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The Role of UN Agencies in Women's Empowerment in Afghanistan: A Comprehensive Performance Analysis (2001–2025)

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ABSTRACT

Fatima Jinnah, known as the Mother of the Nation in Pakistan, played a crucial role in the struggles for independence and women's rights. This study examines her involvement in anti-colonial and anti-tyranny movements in the Indian subcontinent and Pakistan at a time when women's political activities were minimal. The main research questions are: What factors shaped Fatima Jinnah's personality? How did she influence the anti-colonial movement in the subcontinent and the anti-authoritarian movement in newly established Pakistan? And how did she advocate for the rights of women and the underprivileged? The hypothesis is that her adherence to Islamic principles, the influence of her family, especially her brother Muhammad Ali Jinnah, and her intelligence and high education directed her towards anti-colonial and anti-authoritarian struggles and support for women. Using a descriptive-analytical historical method and sources in English and Urdu, this study aims to provide a comprehensive view of her impact. Findings indicate that Fatima Jinnah successfully presented a model of a Muslim woman who effectively mobilized people against colonialism, encouraged women's participation in social and political affairs, opposed tyranny, and supported the underprivileged. These factors made Fatima Jinnah an inspiring figure in the fight for independence, support for democracy, and defense of women's and underprivileged rights, while remaining committed to Islam and religious values.

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Introduction

Afghanistan, a nation with a complex history of political, military, and social instability, represents one of the most challenging contexts for the realization of women's empowerment. Its unique geopolitical position, deeply rooted tribal structure, and successive political upheavals—including the Taliban regime from 1996 to 2001 and its subsequent return in 2021—have made the women's issue in Afghanistan one of the most pressing regional development challenges.

Following the collapse of the first Taliban regime in 2001, the international community, particularly UN-affiliated agencies—including UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), UN Women, UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund), and UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees)—implemented extensive programs in the fields of education, employment, political participation, health, legal support, and awareness-raising. These initiatives were aligned with the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and aimed at reducing gender inequality, elevating women's social status, and strengthening their participation in decision-making spheres. The ratification of the Afghan Constitution in 2004, which recognized the principle of gender equality, marked a watershed moment in the country's legal and social reform process.

However, the persistence of structural (e.g., discriminatory laws prior to 2001), cultural (patriarchal culture and tribal traditions), economic (widespread poverty, with over 85% of the population below the poverty line according to a 2020 World Bank report), and obstacles political (chronic insecurity and repeated changes in power) severely challenged the sustainability of these achievements. The return of the Taliban in August 2021 and the imposition of severe restrictions on women's education, employment, and social presence halted the empowerment process and drastically limited the scope of activities for international agencies.

Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment is a multi-dimensional process in which women, as a historically disadvantaged group, gain the capacity to control their own lives, access key resources such as education, health, economic opportunities, and legal infrastructure, and actively participate in social, economic, political, and cultural processes. According to the United Nations definition, women's empowerment involves strengthening self-reliance, increasing awareness of individual rights, and creating equal opportunities for participation in societal decision-making (United Nations, 2001).

Amartya Sen defines empowerment as the expansion of human capabilities achieved by removing structural barriers and increasing access to necessary resources (Sen, 1999). The Women's Empowerment Framework, developed by Sara Longwe in the 1990s, conceptualizes this process across five hierarchical levels: welfare, access, conscientization, participation, and control. Each of these levels addresses and reinforces a specific dimension of gender equality and empowerment (Longwe, 1991).

In the context of Afghanistan, women's empowerment signifies the removal of multiple barriers: legal barriers (such as discriminatory laws preceding the 2003 Constitution), cultural barriers (e.g., patriarchal culture and tribal traditions), economic barriers (e.g., widespread poverty), and political barriers (e.g., restrictions imposed by the Taliban after 2021) (Basiri and Naimi, 2024). For instance, the female literacy rate in Afghanistan was only 19 percent by 2020. Therefore, empowerment necessitates access to education, creation of job opportunities, and enhancement of women's political participation (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2022).

Methodology

The research methodology employed in this study is a qualytic-survey approach, utilizing qualitative analysis of field data obtained from semi-structured interviews conducted with a selected target population. The interview questions, which were developed based on the research objectives and Sara Longwe’s theoretical framework, were formulated as open-ended questions.

A total of 15 interviews were conducted, each lasting between 45 to 60 minutes. These questions were instrumental in identifying the achievements, obstacles, and opportunities related to the programs under review.

Target Population and Sampling

The target population for this research comprised all stakeholders in UN agency programs in Afghanistan and/or staff of foreign institutions affiliated with international bodies operating within the country. This included women beneficiaries, human rights activists, staff from international organizations, and former government officials.

Purposive sampling was employed to ensure diversity of perspectives and experiences. A total of 15 participants were selected from the following groups:

1. Rural women (5 participants)coming from Bamyan, Herat, Kandahar, Badakhshan, and Balkh, with direct experience in the agencies' educational and livelihood programs. Due to their economic and social vulnerability, this group provided critical insights into program effectiveness.

2. Human rights activists (3 participants), individuals experienced in monitoring UN programs and advocating for women's rights, who offered critical analyses of barriers and opportunities.
3. International organizations staff (4 participants), from UNICEF, the human development and member states empowerment sector, and UN Women (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women), possessing expert knowledge in program design and implementation.
4. Government officials (3 participants) from the former Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Ministry of Education (pre-2021), with experience in policymaking and coordination with the agencies.

The selection criteria included direct experience with the programs, geographic diversity (to cover both urban and rural areas), and role diversity (direct and indirect involvement). This variance facilitated a comprehensive analysis of different viewpoints and helped identify regional and group-specific discrepancies.

Data Analysis Method

Data analysis in this research was conducted using qualitative content analysis and a three-stage coding procedure to provide a structured framework for analyzing the complex data. The analysis stages were as follows:

Open Coding

In this initial stage, over 150 preliminary codes were extracted from the interviews and official documents, including "mobile schools," "sewing workshops," "cultural resistance," "digital literacy," "Taliban restrictions," "internet scarcity," and "lack of teachers." These codes helped identify the fundamental, key concepts within the data, forming the basis for the content analysis.

Axial Coding

In the second stage, the preliminary codes were categorized into 12 principal themes based on conceptual similarities: education, employment, political participation, legal support, educational infrastructure, awareness-raising, inclusion of marginalized groups, effectiveness assessment, cultural changes, strategic shifts, regional disparities, and Taliban impacts. This process facilitated the organization of the data into coherent and interpretable themes.

Selective Coding

In the final stage, the extracted themes were analyzed in depth and aligned with Sara Longwe's theoretical framework to address the main research questions. Furthermore, the interaction between different themes (such as the impact of Taliban restrictions on education and employment) and regional and group-specific differences were examined.

The NVivo software was utilized for the precise organization and analysis of the data. This software played an effective role in managing codes, categorizing themes, and extracting relationships between them. In addition, analytical tables were designed to present the findings in a structured and comparable manner. These tables included the main themes, barriers, achievements, opportunities, regional differences, and strategic shifts, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the patterns embedded in the data.

Interview and Analysis Process

Extracting results from interview data necessitates a logical and rigorous process to ensure a scientifically sound interpretation (or 'valid scientific inquiry'). It is imperative that every stage of this process adhere to the necessary due diligence and methodological principles.

Design of Interview Questions

The interview questions were developed based on the research objectives and within the framework of Sara Longwe's theory. These questions cover the primary axes of the research, formulated to elicit in-depth and diverse data from various perspectives. The main question themes are as follows:

Role of Agencies

- Question: "Which UN agency programs in the areas of education, employment, political participation, and health have had the greatest impact?"
- Purpose: This question helped identify the key achievements and the most effective interventions by the agencies.

Obstacles (Barriers)

- Question: "What are the most significant cultural, political, economic, and social barriers to the implementation of these programs?"
- Purpose: The aim was to analyze the structural and indigenous challenges impeding program implementation.

Opportunities

- Question: "What opportunities exist for improving and expanding programs in the current context?"
- Purpose: This question facilitated the identification of capacities and innovative strategies for increasing program effectiveness.

Achievements (Outcomes)

- Question: "What are the most important achievements of UN agencies in the field of women's empowerment?"
- Purpose: Through this question, the criteria for success and tangible program outcomes were examined from the stakeholders' viewpoints.

Effectiveness Assessment

- Question: "From your perspective, what are the criteria for program success?"
- Purpose: This question allowed for the comparison of differing viewpoints across various groups.

Marginalized Groups

- Question: "How can programs be tailored for widows, internally displaced women (IDPs), and women with disabilities?"
- Purpose: This question focused on identifying existing gaps in program coverage and the specific needs of vulnerable populations.

The questions were designed to allow participants to freely express their personal and professional experiences. For instance, rural women mostly emphasized tangible results such as increased income and literacy, while international organization staff focused on objective indicators like literacy rates and the number of businesses established.
This diversity of perspectives significantly contributed to a more comprehensive data analysis and a multi-dimensional explanation of women's empowerment in Afghanistan.

Data Analysis Process

Code Extraction

The process began with the extraction of over 150 preliminary codes from the interview transcripts and documents, such as "adult female literacy," "carpet-weaving workshops," "Taliban ban on education," "teacher shortages," "online learning," and "cultural resistance." These codes served to identify the initial, key concepts embedded within the data.

Thematic Categorization

The preliminary codes were then categorized into 12 principal themes: education, employment, political participation, legal support, educational infrastructure, awareness-raising, inclusion of marginalized groups, effectiveness assessment, cultural changes, strategic shifts, regional disparities, and Taliban impacts. This categorization organized the data into coherent themes directly relevant to the research objectives.

In-Depth Thematic Analysis

This stage involved analyzing each theme individually, considering regional differences (urban vs. rural), group differences (professional vs. non-professional), and temporal differences (pre- and post-2021). For example, the Education theme was found to be more successful in urban areas (Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif) due to better access to infrastructure, whereas it faced challenges like insecurity in rural areas (Bamyan and Kandahar).

Cross-Sectional Analysis (Intersectionality)

The interaction between themes was examined, such as the compounding effect of Taliban restrictions on both education and employment, or the influence of patriarchal culture on awareness-raising and participation.

Theoretical Alignment

In the final step, the themes were aligned with the levels of Sara Longwe's empowerment theory (welfare, access, conscientization, participation, and control) to provide a comprehensive theoretical analysis.

Software Utilization

The NVivo software was utilized for data organization, coding, and theme extraction. This software facilitated the precise and rapid analysis of the qualitative data and was instrumental in identifying recurring patterns within the dataset.

Analytical Tools and Data Sources

The NVivo software was used for precise coding, data organization, and theme extraction. This software facilitated the analysis of complex data and the identification of relationships between codes.

Additionally, annual reports from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2022 and 2021), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2022), UN Women (2021), and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (2020), along with academic articles and World Bank reports (2020), were utilized to corroborate interview data and enhance the credibility of the analysis.

These tools and sources collectively contributed to the provision of a comprehensive and valid analysis.

Sara Longwe's Women's Empowerment Framework

Sara Longwe's Women's Empowerment Framework (Longwe, 1995) is a hierarchical model for gender analysis that explains the process of women's empowerment from rudimentary to advanced levels. By emphasizing the challenge to patriarchal structures and the attainment of gender equality, this model serves as a tool for planners and policymakers to examine the meaning and consequences of women's empowerment in practice. It also facilitates the critical evaluation of development programs toward achieving gender justice.

Longwe introduces five hierarchical levels of women's empowerment, namely, welfare, access, conscientization, participation, and control. These levels serve as criteria for measuring the degree of women's equality relative to men and evaluating progress in the empowerment process. She asserts that genuine empowerment is realized when women can progressively move from lower to higher levels and effectively challenge discriminatory structures.

Welfare Level

The welfare level is the lowest stage in Longwe's framework and is considered the "zero level of empowerment." This level focuses on improving women's socio-economic status, including enhanced nutrition, health, housing, income, and other basic needs that reduce poverty and improve the quality of life.

In this stage, women are primarily passive recipients of services and benefits, with no role in decision-making. Therefore, although this level does not create structural change, it serves as a necessary foundation for higher stages. Its focus is on addressing immediate practical needs (IPNs) and it acts as an indicator in evaluating development projects to measure the primary impact of interventions on women's material conditions (Longwe, 2002).

Access Level

The access level marks the first genuine step in the empowerment process. At this stage, women, through individual effort and collective organizing, gain equal access to resources and factors of production such as land, water, education, credit, markets, and information.

The goal of this level is to remove structural and cultural barriers that previously prevented women from enjoying equal access to resources. However, focusing solely on equal opportunities without actual control over resources may lead to continued instability. Access serves as a bridge between welfare and conscientization, guiding women from a position of dependency toward self-reliance. Nevertheless, this level sometimes treats women as a homogeneous group, paying less attention to class, ethnic, or racial differences (Longwe, 2002).

Conscientization Level

At the conscientization level, women arrive at the understanding that their deprivation is not the result of individual inability, but rather stems from discriminatory laws, norms, and structures that reproduce male supremacy. This stage, inspired by critical theories such as the ideas of Paulo Freire, emphasizes mental and ideological transformation, turning individual awareness into collective consciousness.

Conscientization leads to the identification of the roots of inequality and the mobilization of women for collective action. Despite its transformative role, this approach may be perceived as challenging or confrontational by traditional societies or individuals not committed to feminist principles (Wallace, 1995).

Participation Level

The participation level is the stage of transition from awareness to action. At this level, women, through collective organization and unity, analyze gender issues, formulate strategies, and implement joint actions to eliminate discrimination.

This level emphasizes collective action, women's organization, and effective leadership, elevating women's role from token presence to genuine participation in decision-making. Participation acts as a bridge between conscientization and control and is a prerequisite for the democratization of power structures. However, an excessive focus on

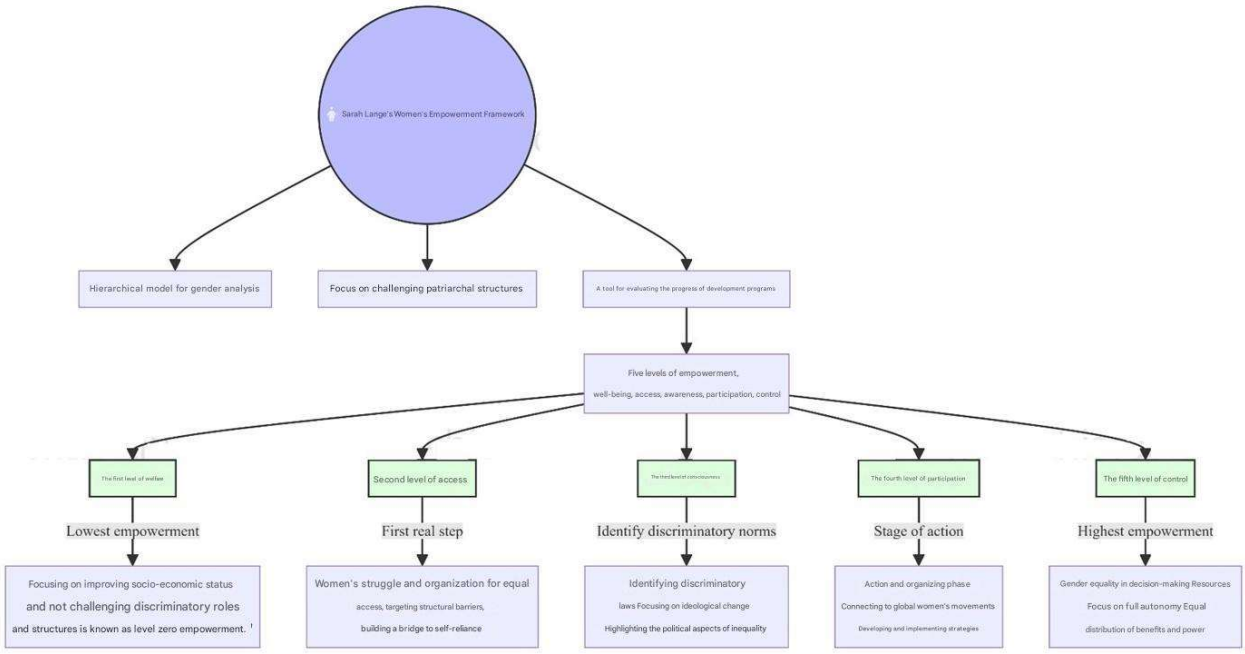
qualitative indicators or a linear view of the change process may limit the evaluation of success (March & Wallace, 1995).

Control Level

The control level is the highest stage in Longwe's empowerment framework. At this level, women achieve true autonomy and equality in decision-making and control over resources, without being dependent on patriarchal structures.

This level signifies sustainable changes in the distribution of power and benefits, making empowerment an intrinsic part of human development. Nevertheless, an exclusive focus on gender equality may overlook other dimensions of inequality, such as class or ethnicity. However, the control level is the pinnacle of the Longwe model, and its realization signifies the transition from dependency to self-reliance and sustainable gender justice (Longwe, 2002).

Figure 1: Sara Longwe's Women's Empowerment Framework (Source: Longwe)



In summary, Sara Longwe's theory posits that genuine women's empowerment is realized when women not only attain welfare but also secure direct control over resources, decision-making processes, and their own destiny (control level).

Women's Empowerment in Afghanistan Through UN Agency Interventions

Since 2001, various UN agencies have played a pivotal role in the empowerment of Afghan women, implementing extensive programs in education, employment, political participation, health, and social support.

- UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), focusing on education for children and women, renovated over 2,000 schools and launched "Back to School" campaigns that re-enrolled over 3.5 million girls in education by 2017 (UNICEF, 2022). The agency also established mobile schools in remote areas, providing educational access for women and girls in insecure regions and covering approximately 150,000 adult women in literacy programs.
- UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), focusing on economic development and sustainable livelihoods, implemented projects such as sewing, carpet weaving, agricultural, and handicraft workshops. By 2019, these schemes enabled over 65,000 women to enter the labor market (UNDP, 2022). These initiatives boosted household income, reduced economic dependency, and fostered women's self-confidence.
- UN Women (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women), aiming to promote gender equality, implemented leadership skills training, supported anti-violence legislation, and ran awareness campaigns. These efforts led to an increase in women's political participation from 27% in Parliament (2010) to about 20% in local councils (UN Women, 2021). Furthermore, the agency provided counseling and legal support through centers for victims of gender-based violence.

- UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) significantly contributed to improving women's health by providing reproductive health services, family planning, prenatal care, and support for violence victims, thereby helping to reduce maternal mortality (UNFPA, 2020).
- UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) focused on displaced and returnee women, offering secure camps, educational and health services, and cash assistance, which improved the living conditions of vulnerable groups (UNHCR, 2021).

These programs were implemented in collaboration with the former Afghan government (2001–2021) and local organizations, playing a significant role in reducing gender inequalities. However, the return of the Taliban in 2021 and the imposition of severe political and cultural restrictions have seriously challenged the continuation and effectiveness of many of these programs.

Findings and Data Analysis

The findings of this research are analyzed based on the Sara Longwe's theoretical framework, which explains women's empowerment across five hierarchical levels (welfare, access, conscientization, participation, and control). The data were collected and analyzed from semi-structured interviews with 15 stakeholders (5 rural women, 3 human rights activists, 4 international organization staff members, and 3 former government officials), official UN reports, and secondary sources. The analysis also took into account regional differences (urban vs. rural) and temporal differences (before and after the Taliban's return in 2021).

Women's Education

International agencies' educational programs, particularly UNICEF's, have had a notable impact on the empowerment of Afghan women. The analysis based on Longwe's five levels is as follows:

- Welfare level: School reconstruction and the "Back to School" campaign led to an increase in the female literacy rate from 12% in 2001 to 19% in 2020. However, budget shortfalls and the destruction of infrastructure post-2021 threatened the sustainability of this progress (statements by Zahra, a rural woman, Bamyan).
- Access level: Establishing mobile schools in rural areas like Bamyan and Badakhshan increased access to education, but teacher shortages, lack of educational resources, and widespread insecurity hindered its continuity (statements by Narges, a teacher, Kabul). While conditions were better in cities, internally displaced women (IDPs) remained deprived due to a lack of identity documents (UNHCR, 2021).
- Conscientization level: UNICEF's awareness campaigns raised women's understanding of the right to education and the importance of schooling. However, cultural resistance in tribal regions, such as Kandahar, prevented its full expansion (statements by Rahimeh, a rural woman, Kandahar). Following the Taliban takeover in 2021, many of these activities were restricted or halted.
- Participation level: The return of millions of girls to schools by 2017 was a sign of women's active participation in education, but the post-2021 ban on girls' schooling has prevented over 1.1 million female students from continuing their education (UN Women, 2022; statements by Fatemeh, human rights activist).
- Control level: Women running home-based classes and providing digital education in various regions exemplify efforts to maintain control over the learning process under restrictive conditions; however, limited internet access and security pressures have constrained these activities (statements by Shukrieh, UNICEF staff).

Table 2: Sarah Lange's Women Empowerment Framework

Empowerment Leve	Sample Text/Evidence	Analysis
Welfare	Reconstruction of 2,000 schools and coverage of 150,000 women (UNICEF, 2022).	Programs improved basic welfare, but infrastructure destruction after 2021 threatened sustainability.
Access	Mobile schools in Bamyan and Badakhshan (Zahra's statement).	Access increased in rural areas, but insecurity and lack of resources prevented equal access.
Awareness	Literacy campaigns (UN Women, 2022).	Awareness of gender barriers was strengthened, but cultural resistance in tribal areas was limiting.
Awareness	Return of 3.5 million girls to schools (UNICEF, 2022).	Active participation increased, but Taliban prohibitions reduced it.
Contro	Covert education after 2021 (Fatima's statement).	Efforts to exert control existed, but political restrictions undermined them.

Source: Research Data

Employment Generation

Agency field: The Human Development and Empowerment Agency for member states implemented livelihood projects for women's employment. The analysis of the Longue levels is as follows:

- Welfare: Creating business opportunities for over 65,000 women by the year 2019 through sewing and carpet-weaving workshops increased the economic welfare of families (UNDP, 2022). However, a limited market and widespread poverty (85% of the population below the poverty line, World Bank 2020) threatened sustainability (Layla, a widow, Herat).
- Access: Vocational workshops in Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif improved access to productive resources (such as raw materials), but the lack of roads and markets in rural areas like Kandahar proved to be an obstacle (statements by Sadiqa, a rural woman, Kandahar). Marginalized groups, such as women with disabilities, had less access due to a lack of adaptation/accessibility measures.
- Awareness: Programs informed women about economic barriers, but insecurity and a patriarchal culture limited awareness (UNDP, 2022).
- Participation: Selling products in local markets strengthened women's participation in the economy, but Taliban restrictions after 2021 reduced participation (statements by Layla).
- Control: Women's control over income increased through small businesses, but cultural and political pressures undermined that control (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2022).

Table 3: Analysis of Employment Generation Based on Sarah Longwe's Framework

Empowerment Level	Evidence/Text Sample	Analysis
Welfare	Opportunities for 65,000 women by 1398 (UNDP, 2022).	Employment increased economic welfare, but the limited market threatened sustainability.
Access	Sewing workshops in Herat (statements by Layla).	Access to resources improved, but the lack of raw materials in rural areas was an obstacle.
Awareness	Awareness of economic barriers (UNDP, 2022).	Awareness was strengthened, but insecurity was a limiting factor.
Participation	Sale of handicrafts (statements by Sadiqa).	Economic participation increased, but Taliban restrictions reduced it.
Control	Control over income (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2022).	Control increased, but cultural pressures undermined it.

Source: Research Data

Political Participation

Agency field: UN Women (The UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women) implemented leadership programs for women's political participation. Analysis of the Longwe levels is as follows:

- Welfare: The presence of 27% of women in Parliament by 2010 improved political welfare through equal rights (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2021). However, a patriarchal culture hindered sustainability (statements by Fatima, human rights activist).
- Access: Leadership training increased access to political skills, but social resistance in rural areas was an obstacle (statements by Nazanin, UN Women staff member, Kabul).
- Awareness: Programs informed women about political barriers, but the return of the Taliban reduced awareness.
- Participation: 20% representation in local councils strengthened participation, but the Taliban's prohibitions after 2021 halted it (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2021).
- Control: Efforts towards equal decision-making demonstrated control, but the dissolution of the councils eliminated that control.

Table 4: Analysis of Political Participation Based on Sarah Longwe's Framework

Empowerment Level	vidence/Text Sample	Analysis
Welfare	27% presence in Parliament (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2021).	Political welfare improved, but patriarchal culture was an obstacle.
Access	Leadership training (statements by Nazanin).	Access to skills increased, but social resistance was a limiting factor.
Awareness	Awareness of political barriers (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2021).	Awareness was strengthened, but the Taliban reduced it.
Participation	20% in councils (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2021).	Participation increased, but prohibitions halted it.
Control	Dissolution of councils after 2021 (statements by Fatima).	Control was attempted, but political events eliminated it.

Source: Research Data

Legal Protection

Agency field: UN Women (The UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women) drafted the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) Law. Analysis of the Longwe levels:

- Welfare: The 2009 law improved women's welfare through the protection of violence victims (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2021). However, governmental corruption hindered its implementation (Khadija, human rights activist).
- Access: Support centers increased access to legal services, but the shortage of female judges was an obstacle (statements by Shukriya, lawyer, Kabul).
- Awareness: The programs strengthened awareness of legal rights, but the restrictions imposed by the Taliban reduced it.
- Participation: Cooperation with the former government increased participation in law-making, but the closure of centers after 2021 halted participation.
- Control: Efforts to enforce the laws demonstrated control over protections, but the Taliban undermined that control.

Table 5: Analysis of Legal Protection Based on Sarah Longwe's Framework

(Empowerment Level)	(Evidence/Text Sample)	(Evidence/Text Sample)
Welfare	EVAW Law 1388/2009 (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2021)	Welfare improved, but corruption hindered implementation.
Access	Support centers (statements by Khadija).	Access increased, but the shortage of judges was an obstacle.
Awareness	Awareness of corruption (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2021)	Awareness was strengthened, but the Taliban restricted it.
Participation	Cooperation with the government (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2021)	Participation increased, but closures halted it.
Control	Closure of centers after 2021 (statement by Shukriya).	Control was attempted, but the Taliban undermined it.

Source: Research Data

Educational Infrastructure

Agency field: UNICEF improved educational infrastructure. Analysis of the Longwe levels is as follows:

- Welfare: The rehabilitation of 2,000 schools increased educational welfare (UNICEF, 2022). However, the deterioration of the infrastructure after 2021 proved to be an obstacle (statements by Shukriya, teacher, Bamiyan).

- Access: Mobile schools improved access in villages, but insecurity was a hindering factor (statements by Maryam, UNICEF staff member).
- Awareness: Infrastructure reinforced awareness of obstacles, but the deterioration limited it.
- Participation: The utilization of the infrastructure increased participation, but subsequent closures reduced it.
- Control : Efforts to repair the infrastructure demonstrated control, but insecurity undermined that control.

Table 6: Analysis of Educational Infrastructure Based on Sarah Longwe's Framework

Empowerment Level	Evidence/Text Sample	Analysis
Welfare	Reconstruction of 2,000 schools (UNICEF, 2022).	Welfare increased, but budget shortages were an obstacle.
Access	Mobile schools (statements by Shukriya).	Access improved, but insecurity limited it.
Awareness	Awareness of obstacles (UNICEF, 2022).	Awareness was strengthened, but deterioration limited it.
Participation	Aid to rural girls (UNICEF, 2022).	Participation increased, but closures reduced it.
Control	Closures after 1400/2021 (statement by Maryam).	Control was attempted, but insecurity undermined it.

Source: Research Data

Awareness Raising (Information Dissemination)

Agency field: Media campaigns by UN Women and UNICEF increased awareness. Analysis of the Longwe evels is as follows:

- Welfare: Campaigns changed attitudes and improved social welfare (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2020). However, cultural resistance was a hindering factor (statement by Narges, human rights activist, Mazar-e-Sharif).
- Access: Media increased access to information in urban areas, but the lack of media in rural areas was an obstacle (statements by Rahima, rural woman, Kandahar).
- Awareness: Programs strengthened gender awareness, but the tribal structure limited it.
- Participation: Workshops increased participation in initiating changes, but the Taliban halted it.
- Control: Efforts were made to control attitudes, but media restrictions undermined that control.

Table 7: Analysis of Awareness Raising Based on Sarah Longwe's Framework

Empowerment Level	Evidence/Text Sample	Analysis
Welfare	Media campaigns (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2020)	Welfare improved, but cultural resistance was an obstacle.
Access	Radio programs (statements by Narges).	Access increased, but the absence of media in rural areas limited it.
Awareness	Change in men's attitudes (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2020)	Awareness was strengthened, but tribal structures limited it.
Participation	Change in men's attitudes (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2020)	Awareness was strengthened, but tribal structures limited it.
Control	Campaign halt after 2021 (statements by Rahima).	Control was attempted, but restrictions undermined it.

Source: Research Data

Effectiveness Evaluation

Agency field: The programs' success criteria were evaluated. Analysis of the Longwe levels is as follows:

- Welfare: A 19% literacy rate and the employment of 65,000 women indicated welfare improvement (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2020). However, the lack of specific criteria was a hindering factor (statements by Maryam, researcher, Kabul).
- Access: Access to data was strengthened, but restrictions after 2021 were an obstacle (statements by Nazanin, UN Fund staff member).
- Awareness: Awareness of challenges increased, but limited access reduced it.
- Participation: The participation of rural women in the evaluation was strengthened, but organizational centralization limited it.

- Control: Control over the evaluation was attempted, but the absence of criteria reduced it.

Table 8: Analysis of Effectiveness Evaluation Based on Sarah Longwe'Framework

Empowerment Level	Evidence/Text Sample	Analysis
Welfare	Literacy rate and employment (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2022)	Literacy rate and employment (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2022)
Access	Objective criteria (statements by Maryam).	Access was strengthened, but restrictions 2021 were an obstacle.
Awareness	Difficulty of evaluation (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2022)	Awareness increased, but limited access reduced it.
Participation	Women's emphasis on results (statements by Nazanin).	Participation was strengthened, but organizational centralization limited it.
Control	Lack of criteria for marginalized groups (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2022)	Control was attempted, but criteria limitations reduced it.

Source: Research Data

Cultural Change

Agency field: Campaigns targeted cultural changes. Analysis of the Longwe levels is as follows:

- Welfare: Attitude changes improved welfare (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2020). However, the tribal structure was a hindering factor (statements by Narges, human rights activist, Mazar-e-Sharif).
- Access: Media increased access to change (information/concepts), but its absence in rural areas was an obstacle (statements by Rahima, tribal leader, Kandahar).
- Awareness: Cultural awareness was strengthened, but traditional interpretations limited it.
- Participation: Participation in changes increased, but the Taliban halted it.
- Control: Attempts were made to control attitudes, but restrictions undermined that control.

Table 9: Analysis of Cultural Change Based on Sarah Longwe's Framework

Level of Empowerment	Evidence/Text Sample	Analysis
Welfare	Campaigns in urban areas (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2020)	Welfare improved, but tribal structures remained a barrier
Access	Radio programs (statements by Narges)	Access was expanded, but rural areas faced restrictions
Awareness	Rural resistance (statements by Rahimeh)	Conscientization was strengthened, but traditional norms imposed limitations.
Participation	Support from men (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2020)	Participation increased, but was halted by the Taliban.
Control	Program suspension (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2020)	Control was attempted, but restrictions undermined it

Source: Research Data

Post-2021 Approach Shifts

The approaches changed after 2021. Analysis of the Longwe levels is as follows:

- Welfare: The shift towards humanitarian aid maintained welfare (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2022). However, the lack of infrastructure was a hindering factor (statements by Fatima, human rights activist).
- Access: New strategies increased access, but poor internet connectivity was an obstacle (statements by Shukriya, UNICEF staff member).
- Awareness: Awareness of the Taliban's pressures was strengthened, but political restrictions limited it.
- Participation: Negotiation with the Taliban strengthened participation, but the associated risks limited it.
- Control: Control over strategies increased, but the digital deficit reduced it.

Table 10: Analysis of Strategic Shifts Based on Sarah Longwe's Framework

Empowerment Level	Evidence/Textual Example	Analysis
Welfare	Clandestine education (statements by Fatemeh)	Welfare was maintained, but infrastructure remained a barrier.
Access	Online learning (statements by Shukrieh)	Access expanded, but was limited by poor internet connectivity.
Awareness	Taliban pressure (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2022)	Conscientization was reinforced, but was curtailed by political factors.
Participation	Digital focus (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2022)	Participation increased, but was constrained by security risks.
Control	Lack of internet (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2022)	Control increased, but was reduced by digital limitations.

Source: Research Data

Regional Disparities

Agency field: Regional differences were observed in the programs. Analysis of the Longwe levels is as follows:

- Welfare: Success in urban centers like Kabul increased welfare (UNICEF, 2022). However, insecurity in rural areas was a hindering factor (statements by Maryam, UNICEF Staff Member).
- Access: Access was better in cities, but the shortage of teachers in villages limited it.
- Awareness: Awareness was strengthened in cities, but prohibitions in Taliban-controlled areas were an obstacle.
- Participation: Participation was greater in cities, but it was halted in Helmand.
- Control: Control increased in cities, but overall insecurity reduced it.
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Table 11: Analysis of Regional Disparities Based on Sarah Longwe's Framework

Empowerment LeveL	Evidence/Textual Example	Analysis
Welfare	Success in Kabul (UNICEF, 2022)	Welfare increased in urban areas, but rural areas faced security barriers.
Access	Insecurity in Bamyan (statements by Maryam)	Access was better in cities, but teacher shortages constrained rural areas.
Awareness	Closures in Kandahar (UNICEF, 2022)	Awareness was strengthened, but the Taliban acted as a barrier.
Participation	Halt in Helmand (UNICEF, 2022)	Participation was higher in cities, but was subsequently suspended.
Control	Security in cities (UNICEF, 2022)	Control increased, but insecurity reduced it.

Source: Research Data

Conclusion

The present study aimed to analyze the role of United Nations agencies in the empowerment of women in Afghanistan during the 2001–2025 period, based on Sarah Longwe's five-level theoretical framework. The analysis demonstrates that these entities achieved significant progress at the first two levels of the model—namely welfare and access. This includes the reconstruction of educational infrastructure, increasing women's literacy rates, creating employment opportunities, and improving health and social welfare indicators. However, the higher levels of empowerment—including awareness, participation, and control—continue to face structural, cultural, economic, and political obstacles.

The findings indicate that in the period following the return of the Taliban (post-2021), many of the achievements of the past two decades in the fields of women's education, employment, and social participation have been interrupted or reversed. Extensive restrictions on girls' education, the prohibition of women's employment and public presence, and the reduction of legal protections have caused the empowerment process to regress from the level of participation and control back to the basic stages of survival and welfare.

Based on the analysis of qualitative data derived from semi-structured interviews, it can be concluded that women's empowerment in Afghanistan is not merely an economic or educational process but a multi-dimensional phenomenon that necessitates political stability, structural reforms, cultural transformation, and the continuation of international support. Therefore, UN agencies must move away from ad-hoc and project-based approaches and focus on developing locally-driven, sustainable, and multi-level programs. These programs must guarantee the active participation of Afghan women in project design, implementation, and evaluation, while simultaneously considering regional disparities (urban vs. rural) and marginalized groups (widows, displaced women, and women with disabilities).

In summary, the findings of this study indicate that the future of women's empowerment in Afghanistan hinges upon the integration of three key factors:

1. The continued structural and financial support of international agencies.
2. The establishment of domestic institutional capacities for the independent management of programs.
3. The expansion of social and cultural awareness regarding women's rights and roles.

Therefore, achieving sustainable empowerment necessitates active interaction among governments, international institutions, and local communities. Failing this, international gender policies will remain stalled at the welfare level and will not lead to sustainable changes at the level of control and genuine equality.

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