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<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Security-Watch/Backchannels/2014/1219/What-has-US-spending-done-for-Afghan-women-US-doesn-t-know>

What has US spending done for Afghan women? US doesn't know.

By Dan Murphy

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An instructor teaches women about a car's mechanics during a technical lesson at a driving school in Kabul last summer. Some of the women who have signed up say learning to drive is a way to escape unwanted gazes and physical harassment on the cramped, crowded minibuses that are often the only method of urban public transport.

In the frequent audits of US spending in Afghanistan, a word that comes up again and again is “unsustainable.”

Whether it be the Western-style Afghan Army the United States has tried to create, the millions thrown at vague “governance” projects, billions wasted on opium eradication, or complicated power plants that run on expensive fuel, a common thread in the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction’s reports is this: Gains are likely to be reversed once the international funding tap is inevitably turned off.

That finding is often woven with another, related thread: US spending has been tracked poorly, and claims of a causal relationship between any improvements made and US spending often can’t be proven.

This sad, largely ignored story line is repeated in SIGAR’s report out Thursday on US efforts to improve conditions for Afghan women.

Twelve years in, there’s no coordinating body for tracking and accounting for spending targeted at Afghan women by the Pentagon, State Department, and USAID. “We determined DOD, State and USAID have not assessed the overall impact of their efforts to support Afghan women,” the report says. “A former [interagency gender] working group co-chair told us that when the strategy was created, the requirement for an assessment was more of an 'optimistic, aspirational statement.' ”

The report predicts that oversight will worsen in this area, as in all other areas, as US soldiers and officials continue to withdraw from Afghanistan.

Between 2011 and 2013, SIGAR says the US spent \$65 million on projects for Afghan women. The inspector general says a further \$850 million in spending was reported to be related to the status of women, but that his investigation “could not identify the specific amount of funds within [these] projects that directly supported Afghan women.”

The results? Unclear. There are far more women and girls receiving an education than under the Taliban, which banned high school and tertiary education for women. About 80 percent of Afghan girls are in primary school now, up from 40 percent in 2002, and high school enrollment has improved from 6 percent to 30 percent, according to USAID.

But societal attitudes about the role of women have been slow to change, and tolerance for violence and rape remains high. The Afghanistan Independent Commission on Human Rights reported a 25 percent increase in cases involving violence against women in 2013 from 2012.

In early 2014, Afghanistan’s parliament passed, and former President Hamid Karzai signed, a law that prohibited family members from testifying against each other, making prosecutions of domestic rape and other forms of violence almost impossible. Karzai later issued a decree rescinding it, but the fact that the law made it that far – and that parliament didn't strike it down – speaks to where attitudes stand.

US spending on women's issues in recent years included things like micro-grants for rural women to learn about bee-keeping, \$62 million to train midwives, \$100,000 spent on sending 10

Afghan women to a leadership training program at a women's university in Bangladesh and \$12,500 spent on opening a women-only internet cafe in Herat.

What do these and other efforts amount to in real terms? According to the SIGAR, the US government has no idea.

“However, we found that DOD, State, and USAID had difficulties producing comprehensive lists of their projects, programs, and initiatives, and funding supporting Afghan women because they lacked effective mechanisms for tracking these efforts and the associated funding,” the report finds.

And it doesn't appear that they will going forward.

Reports and interviews with DOD, State, and USAID officials consistently cited security concerns, the limited capacity of Afghan institutions, and deep-rooted cultural norms as negatively affecting their efforts, despite reported gains in improving the lives and treatment of Afghan women. Additionally, members of Congress and U.S. agency officials, as well as Afghans themselves, have expressed concerns that conditions for Afghan women will worsen after 2014. Further, as we have previously reported, the shrinking oversight capability beyond 2014 will make it increasingly difficult for DOD, State, USAID, and oversight agencies to monitor U.S.- funded projects and programs.