

# FINAL REPORT

## Final External Evaluation of the “Strengthening Afghanistan’s Future through Empowerment” (SAFE) Project

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AGENCY FOR  
PEACEBUILDING



In partnership with  
**Canada**

AUGUST 2021

## About War Child Canada

War Child is an internationally recognized charity that works with war-affected communities to help children reclaim their childhood through access to education, opportunity and justice.°By making a long-term investment to create an environment in which childhood can thrive, the cycle of violence can be broken. War Child also takes an active role in raising public awareness around the impact of war on communities and the shared responsibility to act.

## About the Agency for Peacebuilding

The Agency for Peacebuilding (AP) is a non-profit organization whose mission is to promote conditions to enable the resolution of conflict, reduce violence and contribute to a durable peace across Europe, its neighbouring countries and the world. AP is the first Italian organization specializing in peacebuilding. This allows us to occupy a unique role in the European landscape: on the one hand, we interpret and synthesize relevant topics for the benefit of Italian agencies and institutions working on peace and security; on the other, we highlight experiences, capacities and resources specific to the Italian system, which can contribute to the resolution of violent conflict.

## Acknowledgements

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# List of Acronyms

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ADR	Alternative Dispute Resolution
AIHRC	Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission
AWC	Afghan Women Council
CBPM	Community-Based Protection Mechanism
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DIP	Detailed Implementation Plan
DNH	Do No Harm
EVAW	Elimination of Violence Against Women
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FLN	Functional Literacy and Numeracy
GAC	Global Affairs Canada
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
HCNR	High Council for National Reconciliation
HPC	High Peace Council
ISKP	Islamic State of Khorasan Province
KII	Key Informant Interview
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
MoWA	Ministry of Women's Affairs
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NAPWA	National Action Plan for Women
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDS	National Directorate of Security
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NPP	National Priority Program
OHW	Organization for Human Welfare
PQAL	Program Quality Accountability and Learning
RBM	Result-Based Management
SAFE	Safeguarding Afghanistan's Future through Empowerment
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
USIP	United States Institute of Peace
VAW	Violence Against Women
WGRE	Women and Girls Rights and Empowerment



# Executive Summary



# RESULTS OF THE SAFE PROJECT

The SAFE project applied an integrated approach with activities clustered under **4 main components**

## Legal Aid and Psychosocial Support to Victims of Gender-Based Violence (GBV)



762 cases of GBV were represented in court

820 cases were resolved through mediation and Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)



The awareness of attorneys, prosecutors and police around GBV was enhanced, as was their capacity to effectively investigate cases of GBV and to assist individual cases.

## Women's Economic Empowerment



Cumulative savings from women-led businesses (tailoring, embroidery, food processing and beauty parlours):



As a result of their participation, women entrepreneurs are now more financially independent and have a stronger role in making decisions at household level.

## Strengthening Afghan Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)



43 developed and implemented small grants projects focused on advocacy and campaigns on women's rights at the national and sub-national levels

The campaigns reached 10,145 people



CSOs – which were on average newly created and grassroots organizations – saw their capacity for doing advocacy on women's rights enhanced as a result of the project.

## Community Engagement



24 Community-Based Protection Mechanisms (CBPMs) created to raise awareness of women's rights and participation

Total of 1,200 CBPM members



180 female volunteers trained to conduct community-based sensitization sessions

Awareness and educational sessions reached 17,169 women



CBPMs played a vital role in changing communities' mindsets towards women's rights and their public role, resolving GBV cases through ADR, mediation or referral to relevant institutions.



This report presents the findings from the final external evaluation of “Strengthening Afghanistan’s Future through Empowerment” (SAFE) project (also known by project code D-003692), which has been implemented by War Child Canada with funding from Global Affairs Canada.

The SAFE project’s main goal was to enhance the protection of women’s rights and increase their participation in social and economic life, at both the household and community levels. The project used an integrated approach that sought to address multiple challenges concomitantly. In concrete terms, the project featured four main activity clusters or components, each tied to an expected outcome. These were:

- Strengthening mechanisms to protect women’s rights and respond to gender-based violence (GBV), through capacity-building workshops in legal aid and addressing GBV for key actors in the judicial sector (e.g. lawyers, police, etc.).
- Economically empowering women through literacy and numeracy courses, life skills and vocational training and support for starting micro-businesses.
- Strengthening Afghan civil society organizations (CSOs) through networking, advocacy, and direct support (through sub-grants).
- Enhancing the capacity of Afghan communities to protect and promote women’s rights, through community awareness-raising campaigns, and the establishment and strengthening of community-based protection mechanisms (CBPMs).

To implement the project, War Child Canada partnered with two Afghan NGOs: the Afghan Women Council (AWC) and the Organization of Human Welfare (OHW). Additionally, the project worked closely with, and was supported by, the Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MoWA) and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). The project lasted four years (2017-2021) and took place in the provinces of Kabul, Kandahar and Nangarhar.

The evaluation took place in June and July 2021 with the aim to create an opportunity for a general reflection on the project’s achievements, the challenges it faced and the way War Child Canada responded to them. The evaluation was thus designed to answer lines of inquiry under four areas of focus: relevance and adaptability, external and internal coherence, effectiveness and sustainability, and management approach.

Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources, including a desk review of over 50 documents (internal to the project and external), in-depth interviews with 39 individuals (staff, participants, beneficiaries and stakeholders) and five focus group discussions (involving 20 female and 6 male beneficiaries). The main challenges encountered were the COVID-19 pandemic and the security situation, which hindered travel. Positively, however, the evaluation was able to engage all beneficiaries in person, including those from the provinces.

Before presenting the evaluation’s findings, it is important to mention the current situation in relation to women’s rights and participation in Afghanistan. On these issues the country has made incredible progress over the last 20 years, with women participating in ways that were inconceivable under the Taliban. This said, the situation also remains dire, with some reports suggesting that almost 90 percent of Afghan women experience at least one form of violence in their lifetime. Women’s participation has been similarly stifled, especially in provinces outside of Kabul, mainly because of traditional norms, lack of educational and economic opportunities, and deteriorating insecurity and violence.



Against this backdrop, the evaluation has found the implementation of the SAFE project to have been of high quality, with War Child Canada and partners not only able to achieve the intended outcomes, but also leaving positive marks beyond these. The project's impact is particularly noteworthy in the conservative provinces of Kandahar and Nangarhar, where women's needs run deeper. Following is a presentation of findings by area of focus.

# 1

## Area of Focus 1: Relevance and Adaptability

The SAFE project is very relevant to the needs of women in Afghanistan. Varied and far-reaching as these are, the evaluation found that the project's integrated and holistic approach was particularly relevant, as it understood all these needs as interrelated. Furthermore, War Child Canada assessed the needs of target women during the design of the project, and those needs were regularly monitored during implementation. In terms of adaptability, the organization has shown high awareness of national and province-level conflict dynamics, and it has put in place policies and practices (including on Do No Harm) that have proven effective to manage and respond to security threats. The organization managed administrative and budgetary adjustments with flexibility. An important factor in this respect has been the organization's internal decision-making structure.

# 2

## Area of Focus 2: External and Internal Coherence

The SAFE project was fully aligned with, and responded to, the overarching policy and legal context in Afghanistan, including the relevant National Priority Programs (NPPs) and, most importantly, the Law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW). War Child Canada also took part in the Women and Girls Rights and Empowerment (WGRE) platform, which was managed by the Embassy of Canada in Kabul, but its effectiveness was negatively affected by the pandemic. Internally, the project featured a coherent logic, aligned with its overall approach, whereby it sought to achieve expected outcomes at three levels: individual, household and community. A central nexus in this logic was women's agency, which the project successfully promoted at individual and household levels, and then protected at community level through CBPMs. Efforts in support of court cases (through legal aid), while relevant, were however less clearly connected to the other components, perhaps because of the complex nature of formal judicial processes, which are very different even from mediation.

# 3

## Area of Focus 3: Effectiveness and Sustainability

The SAFE project achieved positive results under all of its components, in spite of ongoing insecurity and the challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Results include:

- Under legal aid and psychosocial support for victims of GBV, the project contributed to enhanced awareness about GBV and the development of the capacity of attorneys, prosecutors and police. A total of 762 GBV cases were resolved in courts, and 820 cases through mediation or alternative dispute resolution (ADR).

- Efforts under the women economic empowerment component were very successful: 600 women were trained and able to establish micro-businesses, significantly increasing their contribution to household income. The project made clear contributions at the individual, household, and community levels in terms of financial independence, decision-making and overall empowerment against the baseline data.
- An alliance of 50 Afghan CSOs (most of them women-led) from all three provinces was established, and the capacity of participating organizations was enhanced. Through sub-grants, the project also promoted women's participation in the peace process by engaging women and youth in discussions about peace and their role in the process. This said, some noted the short timeline and limited budget of the grants as challenges.
- Lastly, under community engagement, War Child Canada and partners were successful in creating CBPMs in target areas, with both male and female members, and these played an important role in resolving GBV cases through ADR, mediation or by referring cases to relevant institutions. CBPMs, combined with other components of the project, also played a vital role in changing communities' mindsets towards women's rights and their public role through awareness raising activities.

Under sustainability, the evaluation found this to be greatest at the individual level, where participating women and men will remain active and supportive of what they built after the project's end. Women entrepreneurs will also continue to play an active role at the household level. CBPM members, likewise, confirmed that they would remain 'unofficially' active in their communities, particularly as regards to ADR and awareness raising on GBV. Positively, participants also created networks spontaneously, and these should outlast the project. Ministries' enhanced capacity on women's rights and protection, particularly that of the MoJ which is mandated with raising awareness around GBV, will also have a lasting impact. This said, the role of MoWA and MoJ in supporting project results remains limited. Looking forward, the main challenge to the sustainability of results is represented by the resurgence of the Taliban and the uncertainty around the intra-Afghan negotiations.

## 4



### Area of Focus 4: Management Approach

War Child Canada adopted a management approach that was appropriate and effective, both to implement activities and to strengthen the role of partners. This included setting up a Project Steering Committee, to review progress and provide strategic guidance, and a Project Task Force, to support monitoring and day-to-day implementation. The capacity of AWC and OHW was indeed enhanced as a result of workshops and trainings organized under the project. CSOs that partnered in the project also significantly benefited from enhanced capacity. Overall, War Child Canada's project team has been effective, creative and adaptive in its coordination. This is also true for how the organization responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, which had important consequences in Afghanistan, leading to an official four-month lockdown during the first wave. This negatively affected project implementation, with some activities on hold for as long as eight months. At the same time, the project was able to adapt and support awareness raising about COVID-19. Changes were managed effectively, but obligations under the signed contract and procedural requirements limited the overall margin of flexibility.


In conclusion, the project was clearly characterized by committed and principled professionals who worked diligently and persistently with communities and local stakeholders through a variety of locally appropriate mechanisms that produced positive results and opened the space for women's participation. War Child Canada's efforts, and those of its partners, have led to a high level of trust at all levels, particularly at the community level and involving men as well. This was found to be a critical positive factor for the project's ability to make progress.

With the hope that such projects continue in the future, the evaluation recommends the following:



#### To GAC:

-  Continue long-term financial support to activities promoting women's protection and economic empowerment.
-  Increase, where possible, flexibility around program adjustments.

#### To War Child Canada and Partners:

-  Continue adopting the integrated approach in target locations and consider scaling up into other areas.
-  Review legal aid activities (particularly support to cases being adjudicated in courts) and their linkages to other project components.
-  Include young men in economic empowerment activities in addition to women.
-  Empower already established women entrepreneurs with continued mentoring and technical backstopping.
-  Provide day care services or early childhood development for participating women.
-  For long-term projects with life span of three years or more, include an external mid-term evaluation.

#### To MoWA and Moj:

-  Maintain collaboration with War Child Canada and partners.
-  Create an accreditation system for project beneficiaries.



# Introduction, Project Background, Methodology



## Introduction

This report presents and discusses the findings from the final external evaluation of the “Strengthening Afghanistan’s Future through Empowerment” (SAFE) project, which has been implemented by War Child Canada with funding from Global Affairs Canada (GAC).

The SAFE project was a complex project implemented in a complex context. The project’s main goal was to enhance the protection of women’s rights and increase their participation in social and economic life, at both the household and community levels. Acknowledging the difficulty of pursuing efforts specifically aimed at women in Afghanistan—a country that has an abysmal record in empowering women and that is consistently at the bottom of rankings that measure gender equality and women’s participation—the project used an integrated approach that sought to address multiple challenges concomitantly.

In doing so, it is interesting to see how the project represented both a continuation of efforts for War Child Canada, in particular around women’s economic empowerment, which the organization has been implementing in Afghanistan for nearly two decades now, but also an evolution that included two new and significant features: a focus on legal aid to address violence against women (around official court proceedings and mediation) and the creation of community mechanisms to protect women’s rights and support their participation.

This evolution has marked a new phase in War Child Canada’s programming in support of women’s empowerment, and this evaluation has therefore served as a useful opportunity to assess what has worked and what can still be improved. The evaluation has also sought to provide insights that can help War Child Canada and its partners to better navigate the significant changes taking place in Afghanistan today, which include the withdrawal of US and NATO forces, the resurgence of the Taliban and the high-level negotiations between them and the Afghan Government. These events will shape the country’s future for decades to come, and they therefore will need to be taken into account as War Child Canada develops its programs.

The report is structured in nine sections. Following this introduction, the next sections provide background information on the project and an overview of the evaluation’s methodology. A brief context analysis is then presented and followed by the findings under the four different areas of focus: relevance and adaptability, coherence, results and management approach. Then, the next section draws out several best practices and crosscutting observations that can help to inform War Child Canada’s future programming. The report ends with the conclusions and recommendations, which are directed to GAC, War Child Canada and its partners, and the Afghan ministries that have collaborated on the project.

Lastly, the present report only includes the findings from the evaluation. Additional relevant information, including the assignment’s terms of reference, the complete lines of inquiry and all data collection tools, can be requested by anyone who might be interested.

## Project Background

The SAFE project's aim was to “strengthen community-based protection for women and young girls by enhancing their access to justice and psychosocial counseling, and through economic empowerment aimed at helping women and girls participate in decision-making processes.”<sup>1</sup> The four-year project—which began in February 2017 and concluded in June 2021— took place in the three provinces of Kabul, Kandahar, and Nangarhar.

In concrete terms, the project applied an integrated approach with activities clustered under four main components, each tied to an expected outcome. These were:

- Strengthened mechanisms to protect women's rights and prevent (and respond) to gender-based violence (GBV). Activities under this outcome included: capacity-building workshops in legal aid and addressing GBV for key actors in the judicial sector (e.g. lawyers, police, etc.), and direct assistance to victims of GBV as they sought judicial redress through courts or mediation.
- Economically empowered women. Activities under this outcome included: literacy and numeracy courses, life skills and vocational training and support to women for starting micro-businesses.
- Strengthened Afghan civil society organizations (CSOs). Activities under this outcome included: creating a network of Afghan CSOs to advocate and work on women's empowerment, providing sub-grants for small projects focused on campaigns on women and girls' rights and empowerment, and organizing dialogue and advocacy meetings with institutional stakeholders.
- Strengthened capacity of Afghan communities to protect and promote women's rights. Activities under this outcome included: broad community sensitization and public awareness raising campaigns, and the establishment and strengthening of community-based protection mechanisms (CBPMs).

To implement the project War Child Canada partnered with two Afghan NGOs: the Afghan Women Council (AWC) and the Organization for Human Welfare (OHW). Additionally, the project worked closely with, and was supported by, the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ).

Despite the fact that the project was implemented during a tumultuous period in Afghanistan, which involved surges in violence, negotiations between the US and the Taliban followed by the intra-Afghan peace process and the COVID-19 pandemic, it was largely carried out according to plan. Year one of the project focused on laying the foundations for successful and sustainable outcomes. Years two and three focused on enhancing the capacity of community members, legal actors and ministries in order to strengthen the social and legal protection of women and girls. In year four, project implementation was delayed for as many as eight months due to COVID-19 restrictions. During this period, the project team continued to collaborate with ministry counterparts, support CBPMs in their sensitization and dialogue efforts and women entrepreneurs with their businesses, to coordinate with the CSO alliance, and to provide psychosocial and legal support and counseling to victims of violence through virtual means. Project implementation continued as planned after the lockdown was lifted in August 2020.

By the end of the project, War Child Canada records indicate that the following main outputs were achieved: a) Provision of legal aid to 8,980 women and men (including GBV survivors); b) Representation of 762 cases of GBV in formal courts, and resolution of 820 cases through alternate dispute resolution mechanisms; c) Provision of psychosocial support to 20,799 women and men (including GBV survivors); d) Establishment of a civil society network comprising 50 CSOs; e) Provision of job mentoring and coaching for 600 women entrepreneurs, and e) Reaching out to 90,000 community members through mass media and public awareness raising events.



## Methodology

The goal of the evaluation was to create an opportunity for a general reflection on the SAFE project's achievements, as well as any challenges faced and how War Child Canada responded to them. The focus of the assignment has been on *learning*—that is, on understanding why and how change occurred. The evaluation, as such, complements and, where relevant, also independently confirms War Child Canada's own reporting on the project's outputs and results.

The specific objectives guiding the evaluation were: (i) to provide a comprehensive analysis of the project's achievements in line with the chosen lines of inquiry; (ii) to understand in particular the extent to which the project has been relevant and effective, and had a tangible impact on the lives of beneficiaries; and (iii) to generate lessons learned to inform future investment by GAC and programming efforts by War Child Canada and its partners.

The evaluation's methodology was based on principles of action research, whereby the starting point was given by lines of inquiry that War Child Canada had chosen under four areas of focus (relevance and adaptability, coherence, results and management approach). The evaluation was thus designed to answer these questions in the most comprehensive and rigorous way possible, in an effort to provide War Child Canada, its partners and stakeholders with insight into where, how and why the project succeeded.

In terms of data sources, the evaluation relied on both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data sources included staff members, project partners, activity participants and beneficiaries, as well as key stakeholders. Secondary sources included internal project documents, baseline and endline data, and external documents (e.g. studies, assessments and grey literature) produced by institutions and researchers working on women's rights and participation in Afghanistan.

Overall, the total number of internal documents and external literature reviewed for the evaluation exceeded 50. A total of 27 in-depth interviews were conducted with 39 individuals, including War Child Canada and partner staff members, participants to various activities, female and male beneficiaries and selected stakeholders. Five focus group discussions were also conducted, with 20 female and 6 male beneficiaries. Positively, the evaluation was able to engage beneficiaries under all of the project's components and from all of the targeted locations (Kandahar, Nangarhar and Kabul).

Data collection and analysis took place between June and July 2021. Participants and beneficiaries—whether they were invited to interviews or focus groups—were all met in person in Kabul. Interviews with three War Child Canada staff members were also conducted in person, whereas the rest were carried out remotely, in response to several challenges, which are discussed below. The analysis of data was done primarily through triangulation, comparison and synthesis. At the same time, elements of Contribution Analysis<sup>2</sup> were also used, in particular to review the project's logic (or theory of change). A context analysis was produced through the literature review in order to have an external and independent assessment of the Afghan context against which to answer questions related to relevance, effectiveness and sustainability. Lastly, the evaluation used a gender-relational approach to understand not only the changes achieved by the project among women, but also the changes produced in the relationships of power that exist between women and men in Afghanistan.

The evaluation faced several challenges. The main ones were those related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the security situation. Firstly, data collection took place during a particularly difficult surge of COVID-19 cases in Afghanistan, and this required several adjustments to the methodology, in particular limiting the number of participants in focus groups to no more than five or six people. The surge also limited people's ability to move and this meant that some stakeholders, those in Kandahar and Nangarhar, were interviewed remotely. Secondly, the country's worsening security situation meant that no evaluation activities could take place in the

provinces. Fortunately, War Child Canada was able to bring partners, CSO representatives and beneficiaries over from Kandahar and Nangarhar to Kabul to be interviewed in person.

A final challenge relates to the legal aid component of the project. Several participants and one beneficiary were interviewed for the evaluation, yet the chosen methodological design and the contextual situation were such that it was not possible to produce a comprehensive assessment of this component. This would have required a carefully studied and extended engagement of beneficiaries, so as to be sensitive to their traumatic experiences, and this was simply impossible given the demands of the evaluation and the context of operation. On this component, the findings of the evaluation are therefore limited. On all others, however, the challenges encountered did not affect the quality and value of the conclusions reached.





# Context Analysis and Evaluation Findings





## Context Analysis

Understanding whether and how the SAFE project has been relevant, effective, and sustainable can only be done by assessing the context in which it has been implemented. This section therefore looks at the current situation and recent developments in relation to women's rights, violence against women (VAW) and women's participation in Afghanistan, which are the themes that the project has focused on.

On the subject of **women's rights and violence against women**, the literature consistently describes the situation as dire. In particular, VAW is still extremely prevalent in Afghanistan today. A study by UN Women revealed, for example, that 80% of Afghan women experience domestic violence<sup>3</sup>; and, according to the World Health Organization, almost 90 percent of Afghan women have experienced at least one form of physical, sexual, or psychological violence in their lifetime.<sup>4</sup> As highlighted by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), it is difficult to know specific levels of VAW because most incidents remain largely underreported (especially in rural areas), due to social norms and cultural restraints such as fear of social stigma and even fear of life-threatening retaliation.<sup>5</sup> Of reported cases, physical violence is the most common form of VAW, followed by verbal, psychological and economic violence. According to the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), physical violence was apparent in more than 25% of all reported cases.<sup>6</sup> Other forms of violence discussed in the literature include direct violence such as sexual violence, as well as indirect violence such as structural violence (i.e. lack of education, which excludes women from political participation).

Many of the rights promised to women in the country's Constitution have yet to be implemented across the country. And while the Afghan Government is committed to women's rights, it is only able to enforce these rights for small segments of Afghan women, primarily women in urban centers and more better-off segments of society, who have had better access to education and jobs.<sup>7</sup> The current security context in the country has made enforcement even more challenging. Experts say that, though VAW was already a pervasive problem in Afghanistan before COVID-19, the pandemic has only increased incidents of violence and abuse towards women.<sup>8</sup> Advances by the Taliban have also led to increased insecurity, which has had a particularly negative impact on the lives of women across the country and in conservative communities in particular.

Numerous factors drive VAW, but the existence and enforcement of certain customs and traditions are frequently cited as perhaps the most significant. In many communities, for example, it is still viewed as acceptable for some women to be treated violently by male family members and it is highly stigmatized for a woman to leave her husband. For example, as noted by CARE International, in Afghanistan, "80% of women and 72% of men believe that a husband is justified in beating his wife for at least one of five specified circumstances (burning food, arguing, refusing sex, going out without telling him, or neglecting the children)."<sup>9</sup> This is more prevalent in rural areas than urban ones. Acts of violence that take place within the victim's own family make up approximately 90% of all reported cases.<sup>10</sup>

An additional challenge that perpetuates the cycle of VAW is the widespread lack of protection for women fleeing violence. Most women's shelters and safe houses are concentrated in Kabul. There are very few shelters in the southern half of the country, and none in Kandahar; no national hotlines exist.<sup>11</sup> As summarized by AIHRC, other factors include the weakness in the rule of law, the continued culture of impunity, corruption and abuse of duty, the limited access of women to justice, illiteracy, low levels of public awareness, and poverty and unemployment.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, literature also highlights the important strides Afghanistan has made in tackling VAW in the past 20 years, some indeed attributed to the Afghan Government. Afghanistan ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2003 (it had signed it in 1980). It then adopted the Afghan Constitution in 2004, which affords rights and protections to women that are considered largely unprecedented in Muslim countries and in the region. The Constitution states that, “Any kind of discrimination and privilege between the citizens of Afghanistan are prohibited. The citizens of Afghanistan – whether man or woman – have equal rights and duties before the law.” Subsequent national governments have built on this framework and taken further steps to curb VAW. The Government established both the Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MoWA) and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). And in 2008 it launched a 10-year National Action Plan for Women (NAPWA). A very significant development has been the approval of the Law on Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) in 2009, which criminalizes 22 acts of violence against women including child marriage, forcing or prohibiting marriage, forced self-immolation, and rape and beating; the law also specified punishments for perpetrators.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, the law mandates the establishment of special VAW courts, which currently exist in 27 out of 34 provinces.<sup>14</sup>

The EVAW law has supported important and positive changes over the last few years, including a substantial increase in women’s presence in the judiciary.<sup>15</sup> The success of the EVAW law implementation is also due to the growing level of awareness of the public, continued advocacy, and ongoing monitoring of legal proceedings by the formal justice system in a number of provinces.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, this success has not been evenly distributed. Many reports suggest, in fact, that no improvement in the implementation of the EVAW law has been reported in more conservative provinces including Kandahar and Nangarhar.<sup>17</sup> These shortcomings can be attributed to both cultural and logistical factors that make it more difficult to enforce the law there. The prevalence of corruption in the judicial sector, as everywhere in the country, also significantly limits women’s access to justice.<sup>18</sup> The challenge is, lastly, political, as most elected officials are resistant to criminalization of VAW, because it is viewed to be in conflict with religious and cultural traditions.<sup>19</sup>

Taken together, all these trends point to a lack of deeper changes and the continuation of a situation where victims and survivors cannot achieve lasting justice. UNAMA found that EVAW law incidents registered by government authorities increased by about 28 percent in recent years.<sup>20</sup> This is largely seen as a positive development because it suggests that women are feeling more comfortable with reporting incidents. However, very few of these registered cases have actually led to criminal convictions. For example, of the 4,505 cases registered in 2014, only 361 led to a criminal conviction.<sup>21</sup>

The dynamic in relation to **women’s participation** mirrors the one just described. While women have been participating in greater numbers in civic, political, and economic life since 2001, the overall level of participation remains low and mainly limited to urban centers. For example, Afghanistan is the second-to-worst performer in the 2019-20 Women Peace and Security Index, which tracks women’s inclusion in peace, justice and security.<sup>22</sup>

The progress achieved over the last twenty years must nevertheless be acknowledged as one of the areas of greatest change since the 2001 overthrow of the Taliban. The significance of this change is best captured in the following excerpt from the final report of the Afghanistan Study Group:

*Female enrollment in public schools rose from zero in 2001 to over 3 million in 2010. As of 2019, millions of women had voted, and 89 of parliament's 352 members were women. Women held 13 seats as ministers and deputy ministers and 4 served as ambassadors. Eight women served as deputy governors, mayors, and deputy mayors, including 2 as district governors. Schools and universities employed nearly 80,000 women instructors, 10 including over 2,000 university professors.<sup>11</sup> More than 6,000 women served as judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and police and army personnel. Government data counted over 8,500 women among the country's health professionals. Female journalists numbered more than 1,000; and nearly 1,500 women entrepreneurs had invested a total of \$77.5 million in their businesses.<sup>23</sup>*

While Afghan women are now more active in nearly all sectors of society, at levels never seen before in the country's history, it is crucial to acknowledge, as indeed the literature does, that there remain important differences in how these achievements have been distributed across the country, and in particular between rural and urban areas, and between Kabul and the rest of Afghanistan. The general consensus is that women's participation is far better in the capital, where the environment is more enabling of women's participation in general and where resources and opportunities are manifold. In provinces, by contrast, women's participation has remained generally low, including in Kandahar and Nangarhar, as this is where the barriers to participation have remained greatest.

These barriers include patriarchal and traditional gender norms, lack of education and economic opportunities, and insecurity and violence. In relation to norms and women's participation specifically, the literature stresses that women face huge impediments in terms of freedom of movement and expression, and that without these there are few (if any) expectations that they can take part in social life, let alone be expected to pursue educational and economic opportunities. Yet as much as norms are stacked against women, they also remain flexible and often open to interpretation, so that in practice women's lives are not as rigidly controlled as one would expect—at least not everywhere. For example, the expectation that women should stay home, while widespread, is also flexible and applied pragmatically in many cases.<sup>24</sup>

Norms also shape how women can access education and economic opportunities, usually in very limiting ways. Women's education, for example, remains controversial, and many communities across the country continue to allow only young girls to go to school, usually up to the end of primary school. A well-known and publicized fact is that the Taliban, when they ruled the country, banned all levels of education for women and girls. Some communities seem to share this view still to this day, but many others, including in locations where the Taliban have regained control in recent months, have kept girls' schools open. This again suggests some flexibility, although with the recent surge in violence and the Taliban's advances, many girls and women fear the loss of opportunities to access education, employment and other resources. Insecurity and the threat of violence remain indeed very important barriers to women's participation—both as a disincentive for women to venture out of their house, and as a justification for men to impose further restrictions—and they are clearly on the rise. Violence against women has also been used symbolically, with many women's schools having been targeted by the Taliban and other insurgent groups like the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) over the last few years.



Insecurity has not, however, only translated into limitations and difficulties; at times it has also been a cause of change. In particular, where war and conflict (and displacement) have disrupted life, women have also seen some opportunities to become more resilient and active, economically and in family decisions. As one report notes:

*Afghan society and, with it, gender norms, expectations and roles have been profoundly shaped by four decades of war, displacement and foreign intervention. These changes have not been unidirectional, uncontested or the same for the whole of Afghan society. New opportunities and spaces have arisen, sometimes temporarily, for more equitable and flexible understandings of gender, while simultaneously other spaces have closed and more rigid understandings of gender norms have prevailed.<sup>25</sup>*

To properly understand the progress and barriers to women's participation, a more attentive analysis is therefore necessary, one that moves beyond a simple review of barriers. This analysis is warranted by the fact that clear relationships exist between these barriers: insecurity, for example, is used to reinforce restrictive norms, yet insecurity itself is determined by forces, like the Taliban and the Afghan Government, that are male-dominated. What, in other words, might be determining whether and how women participate are not norms alone, but who wields those norms.

Literature confirms that norms tend to be flexible even in the Afghan context, with a wide array of behaviors that support and foster gender equality and women's participation. What happens in many locations, however, is that the individuals mandated to interpret norms do so in a very conservative way, which not only restricts women's participation, but also creates disincentives for the emergence of alternative behaviors and attitudes on the part of men who are in favor of women's participation. Yet, such men exist,<sup>26</sup> as do community practices that are favorable to women's participation, and their existence suggests that Afghan views on women's rights and participation are more heterogeneous than one would expect, and that they are regularly subject to negotiations. If women's participation remains so low, it is therefore because of conflict, and how this is used by those in power to uphold one specific interpretation of norms over others.

Conflict has been and remains a fundamental determinant of women's participation. Indeed, the resurgence of the Taliban and the launch of official intra-Afghan negotiations are deeply affecting women and girls' lives all across the country. They also have created immense uncertainty about their future. Women across the country fear for what their future will be should the Taliban return in control.

These fears have not been abated by the negotiation process, which represents a key development of the last few years. Women were supposed to take an active role in this process, through the High Peace Council (HPC), which the Afghan Government created in 2010 to pursue national reconciliation, and also the country's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, the main policy framing the government's commitments to increasing women's participation in peace and security. However, literature provides a very negative assessment of these efforts overall. As one report notes, "the first problem for women even in high-level government positions is that their presence is still considered tokenistic."<sup>27</sup> Another states, "there were women members in the HPC, but...their participation was symbolic."<sup>28</sup> The HPC was eventually disbanded and replaced with the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR), but the concerns remain the same, as it currently consists "of political jihadi parties", all of which "are male-led."<sup>29</sup>

As things stand, many consider the progress made over the past two decades to be in vital danger. The Taliban have made openings on women's rights, but currently do not have a fully formed position. As noted by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), "Although [the Taliban] have seemingly softened their stance as part of their negotiation strategy, there is no guarantee that they will treat women as full and equal members of society once they are included in positions of power in a potential post-agreement government."<sup>30</sup> Facts on the ground confirm imposed restrictions on women by the Taliban, and in some cases inhuman treatment of women in areas under their control.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the fate of Afghan women is today incredibly uncertain.

## Area of Focus 1: Relevance and Adaptability

### Relevance

The evaluation has found that the SAFE project is very relevant to the needs of women in Afghanistan, as these have been described in the previous section. Afghan women indeed continue to face huge challenges to participation, in spite of the progress that has been made over the last twenty years. Their needs are very varied and far-reaching, starting with the protection of their rights, which are routinely violated both within the household and in their communities, to the aforementioned barriers to participation—that is, traditional norms, lack of access to educational and economic opportunities, and insecurity.

Importantly, the SAFE project sought to address all these needs using an integrated and holistic approach, which understood them as interrelated. This approach is further described in the next section, yet it is important and useful to mention that the project sought to tackle the challenges of protection and prevention simultaneously, and that this is a crucial factor that made it very relevant.

Protection and prevention are indeed terms that all staff members interviewed used to describe the project. Protection refers to the need to ensure that female victims of violence receive sufficient help to gain justice (formal and informal), mainly through psychosocial support and legal aid. Prevention refers to the efforts to reduce incidents of VAW by eliminating the structural causes of this violence, i.e., by working on creating an enabling environment where women can fully exercise their human and civil rights. The project's working assumption has been that true empowerment could not happen unless both direct violence and its structural causes were addressed, a view that is aligned with the analysis of the dynamics driving women's marginalization and exclusion (as discussed in the previous section), and which makes the project more relevant still. Importantly, this view is also aligned with the principles of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, where protection and prevention are two core pillars of action.

Practically speaking, War Child Canada assessed the needs of the women to be targeted under the project through a number of methods during the design of the project. Needs were also monitored during implementation.

Formal needs assessment tools included a program evaluation conducted in 2013 and a survey focusing on understanding gender-based violence in Nangarhar, conducted shortly thereafter. Information from these efforts was taken together with all the best practices that War Child Canada had acquired during the implementation of previous programs in the country, and they were incorporated into the design of the SAFE project. In this regard, the project represented an evolution and an expansion of War Child Canada's efforts on women's economic empowerment, which up until that point had mainly focused on helping women within the household. In contrast, the SAFE project includes activities on the protection side and with communities.

On the protection side, the project focused on strengthening the needs that women face when they report violence and seek justice. As previously mentioned, VAW is an incredibly common experience for Afghan women, yet they rarely can access legal aid or psychosocial support. The project therefore addressed this gap directly. On the prevention side, women have much fewer educational and economic opportunities than men. This means that even where they might have the desire to participate more actively in society, they often lack the basic skills to do so. For this reason, the project included activities such as basic literacy and math skills and vocational training, which were meant to fill such gaps and increase the confidence of women to then take part in more advanced training activities.

What tied the protection and prevention efforts together, and sought to also address the barriers linked to insecurity, was the work with communities. Sensitization of community members happened both in relation to women's legal rights, as related, for example, to the EVAW law, and to women's economic empowerment. These efforts also included the mobilization of men and, more importantly, men in positions of power: community religious leaders, shura members, Maleks and elders. Their engagement was fundamentally relevant and ensured women's participation in the project without facing increased risks to their safety.

The needs targeted by the project are therefore the needs that are most often cited as the ones affecting women's rights and participation in Afghanistan. The way the project understood these needs is also coherent with the way the literature sees the linkages that exist between them. For example, literature suggests that Islamic norms alone are not sufficient for, or indicative of, women's marginalization. In the same vein, the project staff acknowledged that, within target communities, there often existed multiple views relating to what Islamic scriptures indicate that women can or cannot do. For this reason the project adopted a community mobilization approach that sought to foster dialogue as a key need.

The project was also relevant to specific needs that women in provinces had. War Child Canada's needs analysis extended to these locations as well, mainly through the engagement of the local implementing partners, AWC and OHW, which were brought into the project with the understanding that they would be responsible for project activities in their respective provinces. Overall, project staff had a good understanding of the differences in needs that existed between target locations—Kabul being more open and tolerant of women's participation, Kandahar and Nangarhar more conservative and restrictive—while many of the more subtle differences were left to the partners to assess and respond to.

## Adaptability

Afghanistan's social, political and security context is highly volatile, which creates multiple and important challenges for any organization working in the country. This is even truer for the last few years, a time of particular instability characterized by the resurgence of the Taliban and the high-level negotiations between the US, the Taliban and the Afghan government.

Overall, the SAFE project staff has shown high awareness of national and province-level conflict dynamics and very strong knowledge of the causes and manifestations of violent conflict. The evaluation found evidence of a number of policies and practices, in relation to security, which mark a high standard for how the organization navigates the context and are linked to War Child Canada's effective responses to various challenges.

War Child Canada's office in Afghanistan has a safety and security management unit and consolidated security policies and standard operating procedures, made necessary by the working environment. As part of this work, the security situation is constantly monitored, and security assessments are regularly conducted. As one informant (a staff representative) said, "the first thing is the engagement through a careful context analysis and we look at the conflict driving factors; that is our entry point."



In Kandahar and Nangarhar, War Child Canada relied extensively on AWC and OHW, acknowledging their strong knowledge of local dynamics as well as their ties to communities. As another informant, also a staff representative, summarized, “Working in a context so affected by security changes, this is important. For working in the provinces, that’s how we engaged the partners, because we realized that they are better positioned and have much better relations with the local stakeholders.” War Child Canada also monitors the security and political situation nationally, including the intra-Afghan negotiation process, and uses this information to prepare different planning scenarios.

Overall, these practices and policies have been very effective: the organization has not been the target of any major incidents of violence, nor have activities been significantly impacted by the conflict. This is not to say that there has not been any impact: access to the partner’s office in Nangarhar had to be temporarily suspended at the beginning of the project and women staff were forbidden from coming to the office due to threats made against the organization, which were judged to be serious and credible. Yet, these situations were handled efficiently and did not have repercussions on the implementation of the project.

The ability of War Child Canada and its partners to complete nearly all planned activities and avoid major incidents is indeed a testament to the relevance of the approach chosen, and to their ability to react to changes in national and local conditions with flexibility. However, there was no greater test to the organization’s flexibility than the COVID-19 pandemic. This impacted project implementation, the same way it also impacted the work of so many organizations. War Child Canada and the project team handled the challenges caused by the pandemic in large part efficiently, with limited consequences on activities and outputs. However, the challenges created by the pandemic were not the same for all partners, and some saw significant disruptions to their work. This is discussed in more detail in the section on the management approach.

Administratively, the project underwent two main adjustments during its lifetime. The first happened early in the project and was caused by a cut in the project’s overall budget, which was requested by GAC. The funding cut was significant and resulted in substantial changes, including the exclusion of one of the three original partners and the redesign of specific activities. For example, vocational courses were shortened from eight months to six months and War Child Canada took over the psychosocial support services rather than subcontracting them. The second main readjustment happened in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a reallocation of financial resources and a no-cost extension.

War Child Canada managed these adjustments attentively and by all accounts it was able to work effectively with GAC, which also proved open to proposed modifications. For example, as part of the adjustments made in response to the pandemic, GAC allowed War Child Canada and partners to conduct COVID-19 response and sensitization activities, which, at the height of the country’s first wave in spring and summer 2020, were indeed very relevant. However, the margin of flexibility within the existing contract was also narrow: for example, funds could be moved across budget lines and headings only to a certain extent, and negotiations between War Child Canada and GAC lasted months on account of administrative procedures. This meant that some negative impacts could not be avoided, such as the aforementioned exclusion of one of the original partners caused by the budget cut. Overall, War Child Canada and GAC appear to have navigated these adjustments effectively, but the degree of flexibility could be improved in the future.

To conclude, it is undeniable that War Child Canada and its partners were able to work effectively in a context that was marked by objective and significant challenges. In doing so, the organization has shown a strong capacity to assess its operating context and develop responses that respected what it could do within its agreement with GAC. An important factor in this respect is the organization’s internal decision-making structure, which allowed it to gather relevant information and respond quickly and decidedly to external events. Another is War Child Canada’s strong ties to its partners, to Afghan government officials, and to GAC. The closeness of these ties, which are consistently nurtured both in formal and informal ways, proved important to ensure that there would not be any obstacles to implementation—whether they be the need to

obtain relevant approvals, as is generally the case with ministries, or amend budgets.

War Child Canada's response capacity was likely also due to its work at the community level and to the overall duration of the project. The former is extremely important for explaining the success of the project, as will be discussed in the section on effectiveness, allowing the organization and its partners to effectively work in difficult contexts—in particular in Kandahar and Nangarhar—even as these changed. Having close ties with communities, and enjoying the trust of their leaders, allowed the organizations to feel confident about running planned activities, and also in proposing alternative ones whenever necessary. However, according to all staff and partner representatives interviewed, this trust-building work required time and several interactions with the same people—to present the organization and the project, to discuss the activities, and to discuss the participation of both women and men. This was possible only because of the relatively long duration of the project, which spanned four years. This must be acknowledged as a key factor, and hopefully something that can be retained as a best practice, by War Child Canada and GAC, in the future.

## Area of Focus 2: Coherence

Under this area of focus, the evaluation sought to assess the SAFE project in terms of its external and internal coherence. External coherence refers to the project's alignment with Afghan policies and laws on women's rights, participation and empowerment. Internal coherence refers to the quality of the project's logic (its theory of change), and, in particular, whether this can be proven valid, given the results achieved by the project.

### Policy Coherence

In terms of external coherence, the SAFE project was perfectly aligned with, and indeed responded to, the overarching policy and legal context in Afghanistan in relation to women's rights, participation and empowerment. The project was specifically aligned with several national priority programs (NPPs). NPPs are the policy frameworks, officially approved by the Afghan Government, which guide the work of ministries and their partners on specific themes. Currently, there are ten NPPs and the SAFE project mainly contributed to two of them: the Women's Economic Empowerment Program and the National Justice and Judicial Reform Plan (and, in particular, the plan's priority on "Greater access to justice by citizens particularly the most vulnerable populations").

More importantly, however, the project wanted to support the EVAW law, which, as already discussed, is the country's main tool for addressing violence against women and gender-based violence. At the same time, the project also supported other relevant laws such as the Law to ban children's harassment (2019), the Penal Code (2018) as well as Afghanistan's commitments under CEDAW and UNSCR 1325 (through its National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security).

Lastly, as a recipient of GAC funding, War Child Canada was one of the organizations participating in the Women and Girls Rights and Empowerment (WGRE) program. This functioned as a national platform for all NGOs receiving funding from GAC to come together, share information about their respective projects, and promote collaboration. WGRE-participating organizations, which included BBC Media Action, the Aga Khan Foundation, Oxfam, Relief International and Zardozi, were brought together by the Embassy of Canada in Kabul. This said, informants indicated that the regularity of these meetings ebbed with the arrival of the pandemic. As such, the WGRE program was able to support some collaborations, but in a limited capacity.

## Project Logic

The SAFE project does not have a formal theory of change, but it does have a clear logic, which is reflected in its result based management (RBM) model, its goal and objectives and in its integrated approach. Assessing this logic can help to understand how and why the project has been successful. To do this, the evaluation analysis has used elements of Contribution Analysis, a theory-based evaluation approach that is particularly useful to assess social change projects. Specifically, Contribution Analysis allows a closer inspection of the relations that exist between the expected results, as well as of the assumptions made by the project. This is done by looking at the results' domains of change and the project's causal mechanisms.

The domains of change are the levels at which intended changes are being promoted, and in the case of the SAFE project these can be defined as three: individual, household and community.

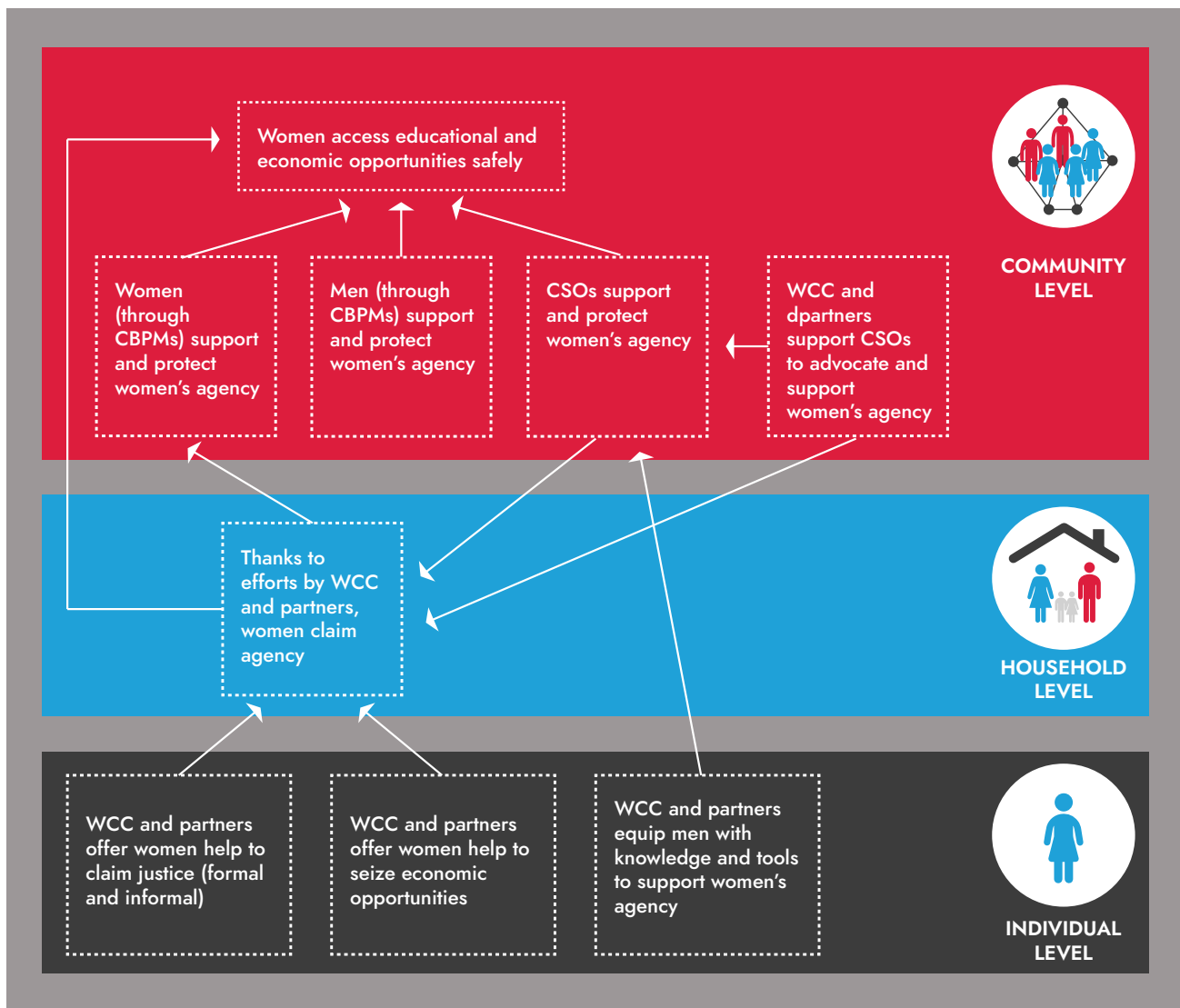
The individual domain refers to changes to people's knowledge and competencies, which varied for women (whom the project wanted to support in their ability to work independently) and men (whom the project wanted more informed about women's rights and more aware of the laws that protect them). It also refers to the work on legal aid, through which the project wanted to support GBV victims to seek justice. At the household level, the project wanted to change the behavior and practices of women, and therefore also of the men around them, by having them start new businesses and access economic opportunities with confidence. The community domain refers to changes in the attitudes of community members towards women's participation, which the project wanted to bring about through the creation of CBPMs in particular. The work with CSOs was also aimed at creating a more enabling environment for women's participation and empowerment.

The analysis of project documents and interviews suggests that there is a clear relation between these three levels: namely, the project saw individual changes as a necessary precondition to trigger and sustain household and then community-level changes. Yet, to better understand this relation, it is helpful to turn to an analysis of causal mechanisms. These are combinations of agents, actions and results, which are assumed to be necessary and sufficient to move towards an agreed goal. After careful review of the project's design, the SAFE project's logic was found to feature the following different mechanisms, all of which are presented in the graph on the next page.

The graph helps to understand the project's logic and, in particular, the centrality of women's agency, something that is indeed highlighted in the section on effectiveness. In the logic of the project, achieving this agency is one the main results to be achieved, mainly through the legal aid and economic empowerment activities. Once achieved at the individual and household levels, the project's efforts are subsequently about protecting and reinforcing this agency by working at the community level, through CBPMs and also through local CSOs. This logic is coherent and led to tangible impact, as will be seen through the evidence presented hereunder. The logic is also coherent with War Child Canada's past work in Afghanistan, which primarily focused on improving women's status and role in the household. In fact, the SAFE project sought to expand on this effort by promoting changes in the enabling environment and by targeting violence against women and gender-based violence more specifically. In particular, the evaluation has found the links between the individual-level activities and the community-level efforts to be valid: they are, in other words, necessary and sufficient to promote (or safeguard) women's participation.

The validity of the links between the work on legal aid, women's agency and women's participation is, however, less clear. In theory, addressing the specific needs of victims of violence is necessary to restore their dignity, which is in turn necessary to activate their agency. The needs, as previously discussed, are also staggering, justifying War Child Canada's choice to intervene.





In practice, however, the evaluation found that important differences existed between specific activities under this component, and in particular between legal aid provided to women who went to court, and the assistance provided to women through mediation and alternative dispute resolution (ADR). The latter appears to have been connected with the rest of the project—for example through the CBPMs, whose members also assisted the resolution of family disputes. On the other hand, court cases remained very separate from all other project components, perhaps because of their inherently individual nature. This distinction is important in the current analysis, as it might suggest a different, more complicated (and possibly more dangerous) pathway to change for those women who decide to go to courts. The role of legal aid activities should perhaps be reviewed in light of these considerations

Lastly, the analysis sheds light on an important dimension and several key assumptions linked to it. The project focused primarily at changes at the individual, household and community level; it also engaged in advocacy, but did not necessarily expect to lead to significant changes in the way institutions work or deliver relevant services. Yet, the ability of the project to have impact is based on the assumption that schools remain open, that there is access to markets and market services (like loans), and that courts and other judicial mechanisms operate normally. Normally, these assumptions would be valid, but in Afghanistan's current context, this is not the case. The resurgence of the Taliban and the ongoing intra-Afghan negotiations might in fact lead to women and girls not being able to go to school or work. This would have a negative impact on the project, and, for this reason, the project's theory of change should in the future be formulated to take this into account.

## Area of Focus 3: Results

### Effectiveness

Effectiveness of interventions to empower Afghan women and to protect and promote their rights must be examined in a context where, in the past 20 years, international donors pledged strong support to gender and women's empowerment, some even conditioning aid on projects using a gendered lens. Such interventions have often been planned for relatively short periods (not sufficient to examine the qualitative change) and mainly focused on one area. The SAFE project, however, has been an integrated, multi-pronged and community-based initiative implemented over a longer period of time (four years) aiming to empower women and girls to participate in decision-making in Afghan society, build women and girls' capacity to exercise their rights, and build the capacity of Afghan civil society to promote and protect women's empowerment.<sup>32</sup> As already discussed, War Child Canada and partners did this through four distinct yet integrated components, and results are therefore examined under each one.

#### Legal aid, psychosocial support and improved access to GBV response

This component of the SAFE project focused on providing legal aid services to GBV survivors by representing their cases either in the criminal, family or civil courts as pertinent or resolving them through community-based alternate dispute resolution (ADR) or mediation processes. This component was further enhanced by providing psychosocial support to survivors of GBV and their families.

Documents show that, thanks to the project, a total of 762 GBV cases were resolved in courts, while 820 cases were settled through mediation or ADR.<sup>33</sup> At the end of the project, however, 10 cases were still not settled and War Child Canada has decided to continue those cases through contract-based attorneys.<sup>34</sup> Project output in terms of GBV cases varied from year to year against the annual target. For example, in the project's second year 275 GBV cases were registered, representing a 55 percent achievement towards the annual target of 500 cases.<sup>35</sup> In the third year<sup>36</sup> this achievement was at 28 percent (128 GBV cases against the annual target of 450 cases),<sup>37</sup> while in the final year it reached 77 percent (207 GBV cases against the annual target of 270 cases).<sup>38</sup> It is not clear why such variations exist, but one potential explanation could relate to the accumulated increase of awareness of GBV cases as a result of the project's multi-pronged and integrated approach.

The successful awareness raising on women's rights and GBV was indeed confirmed in multiple conversations with beneficiaries from Kabul, Kandahar and Nangarhar. Participants in focus groups, all of them men representing five different CBPMs from various locations in Kabul, categorically affirmed the change in community perception towards GBV. One representative estimated this impact to be 70% on men's mentality in his community.<sup>39</sup> A private attorney also acknowledged the important contribution of the SAFE project towards raising awareness on GBV among women and society at large through the *mullahs*, mosques and other community-based platforms.

Cases referred for mediation often included issues related to women's rights to alimony, inheritance, family conflict, dissolving engagement, forced marriage, threat of divorce and so on.<sup>40</sup> The ADR mediation was formally documented with evidence from both sides, final agreement on the resolution and all decisions, and signature of both parties were taken. Furthermore, War Child Canada and its partners carefully followed up the cases to ensure compliance to the agreement. A 2019 assessment through the Program Quality Accountability and Learning (PQAL) team and follow-up meetings suggested that "71% of the clients were fully satisfied with the results and impact of the project."<sup>41</sup>

However, interviewed project staff expressed explicit preference for resolving GBV cases through mediation, leaving court procedure as the final resort. Indeed, in their view one of the biggest successes of the project was case resolution through mediation, which helped families from “disintegration”, such as loss of child custody for women or further abuses.<sup>42</sup> This view was further confirmed in interviews with private attorneys as well as beneficiaries.<sup>43</sup> Respondents agreed that a preference for mediation is mainly due to cultural reasons, as people still “do not perceive well a woman who has taken her case to the court.”<sup>44</sup> They also referred to the security challenges formal court procedures can entail, including personal threats from the families of the accused party. The security challenge is additionally compounded considering the overall weak rule of law and a thriving culture of impunity in Afghanistan.

Overall, under this component the SAFE project met its overall objective and contributed to enhanced awareness about GBV, development of the capacity of attorneys, prosecutors and police to effectively investigate cases of GBV, and to assist individual cases. In addition to the EVAW law, the capacity development trainings also focused on the recent law on children’s rights (2019) and the ban on *bacha bazi* (2018).<sup>45,46</sup> A project stakeholder called War Child Canada’s capacity development workshops on legal issues, such as inheritance laws for women, “very effective and tailored to their needs.”<sup>47</sup> As a project staff noted, 85% of the legal aid component was targeted at raising awareness and developing capacity, particularly focusing on divorce, separation and child custody, as well as women’s protection from a legal and sharia-based point of view.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, the challenge to adjudicate cases in courts, particularly in special GBV courts where the EVAW law is implemented, remains strong. In addition to the cultural and security challenges mentioned above, the capacity of legal actors remains limited. Other documents and evidence confirm this, in addition to what was highlighted through the interviews with people who had witnessed first-hand the inept capacity of prosecutors in carrying out investigations, in particular with regard to girls who are victims of GBV. As one respondent stated, case representation in Afghanistan has not yet become institutionalized, and the Afghanistan Independent Bar Association has engaged minimally with the issue.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, case resolution through mediation or CBPM remains more practical and popular.

Lastly, several informants (among both project staff and stakeholders) also expressed concerns about the project’s achievements in relation to women’s protection and access to justice due to the current political fragility and deteriorating security situation. Linked to this, some drew attention to other groups who are very much at risk of GBV, but have received little attention, and not just in the SAFE project. In particular, a lawyer interviewed for the evaluation raised serious concern for the fate of six million children, many of who are girls, who are at great risk, including for GBV, on a daily basis.<sup>50</sup> According to UNICEF, 3.5 million children in Afghanistan aged between 5-17 do not attend school, and over 2 million children between the ages of 6-14 are engaged in child labor. The latter is a particularly vulnerable group, at high risk of not only of roadside accidents and suicide attacks but also victims of sexual and physical abuses.<sup>51</sup>

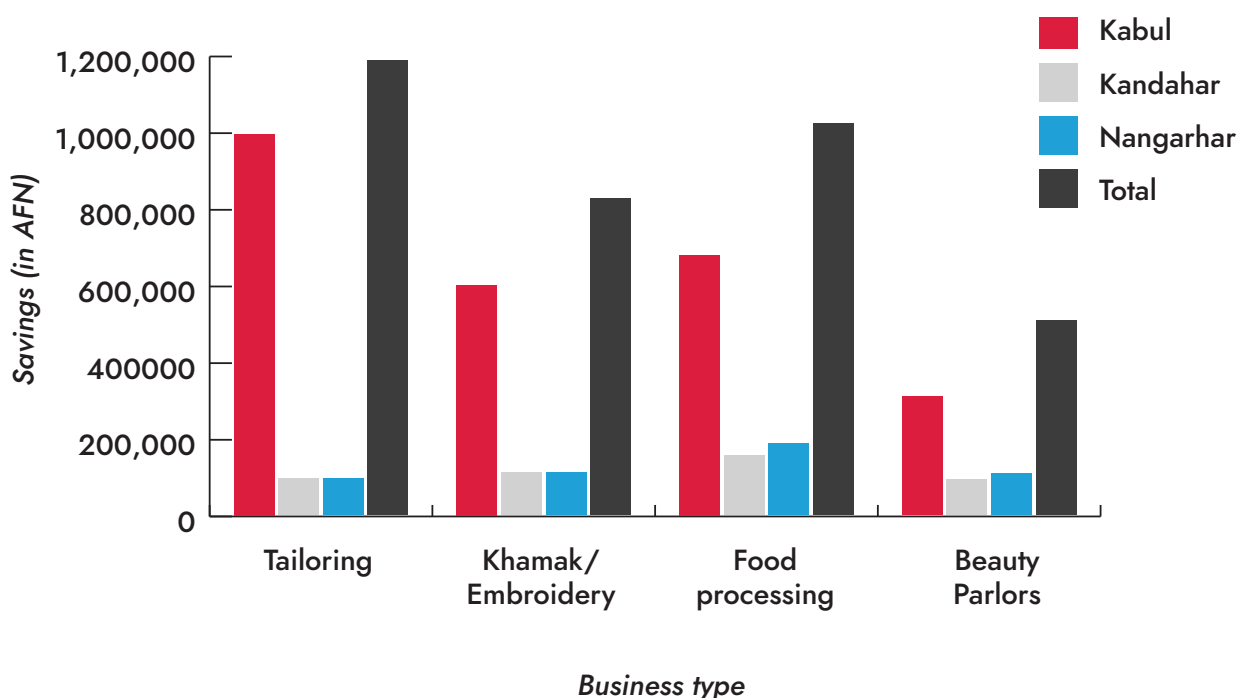
## ■ Women’s economic empowerment

The SAFE project aimed to support 600 women by offering functional literacy and numeracy (FLN) courses to improve their basic reading, writing and basic math skills; life skills training to enhance their communication, negotiation and decision-making skills; and vocational skills and business development trainings. Women were also provided financial support to establish and manage their own businesses. Following the selection and training of FLN officers and teachers in the three locations, beneficiaries were selected in consultation with the community members and implementing partners.<sup>52</sup> The focus of the first year was on FLN and life skills training, followed by vocational and business development training in the second year and actual business development and marketing in the third and fourth years.



By the end of the project, the 600 women had been trained in the above-mentioned areas and established either group or individual businesses.<sup>53</sup> These businesses have so far proven to be quite profitable, generating significant savings in all provinces and in all sectors, as the graph below indicates (for the period 2020-2021).<sup>54</sup>

*Savings from women-led micro-businesses (by location and business type):*



Currently, their contribution to the household income is around 35-40% and all women entrepreneurs interviewed for the evaluation indicate that they are now involved in decision-making at the household level.<sup>55</sup> Numerous beneficiaries in both interviews and focus groups (men and women alike) confirmed this. To truly capture this change, however, it is worth looking at specific expressions that came up during the evaluation.

A common response in interviews with all women entrepreneurs, but also from the male and female CBPM members who had witnessed the change in the lives of women entrepreneurs in their respective communities, was that women were “standing on their own feet.” This was mainly in reference to their economic independence, which was not experienced by most beneficiaries before the project. One participant expressed:<sup>56</sup>

*[The project] has improved women’s conditions. Before, women would not dare to leave their homes. But now they stand on their own feet. Many women have lost their husbands and did not have an income. This is the best way for us to earn because we learn an art, show it to people and make a living from our art.<sup>57</sup>*

Another common expression used by beneficiaries (entrepreneurs, but also CBPM members) was “we were blind before.” In reference to the literacy and awareness raising component of the project, women indicated that it was as if they were blind before because they were illiterate, but are now able to read a label, write their grocery lists, help read messages for their husbands who cannot read, and even help their children with school work. Some also used the expression “we were asleep before, but we have become awake now.”

Yet another common expression was “we step outside our homes”, which, in the context of Afghanistan, refers to an activity that takes places outside the domestic chores. Most beneficiaries expressed they had never before been engaged in activities outside the domestic sphere. For almost all beneficiaries who travelled from Kandahar and Nangarhar to Kabul for the project, this was the first trip to the capital and represented a lifetime adventure and something they had always desired to do, as they themselves described it.

Female beneficiaries often said, “we learned about our rights”, and were explicit to emphasize the importance of learning about their rights as human beings and as women, which they were not aware of before. This included the right to education, the right to work, family rights, including marriage, and, importantly, the rights of their children. They also placed emphasis on becoming aware of not only their rights, but also their responsibilities towards others and society at large.

Lastly, participants used the expression “it made us courageous” to compare their state of being today with before, when they could not express themselves in public, discuss their point of view to defend themselves, or step outside their homes. Now, they feel they can talk in public and even travel to Kabul (mentioned repeatedly with pride and a sense of achievement). One beneficiary (an entrepreneur from Nangarhar) said:

*My father did not allow me to study before. Since I started with the project, I could speak with my father. I told him I was not disrespectful towards him, but merely wanted to defend my rights. That I wanted and needed to study, just like boys. He then was convinced and now I am in the second semester of dentistry and I am very happy. The project gave me the courage to reason and defend my rights.<sup>58</sup>*

Such expressions and states of being demonstrate a transformation in women beneficiaries that can be translated in enhanced agency. Agency in this context could mean the ability to decide and make choices, the capacity to stand by their decisions and exercise them, and the will to transform their lives as they desire. It also meant enhancing citizenship to recognize their rights and responsibilities and to hold duty-bearers accountable. This transformation was most palpable among beneficiaries from Kandahar, which is considered one of the most conservative provinces of Afghanistan, especially with regard to women’s rights. Beneficiaries from Kandahar came across during the interviews as strong, confident, enthusiastic and full of “sparks” in their eyes and expressions, which can be demonstrated in a few stories.

A beneficiary from Kandahar, who now has a food processing business, learned not only to read and write in the first year of the SAFE project, but continued with schooling all the way to finish the 12th grade in her late 20s. She is determined to continue her education at the teacher’s training college. Her husband initially opposed her education, but he stood by her decision and as he observed the benefits and advantages, he changed his mind.

Another beneficiary (a beauty parlour owner), also from Kandahar, whose brother had talked with a cousin about her engagement to him without her awareness and consent, discussed and convinced him to rebuke his decision. She argued: “you created this mess in my absence and without my awareness, you clean it.”

Another young beneficiary (age 19), who was married off at the age of 13 without her consent and satisfaction, fought her way through. With support from the male and female members of CBPMs in Kandahar, she was able to divorce, remarry, and start afresh, an act, as she asserted, unheard of and almost impossible in Kandahar before.

Data from interviews and focus groups overwhelmingly indicate the important contribution of the SAFE project on individual, household and community levels in terms of financial independence, decision-making and

overall empowerment against the baseline data. One female entrepreneur from Kandahar stated: “In the past we were always dependent on our fathers and brothers, but now we have become self-sufficient.”<sup>59</sup> Another participant also from Kandahar said with a deep sense of pride: “before the project I used to feel that I was unwanted in the society and that I could not do anything. Now that I know we can also do something and be of help, I feel so proud, this is the best feeling.”<sup>60</sup> The expression of “unwanted being” came up several times also with other beneficiaries as a way to express their situation before and transformation after their involvement with the SAFE project.

The sole shortcoming in this component of the SAFE project was attributed to the quality of instruction relating to tailoring specifically, something brought up by a number of informants, including beneficiaries. One beneficiary, who otherwise expressed great satisfaction with other aspects of the project, expressed dissatisfaction at the lack of competence of tailoring teachers who were not familiar with modern designs. She felt disappointment about her inability to produce more refined and modern dresses, for example for a wedding party. She stated: “people say you studied for four years and you can’t even sew a party dress?”<sup>61</sup> Another key informant confirmed this<sup>62</sup> in the case of Kandahar, noting that the tailoring quality was not very standard and therefore posed a challenge for marketing.

### A Success Story on Women’s Economic Empowerment

Habiba<sup>63</sup> is a woman entrepreneur from Kandahar who was enrolled in the SAFE’s project food processing and basic literacy training module. Her thirst for learning, however, was not quenched and she determined to continue her studies beyond Functional Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) with support and encouragement from the course teacher. Already in her late 20s, married and with children, she decided to take the state’s school entrance exam, which she passed successfully and was placed in 9th grade. She finished 12th grade and went on to work as a substitute teacher for 9th and 10th grades in the school from where she had graduated. Now she is enrolled in the teachers’ training college. In her own words, she described the project’s transformational impact:

“ I always desired to have my own place in society, which I did not have before, but now I do, and it is the greatest pleasure and honor of my life. I now work as a substitute teacher, which is very enjoyable and makes me feel proud of my life. I will certainly continue my education and serve my society. I love this.

Habiba is equally proud of her work as an entrepreneur, which has turned her into an important financial contributor to the household as well as an equal participant in all family decisions. In the conservative society of Kandahar, where a woman’s name is not to be uttered in public due to honor issues, Habiba wishes to one day open a bakery under her own name.

“ I prepared my brother’s wedding cake, which is one of the best memories of this process [SAFE project]. It was very pleasing because all the people from the village saw my work and encouraged me. It was as if I had received a doctorate [PhD]. I was very proud; so was my family.



## Strengthening CSOs

An alliance of 50 Afghan CSOs from the three provinces was established to raise awareness and engage in advocacy on women's rights and protection, which is a much bigger achievement than the intended output of 30 CSOs. CSOs were initially identified through the Afghan Women's Network and the Afghan Civil Society Organization Forum. War Child Canada, AWC and OHW selected the organizations to invite based on several criteria, including their advocacy experience on women and children's rights.<sup>64</sup> Organizations were then supported with small grants, at the national and sub-national level. By the end of the project, 27 CSOs, including 15 women-led CSOs, implemented 43 small grants projects focused on women's rights advocacy and campaigning.<sup>65</sup> A key informant commended War Child Canada for carrying out the selection process in a transparent manner; taking into consideration the capacity and competency of the organization rather than other affiliations (i.e., ethnicity or language) or prior acquaintances.<sup>66</sup> The transparent work of the project was also admired by another key informant,<sup>67</sup> which in the context of Afghanistan, mired by institutional corruption and nepotism, is worth highlighting.

The SAFE project enhanced the capacity of participating CSOs by organizing workshops and trainings on women's rights and protection issues, the ERAW law, development of advocacy strategies, proposal and report writing, project management and monitoring and evaluation (M&E).<sup>68</sup> Representatives interviewed for the evaluation<sup>69</sup> reported that these trainings and workshops were very effective in "equipping them with a weapon,"<sup>70</sup> which they could use "on the ground" and even utilize that capacity to secure grants from other donors. All participating CSOs stated they first carried out a needs assessment before designing their projects. Therefore, their projects addressed specific needs and characteristics of each location.

Through the implementation of small grants, all informants interviewed said that CSOs played an effective role in advocating for women's rights and protection at the community level as well as with policymakers, legislatures and ministries.<sup>71</sup> Key informants from CSOs confirmed this by noting the role their projects played in raising awareness about women and children rights, improving their socio-economic standing, and enhancing their capacity to make decisions. One interview participant stated:<sup>72</sup>

*We achieved beyond our expectation. Our aim was to support women financially, but the project also helped their children to go to school [instead of working as before]. Women learned how to lobby and engage in advocacy in our trainings... They have advocated at their quarter and neighborhood level, for example for *destarkhan-e mili*.<sup>73</sup> They defend themselves and the rights of their children. For example, some have said to their husbands that if they oppose their daughters' education, they [the mothers] will commit suicide.*

The grants also enhanced women's participation in the peace process by engaging women and youth in discussions about peace and their role in the process.<sup>74</sup> Interview participants underlined an initial skepticism on the part of beneficiaries about their role in the peace process, believing that it was merely top-down and elite driven. This perception changed in the course of the project as beneficiaries became more aware of their role, agency and impact.<sup>75</sup> One of these projects resulted not only in the creation of a new multi-stakeholder alliance—between youth and women—but also the sharing of their research and data with a prominent member of the negotiation team from the Government, who later stated: "in our negotiations with the Taliban, it is more effective to present data and findings that represent perceptions of people, rather than merely views of the Government."<sup>76</sup>

The short timeline (three months) and limited budget scope (which were under USD 8,000) of the grants were mentioned as the main limitations of this component. Beneficiaries noted that this impacted the quality and outreach of their projects.<sup>77</sup> In some cases, CSOs requested an extension, and, in one case, an extra budget to cover more beneficiaries, to which the project responded positively.<sup>78</sup> In other cases, however, a request for an extension was negated on the basis that the nature of such projects was short-term. The evidence from civil society beneficiaries in terms of project impact is therefore mixed as discussed in the section on sustainability.

## Community engagement to protect and promote women's rights and participation

The SAFE project was able to enhance the capacity of communities on women's rights, GBV prevention and support to GBV survivors, the EVAW law, ADR and mediation, effective communication skills and reporting. It did so by conducting awareness and educational sessions for CBPMs, which often included up to 25 members each (both men and women), sensitization sessions by trained volunteers and also mass media.<sup>79</sup>

Project reports as well as interviews and focus groups show both female and male members of CBPMs played an important role in resolving GBV cases through ADR or mediation, or by referring cases to ministries, to the AIHRC or to the police. One important outcome in terms of decision-making and empowerment was building the capacity of women to conduct mediation.<sup>80</sup> A number of beneficiaries recalled their own experiences where the CBPMs' role was vital to resolve their situation. One beneficiary from Kandahar stated:<sup>81</sup>

*At the age of 16 I divorced and remarried. The SAFE project helped with my divorce. The CBPM spoke to the men in my family, otherwise in Kandahar a woman has to live in the husband's home no matter what. My first husband was beating me up. My life was horrible. I pray for SAFE project with all my heart because they brought me from hell to paradise. They gave me everything, training, material, and money. I was suffering from psychosocial problems, they helped with that, too.*

The CBPMs, combined with other components of the project, played a vital role in changing communities' mindsets towards women's rights and their public role. Reports and beneficiary interviews unanimously confirm that initially communities demonstrated resistance to the SAFE project due to its sensitive nature (i.e., women's rights and empowerment in a conservative society). This changed over time as communities experienced first-hand the project impact not only on the lives of individuals as direct beneficiaries, but also on their communities at large. A few direct quotes from beneficiaries can best capture this change:

*The project was like a revolution in our area. Our men were like savages before, but now they know about women's rights. Also, we (the women) were of the opinion that we were created to endure suffering. We knew nothing about our rights. But now we do, and since I have become the breadwinner no one dares to treat me badly. My husband also lets me take part in such activities.<sup>82</sup>*

*One of the CBPM male representatives told me not to put a spot in my skirt [an expression to convey shame and disgrace] by participating in this project. After his membership and participation at the CBPM, he changed and even sent his own daughter to take part in the project activities.<sup>83</sup>*

*The project was very beneficial to the society, particularly to girls who previously could study up to 7-8 grades, but now they finish 12th grade and even go to university as a result of this project.<sup>84</sup>*

Interview participants from all three provinces expressed a desire for the continuation of the SAFE project. They also stated other nearby communities who were not covered in the project, but nevertheless witnessed its impact on women and society, have also demanded the implementation of such projects in their communities.

### A Success Story on Community Engagement

As the head of a CBPM in one of the target locations in Nangarhar province, Freshta<sup>85</sup> was trained not only on women and girls' rights, but also on mediation techniques and skills to resolve community tensions. She was, however, not aware that one day community mediation could change the course of her life.

Her brother was involved in a car accident that led to the death of three people. This led to a dispute between Freshta's family and the families of the victims, whose resolution fell under the responsibility of traditional community mechanisms. As per the community's initial decision, she and two of her nieces were to be given as compensation in baad, a practice where a woman is given as a bride to the victims' family to settle a dispute. Baad practice is illegal according to Afghanistan's laws, about which the SAFE project raised awareness through the CBPMs, including the one led by Freshta.

Equipped with this knowledge, the female and male members of the CBPM in Freshta's district fought against the community decision until they convinced the victims' families to settle the dispute with cash payment instead. Freshta was very happy that she and her two nieces did not have to pay such a heavy price for a matter in which they were not even involved.

### Sustainability

Implementing partners demonstrated a clear understanding of the project, its outputs and outcomes (both intermediate and long-term). As they were engaged in both the project's design and its overall implementation, they also fully grasped the integrated nature of the project's approach and why it was important in achieving the overall goal. Interviews with MoWA representatives in Nangarhar and Kandahar also showed this. The MoJ representative, however, exhibited knowledge mainly of the legal aid component. The AIHRC was not a direct partner (it did not have a memorandum of understanding with War Child Canada on this project, as both the MoWA and MoJ had), but its representative highlighted that the project targeted beneficiaries among the most vulnerable, its integrated approach and duration helped beneficiaries to "learn fishing rather than cooking the fish."<sup>86</sup>

The project's institutional support, particularly to MoWA, MoJ and the special GBV courts, is noteworthy as it has enhanced knowledge and capacity on women's rights and protection as well as children's rights. Interviews with stakeholders and project staff demonstrate that this enhanced capacity and knowledge is continuously being used beyond the SAFE project. In particular, this was highlighted by the MoJ representative, who leads the ministry's awareness raising work.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, through the CBPMs communities have become aware of women's rights and protection and continue to use that knowledge in resolving GBV cases through mediation or reference to other sources. CBPM members in a number of focus groups confirmed their continued engagement with such cases, even where project support to CBPMs had officially ended. An important point to highlight here in terms of enhanced decision-making at the community level is the role of women mediators in resolving GBV cases, as noted by project staff as well as several female CBPM members. This aspect is



particularly significant considering that, traditionally, many community decisions (i.e., at the level of *shuras* or *jirgas*) are taken by men. This continued impact of the project is therefore particularly noteworthy in terms of changing “gendered” norms and affecting the power relations between men and women.

War Child Canada’s project team has a strong conviction about the sustainable and long-term impact of the SAFE project given the change and transformation it has brought to communities, including women’s financial independence and decision-making at household and community levels. They maintain regular contacts with the partners and stakeholders as well as their “professional engagement” with lawyers who worked on an ad hoc basis.<sup>88</sup> All the evidence collected and presented above indicates that sustainability is greatest in relation to the individual level, and that the women and also the men whose lives were changed because of the project will remain active and supportive of what they built over the years of implementation. Beyond this, however, there is mixed evidence about other aspects of the project’s sustainability.

Sectoral ministries are not likely to play a role in sustaining the project, beyond maintaining contacts with key focal points as mentioned by MoWA’s provincial representatives, because they have limited budgets and are not implementing agencies. Furthermore, deteriorating security and the political situation make it very difficult for public institutions to function in Taliban-controlled areas.

Nevertheless, evidence from beneficiaries shows a strong tendency towards the maintenance of interventions carried out by the project. If sustainability is measured by specific outcomes and outputs, the most tangible examples come from women entrepreneurs in all three provinces. Many interview participants stated that they will continue with their entrepreneurial activities either on an individual basis or as groups. As discussed earlier, many entrepreneurs have also become independent financially, and in some cases the sole breadwinner of the house.

Positively, interview participants discussed the creation of WhatsApp groups to remain in touch, share ideas, discuss challenges, and sometimes even engage in advocacy.<sup>89</sup> Women entrepreneurs have created their local WhatsApp groups to share designs and coordinate the delivery of their products to local markets, as they prefer to go in groups for safety and cultural reasons. Some of them, however, acknowledged the challenge of having access to Internet due to financial or network limitations. Members of the CSO alliance, likewise, coordinate and share lessons learned for future initiatives through a WhatsApp group. All these networking initiatives are actively supported and promoted by the SAFE project, and this can be considered an important factor contributing to sustainability.

In some cases, after the closure of the projects, activities or groups continued on a volunteer basis. A small grant project implemented by a CSO to promote women and youth engagement around the peace process has resulted in the creation of a group called “Shared Voice of Women and Youth for Durable and Just Peace,” which has also become an advisory board member of the Ministry of Peace.<sup>90</sup> Some of the CSOs assisted in the project were also able to secure additional funding from other donors, for example from UNICEF, to continue with awareness raising activities started under the project. Many CBPM beneficiaries reported that after the official closure of CBPMs, they continue to provide advice and remain engaged with people in their communities. Implementing partners also continue having regular contacts with focal points in each community to follow up and provide guidance on such issues as cost effectiveness, and also to provide moral support, especially when they organize public events such as a trade fair.<sup>91</sup>

To conclude, while the project's integrated and multi-pronged approach towards women empowerment has been successful in having women claim agency, access justice, economic and educational opportunities, and importantly enhance their decision-making at home and in the larger community, the current prospect of a Taliban takeover of services could significantly undermine the sustainability of these results. The change in the political and security landscape for projects of this nature is worth noting precisely because they have to function in an enabling environment where coordination with key stakeholders, including sectorial ministries, and implementation through communities is key to their long-term success.

## Area of Focus 4: Management Approach

### Coordination and Management

The capacity of local partners has been significantly enhanced as a result of ongoing workshops and trainings on both the substance (such as EAW law, mediation strategies and court proceedings) as well as procedures (project planning, report writing, technical support, financial management and M&E). The stakeholders' capacity, such as MoWA and MoJ, has mainly been enhanced in the substance, although M&E trainings were also offered to ministry officials.<sup>92</sup> As noted earlier, CSOs who partnered in the project reported significantly benefiting from enhanced capacity, in particular with regard to proposal and report writing. Implementing partners, likewise, found the various trainings and workshops very significant and informative for building institutional capacity.

Overall, the project team has been effective, creative and adaptive in its coordination. Project documents and information gathered from interviews show persistent availability and support from the project team to all relevant actors. As an example, with the main implementing partners, War Child Canada adopted the strategy to communicate and coordinate on a daily, weekly and monthly basis via phone, e-mail or in-person. A positive strategy highlighted by an implementing partner was coordination between respective sections, i.e., the M&E section of War Child Canada with the M&E of the implementing partner and so on. Moreover, the careful annual planning of the Detailed Implementation Plan (DIP) paved the way for smooth implementation for the rest of the year.<sup>93</sup> With MoWA and MoJ, the coordination was conducted based on a memorandum of understanding (MoU).<sup>94</sup> This meant submission of monthly or quarterly reports by War Child Canada to ministries as well as regular contacts via phone, e-mail or in-person to coordinate.

These strategies were formalized in two different bodies: the project steering committee and the project task force. The steering committee oversaw the project strategically: it was chaired by War Child Canada's country director and included the partners as well as high-level representatives of MoWA and MoJ. The committee had a broad mandate, but could not convene as regularly as originally expected because of the pandemic. The task force included the project managers from War Child Canada, AWC and OHW, and more technical representatives from ministries. It was an operational body, focused on coordination, but it also provided opportunities for participants to give inputs on implementation.

Overall, these two bodies, and War Child Canada's broader efforts to consult and coordinate, were effective and much appreciated. A key informant, from one of the partner ministries, noted: "the strength of War Child Canada is that they always coordinate with us, whereas many other NGOs evade [this]."<sup>95</sup> In addition to planned coordination and communication, the team remained open to communication on a need-to basis. A representative of a CSO expressed great satisfaction about communication and coordination with War Child Canada, noting their responsiveness.<sup>96</sup>

M&E was conducted at various levels, which contributed to successful implementation. The project M&E team was active throughout the implementation in all components and processes. They also conducted joint M&E activities with AWC and OHW, as already noted, continuously sharing reports and discussing to reach solutions. A project staff member highlighted a strong emphasis on this aspect during project implementation, noting a “very good coordination” in the M&E sector with partners across the three provinces.<sup>97</sup>

The evaluation confirmed that War Child Canada shared its Do No Harm (DNH) policy, including Child Protection policy, with all relevant actors. War Child Canada’s DNH policy is based on the humanitarian principles as well as the Afghan Constitution and relevant laws. Implementing partners must agree with all War Child Canada policies, including the one on DNH. In addition, implementing partners have their own DNH policy as part of their general Code of Conduct, which they discussed in all activities with communities. The DNH principle was also applied in relation to the pandemic.

As already noted, while the overall security situation in Kabul and Kandahar was reported as relatively stable and “quiet” by beneficiaries and stakeholders alike, in Nangarhar due to the presence of the Taliban and other jihadist groups, OHW faced serious security challenges because of how prominently the project involved women. After two explosions in front of their office and after receiving notification by the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) that they were a target, the organization adopted the strategy to work directly with beneficiaries in the field until NDS’s clearance notice.<sup>98</sup> However, security challenges were not persistent throughout the project period and varied from year to year. For example, the problem just mentioned above existed in the beginning of the project due to the external security challenge. As Taliban activities shifted elsewhere, the security situation in Nangarhar eventually improved. Despite such severe security challenges, War Child Canada was able to carry out the projects as planned.





## Response to COVID-19

Because of the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic across the world and in Afghanistan specifically, the evaluation sought to assess how GAC, War Child Canada and its partners specifically responded to the challenges it created.

The overall impact of the pandemic on project implementation depended on various waves of the pandemic, which affected Afghanistan differently. Unlike elsewhere in the world, the first wave did not strike Afghanistan very hard, particularly remote villages and districts. Beneficiaries from Nangarhar and Kandahar confirmed this in both interviews and focus groups. They were therefore able to continue their work either in the centers or from their homes, taking War Child Canada's COVID-19 protocols into consideration. In Kabul, where anti-contagion restrictions were more strictly implemented, there was an official lockdown that lasted for four months starting March 2020. This said, some of the beneficiaries interviewed during the evaluation reported that project activities were on hold for up to eight months.<sup>99</sup> At the same time, the pandemic also created some new opportunities, for example for women entrepreneurs. Indeed, food-processing entrepreneurs were affected positively during the first wave because they could sell their products, such as jam and pickles, from home when people avoided crowded markets, especially during the month of Ramadan.<sup>100</sup>

Through the CBPMs the project raised awareness about COVID-19. During the official lockdown, WCC staff members were sharing information and messages to partners and beneficiaries via phone and online platforms.<sup>101</sup> As per beneficiaries' accounts, the project team also provided facemasks and hand sanitizer. Most beneficiaries, especially the women entrepreneurs, produced masks themselves. In provinces where beneficiaries continued their work from the centers, the project ensured that COVID-19 protocols of social distancing, wearing facemasks and refreshing the air of indoor spaces were followed. Furthermore, beneficiaries organized their working days and hours in such a manner as to ensure there were not too many people together at any one point in time. During the lockdown, War Child Canada, AWC and OHW staff continued working from home, including for the provision of legal aid and mediation services.<sup>102</sup>

In response to the pandemic, the project had to request a budget adjustment and a no-cost extension from GAC. As already mentioned, this was managed effectively and with some level of flexibility. However, the obligations under the signed contract limited the overall margin of flexibility. This led to some challenging situations. For example, one of the partners noted how the lengthy suspension of activities due to COVID-19 resulted in a suspension of funds and forced the organization to temporarily let some of its staff members go. In relation to this, an informant noted that War Child Canada restarted activities later than other organizations, albeit this might be related to the additional layer of regulations coming from Canada's official response to the pandemic (by which both GAC and War Child Canada would have had to abide).<sup>103</sup> Another key informant lamented War Child Canada's zero tolerance policy towards deadline extension as "inflexible."



# Best Practices, Conclusions and Recommendations



## Best Practices

Project documents and field data attribute a number of good practices that contributed to the successful implementation of the SAFE project.

One of the main strengths of the SAFE project was its careful needs assessment. Interview participants by and large agreed the project had carefully examined their needs and responded to them, which were about access to financial means, illiteracy and the closed mentality of the society towards women and their public role and participation.

Working on GBV was important for those involved in this component of the project, but its overall impact remains unclear. GBV was not highlighted as a need on the same level as the others, but this was mainly due to the limited number of interviews conducted with GBV victims and survivors as part of this evaluation. However, this aspect was highlighted in interviews with staff and stakeholders, and also in the context section. Beneficiaries talked about family tension, sometimes resulting in forms of GBV, including verbal violence, that were caused by financial difficulties or closed mindsets in regard to women's work outside the home or their financial independence. The AIHRC representative confirmed the latter, particularly in villages and districts where, in addition to poverty, limited (and in some cases non-existent) access to legal aid and services increases levels of GBV.<sup>104</sup> Such issues were understood and reflected well in the design of the project, which staff as well as partners, stakeholders and beneficiaries unanimously agreed to be very realistic and in line with the objective situation. That said, for future programming, it is worth considering engaging in this work when community attitudes have already shifted, which might make it easier both for women to denounce violence, and for men not to oppose judicial redress, even through courts.

War Child Canada's outreach to some of the remotest communities, where it targeted the most vulnerable populations, was another project strength. In particular, the project took into consideration the needs of widowed women or otherwise single-headed households (i.e., where the husbands were disabled or had addiction problems). In addition to project reports and beneficiary interviews, a visit to Yaka Toot, a neighborhood located in district nine in northeast Kabul, further confirmed this. During the visit, a beneficiary showed her beauty parlour, a small room in her home where she earns, on average, 15,000 AFN (around 232 CAD) per month to support her family of six children and a disabled husband.

The project's integrated approach has been an important enabling factor in improving women's rights and empowerment. The approach was able to combine legal assistance with psychosocial support, while also providing something "tangible", as highlighted by a key informant,<sup>105</sup> in the form of financial capacity development and aid. Furthermore, community involvement through the CBPMs was a crucial dynamic in not only influencing and impacting the society, but also in ensuring the lasting impact of achieved results.

Last but not least, the project's bottom-up approach, where in particular it engaged male representatives from the onset, was essential in empowering women. This was one of the most sensitive cultural issues the SAFE project faced, and it handled it with much competence. In addition to documents, all interview participants acknowledged this aspect as a significant facilitating factor. In districts and villages in Nangarhar and Kandahar, the project approached the *Malek* to discuss the project and select beneficiaries. The *Malek* then either discussed the matter through the village mosque (considered to be the focal point for community life) and requested families in need to enlist; or he discussed with men (often the head of households) to identify the families in need; or he nominated beneficiaries directly as he was aware of his community's needs (i.e., single headed household, widowed woman or those in difficulty). In addition, the Malek role was important to convince and influence the family heads (often men) to let women join the project. In Kabul, the project approach was the same, but it relied and worked through the *Wakil-e Guzar* (officially appointed

representative of a neighborhood) who played a similar role as Maleks in introducing interlocutors and beneficiaries to the project and vice versa.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The SAFE project implementation overall has been of high quality. War Child Canada was not only able to achieve the intended outcomes; it has also left positive marks beyond these. This includes, for example, the production of role models, such as women entrepreneurs, who are today looked up to by other women and young girls in the larger community who wish to follow in their footsteps. This impact is particularly noteworthy in the conservative provinces of Kandahar and Nangarhar.

The project is characterized by committed and principled professionals who work diligently and persistently with communities and local stakeholders through a variety of locally appropriate mechanisms aimed at producing results towards opening up space for women's protection, participation and their empowerment. War Child Canada's effective communication and coordination with project partners, together with persistent and multi-level M&E efforts, have significantly contributed to successful implementation. All partners have benefited from institutional learning and capacity building as well as the creation of best practices, noted above. As a result, there is a high level of trust at all levels, particularly at the community level, where it is indeed most important.

While there is evidence to illustrate the project's sustainability, such as continued economic activities, networking among partners and beneficiaries, institutional awareness raising (i.e., by the MoJ) and knowledge and awareness retained by individuals and communities on women's rights and protection, the current political fragility and deteriorating security could substantially undermine this aspect. Nevertheless, as pointed out by many beneficiaries and key informants, regardless of what may come next, including a return of the Taliban, their enhanced capacity and sense of empowerment will stay with them.

With the hope that such projects continue in the future, the evaluation recommends the following:

### To GAC:

**Continue long-term financial support to activities promoting women's protection and economic empowerment.** The evaluation confirmed both the perseverance of needs and the relevance of the SAFE project to addressing them. Progress in terms of women's rights and participation will, as such, require long-term efforts, and GAC is ideally placed to do this given its record and prior commitment. Especially at this critical time, long-term funding will ensure organizations and beneficiaries can navigate uncertainty knowing that support will be provided.

**Increase, where possible, flexibility around program adjustments.** Keeping in mind that the Afghan context is rapidly changing, GAC could adopt procedures to facilitate program adjustments when and if necessary. This could be done, for example, by creating a budgetary contingency reserve.



### To War Child Canada and Partners:

**Continue adopting the integrated approach in target locations and consider scaling up into other areas.** The evaluation found this to be relevant, effective and to generate sustainability. The approach should continue to be the basis for War Child Canada's work in the country, and if possible best practices from the SAFE project should be replicated into other locations.

**Review legal aid activities.** There is huge need and therefore a justification for working in support of women seeking justice through courts. Yet, judicial processes remain very complex and dangerous, and very individual experiences. Perhaps War Child Canada could consider creating a separate pathway to change for women supported under these activities, to allow them to come together (where appropriate) and access tailored training and vocational opportunities.

**Develop economic empowerment activities aimed at young men.** This recommendation came from beneficiaries, who underlined the fact that young men are also often marginalized economically and that communities might for this reason become even more supportive of women's participation if this is not seen in competition with opportunities for other demographic groups.

**Empower already established women entrepreneurs.** Some women have grown so much through the project that they can now mentor and support peers, especially in the early stages of creating businesses and in provinces. A training of trainers for women entrepreneurs could further reinforce impact and sustainability, and also allow the project to increase the number of beneficiaries.

**Provide day care services.** This recommendation also comes from beneficiaries, and indeed War Child Canada tested this in another project in the past. Day care services for the children of beneficiaries (during the hours of program activities) would allow women to be freer to focus on their business ventures. This could also increase the impact of the project by promoting unintended positive outcomes for children, their families and communities as a whole.

**Plan for an external mid-term evaluation.** For a project like SAFE, which lasted four years, an external mid-term evaluation could serve to generate relevant and useful insight into the effectiveness of the project, which could then be used to inform ongoing programming.

### To MoWA and MoJ:

**Maintain collaboration with War Child Canada and partners.** MoWA and MoJ have benefited from the work of War Child Canada and its partners, and the sustainability of the project can in turn be enhanced by the collaboration with ministries. MoUs between them could therefore be reviewed to focus on those activities that can be still carried out outside of the project, for example around how manuals from the project could be put to the service of activities planned by the ministries.

**Create an accreditation system for project beneficiaries.** MoWA could create a system of certificates for recognizing the trainings and efforts done by women entrepreneurs, and give them special status in the eyes of other institutions and the communities. MoJ could also do something similar for lawyers and other judicial officials who attended trainings on the EVAW law. This could serve to increase the status of participants and beneficiaries and their confidence to continue in their efforts.



# Endnotes

- 1 *Strengthening Afghanistan's Future through Empowerment (SAFE) Annual Report: April 1, 2020 – March 31, 2021.* War Child Canada, Apr. 2021, pp. 1–55.
- 2 *Contribution Analysis is a theory-based approach for assessing causal questions and inferring causality in real-life programme evaluations. Having identified a specific observable result, Contribution Analysis requires the development of a narrative (based on a project's theory of change), which is assessed against all available evidence in an attempt to reduce uncertainty about the contribution of an intervention to that result.*
- 3 "The Fate of Women's Rights in Afghanistan." *Brookings*, 16 Sept. 2020.
- 4 "Women, Girls, and Afghanistan's Missing Justice after School Attack." *The New Humanitarian*, 10 May 2021.
- 5 *A Way to Go: An Update on Implementation of the Law on Elimination of Violence against Women in Afghanistan.* United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Dec. 2013, pp. 1–54.
- 6 *Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), Violence Against Women In Afghanistan, 6 January 2013, (Biannual report 1391).*
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- 9 "CARE Gender Analysis Afghanistan," CARE International, July 2020
- 10 *Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), Violence Against Women In Afghanistan, January 2013.*
- 11 "Women, Girls, and Afghanistan's Missing Justice after School Attack." *The New Humanitarian*, 10 May 2021.
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- 13 *A Way to Go: An Update on Implementation of the Law on Elimination of Violence against Women in Afghanistan.* United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Dec. 2013, pp. 1–54.
- 14 Saeed, Huma (2020). *Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM): Afghanistan Implementation Report, Open Government Partnership National Action Plan (2017–2019)*
- 15 Hamta, Ahmadullah, et al. *Women in the Formal Justice System: An Assessment.* Afghanistan Public Policy Research Organization, April 2020, pp. 1–18.
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- 21 *CARE Gender Analysis Afghanistan,* CARE International, July 2020.
- 22 Ebtikar, Munazza. *Understanding Men and Masculinities: Towards Creating Egalitarian Gender Relations in Afghan Society.* Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, Dec. 2020, pp. 1–34.
- 23 *Afghanistan Study Group Final Report.* United States Institute of Peace, Feb. 2021, pp. 1–88.
- 24 Myrtilinen, Henri. *Navigating Norms and Insecurity: Men, Masculinities, Conflict and Peacebuilding in Afghanistan.* International Alert; Peace Training and Research Organisation, Nov. 2018.
- 25 *Ibid.*

- 26 Ebtikar, Munazza. *Understanding Men and Masculinities: Towards Creating Egalitarian Gender Relations in Afghan Society*. Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, Dec. 2020, pp. 1–34.
- 27 “Modest Gains at Risk: Afghan Women Face Multi-Dimensional Challenges for Economic Participation.” Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Asia, 20 May 2021.
- 28 Azadmanesh, Shukria, and Ihsanullah Ghafoori. *Women’s Participation in the Afghan Peace Process: A Case Study*. Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit; UN Women, Sept. 2020, pp. 1–70.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 “Amid Peace Talks, Afghan Women’s Rights Hang in the Balance.” USIP, March 2021.
- 31 “You Have No Right to Complain”: Education, Social Restrictions, and Justice in Taliban-Held Afghanistan, Human Rights Watch, 30 June 2020, pp. 1-69; Taliban ‘has not changed,’ say women facing subjugation in areas of Afghanistan under its extremist rule, *The Conversation*, 27 July 2021; Nizaman, Gul Rahim and Noorzai, Roshan, Taliban impost new restrictions on women, media in Afghanistan’s north, *Voice of America*, 9 July 2021.
- 32 *SAFE Project Proposal, Promoting the Advancement of Women and Girls’ Rights and Empowerment in Afghanistan*. Global Affairs Canada, 2015.
- 33 *Project Steering Committee Meeting (Power Point)*. War Child Canada, 20 April 2021.
- 34 *Personal interview, KII project staff, Kabul, 26 June 2021.*
- 35 *Strengthening Afghanistan’s Future through Empowerment (SAFE), Annual Progress Report April 1, 2018 – September 30, 2018*. War Child Canada, 2018.
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- 39 *Personal interview, FGD male CBPM members, Kabul, 27 June 2021.*
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- 42 *Personal interview, KII WCC staff, Kabul, 26 June 2021; KII WCC staff, Kabul, 24 June 2021 and follow up online interview on 12 July 2021.*
- 43 *Personal interview, KII female CBPM from Nangarhar, Kabul, 29 June 2021; KII entrepreneurs from Kandahar, Kabul, 29 June 2021; KII private attorneys, Kabul, 1 July 2021; KII WCC staff, Kabul, 26 June 2021; KII WCC staff, in person and online interview, Kabul, 24 June 2021 and 12 July 2021.*
- 44 *Personal interview, KII WCC staff, Kabul, 26 June 2021.*
- 45 *Bachi bazi, literally meaning boy play, refers to a practice that involves child sexual abuse between older men and adolescent and young boys.*
- 46 *Personal interview, KII private attorneys, Kabul, 2 July 2021.*
- 47 *Personal interview, KII project stakeholder, Kabul, 3 July 2021.*
- 48 *Remote interview, KII project staff, 12 July 2021.*
- 49 *Personal interview, KII private attorney, Kabul, 1 July 2021.*
- 50 *Personal interview, KII private attorney, Kabul, 1 July 2021.*
- 51 *Street children back to school, The UEFA Foundation for Children, May 2019.*
- 52 *Strengthening Afghanistan’s Future through Empowerment (SAFE) Annual Progress Report, February 21st 2017 – March 31st 2018*. War Child Canada, 2018.
- 53 *Project Steering Committee Meeting (Power Point)*. War Child Canada, 20 April 2021.
- 54 *Ibid., page 8.*
- 55 *Personal interview, KII WCC staff, Kabul, 24 June 2021.*
- 56 *Personal interview, KII with woman entrepreneur from Kandahar, Kabul, 29 June 2021.*
- 57 *A few participants referred to their earned skills as “art,” which seemed to give them an additional sense of pride and autonomy.*
- 58 *Personal interview, FGD 2, woman entrepreneur from Nangarhar, Kabul, 30 June 2021.*
- 59 *Personal interview, FGD 4, woman entrepreneur from Kandahar, Kabul, 30 June 2021.*
- 60 *Ibid, another woman entrepreneur from Kandahar, Kabul, 30 June 2021.*
- 61 *Personal interview, KII women entrepreneurs from Kabul, Kabul, 26 June 2021.*
- 62 *Remote interview, KII stakeholder from Kandahar, 28 June 2021.*
- 63 *The name of the beneficiary has been changed to ensure her safety and confidentiality.*
- 64 *Personal interview, FGD 4, woman entrepreneur from Kandahar, Kabul, 30 June 2021.*
- 65 *Project Steering Committee Meeting (Power Point)*. War Child Canada, 20 April 2021.
- 66 *Personal interview, KII, CSO representative from Kabul, Kabul, 24 June 2021.*
- 67 *Remote interview, KII stakeholder from Nangarhar, 28 June 2021.*
- 68 *Personal interview, KII, CSO representative from Kabul, Kabul, 24 June 2021; Strengthening Afghanistan’s Future through Empowerment (SAFE) Annual Progress Report, February 21st 2017 – March 31st 2018*. War Child Canada, 2018.
- 69 *Personal interview, KII, 2 CSO representatives from Kabul, Kabul, 24 June 2021; 2 CSO representatives from Nangarhar, Kabul, 28 June 2021; 2 CSOs representatives from Kandahar, interviewed by e-mail, 8 July 2021.*

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80 Remote interview, KII WCC project staff, 12 July 2021.

81 Personal interview, KII woman entrepreneur from Kandahar, Kabul, 29 June 2021.

82 Personal interview, KII, woman entrepreneur from Kandahar, Kabul, 29 June 2021.

83 Personal interview, KII, woman entrepreneur from Kabul, Kabul, 26 June 2021.

84 Personal interview, KII, female CBPM from Nangarhar, Kabul, 29 June 2021.

85 The name of the beneficiary has been changed to ensure her safety and confidentiality.

86 Personal interview, KII AIHRC, Kabul, 3 July 2021.

87 Personal interview, KII project stakeholder, 3 July 2021.

88 Remote interview, KII WCC project staff, 12 July 2021.

89 Personal interview, KII CSO representative from Kabul, Kabul, 24 June 2021.

90 Personal interview, KII CSO representative from Kabul, Kabul, 24 June 2021.

91 Personal interview, KII implementing project partners, 26 June 2021.

92 Remote interview, KII WCC project staff, 12 July 2021.

93 Personal interview, KII implementing project partner, 26 June 2021.

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95 Remote interview, KII stakeholder, 28 June 2021.

96 Personal interview, KII CSO representative from Kabul, Kabul, 24 June 2021.

97 Remote interview, KII WCC project staff, 12 July 2021.

98 Personal interview, KII implementing partner, Kabul, 26 June 2021.

99 Personal interview, KII beneficiaries from Kabul, Kabul, 26 June 2021.

100 Personal interview, KII implementing project partner, Kabul, 26 June 2021.

101 Remote interview, KII WCC project staff, 12 July 2021.

102 Personal interview, KII project staff, Kabul, 26 June 2021.

103 Personal interview, KII implementing project partner, 26 June 2021.

104 Personal interview, KII AIHRC, Kabul, 3 July 2021.

105 Personal interview, KII WCC project staff, Kabul, 24 June 2021.



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