

**Evaluation of the EU-funded project on the  
empowerment of women from Afghanistan**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to examine the 2019 EU-funded project on the empowerment of Afghan women via training and education. In this research, we analyze the project's development, implementation, stakeholder issues and challenges, as well as broader implications for gender equality in post-conflict areas, such as that of Afghanistan. A qualitative methodology is used to analyze documents, as well as conduct in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including EU representatives, UNDP officials, partner university administrators, who are all part of the initiative. The two-phased project was aimed at providing Afghan females with higher education opportunities and future career prospects. Findings show that the implementation of the project was rather smooth and the participants who participated were successful in their studies. However, following the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021, the project changed immensely and the reintegration of females into Afghan society and job market became close to impossible; thus, most females seek to build a new life and use their skills abroad. Findings highlight the need for enhanced post-graduation support for participants, as well as more flexible and adaptable implementation strategy to accommodate shifting political landscapes. This study serves as a project evaluation paper, with a target demographic of scholars and policymakers actively involved in international development and gender studies. This research also enhances the discussion on women's empowerment and provides valuable insights into the intricacies of implementing extensive programs in developing nations.

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“A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in.”

– Greek proverb

This quote, which we encountered on the walls of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in Singapore during our two-week educational trip, has profoundly inspired us as we complete our Master's thesis and degree at Nazarbayev University's Graduate School of Public Policy. It serves as a reminder of the lasting impact of our work, not only for ourselves but for future generations, as we contribute to the fields of public policy and public service.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Education remains one of the most significant challenges Afghan women continue to encounter today. Socio-cultural traditions, together with unstable political situations and limiting policies, stood and continue to stand as substantial obstacles blocking their access to education. International initiatives promote higher education access for Afghan women and try to eliminate the fundamental obstacles that restrict their participation in economics and society. In response to these persistent challenges, the European Union (EU) began its project in 2019, which aims to offer education and training programs to Afghan women in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2019) with the initiative expanding to Kyrgyzstan in 2021. Initially, only 50 students got the chance to study in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (UNDP, 2022). In many universities in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, selected Afghan women obtained education and training. Later, the project's scope was broadened to include more female Afghan students and host countries, educational institutions, and academic fields. In 2021, the number of Afghan students increased to 105 (UNDP, 2022). The UNDP offices in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan are assisting the EU in the completion of this project. The EU is the only donor of this entire initiative. The primary focus and key beneficiaries of this project are Afghan female students.

While this project seeks to foster academic, economic, and social empowerment via educational initiatives, the Taliban's return to power in 2021 changed the whole scope of the initiative and made it nearly impossible for Afghan female students to reintegrate into their society and job market, as it was planned before the regime shift. Given this change, it is necessary to evaluate the EU project on Afghan women's empowerment to determine and analyse its implementation process, its successes and challenges in empowering Afghan women.

Thus, the following questions for research arise:

- How is the EU's project on the empowerment of Afghan women implemented?
- What are the key challenges and successes that stakeholders, including project designers, implementers, and participants faced during the implementation of the project?
- What can be done to improve the project implementation?

The significance of this study lies in how effectively it examines the operations of international empowerment projects within unstable political contexts. The evaluation of this EU-funded project delivers important information for stakeholders and implementing partners who work on similar programs. The research contributes to the broader understanding that education serves as a tool for survival among displaced women, while also challenging standard interpretations of empowerment in fragile states. The methodology is based on a combination of primary data from interviews with EU representatives and university administrators. Although reaching out to interview participants and officials was far from easy due to the sensitivity of this project, we managed to communicate with both hosting universities and EU representatives and conducted two in-depth interviews which provided important insights into the implementation process and trajectory of the project. For secondary data we relied on a variety of authoritative sources like official web pages, blogs, project documents, reports, social media portals and academic literature. After collecting the data, thematic analysis served as the method to explore interview results during the analysis phase. Complying with ethical restrictions and rules became our top priority and shifted the whole direction of our research.

We purposely selected Kazakhstani collaborating universities for our research. Kazakhstan has been a key partner in the EU-funded project, hosting a significant number of Afghan female students since 2019. As students of Nazarbayev University in Astana, we chose Kazakhstan due to the feasibility of assessing key stakeholders, such as university administrators and EU representatives. This allowed us to gather data efficiently and gain insights into the project's implementation, challenges, and successes.

The research findings enrich discussions about gender equality while providing guidance for women empowerment in post-conflict regions like Afghanistan. The findings also provide a detailed comprehension of the obstacles and achievements linked to these endeavors. In terms of analysing findings through the spectrum of our research questions, we found that the project had successfully delivered new educational opportunities to Afghan women, even though it faced certain obstacles. With respect to implementation, the initiative was smooth and rather unproblematic, however, the regime shift of 2021 changed the whole initial scope of the project and affected its advertising, visibility, as well as the lifepaths of participants. Main successes of the project proved to be the academic accomplishments of participants and the fruitful cooperation

between participating institutions (host universities and UNDP). Regarding the challenges, our research highlighted the lack of post-graduation support, as well as low project adaptability and flexibility, along with limited social integration of female participants. To address the issues highlighted in our research findings, the donor and implementing partners should consider creating a career support network system for female Afghan graduates, as well as make sure that the initiative is more adaptable to political regime shifts and instability. In addition, language and cultural integration programs should be expanded both inside the university and post-graduation to help graduate students improve their employability and adaptation in new environments. Thus, it can be concluded that the EU project achieved success in educating Afghan women; however, it faced uncertainty over its future mainly due to the return of the Taliban's restrictions and students' inability to return to Afghanistan and use their acquired skills and knowledge in the government sector of their country.

This Policy Analysis Exercise Project is organized into five main chapters. After introducing the topic we review the literature on women's rights and education in Afghanistan, as well as EU initiatives for gender equality, identifying gaps in the existing research. Then we proceed to provide details on our methodology, including the qualitative approach, data collection methods, and ethical considerations. The following section presents the findings and discusses their implications, addressing the research questions and highlighting key challenges and successes. Finally, the conclusion of the study summarizes the findings, discusses the study's contributions to the field, and suggests directions for future research and recommendations.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section provides a detailed analysis of the historical context of women's rights and education in Afghanistan and EU initiatives to promote gender equality and empower Afghan women. The first part examines the barriers Afghan women face in accessing education and equal rights, with particular attention to important scholarship that examines the socio-political and economic obstacles to their development. The second part discusses the EU's broader role in global efforts to achieve gender equality, following the development of its policies and analyzing specific projects. Finally, the third part examines an EU-funded project aimed at empowering Afghan women, outlining its structure, goals, and overall influence.

### **2.1 Historical Context of Women's Rights and Education in Afghanistan**

Education and training are the cornerstone of any progress and development (Burrige, Payne, and Rahmani, 2015). Women's education plays a vital role in individual empowerment and long-term societal growth. It is a basic right and an essential factor in achieving sustainable growth through the promotion of gender equality, empowerment of women, improvement in family well-being and economy, and building of peaceful and just communities. Access to education, regardless of gender, enables individuals to participate in the labor market, increase skilled and productive workforce, achieve a balanced life, overcome cultural and financial poverty, and contribute to the well-being of their families and societies. Focusing on the importance of women's empowerment, Duflo (2012) emphasizes the importance of it by examining how a country's development can drive inequality down and how women's empowerment can contribute to economic growth. According to the author, when women are educated, they tend to have better health, which reduces the risk of maternal and child mortality, (Duflo, 2012; Heath & Jayachandran, 2016). They also gain skills that help them find jobs and contribute to the economy's growth. Educated women make informed choices about their families, which can help lift future generations out of poverty. Additionally, when women take on leadership roles, they bring about positive changes in governance and decision-making, benefiting society as a whole (Duflo, 2012). This is why investing in women's education is key to a country's progress and development, leading to substantial socio-economic benefits.

Women's empowerment and education are important and relevant issues worldwide, but a clear example of this issue is Afghanistan. The country specifically has been struggling with providing women with equal rights and accessibility to education for decades because of deep-rooted cultural barriers and historical difficulties. Due to its severe constraints on women's access to healthcare and education and the presence of various humanitarian crises, it is regarded as the most dangerous and unsafe country for women (Septiadi, 2019). As Roy (2022) writes, in every humanitarian crisis and war, the victims are women, and in Afghanistan, women are treated as nothing more than an object and reproductive machines. The Afghan government continues to have a negative impact on women's lives and has difficulty in providing women with the necessary education, labor, and equality rights. As mentioned earlier, education is important for both genders and the overall performance of a country. Afghan women see education as a tool to address their specific needs such as the desire for independence, gaining qualifications and employment prospects, increased awareness of women's rights, and ultimately the desire "to have a better life" (Burrige, Payne, and Rahmani, 2015). However, despite the recognition of education as a path to gender equality and a better future, women in Afghanistan struggle to access it.

Numerous authors and researchers have analyzed women's empowerment and education in Afghanistan. In her work, Huma Ahmed (2013) provides a detailed overview of the history and struggles of Afghan women and their achievements in the last century. The article highlights that Afghanistan faces different issues at a time: lack of peace, war, political and economic instability, and religious extremism, which largely curb the rights of women and severely impact their freedom. The author also discusses the important factors (cultural norms, religion, etc.) that influence the evolution of women's rights in Afghanistan, which are of key importance in our research. Regarding educational issues, Hazrat's (2017) article analyzes the history of women's education in Afghanistan and the importance of educational rights, focusing on the unequal access to education for females and males in the country. The author points out the effects of the government on the situation in women's education throughout the years, as well as the main obstacles for female education in general. Overall, Hazrat focuses on highlighting the factors that affect female education and the causes of inequality in the issue. Similarly, Hayward and Karim (2019) analyze the complex situation of gender equality policies in Afghanistan's higher education system. This research focuses on the gains made through the adoption of gender-related policies and draws attention to the many obstacles women encounter in pursuing higher education.

Since the Taliban regained control in 2021, women's rights and access to education have been further restricted, with obstacles such as underrepresentation, financial, educational, and professional restrictions, and security risks making it difficult for women to pursue higher education (UN Women, 2024). Women's participation in public life and independence were significantly restricted. In 2023, an estimated 80% of school-aged girls were out of school, and 1.1 million were missing out on secondary education (UN Women, 2024). According to the Taliban rule, women are not allowed to take university entrance exams and work for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the UN. In 2023, women lost their income - even beauty salons were forced to close (UN Women, 2024). According to UN Women (2024) projections, such constraints not only undermine women's fundamental rights but put future generations at risk, leading to a 45% increase in early childbearing and a 50% increase in maternal mortality. Such extreme limitations on women's education and participation in public life not only deprive them of their fundamental rights but also exacerbate the problems of gender inequality and hamper the growth of the nation.

## **2.2 Advancing Women's Empowerment and Education: EU, UN, and Beyond**

As the EU has emerged as an international player, it has committed to important ideals and principles in its foreign policy, including democracy, respect for human rights, and women empowerment (Ghrieqanah & Asleem, 2017). It has consistently shown a longstanding commitment to achieving gender equality. Over time, the EU has honed its gender equality strategies both within its borders and in its foreign policies, which has made significant progress since the first Treaties were signed (Arribas & Carrasco, 2003). The EU's journey towards gender equality laws began with the Treaty of Rome in 1957 (Erum & Daud, 2021). Following this, the European Commission gradually passed legislation to safeguard European women's equal rights.

Since the 1970s, this legislation has taken the shape of both binding and non-binding measures, including two major directives addressing equal pay and non-discriminatory behaviour. In 1975, the UN declared the Year of International Women and urged its members to take real actions to improve the status of women. Despite the agreement between the countries, the implementation of the legislation was hampered by the enormous costs of the 1979 oil crisis (Erum & Daud, 2021). In response, the European Commission has used lenient legislative steps, such as non-binding rules and guidelines, to promote gender equality and raise awareness of women's issues. The legal

impasse lasted until 1992, when the Maastricht Treaty by the EU was amended significantly, opening the door to stricter gender equality laws. The European Parliament became a full-fledged authority, raising the prospect of a more reformist EU gender policy (Erum & Daud, 2021).

The EU is a strong advocate for gender equality and women's empowerment, actively working to remove barriers to their progress (Erum & Daud, 2021). The value of these ideas is recognized in various documents of the EU. Rees (2005) divided the evolution of EU gender equality policies into three main stages. The first is associated with liberal feminism (or "equal treatment"), which focuses on equal rights for men and women. (Erum & Daud, 2021). The second stage focuses on "positive action," a term rooted in feminist theory but expanding to proactive efforts required to fix past imbalances and create real parity. The last stage is "gender mainstreaming" which is associated with postmodern feminism and the idea of fundamental change. Ghrieqanah and Asleem (2017) write that the EU still applies these three strategies in its gender policy.

Beyond legislative and policy developments, the EU has implemented several projects and initiatives to promote women's empowerment and education across the globe. The EU and UN Women have been collaborating and working together across more than 90 countries. One of the global and multi-year initiatives to end all forms of violence against women and girls by 2030 is the Spotlight Initiative (SI) which was launched in 2017. The SI has received above \$500 million in funding from the EU to UN organizations (e.g., UN Women, UNDP, UNICEF) (Maralbaeva & Pierobon, 2023). The initiative launched a ProBono project in some countries like Kyrgyzstan that offers legal assistance to women suffering from violence. The assessment of the initiative is difficult due to its broad long-term scope, recent start, and challenges caused by COVID-19, which led to an increase in incidents of violence. However, the program is considered a success so far. In addition to these ongoing partnerships, the organizations are planning on broadening their collaboration thematically and geographically in the framework of the EU Gender Action Plan III (2021-2025) (GAP III) and to undertake measures to reach gender equality by 2030.

Beyond Central Asia, the EU has also funded several programs aimed at improving the situation of women in Turkey, such as the Women Entrepreneurship Support Network and Women Business Incubator Centers (Yildirim, 2015). Some of the most successful programs besides the SI also include the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) (2010) project in G7 countries, the EU Madad Trust Fund (2014), which worked to strengthen the resilience of Syrian women and host

communities in Iraq, Iran, Jordan, and Turkey. Overall, the EU is committed and focused on promoting women's empowerment, education, and other rights around the world through a wide range of projects, aimed at increasing women's access to education and improving their learning outcomes.

Internally, the EU has worked to integrate gender research and policy development within its structures. In 2005, the EU created the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) as a method of advancing the equality agenda in a rigorous, evidence-based, and democratic manner (Hubert & Stratigaki, 2011). It is an important resource that provides data and expertise on the understanding of gender issues through research efforts spanning economic involvement, decision-making, and violence against women. Some believe this is a window of opportunity for gender equality policies and a more inclusive and equal society (Hubert & Stratigaki, 2011). Besides that, women's economic empowerment is a critical component of the EU's Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) (Sergejeff & Ciommo, 2023). While EIGE represents a structured approach to gender equality within the EU, GAP III is a long-standing commitment within the EU's external activities.

Despite these actions and achievements, challenges still exist. According to the analytical framework for evaluation by Watkins et al. (2015), the GAP is insufficient to achieve its original goal. The authors argue that the EU is not living up to its original strong institutional commitments to Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) set by the UN. Other authors are concerned with the fact that despite attempts to promote gender parity and mainstreaming in the European External Action Service (EEAS) of the EU, many areas remain gender blind. This has resulted in the artificial character of gender mainstreaming, which is often disregarded by EU member states, with unmet objectives due to the ongoing limits of internal state legislation (Erum & Daud, 2021). Therefore, even with all these measures, the EU still faces challenges in achieving its goals of gender equality and women's empowerment. While some programs have made a difference, others have not achieved the expected results, emphasizing the need for greater commitment and better ways to implement these initiatives.

### **2.3 EU Initiative for Afghan Women's Empowerment**

Afghanistan has received the most development funding from the EU and its member states than any other country (Sharma, 2017). As a significant donor, the EU offers both Official Development

Assistance (ODA) and humanitarian aid, demonstrating a strong commitment to improving gender equality both inside and outside of the Union (Sharma, 2017). In detail, since 1994, the EU has allocated around €1.8 billion in humanitarian aid to Afghanistan (European Council, 2024). In addition, the foreign policy instrument of the EU, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) has provided €7.5 million to support justice reforms, political participation, especially among women, and the protection of basic rights and the rule of law (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2023). Following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, the EU introduced a Special Program, providing €150 million to support Afghanistan, with €53 million allocated since October of that year. The main goal was to maintain essential services (e.g., healthcare, education) for Afghan women, children, and other vulnerable groups (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2023).

As part of its major initiatives, the EU has introduced a specialized project for the empowerment of Afghan women, implemented in two phases. According to the Official Regional Project Document of UNDP (2021), phase 1 was launched in 2019 (2019-2025), followed by phase 2 in 2021 (2021-2027). The first phase of this trilateral cooperation project between the EU, Afghanistan, and Central Asia was funded with €2 million, while the second phase contributed an additional €4 million, increasing the overall budget of the project (EEAS, 2023). The project seeks to foster resilience and promote academic, economic, and social empowerment for Afghan women, particularly for those living in difficult and vulnerable circumstances. The project provides access to education and training in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and as of phase 2, Kyrgyzstan to enhance their skills, employability, and future professional prospects. Phase 2 of the project concentrates on training specialists in Agriculture, Agribusiness, Engineering, Construction, Marketing, and ICT.

In addition to fostering academic, economic, and social empowerment for Afghan women, the initiative assists the participating universities in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan to manage learning mobility programs in collaboration with UNDP and focus on gender inequalities in higher education. In terms of education, Kazakhstan has also become part of an EU-funded project in which 30 Afghan women (the first group) began their education in Almaty (2019), and a second group of 50 women will be educated in several universities in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan by 2025 (EEAS, 2020). Kazakhstan's engagement with the EU in this common effort demonstrates

the effectiveness of its \$50 million education program (Astana Times, 2019). Later, the project's scope was broadened to include more female Afghan students and nations, educational institutions, and academic fields. In 2021, the number of Afghan students increased to 105 (EEAS, 2023). The EU is the only donor of this entire project, and the primary focus and key beneficiaries of this project are Afghan female students. The EU and the four UNDP offices in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Afghanistan are the most important stakeholders in the women empowerment project. The project collaborators in Kazakhstan are the Ministry of Higher Education and Foreign Affairs (MoHE and MoFA), the Afghan Embassy, the Bolashak Centre for International Programs (CIP), and UN Women. In addition to this, the execution of the project involves the representation of Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan to the European Union in Brussels, as well as the representation of the EU Delegation in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan.

Despite many efforts, some EU projects, such as GAP III, are failing to achieve their original goal. Women empowerment international initiatives in traditional civilizations such as Afghanistan are hampered by a lack of incentives to change power dynamics and sociocultural norms (Sharma, 2017). Achievement of the objectives requires a comprehensive strategy that takes into account sociocultural, historical, and political elements. For instance, Sharma (2017) argues that for programs to be successful, not only women, but men also need to be actively involved in the empowerment process. This may be one of the major challenges hindering the progress of women's empowerment initiatives in traditional communities like Afghanistan. Overall, while there has been a significant amount of research on Afghan women's empowerment and education, as well as EU projects on this topic, the specific impacts of the ongoing 2019 EU-funded project remain understudied. Our paper will fill this gap and contribute to the literature by analyzing the implementation process and barriers faced by stakeholders, exploring their experiences, and examining the project's role in improving Afghan women's access to education.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

Research always follows an unpredictable process. The evaluation of the EU's Afghan women's empowerment project began with a defined approach that included interviewing key stakeholders while analyzing documents and collecting information from secondary sources. However, reality

had other plans. Our initial expectation of conducting simple data collection transformed into an educational journey regarding flexibility and moral duty toward research ethics.

### **3.1 Data Collection: A Modified Plan**

This research used a qualitative method which studied the field through semi-structured interviews followed by thematic analytical procedures due to the sensitive nature of the content. We used this approach because it aimed to present stakeholders' complex perspectives rather than transform personal stories into statistical data.

We initially intended to conduct in-depth interviews with key stakeholders which included representatives from the EU, UNDP and university administrators. We designed additional research through secondary sources including reports about policy and academic papers, blogs, official web pages and social media pages like facebook and LinkedIn to extend the understanding of our evaluation.

Before we began our evaluation, we faced substantial obstacles. It turned out to be challenging to find interview participants and requests to the UNDP resulted in slow responses; consequently we faced restricted access to officials. The original method failed to produce the desired outcomes, but we did not give up and continued looking and knocking on doors. We interviewed program administrators and host university officials since they were available and willing to discuss the structural components of the project.

### **3.2 Methods: Qualitative Approach in a Complex Setting**

The main research technique involved carrying out detailed interviews with essential participants. Two key participants took part in the qualitative research which consisted of officials from the EU and hosting university administration. We conducted open-ended interview sessions that enabled participants to express their thoughts freely under our direction through key questions.

### **3.3 Data Analysis: Assessing the Responses**

Thematic analysis served as the method to explore interview data during the analysis phase. Thematic analysis stands as one of the most applied qualitative methods which facilitates discovering important themes and recurring patterns in their data. We selected specifically

thematic analysis because it delivers significant information about their results yet upholds ethical principles.

The research analysis included three distinct steps. First we got familiar with all data and secondly we applied coding techniques and thirdly we grouped responses into specific themes. The study revealed main themes about academic success and adaptation alongside employment difficulties faced by these students along with the importance of institutional backing. The university administration attributed positive results to the degree program through its good graduation numbers even though thematic analysis showed difficulties for students in professional adjustment and cultural assimilation.

Due to ethical limitations, we discuss institutional information instead of learning about students' personal stories. The research approach preserves integrity and enables thorough assessment of how the initiative performs and affects its implementation.

### **3.4 Ethical Considerations and Adjustments**

*Note: We received our initial formal ethical approval from GSPP IREC on June 26, 2024 and proceeded with our research as previously agreed upon. However, as of February 2025, we received information on new ethical restrictions regarding our research. Due to the newly imposed ethical restrictions of NU IREC, we are unable to share any information on Afghan female participants.*

The research on Afghan women's empowerment demanded continuous attention to ethical factors throughout the study. A shift in research approach occurred because of obstacles with participant vulnerability resulting in institutional data collection rather than individual participant data gathering. We received an ethical approval from GSPP IREC in June 2024 and continued our research as previously agreed upon. Then the mention of Afghan female participants and any information related to them became prohibited due to the fact that NU IREC revoked the decision of the GSPP IREC because of data sensitivity and participant vulnerability in February 2025.

Ethics standards required the analysis and research findings section to contain only institutional data. This change in the course and depth of our research limited the level of understanding about personal challenges faced by students along with their successes. This reduced analytical scope

and left cultural adjustment and psychological health aspects unexamined. Using only institutional data might lead to biased findings because EU representatives and university administrators could present formalized or positive views about the project without showing the full picture. Despite these constraints, the study still offers valuable insights into the project's implementation and institutional outcomes. Future research needs to integrate participants' point of view to acquire fully developed insights into these initiatives when it is ethically achievable.

### **3.5 Challenges and Reflections: What worked and what didn't**

The challenge of dealing with institutional bureaucracy presented itself as another hurdle in the research process. The process of reaching UNDP officials became especially challenging, since many emails remained unanswered while requests for interviews received numerous redirections. The administrators within universities were more reachable but their views focused primarily on operational matters instead of student life realities.

We discovered different approaches to obtain data necessary for our research despite facing these difficulties. We gathered effective insight from the program through both confidential responses and an increased sample size by studying administrators and coordinators to offer a comprehensive success assessment.

The entire research process functioned as an experience focusing on learning how to adapt. Our research process improved our understanding of how scientific work proceeds in the real world through the changing data methods and procedural obstacles together with the moral challenges we faced. The information gathered from interviews and institutional sources proved essential for the development of our research.

Our research methodology developed from both design needs and necessity. Our research approach needed constant reassessment because we struggled with interviewee recruitment as well as changing research objectives together with unexpected ethical issues. The research process enabled us to understand important aspects of evaluating international empowerment programs, but we faced numerous unplanned obstacles in our plans. Our commitment to persistence and adaptability along with ethical practices allowed us to collect and interpret essential insights that demonstrated successes and weaknesses of the EU-funded Afghan women empowerment initiative.

### **3.6 Limitations**

There are three significant limitations of our research. Since Afghan female participants are considered a vulnerable group, we are unable to mention them or include them in our research, which significantly impacts the depth and breadth of our study. Thus, we are reliant on administrator perspectives, which may include institutional bias and overemphasize operational successes over student struggles. Another important limitation is that of geopolitical factors due to the return of Taliban to power in 2021, which disrupted the project's original scope and complicated the long-term assessment of the initiative. As external evaluators, we focused on mitigating bias by cross-verifying institutional claims with project documents and shifted our methodology to comply with ethical restrictions.

## **IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

*Note: We received our initial formal ethical approval from GSPP IREC on June 26, 2024 and proceeded with our research as previously agreed upon. However, as of February 2025, we received information on new ethical restrictions regarding our research. Due to the newly imposed ethical restrictions of NU IREC, we are unable to share any information on Afghan female participants.*

As mentioned above, the primary objective of this research was to identify and highlight the effectiveness, the implementation process, the challenges and the successes of the EU-funded project on the empowerment of women from Afghanistan, thus, to answer our research questions. In this section, we present our findings and conclusions drawn from the analysis of project documents, news outlets, as well as from qualitative interviews with hosting university administrations and European Union delegation members in Astana.

### **4.1 Project implementation**

When analysing our findings in light of our first research question on the implementation of the project, we learned that the EU-funded initiative aimed at supporting the empowerment of Afghan

women in Central Asia was implemented in two phases with an overall funding of €6 million. The program focuses on scholarships for Afghan women at universities in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Here we provide important information on the phases of the project, as well as the participants and implementation details.

**Table 1. Program Phases**

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Years</b>	<b>Funding (€ million)</b>	<b>Number of Women</b>	<b>Countries Involved</b>	<b>Key Details</b>
<b>Phase 1</b>	2019-2025	2	50	Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan	Funded scholarships for 50 Afghan women at universities in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.
<b>Phase 2</b>	2021-2027	4	105	Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan	Expanded program with €4 million, reaching 105 Afghan women, including universities in Kyrgyzstan.
<b>Total</b>	2019-2027	6	155	Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan	Initiative supporting Afghan women's education, with a total of €6 million funding and 155 beneficiaries.

**Table 2. Key Milestones**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Milestone</b>
<b>2019</b>	Initial group of 30 students arrived in Kazakhstan, enrolled in Satbayev University, Kazakh British Technical University, and Kazakh National Agrarian University.
<b>2023</b>	56 students continued studies within the framework of the project in Kazakhstan.
<b>2024</b>	By 2024, 90 women had participated in the project, with 48 successfully completing their studies.

The project provides funding for undergraduate, graduate, and professional (TVET) studies, with students first completing a foundation year focused on language and cultural training. In addition to the academic development described above, the initiative offers professional growth opportunities, including summer and winter schools, leadership programs, and workshops aimed at increasing employability. This EU-funded program is part of Kazakhstan's ongoing efforts to educate Afghan citizens, which initiated in 2009 and has resulted in more than 1000 Afghan students receiving educational support. The initiative is vital to empowering Afghan women and students currently studying by providing them with access to higher education and vocational training, specifically given the limitations women face in Afghanistan. Overall, participants reported a strong sense of accomplishment in career prospects, with many seeking to further their education.

Initially, the project was highly publicized (before the year of 2021) and included several steps of admission procedures. During our interview with the EU official well familiar with the project, we got some valuable insights into how the selection and admission procedures ran and how the project was actually designed. It was mentioned that the Afghan government, particularly the countries' ministries, specified which experts were needed in the government agencies and thus chose academic programs that were required for the women to be able to later take their places at government bodies. Thus, the programs were pre-agreed between the Afghan government and governments of countries of Central Asia and the whole goal was to empower women to get diplomas abroad to then bring the knowledge and skills back to their country and foster the economic development of the nation.

Before 2021, the program had high visibility, allowing Afghan women to participate freely in the academic and professional training throughout Central Asia. However, the regime shift established serious obstacles and challenges. The initial admission interview was held in Kabul in 2019 where the candidates were able to present their motivation for participation in the project. What was fascinating to the project managers was that the initial number of applicants was over 2000 and the female students were from all parts of Afghanistan, including small villages with lack of internet access. Moreover, the 90 girls that were chosen from the interviews showed such a high level of motivation, confidence and skillfulness that all project organizers were pleasantly surprised. This

shows and proves that the project was well-advertised and many females saw a possibility of improving their lives and educational skills with the participation in this initiative.

#### **4.2 Challenges and successes of the program**

When answering our second research question on the project's successes and challenges, we found that the actual implementation of the project once the candidates arrived proved to be rather smooth and unproblematic, meeting both the participants and implementers expectations. The interview with the representative of one of the participating universities also highlighted the implementation details and the experience of females studying abroad. Since previously the university had one-year Master's degree programs only in Russian language, a special group was created to facilitate the English language studies of the females. In 2022 six women started the program at one of the hosting universities and they all successfully graduated in 2023. The interviewee mentioned that another group of Afghan female participants studied on a certification program, not a whole degree, since their academic background was too different from the Master's programs offered.

What is important to point out is that the participants were very successful at their studies, showed high levels of dedication and managed to graduate with flying colors. At the university level, the female participants were assigned a supervisor who was responsible for helping them with integration into the academic process and into the new surroundings. The university administration also helped some of the female students find jobs after graduation and some of them still live and work in Almaty. An important point to mention is that the Afghan female students studying under the EU-funded program faced a certain level of difficulty in integrating into the university life and in establishing ties with other students since they studied on an intensive 1-year course and had no classes with other students. However, the language barrier was not much present, many of the females managed to learn both Russian and Kazakh languages, which helped them increase the possibility of staying in Kazakhstan for work opportunities and also helped them integrate better into the local society. The universities were also in close contact and regular communication with the UNDP, who is the main implementer of the project and their participation in the participants studies was rather smooth. In terms of the organizational difficulties, the university administration highlighted that there were no major challenges faced, since the university programs were already pre-existing with a clear design and the girls all had a high level of English language (upper-

intermediate) and skills. To ensure the best education for the female students, the university specifically hired international professors from abroad with a high proficiency in English.

*We had very close communication with the UNDP, because this representative himself, he was interviewed, then he often came to process some documents so that they could study with us without problems. Therefore, we had close contact with representatives of the UNDP. They came to us and participated in the educational process itself. That is, we made sure that everything was fine with the documents, and that they also received their grants under this scholarship program (Interview 2, University administration).*

The interview with the EU official well familiar with the project also strengthened this point and disclosed that the EU and UNDP executed substantial assistance initiatives to assist Afghan women in adjusting to life and education outside of their home country. This included continuous engagement with UNDP project managers who facilitated communication, tracked academic progress, and supplied essential resources during emergencies, such as COVID-19. During the epidemic, laptops and other necessary equipment were provided to the Afghan female students to ensure the continuing of their education. The hands-on assistance was compared to "babysitting," with the EU representative highlighting the distinctive, continuous connection that UNDP workers had developed with participants.

Thus, in terms of facilitating Afghan women's education in Central Asia and providing them with opportunities to empower them- the project was successful. Post-graduation, some continued their studies in Europe and the USA, while others remained in Almaty for work, with some receiving employment assistance from the university. The interviews also offered valuable insights in the life paths of some of the participants (anonymously), pointing out that some of the female participants continued their education on Master's and PhD programs abroad (primarily in Europe and in the USA), while others stayed in Almaty and entered the job market. Many of them are in close, regular contact with their hosting universities up to this day.

An important scope of our research was to highlight the challenges of the project as well. This initiative, despite its achievements, has significant hurdles arising from geopolitical factors, cultural sensitivities, and the evolving political landscape in Afghanistan. The EU representative

emphasized the challenges of actively connecting with Afghan women due to increased sensitivities and political ramifications, particularly after government changes in Afghanistan. It was highlighted how the political transition in Afghanistan resulted in substantial modifications to the program implementation and changed the whole aim of the initiative, which was partly due to the low flexibility and adaptability of the initiative. The regime shift established obstacles that curtailed educational and job prospects for Afghan women, as the new administration enforced limits on female education and employment, as well as their rights. As a result, some of the women sought asylum in Western states, while others had difficulties in reentering Afghanistan or securing steady employment in Central Asia due to the geopolitical climate.

The changes affected visibility, since the previous public advertising of the program was curtailed after 2021. The initiative was originally prominent, using advertising materials on social media and online that highlighted the accomplishments of Afghan women and the possibilities offered by the project. To safeguard participants, such visibility and advertising was reduced, eliminating identifying photographs and personal success stories. UNDP and its partners comply with EU visibility mandates, ensuring that all project materials emphasize EU branding in accordance with contractual responsibilities. Regardless of these limitations, the initiative maintained a systematic methodology in providing educational and professional possibilities to Afghan women in Central Asia and subsequently in Europe.

Moreover, post-graduation, several Afghan women had difficulties in obtaining work or securing futures abroad due to the program's original design lacking post-graduation assistance. Although the EU provided some support, including prolonged stays and jobs via partner organizations, a clear need for long-term planning still remains. According to our interview with EU representatives, numerous graduates secured temporary work in countries like Kazakhstan or Spain, while others obtained roles inside UNDP offices, although with restricted availability. Spain provided educational possibilities for the Afghan women to pursue studies in Spanish language, facilitating eventual absorption into the Spanish job market. The Afghan women participants have actively advocated for more assistance, with several individuals contacting EU personnel, project directors, and the UNDP for further advice and future chances of staying abroad and building a life with a more positive future picture. Nevertheless, the EU is in a challenging situation, attempting to reconcile the support of these women's ambitions with the constraints of its programs.

The conducted interviews also highlight the general challenges of executing an empowerment campaign for Afghan women in unstable political circumstances. The program has achieved significant results in providing education and beginning employment possibilities; nevertheless, continued assistance for graduates is a critical concern. The EU, in collaboration with UNDP and other international partners, must persist in adjusting to the changing geopolitical situation to maintain and enhance the empowerment initiatives for Afghan women. The EU representative's insights highlight the need for strategic planning and strong partnerships to enable Afghan women to access meaningful educational and employment opportunities, despite considerable external challenges.

It is important to add that with the Taliban coming back to power in 2021, it is unclear whether the real empowerment of these women is still achievable. The initial idea was not only for the female participants to get education, but to use their skills and knowledge to improve the political and economic landscape of Afghanistan, to raise female employment and improve their opportunities. However, the real and meaningful reintegration of these women into Afghan society and workforce is almost close to impossible and this has shifted the whole project. Of course, the interviews highlighted the personal success of these women in terms of their studies and skills, but the new political reality of Afghanistan creates a "brain-drain" situation out of this project.

#### **4.3 The project through the eyes of the female participants from Afghanistan**

*Note: We received our initial formal ethical approval from GSPP IREC on June 26, 2024 and proceeded with our research as previously agreed upon. However, as of February 2025, we received information on new ethical restrictions regarding our research. Due to the newly imposed ethical restrictions of NU IREC, we are unable to share any information on Afghan female participants.*

## **V. CONCLUSION**

This research has studied and analyzed the EU-funded project on the empowerment of women from Afghanistan and answered the research questions on the implementation and successes, as well as challenges of the initiative. For this study, we used a qualitative method approach and conducted semi-structured interviews with stakeholders followed by thematic analysis. Through interviews with hosting university administrators, EU delegation members and secondary data analysis of project documents and news articles, the research has produced the following outcomes.

The EU-funded project aimed to empower women from Afghanistan via receiving higher education in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, by providing educational and professional opportunities. The program successfully facilitated the higher education of numerous women, with many of them graduating with honors and pursuing studies or finding employment abroad. When examined through the lens of our research questions, our findings suggest that the project's implementation proved to be rather smooth from the part of all stakeholders, however the whole goal of the initiative shifted when Taliban came to power in 2021. Our research also revealed the academic successes of participants as well as the achievement of institutional cooperation between UNDP and host universities. When analyzing challenges, our study revealed a lack of flexibility and adaptability of project implementation; moreover, an insufficiency of post-graduation support and participant integration into university society turned out to be an important issue that needs to be addressed by project implementers. Despite all hurdles encountered, the project still impacted the lives of each and every female who participated in it and can be considered an example of necessary initiatives in the sphere of female empowerment and gender equality support. Even though we have faced certain ethical restrictions in terms of mentioning project participants, we believe our research and analysis have provided some important insights into women empowerment initiatives, into European Union-funded projects, but in particular into this project's implementation and successes, as well as its challenges.

### **5.1 Recommendations**

Funding and working on such an impactful and sensitive project is a difficult task and requires thorough planning, sufficient funds and a long-term approach towards achieving real change and

improving the situation women are facing in Afghanistan currently. Our recommendations will follow our research questions and findings section structure.

### **5.1.1 More Flexible and Adaptable Project Implementation**

The project was launched in 2019 and at that time foreseeing a political regime change and Taliban coming back to power might have been very difficult. However, this project, as well as other future projects, should include higher flexibility and adaptability to political realities and changes, since these projects are usually launched in politically unstable or unpredictable regions of the world. There should be a scenario planning and serious risk assessment of any initiative, taking into account the political history and socio-economic reality of the country. Also, having a serious and highly professional crisis response mechanism system will ensure there are several emergency response plans and strategies when the political situation in such countries shifts abruptly and changes are needed urgently. Without these response systems and scenarios, the project lost its real long-term effectiveness and thus the empowerment initiative was not seen through until the very last and crucial step.

### **5.1.2 Post-Graduation Support and Assistance**

During our interview with the EU representatives in Astana, it was mentioned that most of the females struggle with post-graduation life, trying to find a workplace abroad, managing visas, residence permits, job opportunities and trying to find a way to build a life outside of their country. We recommend that the EU, together with UNDP, create a network where graduated students could get assistance from NGOs, help each other by sharing their experiences with new students and get easier access to employers and available job opportunities. This is essential since the project's scope changed after the Taliban came back to power in 2021 and most girls are trying to build a life outside of Afghanistan. Although this was not a foreseeable circumstance in 2019, when the project was launched, we believe it is important to adjust to the new realities and help the participants as much as possible. This can be created via partnerships through LinkedIn and agreements with EU-based employment agencies focused on foreigners.

### **5.1.3 Cultural and Psychological Integration of Participants**

The interview with hosting university administrators highlighted that the females studying under this program studied “alone”, segregated from other students and groups in a way, since the university created English-speaking courses specifically for them. Also, due to language barriers, they mostly communicated between each other. This was not highlighted as a major issue by our interviewee, however, we think it would be important to pay more attention and put more effort into this, because education is not only about the knowledge they get from actually studying, but also the experience of immersing themselves into new cultures, talking to people with different viewpoints and cultural backgrounds, as well as broadening their horizons and opportunities. Since they already are in a difficult situation, having a community where they fit in and belong is very important. We recommend organizing more cultural events at the university, where students come together to explore each other's cultures. Moreover, allowing them to have courses with local students, not only separately, is extremely important, as well as doing mixed accommodation between students of different nationalities. For the sake of their mental well-being, we recommend there be a specific psychological assistance hotline for these women and a psychological counselor to support them and provide mental help with any issue they might be facing.

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## APPENDIX A

### Interview questions

#### Part A: Questions for EU/UNDP officials

1. How was the project design developed to address the specific needs and challenges faced by Afghan women?
2. Were there any political, social, or economic factors that influenced the design or implementation of the project?
3. What strategies were employed to ensure the active participation and involvement of Afghan women in the project activities?
4. How were resources allocated and managed throughout the duration of the project to ensure efficiency and effectiveness?
5. How collaboration established with Bolashak Centre for International Programmes (CIP) during the project implementation phase enhances its impact?
6. How were the outcomes and impacts of the project measured and evaluated?
7. Did the outputs meet the quality standards set by the project?
8. Were there any unexpected challenges or obstacles encountered during the implementation of the project? If so, how were they addressed?
9. Were there any mid-course corrections made based on monitoring findings?
10. Can you provide examples of innovative approaches or best practices adopted during the project that contributed to its success?
11. What mechanisms were put in place to ensure the sustainability of project outcomes beyond the funding period?
12. How were local communities and relevant stakeholders engaged in the project planning and decision-making processes?
13. What role did local cultural and socio-political dynamics play in shaping the project's approach and outcomes?
14. How were risks and uncertainties identified and managed throughout the project lifecycle?
15. In what ways did the project contribute to promoting women's empowerment and gender equality in Afghanistan?
16. Can you elaborate on any specific challenges or opportunities encountered in working with local communities and government authorities?
17. How were communication and coordination facilitated among project stakeholders to ensure alignment and synergy?

## **Part B: Questions for university administration**

1. How was the EU-funded project on the empowerment of Afghan women integrated into the existing programs and initiatives of the university?
2. Can you describe the specific roles and responsibilities assigned to the university administration in the implementation of the project?
3. What measures were taken to ensure the effective coordination and collaboration between different departments or faculties within the university?
4. How were the needs and preferences of Afghan women students taken into account during the planning and execution of project activities?
5. Can you discuss any challenges or barriers encountered by the university administration in the implementation of the project? How were they addressed?
6. What strategies were employed to promote inclusivity and diversity within the university environment, particularly for Afghan women students?
7. How were the university's facilities and resources utilized to support the project objectives and activities?
8. Can you provide examples of capacity-building initiatives or training programs organized by the university to empower Afghan women students?
9. How were opportunities for mentorship and peer support created to facilitate the integration and success of Afghan women students?
10. In what ways did the university engage with external stakeholders, such as community organizations or government agencies, to enhance the impact of the project?
11. How were the progress and outcomes of the project communicated and disseminated within the university community?
12. What mechanisms were put in place to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of project activities and interventions?
13. How were feedback and input from Afghan women students solicited and incorporated into decision-making processes related to the project?
14. Can you share any success stories or testimonials from Afghan women students who benefited from the project?
15. How were cultural sensitivities and differences taken into consideration in the design and implementation of project activities?
16. What efforts were made to ensure the sustainability of project outcomes?
17. How did the project contribute to fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students, including Afghan women?
18. What lessons were learned from the project experience, and how will they inform future initiatives aimed at supporting marginalized student populations?
19. Looking ahead, what are the university's priorities and recommendations for advancing the empowerment of Afghan women students?

## APPENDIX B

### Graduate School of Public Policy Institutional Research Ethics Committee Approval Letter and Ethical Modifications Letter



GSPP irec 26 Jun 2024



to me, Safdar, Madina ▾

Dear Karina,

Please be informed that your IREC application has been approved by the Committee.

Kind regards,  
IREC Secretariat



GSPP irec 14 Feb



to me, Safdar, Madina, Zhanibek, Peter ▾

Dear Karina,

We would like to clarify that GSPP IREC has reviewed the information provided in the Amendment Form and approves the changes. As a result, please proceed with the approved changes to your research protocol.

Additionally, please note that the wording in our previous email was not accurate due to a misselection of terms on our part. We appreciate your understanding and apologize for any confusion.