woman” as a damsel in distress. Under colonial feminism, she must be transformed via Westernization in order to be “saved” from the sociopolitical and cultural factors that colonial feminists perceive as oppressive to Muslim women, regardless of Muslim women’s actual perspectives (Abu-Lughod 784-785).

The colonial feminism aspect of the analysis will thus focus on relevant sociopolitical and cultural factors historically and presently affecting Afghan women, with each factor presented in the historical context it most closely relates to. The interwar period focuses on the internal colonization in the formation of the Afghan state, followed by instances of early colonial feminist educational programs in the Middle East (Iran and Egypt) that preface future US educational programs in Afghanistan. The Cold War period focuses on Afghanistan’s gender politics as they relate to political legitimacy, highlighting how US educational programs shifted from previous Middle Eastern programs to using Islam as a social force rather than erasing it. Initially this was to work towards a mutually beneficial modernization but shifted to support radicalized fundamentalist Islam to combat communism, at the expense of Afghan women. The Taliban period will focus on the problematization of “the
veil” as a fundamentally and harmfully misunderstood custom that was a major symbol in the US government’s response to 9/11, framing military intervention as a way to “liberate” women and tying this liberation to a Western education. In this paper, “the veil” refers to the general practice of veiling by many Muslim women. This term encompasses the many different types of veils, like the hijab, shayla, or niqab, and should not be confused with the more specific burqa, which is a term used when relevant instead of the general “veil.”

The overarching goal of this historical analysis is to examine how US educational programs 1) ultimately failed in being effective and beneficial to the Afghan people, 2) led to the rise of Islamist movements, specifically the fundamentalist mujahedeen and the later Taliban, and 3) negatively affected Afghan women directly and indirectly as a result of colonial feminist ideology.

This historical analysis is followed by a present-day case study of the recent USAID education program Promoting Gender Equity in National Priority Programs Project (Promote). In the past, Promote has been presented as a progressive educational program that supports and furthers the interests of Afghan women and Afghan people as a whole. However, this case study will explore how the United States’ continuing, albeit more subtle, colonial feminist approach and related failure to address sociopolitical instability influenced by the US government in Afghanistan shapes educational program goals and execution, ultimately negatively affecting their efficacy.

Through reviewing the US government’s mistakes in educational programs in Afghanistan as well as laying out the policy recommendations issued by Afghan women and women’s groups, this analysis seeks to form a more successful educational program that rejects the historically colonial feminist approach, and in doing so puts the best interests of the Afghan people, particularly women, first. Not only will this involve an analysis of past programs and inclusion of Afghan voices, but also an analysis of the underlying turmoil in Afghanistan that has hindered past programs, and how the US has played a part in it.

**Historical Analysis**

**Interwar Period**

Afghanistan gained independence from Britain in 1919; however, despite Afghan efforts to establish diplomatic relations with the US, they refused to grant Afghanistan diplomatic recognition until 1934 when American diplomats and businessmen persuaded President Roosevelt that to do so was in the United States’ best interests (Poullada 179, 180). In large part, this long avoidance was due to biased misperceptions about the country based in orientalism and Western superiority. These misperceptions are exemplified in a memo from the US State Department’s Middle East “expert,” Wallace
Murray, in 1930:

Afghanistan is doubtless the most fanatic, hostile country in the world today. There are no capitulatory or extra-territorial rights to protect foreigners. There is no pretense of according to Christians equal rights with Moslems. There are no banks and treasure caravans are plundered. The British have for years absolutely forbidden any white British subject from entering Afghanistan and though Nadir Shah is sound, he cannot control the tribes and will soon fall. (179)

Murray was at least correct that Nadir Shah would be unable to maintain political authority as he was assassinated in 1933 and succeeded by his son Zahir Shah, the first Afghan ruler to gain US recognition and the last Afghan king (Britannica). Despite this, Murray’s perception of Afghanistan as lawless, hyper-Islamic, and politically unstable is lacking the context of Afghanistan’s role in the colonial system that continued in various ways even after independence in a phenomenon referred to here as “internal coloniziation.”

The historical background of Afghanistan’s internal coloniziation is vital to an understanding of US involvement in Afghan women’s education, because colonization provides insight into the reasons why the US viewed post-independence interwar Afghanistan as so hostile to such educational programs. This historical analysis will also include US educational programs in Iran and Egypt to encompass the larger context of colonial feminist policies during the interwar period.

First, Afghanistan is similar to Iran in that the population is over 99% Muslim (Diamant) which, to the US government, suggested a homogeneity via this shared Muslim identity – however, this could not be further from the reality. Murray hints at the “tribes” which Nadir Shah could not “control,” likely referring to the Pashtun tribes, who formed a confederation now called the Durrani which then served as the basis for the modern Afghan state (Kandiyoti 172). However, there are many other ethnic groups in Afghanistan’s population: approximately 42% are Pashtun, 27% Tajik, 9% Hazara, 9% Uzbek, 4% Aimak, 3% Turkmen, 2% Baloch, and 4% “other” (“Afghanistan Population 2020”). The fact that the Pashtun represent a plurality of Afghanistan’s population has resulted in an attempted “Pashtunization” of the country that resembles internal coloniziation as the ruling tribes who have become an “urban-based state elite” enact the policies most beneficial to them (Kandiyoti 172). Ironically, this Pashtunization and creation of an Afghan “state” was aided by the British, who supplied Pashtun tribes with financial subsidies and arms from 1880 until Afghan independence in order to shape Afghanistan into a “buffer state” that could defend any Russian advance into British India (172).
Afghanistan’s role as a buffer state and continued internal colonization made moves towards centralization and modernization risky, including any reforms in education or women’s statuses (Kandiyoti 172). Yet, reforms were still attempted, notably by Amanullah Khan, who ruled from 1919-1929 and passed progressive legislation including a 1921 family law banning child marriage, a mandate limiting polygamy, and allowing widows to leave the control of their husbands’ families (173-174). Queen Consort Soraya Tarzi continued her husband’s policies when he appointed her Minister of Education. In this position, she worked specifically to “educate and liberate the women of Afghanistan,” often drawing upon Western ideas, yet also emphasizing the importance of Islamic values and women’s importance within Islam (Syed 109-110).

This environment might have seemed ideal for US involvement via women’s educational programs in Afghanistan. However, Amanullah Khan’s modernizing reforms were seen by many in Afghanistan as undermining tribal and religious authority and he was subsequently overthrown in 1928 via tribal uprising (Kandiyoti 174). This uprising was also likely motivated by Amanullah Khan’s high taxation and the apparent Western influences on his policies, both aspects of internal colonization in Afghanistan (174). This push and pull between reforms and internal colonization would continue in the Cold War era.

However, though the US government viewed Afghanistan as unstable and hostile to foreign intervention, particularly in a religious context, this US wariness during the interwar period did not extend to its neighbor, Iran. Indeed, many American missionaries saw it as their duty to get involved in Iran, especially in promoting the education of Iranian women through a Christian lens, perceived as more unwelcome in Afghanistan.

In comparison, Iran underwent a “transition from the fanaticism of 1898, which opposed education for girls as a menace to society” to “the liberalism of 1936” when women’s education became more popular (Woodsmall 144). Two Iranian women, Sadigeh Khanum Daulutabadee and Khanum Azamodeh, led this push for promoting women’s education (145). However, over half of the women’s schools in Iran were private, affiliated with or wholly run by American missionaries. This privatization of women’s education limited the chance to be educated only to the Iranian elite (Zirinsky 190), which would lead to a deepening of class divisions not uncommon in these educational programs, and which is still evident in modern US educational programs for women in Afghanistan, such as Promote.

Not only did these educational programs deepen class divisions, they also prioritized Westernizing education over more traditional educations with an Islamic foundation. Ruth Frances Woodsmall, an American teacher and women’s rights advocate in the region, compared these American missionary schools to “the dull, damp room connected with some mosque” of the preexisting “Koran schools,” or madrasas, which contrasted the “well-ordered schoolroom, its maps and blackboard, its orderly atmosphere, and young teachers”
(Woodsmall 149). This prioritization of Western education and disparaging tone towards Islamic education perpetuated a sense of Western superiority that was reflected in the staffing choices at these institutions. American missionary schools in Iran employed both American and “national” teachers, but American teachers were paid higher salaries even when the Iranian teachers were equally qualified for the positions (Zirinsky 190). Many Iranian teachers graduated from mission schools themselves, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of the mission schools’ Americanizing teachings designed to last (191).

These schools for Iranian girls emphasized a move away from the madrasas and a move not simply towards but directly into Americanization. In these schools, girls were instructed in everything from writing and arithmetic to sewing and cooking to dressing like American women. Most significantly, this included doing away with “the veil,” regardless of the actual students’ thoughts on the matter and in direct opposition to Islamic traditions (Zirinsky 190-192). Westerners like Woodsmall praised unveiling as a step towards equality between men and women, and in doing so widened the gap of misunderstanding. This caused continuous tension and even led to violence in the interwar period between American missionaries and the people they claimed to be helping.

One of these cases is the “Port Said Orphan Scandal of 1933,” in which a Muslim girl named Turkiyya Hasan was caned as punishment for refusing to pray, or simply obey, at the Swedish Salaam Mission. It resulted in national outrage and fueled the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, among other Islamist movements. Though the Muslim Brotherhood’s officially stated reason for existing was “to rejuvenate Islamic practice in a modern context” (Baron 123), it was a direct response to the increasing encroachment upon Islam and Islamic culture by the British occupation, missionaries, and general Westernization guided in part by colonial feminism.

In the wake of the Turkiyya Hasan scandal, missionaries, Americans among them, failed to recognize the gravity and complexity of the situation (Baron 135). They came up with conspiracies to explain the conflict, when in fact they were the cause of what many Muslims saw as “evangelical brutality” through education (136). This brutality was a cause of great concern, perceived as a threat to the most vulnerable of the population, children – in this case, girls. Islamist organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood continued to spread into an Islamist movement in Egypt, one which ultimately proved to uproot Swedish and American missionaries alike by 1933 (138). No matter how good their intentions might have been to “empower” Muslim girls, the missionaries’ lack of understanding and dialogue with the Egyptian people proved to be terminal, foreshadowing future US educational failures in Afghanistan.
Cold War Period

Colonial feminism is inherently self-interested. Among other reasons, this is why colonial feminism does not lead to effective educational programs, which logically should have the students’ best interests in mind, not the teachers’. Student interests are further harmed when teachers’ interests change as they did in the Cold War era, when Afghanistan stood once more as a “buffer state,” this time between the Soviet Union and American interests of containing communism (Shirazi 218). This shift in the intent of US educational programs in Afghanistan corresponded to a shift from subtler colonial feminism to overt colonialism, in favor of policies that were blatantly not in the best interests of the students – in this case, Afghan women.

However, before US involvement during the Cold War period, Afghanistan saw a period of increased modernization and subsequent educational reform, with laws passed under Prime Minister Daoud between 1953 to 1963 supporting voluntary removal of the veil, an end to enforced purdah, and granting women voting and election rights (Kandiyoti 174). This modernization became radicalized in the 1978 Saur Revolution, when the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) seized power via a military coup and, in a more extreme mirroring of Amanullah’s previous internally colonial policies, began passing land reform laws, overhauling family legislation, and focusing on improving women’s literacy and participation in the public sphere (174). The marked difference was that the PDPA was “transparently beholden to the Soviet Union,” which undermined the party’s claims to political legitimacy by marking them to many Afghans as aligned with a foreign, potentially colonial power (174).

Political legitimacy in Afghanistan is closely related to gender politics, and to the events of the Cold War period in Afghanistan, making it another vital aspect of understanding US involvement in Afghan women’s education. Traditional Afghan concepts of rule and authority are rooted in honor, which is rooted in tribal gender relations. These relations, at least when strictly interpreted, are framed as a form of “complementarity” in which men and women have “mutually recognized rights and obligations,” including women’s obligation to be virtuous and men’s obligation to command them. It is from these obligations that honor is derived (Kandiyoti 180). Therefore, it is not difficult to see that conflict could arise when the PDPA, which may have respected some Islamic laws but was tied to a foreign, secular power, passed reforms that would undermine the conservative concept of honor by equalizing gender relations and, more pertinently, undermining men’s obligation and ability to control their female kin (174).

The US government may not have fully understood the beliefs behind this Afghan resistance to the PDPA or general communism, but they recognized it as a potential tool to further anti-communist Cold War policies. Unlike the interwar missionary work in other
Middle Eastern countries, the US in the Cold War period took a different approach to Islamic education. Initially, rather than eliminate Islamic education in favor of secularization or Christianity, American education initiatives like The Teachers College at Columbia University (TCCU) in 1954 saw the power of Islam as a social force in Afghanistan, capable of working in tandem with Western ideology to “modernize” or Westernize the country (Shirazi 213). Although the TCCU was originally working to utilize the “flexibility of Islamic faith” as a positive tool to reform education in Afghanistan and a potential step away from colonial ideology, this policy would change after the aforementioned Saur Revolution and the following Soviet invasion in 1979 (215).

The invasion and answering Afghan uprising prompted the US to provide a huge influx of weaponry and funding for humanitarian aid and education to the Afghan rebels (Yaqub 21). This US aid enabled the proliferation of radicalized, militaristic madrasas in refugee camps along the Afghan border, which allowed for increasing indoctrination of students into “jihadist warriors,” or mujahedeen, to combat Soviet communism (Shirazi 221).

Far from halting this radical Islamist fervor, the US government actively encouraged it. From 1986-1992, even after the Soviets left Afghanistan, organizations including USAID, UNO, and the Education Center for Afghanistan, which was supported by seven ISI and CIA aided mujahedeen groups, oversaw the printing of violent, anti-Soviet, pro-radical Islam textbooks for children in elementary school (Shirazi 222). These included calls to anti-Soviet action as early as learning the alphabet: “alef is for Allah, jim is for jihad, and shin is for Shakir, who conducts jihad with his sword. God becomes happy with the defeat of the Russians” (222). These textbooks and their content may have not espoused particularly American ideals, but they were anti-Soviet, anti-communist, and pro-military, all of which helped to advance US policy goals.

These ideologies opposed and harmed the women’s rights movement in Afghanistan. However, because of the PDPA’s radical reform the women’s rights movement in Afghanistan, despite their opposition, were associated with the PDPA and as a result with socialist and Marxist ideology (Moghadam 50). Unsurprisingly, the US government did not align itself with this movement, but rather with militarized Islamic fundamentalism, an ideology that gave rise to mujahedeen leaders. One such leader is Gulbeddin Hekmatyar, a staunch anti-communist, “favorite of the Reagan administration,” and future prime minister of the authoritarian government that led to the 1996 Taliban takeover in response to the mujahedeen, or “warlord,” regime (Rubin 287). In 1970, Hekmatyar participated with other mujahedeen in splashing acid on and shooting at the legs of women in “Western” dress. The violent acts he and his followers committed against women were not addressed by the US government, despite a protest of 5,000 Afghan women and girls in the aftermath (Moghadam 51). These protests were not small or unorganized events, nor was the larger women’s rights movement. Yet the US government
chose to overlook this to pursue total defeat of the Soviets, and thus institutionalized ideology that actively harmed women’s rights in Afghanistan. In doing so the US revealed both the inherent self-interest of colonial feminism and the beginning of the US government’s problematic and inconsistent usage of Islam as an educational and rhetorical tool to either undermine or “support” Afghan women’s rights.

**Taliban-to-Present Period**

After Taliban forces captured Kabul in September of 1996, Afghan women’s role became primarily “to function as symbols of legitimization for political groups led by men,” at the expense of their human rights, and though some women resisted, they had little international support (Barnett 291-292). It was not until after 9/11 in 2001 that the US officially acted against the Taliban, and they did so not to help Afghan women, but to fight the War on Terror.

When delving into this period of US involvement in Afghan women’s education, it is first vital to interrogate the rhetoric used by major US figures regarding women’s rights in Afghanistan, which constructs Afghan women in what anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod calls a “new colonial feminism” (Barnett 787). In November 2001, shortly after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, First Lady Laura Bush told the American people, “the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.” But this was not the United States’ primary goal.

If the US had truly sought to fight for the rights and dignity of Afghan women, then it makes little sense that the US did not intervene sooner. Afghan women lived under oppressive Taliban rule for five years after the 1996 takeover, without any US intervention, despite the United States’ indirect involvement in the Taliban’s creation (Rubin 288). This rhetoric justifies military intervention for the War on Terror on moral grounds disguised as feminism. However, this is a form of feminism that resembles the oppressive rhetoric of Woodsmall’s missionaries, who claimed to be empowering women by the mere application of Western ideals, not by actually addressing systemic issues like sociopolitical instability.

This new colonial feminism is tied to the image of the full-body burqa, which the US has used as a symbol of “the ultimate sign of the oppression of Afghan women under the Taliban” (Abu-Lughod 785). However, as Palestinian-American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod points out, the burqa was not a creation of the Taliban formed to oppress women, but rather originally the traditional garb of some Pashtun women. To these women, the burqa is “symbolizing modesty or respectability,” and can be seen as a form of “portable seclusion,” which actually allows women greater mobility while still keeping purdah (785). None of the veils, of which there are many styles with many different social signifiers, are meant to signify oppression or Arab “backwardness,” as many Western cultures including the US have often wrongly interpreted them (Pratt).
When garb like the burqa are used in a way that appears to restrict women, as with the Taliban, the burqa itself is not at fault, nor is the culture that created it, nor the women wearing it. The fault here is of the fundamentalist Islamic ideology of the Taliban, which is based on ethnic lines and the need to assert power, masculinity, and national identity in a nation-state wracked by war. This violent instability was in part sparked through violent radical Islamic ideology, which the US government actively encouraged, a responsibility the US government is now detached from, placing itself instead in the role of the Afghan women’s savior.

This new colonial feminism is not confined solely to the rhetoric used by the Bush administration; the US government garnering public support using the plight of Afghan women is pervasive. In October 2001, the US launched “Operation Enduring Freedom – Afghanistan.” The “liberation of Afghans, particularly women,” was the stated goal for this US intervention against the Taliban regime; however the War on Terror remained the US government’s highest priority, “whatever the costs to Afghans and stability in the region” (Niland 4).

Eighteen years later, this new colonial feminism has served to fuel a war that has cost the US nearly $2 trillion, and has cost the Afghan people their rights, dignity, and stability. In Afghanistan, the cost of war falls especially heavily on women, because “as in all war-torn societies, women suffer disproportionately” (Bohn). The Taliban controls 60% of the country, as much territory as in 2001, and approximately 3,000 civilians were killed and 5,000 injured in 2018 alone. About two-thirds of Afghan women do not attend school, and the literacy rate is roughly 13% for women. US and international aid have so far failed to fix this statistic, despite huge investments into programs aimed at “advancing women’s rights” like Promote, a “flop” which TIME calls “a waste of taxpayers’ money” (Bohn).

Currently, the US is engaged in peace talks with the Taliban, and the Afghan government has not yet been included. Nor had any Afghan women, until 3,500 of them organized their own jirga (tribal council) to outline and emphasize what they want from the peace process in February. Their biggest concerns included education, justice, economic opportunity, and the protection of their constitutional rights. So far, the US government has not included Afghan women on an official level (Gharib), continuing this historical cycle of alternately ignoring or supporting the rights and voices of Afghan women for the sake of achieving US goals in the region, even when those goals are supposedly to help Afghan women.

Case Study

The historical background may seem like a grim precedent for current and future US educational programs in Afghanistan; however it can also be seen as a guide for what not to
do, serving as a warning against colonial feminist ideology and self-interested policies that undermine sociopolitical stability. “Promote” can also be seen as an educational program with plenty of room for improvement, because although it does not seem to be inciting uprisings or indoctrinating soldiers, it is not an effective program, and the steps to making it one are currently well-within the United States’ reach.

The Promoting Gender Equity in National Priority Programs Project, colloquially referred to as “Promote,” is a $216 million USAID program billed as “the world’s biggest program ever designed purely for female empowerment” (United States, Congress, SIGAR 18-69 Audit Report 2). It is also a program that has, according to an audit report and quarterly report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), spectacularly failed in executing its goal of empowering 75,000 Afghan women (United States, Congress, SIGAR 18-69 Audit Report 2).

Due to Promote’s lack of a baseline study, general disorganization, poor communication, possible internal corruption, and changing of stated goals when it failed to meet those goals, it is difficult to tell if any women were concretely helped through Promote’s four component programs: Women’s Leadership Development (WLD), Women in Government (WIG), Women in the Economy (WIE), and Musharikat, which focuses on women in civil society (United States, Congress, SIGAR 18-69 Audit Report 2). As of September 30, 2017, out of these four programs only one, Musharikat, was meeting most (half) of its performance indicator targets – this was after these targets had been changed to more “realistic” goals (12). USAID/Afghanistan did not set targets for Musharikat’s other eight performance indicators, leading SIGAR to conclude they could not fully assess whether Musharikat, or any of the other programs, had been effective at all (20).

What went wrong in Promote goes beyond disorganization and a lack of cohesive goals. In 2016, a year before releasing the audit outlining Promote’s failures, SIGAR asked 40 Afghan women in various public sectors about the program, about what they thought could be improved, and about what Afghan women truly need in educational programs. Notably, SIGAR interviewed Afghan First Lady Rula Ghani, who critiqued Promote for 1) being launched too early, 2) having too few female staff (and too few staff in general), 3) putting most of the money towards administrative costs and American contractors rather than to Afghan women, 4) training women to seek jobs in Afghanistan’s relatively weak economy rather than building their own businesses, and 5) targeting a disproportionate number of urban women with a high-school education rather than the rural provinces where there is a greater need for education (United States, Congress, Quarterly Report 6). These critiques echo many of the past issues with American-led educational programs in the region – their focus on ‘modernizing’ and ‘empowering’ Afghan women is orchestrated in a Western context and ideology.
Ghani also made a vital point regarding Promote’s apparent intentions to “build a cadre of activists and civil-society organizations” focused on “women’s equality and empowerment” which she believes will have unanticipated negative consequences, not just because of the participants’ young age and political inexperience, but because the US, like many other Western powers, is taking a Western approach to gender programs (United States, Congress, Quarterly Report 6). Rather than consulting with Afghan women on their thoughts and goals regarding their own liberation, US programs like Promote use language “singling out ‘women’s rights’ instead of calling for ‘mutual respect between men and women,’” which is what Ghani and other Afghan women claim is more culturally resonant (9). While this approach may seem too moderate, it has historically proven unhelpful and even counterproductive for the US government to project Western feminist ideology onto Afghan women. As Helena Malikyar, an Afghan-American scholar and journalist contacted by SIGAR, notes, “USAID doesn’t consult Afghan women until it is too late to make any changes,” even though programs like Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society in which Afghan women have been consulted and Afghan people as a whole have been involved have proven to be more effective (United States, Congress, Quarterly Report 11).

Ultimately, SIGAR found that the Afghan women they interviewed believe security and corruption remain the two most important issues hindering and endangering Afghan women today. Lack of security prevents women from attending school and working, and in doing so enforces attitudes that women are too vulnerable to leave the home. Corruption is prevalent in politics, the justice system, and the workforce, preventing women from climbing social ladders, and leads to misspending in women’s programs like Promote (United States, Congress, Quarterly Report 4). Both need to be addressed and improved upon before real change can be made.

Most women interviewed expressed gratitude towards the US and the international community for their support – at least, the women SIGAR chose to include in this survey did – but wished the US government sought far more input from local Afghan women while the programs were being designed to make them more sustainable (United States, Congress, Quarterly Report 5), rather than meeting short-term quotas and goals like Promote (4). The educational programs these Afghan women argued would be most valuable are programs for rural women (4), sponsoring women to study Islamic law in order to improve women’s legal protections, entrepreneurial courses and resources, and giving more attention and funding to programs beyond primary school (16, 19, 23). Literacy rates in Afghanistan remain low, especially for women, but it is clear that not only are Afghan women hopeful about their futures, they are advocating for themselves and devising solutions to best solve the sociopolitical issues they face, and the issues with US programs like Promote.
Conclusion

Based on this joint historical analysis of US educational programs as based in colonial feminism and a case study of a current program that is ineffective because it clings to similar ideological echoes, it is clear that a sustainable educational program for Afghan women should not only include but prioritize the plans and goals of Afghan women. Additionally, this new program must contextualize its efforts to improve Afghan women’s rights within the larger historical and cultural context of Afghanistan-US relations with women, education, and their intersection.

Before this program is implemented, or in conjunction with its development and launch, the US government must work to restore stability and security in Afghanistan, with the ultimate goal of achieving peace and withdrawing troops. This can begin with diplomatically addressing the issues of corruption and security identified by the women SIGAR interviewed, which contributed to Promote’s failure. In particular, the US government should reform the Afghanistan Local Police (ALP) and the Afghan National Police (ANP), which are programs the US government created and which now pose threats to women and rural communities via widespread violence, sexual assault, and drug trafficking (Niland 9). This can be enacted via the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs in partnership with the Afghan government. This partnership with the Afghan government should also extend to US and Taliban peace talks to avoid giving sole political legitimacy to the Taliban. Inclusion of the Afghan government includes Afghan women, whose voices the US government must listen to and engage with in every step of the peacemaking process.

As a more stable foundation is established, USAID should be required to work more closely with SIGAR and USAID’s Automated Directives System (ADS) while developing this new education program in order to establish an accurate baseline, analyze sustainability, maintain financial transparency, and overall avoid Promote’s mistakes. USAID should also design the program in partnership with NGOs founded by Afghan women, such as the Afghan Women’s Network (AWN) and the New Afghanistan Women Association (NAWA). Coalition with the Afghan government, particularly the women in it, would ensure the program has state support and in turn supports the long-term stability of the state. This new education program should also strive for a majority-female, majority-Afghan staff. The number of Afghan women on staff should increase over the program’s lifetime.

Like Promote, this program should have component programs; unlike Promote, these component programs will be created based on the recommendations of Afghan women. Based on SIGAR interviews, they might resemble this:

1. Women in Law (WIL): Sponsoring women to study Islamic law under internationally recognized scholars to improve women’s legal protections, aiding the formal court system to
reduce corruption and increase women’s options for legal recourse.

2. **Women in Business (WIB):** Focus on entrepreneurial courses, marketing products, and creating formal organizations for women to pool resources and create business models.

3. **Wuleswali**\(^4\): Focus on rural women, with the idea that this is a foundational program based in improving literacy, health/reproduction education, and primary schooling, and will expand to include higher levels of schooling past the sixth-grade level as need demands.

4. **Musharikat:** Shift away from Western feminist activist ideals of “empowerment” and Americanization and towards language of inclusion and respect between genders, work in partnership and support with local Afghan women’s activists groups, both Islamic, like Women for Afghan Women (WAW), and secular, like the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA).

Promote used only $181 million from the $216 million of its allocated funds. This program should aim for a $200 million budget, with a total ceiling on the contract of $400 million to allow up to $200 million from international contributions. Promote was designed for 5 years, but this program should be designed for at least 10 years. This design will include the condition that if both Afghan and American constituents agree on the program’s success after 5 years, the program will be placed under Afghan control, likely with US funds, with the ultimate goal of self-sufficiency.

Promote did not fail Afghan women to the degree that missionary schools and militarized madrasas did, but the program’s aforementioned shortcomings and critiques stem from the same underlying reasons – instability created by the US government’s actions based on US goals surrounding both Westernization and eradicating “the enemy,” whether communist or terrorist. These actions were taken purely for US benefit while claiming to help the Afghan people and to save Afghan women. However, after eighteen years, the failure of this claim is evident. Past strategies, those that place US goals over Afghan goals, that aim to Christianize, Westernize, or even radicalize, have not succeeded to Afghan benefit.

Compared to these past programs, Promote is an improvement because it makes an apparent attempt to put Afghan women’s best interests first and the US government has finally begun to involve Afghan women in the process of critiquing and reviewing the program. Ultimately, Promote was ineffective because the US government refused to shed the paternalistic vestiges of its previous colonial feminist involvement in the Middle East and Afghanistan. In order to shed them once and for all, Afghan women need to be at the forefront of this educational program – not to justify US involvement on moral grounds, but to put an end to an eighteen year long war and ultimately leave Afghanistan and its people in a position to move forward, and to repair trust in the US as an ally in the years to come.
Works Cited


**Notes**

1 It is important to note that the fundamentalist and radical forms of Islam practiced by groups like the mujahedeen and Taliban are very different from the religion of Islam as it is widely practiced around the world, and just as the KKK or Westboro Baptist Church is not accurately representative of Christianity, neither of these groups can be viewed as accurate representations of Islam.

2 I acknowledge that the US government is not a uniform entity and over the course of the years this paper covers, many different administrations were involved, often with conflicting or multiple positions on the topics covered in this paper, such as women’s rights, education programs, and foreign policy. However, for the sake of word limits and because there is a great deal of existing literature on US administrations in these eras, this paper focuses more closely on Afghan politics and the United States’ intersection with them, and simply draws comparisons between various US administrations which have all used or condoned what I argue are colonial feminist policies.

3 “Madrasa” is a transliteration for the Arabic word مدرسة, used here to mean traditional Afghan educational institutions that involve a heavy emphasis on study of Islam; however the word itself can be used to refer to any type of educational institution, secular or not.

4 “Wuleswali” is a transliteration of the Pashtun word ۍلاوسلو, which refers to the administrative districts or provinces of Afghanistan.