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STEPHENIE FOSTER

Interviewed by: Robin Matthewman
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INTERVIEW

Q: It's March 11, 2024. I am Robin Matthewman and today I'm interviewing Stephenie Foster for our Afghanistan Project. Stephenie, welcome.

FOSTER: Thank you. Nice to be here.

Background

Q: Just to start off, can you give me a sense of where and when you were born, and a little bit of your life before you started working with the State Department on Afghanistan issues.

FOSTER: I am originally from the San Francisco Bay Area. I started my career as a lawyer and partner at a law firm in San Francisco doing big-case litigation. I was not engaged in international work at that point in my career. I was focused on advancing the role of women in the profession of law and more broadly on gender equality.

Q: How did you come to work in the Department of State?

FOSTER: I came to Washington, DC at the start of President Clinton's administration. My then-husband was recruited to work at the National Democratic Institute (NDI). I came to Washington thinking I would be here for just a few years.

I was first hired by Senator Barbara Mikulski from Maryland as her chief of staff. Senator Mikulski was the first Democratic woman elected to the U.S. Senate in her own right. When she came to the Senate there was one other woman, Senator Nancy Kassebaum from Kansas. Senator Mikulski retired in 2016 as the longest serving woman in Congress. She was a great fighter for Maryland, and for gender equality. She also focused on foreign policy and national security.

I began to work on global women's issues shortly after the 1996 reelection campaign of President Clinton. I was the Director of Women's Outreach for that campaign. Several

months later, I was asked to travel to Yemen to work with a group of women who were running for Parliament.

Q: Was this part of Vital Voices?

FOSTER: It was an NDI [National Democratic Institute] initiative. I returned to Yemen six or seven times after that, mostly for NDI, but also for Vital Voices. That was my entry into working on international affairs or global women's issues, but it wasn't traditional foreign policy. It was exciting and intriguing.

Over the next ten years, I did more and more of those kinds of engagements, working with NDI, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), Vital Voices, and other groups. I worked in many countries with women who were either running for office themselves or working in civil society or political parties to advance the role of women in public life. I also did some work with political parties on how to increase engagement with, and outreach to, women voters and potential women candidates.

I returned to Capitol Hill as chief of staff for Senator Christopher Dodd from Connecticut, who served on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He currently serves as the Special Presidential Advisor for the Americas. In this time period, I was shifting gears from where I had started out in my career to more of an international focus.

Q: When you were working with women who were running for office or thinking about running for office, what were the key things that were involved in that? Was there training and coaching? What other kinds of work were you doing to support them? These were assistance projects of a certain type.

FOSTER: Yes. Many of the projects were funded by USAID, through democracy and governance funding. The goal was to strengthen political parties and train women who were considering running for office.

In general, the training for candidates is fairly standard but also has to be adapted based on the country and political context. It encompasses key skills that women need to run a successful campaign: voter targeting, developing messages, media training, public speaking, constructing budgets, and hiring staff, as well as working with the political party. There are, of course, unique challenges that women candidates face everywhere, like media bias, gender norms around women's role in society, and the reluctance of political parties to take them seriously.

In the United States we have two parties, but most other countries have a parliamentary system where a candidate is placed on a party's electoral list. The candidates nearer the top of a party's list are more likely to be elected. Very often women were put near or at the bottom of these party lists, allowing parties to say they had women candidates but making it very hard for women to be elected.

A lot of the work NDI and other groups did was creating momentum, not just for the women candidates individually, but to ensure that political parties understood the importance of women as candidates and voters. There were many local, ongoing efforts by women activists to ensure that political parties voluntarily put women higher up on party lists and to change laws and policies to mandate women and men be placed on lists more equitably. These efforts all helped propel more women into office.

Q: We don't have a parliamentary system here, so this is all a new world when you first discover it. I want to pick up on Yemen because it is a Muslim country, but it's also more of a traditional country. Did you find that it was hard for political parties to get established when people were more used to working on a clan or tribal basis?

FOSTER: When I started working in Yemen in the late 1990s, there were already three major political parties: the General People's Congress (the GPC), which was the party in power; the Socialist Party with roots in South Yemen, when South Yemen was in the Soviet orbit; and an Islamist party.

Yemeni women were interested in pushing institutions to be more responsive to them and were identifying the laws and policies that should be changed or should reflect the reality of their daily lives. There were a number of very effective and outspoken women activists across the country who wanted to run for office themselves or who were very active in civil society. As an example, Tawakkol Karman, a Yemeni women's rights activist received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 for her role in leading a pro-democracy protest movement. Several years later, there was a national dialogue leading to a revised draft constitution. Ms. Karman was involved and almost 30 percent of the delegates to the drafting convention were women.

In the democracy promotion work that I've done—and this is relevant to Afghanistan—it is critical to listen to the women and men on the ground because this work is about them. It's about helping them to develop or deepen their capacity and skills so they can advocate for the changes they view as important in a way that is context specific.

Q: Getting back to the question of when and how you joined the State Department, what happened next?

FOSTER: I went to Afghanistan in the fall of 2011 for the International Foundation for Electoral Systems as part of a team evaluating the effectiveness of the Afghan Independent Election Commission (the IEC) and making recommendations to strengthen that institution. My task was to look at the IEC's gender work. The IEC had an office focused on how to increase the number of women voters by conducting media campaigns and doing outreach. There was a need to ensure that polling places had appropriate places for women to vote since in most parts of Afghanistan, women and men did not vote in the same room.

That was how I started working in Afghanistan. I was there for a month or so, and while there, I visited friends at Embassy Kabul for dinner. We were talking about the

gender-focused work I was doing and that started the conversation about me working for the State Department.

Q: You came back to Washington. And what happened next?

FOSTER: When I was in Kabul in the fall of 2011, I was asked if I would come to Afghanistan and work on issues around women and gender at the embassy. I said yes but didn't think much further about that conversation. Several months later, I got a call or an email from Eileen O'Connor, who was Director of Communications and Public Diplomacy at Embassy Kabul, telling me that a position had been created to do outreach to women and civil society organizations and asking if I was interested. I was a little stunned.

For background, this was during the civilian surge and there was a concerted effort to get more people to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan. In 2010, Congress granted the Department and USAID hiring authorities for temporary civil service employees. At State, these were called 3161s, for the section in authorizing legislation. These jobs were created to address critical needs at the time. My expertise was working on women's issues and gender equality. So, that's how I started working at the State Department.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

FOSTER: When I was offered the position, Ryan Crocker was the ambassador. When I got to post, Jim Cunningham was taking over as ambassador.

Q: Tell me about the job and what you were able to do.

FOSTER: This job did not exist before I arrived. As I understood it, the embassy wanted to do everything that it could to systematize its outreach to women and women's groups, and civil society across the country. My job was to figure out how to do that.

Having said that, I want to be clear that there was a tremendous amount of work focused on women and girls already being done by staff at the embassy, at USAID, by people in the military. The Department of State and USAID had gender-focused programs and some gender advisors. The military had female engagement teams (FETs). teams of women undertaking tasks that would be difficult for their male counterparts in the cultural context. In Afghanistan, the FETs interacted with local women.

The idea behind the position I filled was to have a person whose sole focus, on a full time basis, was to systematically do the work of outreach and public diplomacy focused on women and girls, and gender.

I was at Embassy Kabul for about a year and a half. During that time, I created an infrastructure to systematize more of the work and focused on the issue of knowledge management. Because Embassy Kabul was in a conflict zone, many Foreign Service Officers only stayed a year. People do great work and then they leave. Information gets

lost in the transfer of responsibility. I worked to create systems to ensure the continuation of the good work on gender taking place. This included the development of a mission-wide gender strategy.

Q: You met a lot of Afghan women and activists, and NGOs during that time.

FOSTER: Yes. I spent a tremendous amount of time meeting people and learning about what was going on that affected women and girls. The Embassy staff—both Americans and Afghans—had a lot of contacts already but we were able to expand that pool. I traveled to meet people around the country, in Kabul of course, but also in Herat, Mazar, Kandahar, Spin Boldak, and Jalalabad.

Q: Very often, the public diplomacy section of an embassy is very important in ensuring that we're able to make contact with a wider range of people. Could you summarize what you think was important for all these agencies and sections to keep in mind as they did their day-to-day work in order to make sure it was working well for women?

FOSTER: In Afghanistan, and frankly everywhere, it is critical to understand the differential impact of laws, policies, and gender norms on men and women, and boys and girls. This type of gender analysis is foundational. It makes such a difference. It's also important to ask questions and listen.

Q: Can you give me an example?

FOSTER: Education is a perfect example. In the U.S., we assume that everyone can go to school. In Afghanistan, educational opportunities increased dramatically for women and girls after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. The Taliban banned girls from going to school when they were in power in the late 1990s. This is true again today under Taliban rule, with girls only being allowed to go to primary school.

Even after 2001, when the Taliban fell and education was more widely available, girls and young women faced barriers that young men and boys did not face. For example, many families hesitated to send their daughters to school due to safety issues. This was particularly true at the university level where families did not want to send girls to university unless there was a women's dorm or some chaperoned housing option. Families wanted their daughters to be in a secure place and not living on their own. They did not have this same concern about their sons.

To address this barrier, we worked to ensure that there were women's dorms available at universities and that they were in good condition and secure. It was a good example of the Embassy collaborating with the military and USAID on a project. The Embassy's public affairs officer, now-Ambassador Jean Manes, really spearheaded this work. Jean and I visited a couple of women's dorms that were in not great shape, so we worked to find funding to make sure the dorms had the types of facilities needed for young women to be able to learn and focus on their studies.

Another example is the work we did with the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF). AUAF is a four-year university conducted all in English. It had international affiliations, such as with Stanford Law School and various business schools, to educate the next generation of Afghans. AUAF's first class of students was overwhelmingly male. In order to rectify that imbalance, we looked at what the barriers were to young women being accepted to AUAF. One of those was that a lot more young Afghan men were fluent in English because they had more access to education under the Taliban.

The Embassy's public diplomacy section, along with others, sponsored scholarships to AUAF for young women. The scholarships were for five years—not four years—because that gave young, qualified women an extra year to sharpen English language and computer skills. That extra year helped young women be more successful. Before the fall of Kabul, the AUAF classes were almost equally balanced between young women and men. As an aside, AUAF still educates many hundreds of students in Afghanistan and among the diaspora, online and in person in Qatar.

Q: Did you work with groups that worked on abusive situations, shelters, and other kinds of services?

FOSTER: We did. Afghanistan had (and still has) a high rate of domestic abuse and gender-based violence. There were some women's shelters in place, but not enough to meet the need. There were other challenges. First, in some circumstances, spouses were separated from each other in abusive situations, but the standard protocols to ensure the abuser did not know the woman's location weren't known or followed. That meant educating people about the importance of that practice. Second, the laws weren't that strong and the prosecutors who wanted to take action were often stymied. Those were continual issues. The Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (or INL) and USAID did a lot to strengthen the legal and judicial system in this regard.

Q: Outside of Kabul, did you find that people were willing to send their daughters to college if there was financial support and this kind of support?

FOSTER: Yes, if there were women's dorms or safe places to live. Many parents were open to it as long as these young women were in a safe and protected environment. As I mentioned, we worked on ensuring there were women's dorms at the university level across the country.

At the secondary school level, the Embassy also supported the School of Leadership Afghanistan (or SOLA), which was a boarding school for young women, again with classes conducted completely in English. That school is now in Rwanda. SOLA was very much a model. The school worked with parents and families across almost every province of Afghanistan to increase their comfort level with sending their daughter to secondary school in Kabul. There were always a tremendous number of applicants to go to SOLA.

Q: You were there from June 2012 to September 2013. Then you came back to the Department and you worked in the Department on a broader range of issues.

FOSTER: Yes. I was the Senior Advisor and Counselor in the Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues (S/GWI), working directly for Cathy Russell, the Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues. I oversaw a wide variety of our work, including our work on Afghanistan. I also oversaw our work in the Western Hemisphere, Africa, Europe, political participation, economic participation, and women, peace and security. I kept up with Afghanistan, but not with the same intensity as when I was at the embassy. The person in S/GWI who worked on Afghanistan issues was excellent.

Q: For how long were in the GWI office?

FOSTER: I left at the end of the Obama Administration.

Q: What were you doing, as Biden came into office and announced, in April of 2021, that we would be withdrawing all troops from Afghanistan, by September 11? Where were you working then?

FOSTER: After I left the Obama Administration, beginning in 2017, I co-founded a firm called Smash Strategies, working with corporations, non-profits, philanthropists, and multilateral institutions on how to integrate gender into their strategic work. That's what I was doing when President Biden announced the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

One of the other co-founders, Susan Markham, had been the Senior Gender Coordinator at USAID during the Obama Administration. We each had worked a lot on women's leadership and gender equality, both in the U.S. and globally. She had been at the National Democratic Institute, which is where I met her, and we worked together, both in and out of government. We co-authored a lot of articles around gender, economics, peace and security, political participation, and feminist foreign policy.

After Kabul fell, we wrote a piece about Afghan women that was published in *Just Security* in November 2021. As part of the research, we interviewed Afghan women and men about their perspectives at that moment in time. We wrote that as attention shifted away from evacuation, the international community, including the U.S. government, needed to learn lessons from the past 20 years and understand what is important to Afghan women going forward.

I think that article and the fact I had worked at Embassy Kabul led the Secretary and his team to ask if I would come back to the Department and work on Afghan relocation. I know it was a priority to increase our focus on women and girls, and adding a position in the office that dealt with Afghan relocation was one way to get the work done. Secretary Blinken was committed to this effort and the Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues was advocating within the Department for dedicating more resources to this effort.

Q: Were there any particular parts of this need to focus on women and girls, core things that you were advocating in the article?

FOSTER: The key idea was that Afghan women had borne the brunt of the Taliban regime's policies and that the international community needed to hear from them about their experiences, needs, and expectations in the months and years after the fall of Kabul. While many Afghan women had fled the country, or wanted to leave, almost 40 million Afghans remained in Afghanistan, at least half of them women or girls. We argued that the United States and other donors must listen to women — those who have left, those who wish to leave, and those who remain — to inform policy moving forward. Ensuring that the voices of those impacted by U.S. foreign policy decisions is critically important and one of the key principles of feminist foreign policy, about which we had written in the past.

Q: At what point did you start working with the offices that were doing relocation that came to be called CARE?

FOSTER: I started in early December 2021. The Secretary's Chief of Staff, Suzy George, contacted me in November 2021, shortly after the article was published. Things were finalized very quickly for me to rejoin the Department in the Office of the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, or CARE. When I started, Ambassador Beth Jones headed the CARE office.

That November, the Secretary created two positions. One was the position I took as a Senior Advisor on Women and Girls in CARE, which was then a task force. The other position was the Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls and Human Rights, which was filled by Rina Amiri. Rina is still at the Department in that position, which is focused on policy and is situated in the Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues.

Q: Did we have Afghan women and girls in bases at that point?

FOSTER: Yes. When I rejoined the Department, relocation efforts had been going on for about four months. There were women and girls who had already been relocated to the United States. There were women and girls in third countries at military bases or other facilities called "processing platforms." They were at various stages of the interviews and other aspects of the vetting leading up to relocation in the United States. From the very beginning to today, there have been Afghan women and girls as well as men and boys being relocated.

Q: This position and this work is the main focus of our interview today. So I'm going to let you go ahead and describe what the situation was and what the work was that you did during your time at CARE from, I believe it was December 2021 to March 2023. If you can give an overview of what you found when you got there and what you started to institute.

FOSTER: Similar to the situation when I went to work at Embassy Kabul, this position was new and no one else had ever held it. There was a commitment by the Secretary to focus on Afghan women and girls, both those in the relocation process and those remaining in Afghanistan. Again, like in Kabul, people at the Department and across the U.S. government were working on how to relocate women and girls safely but there was no one person with this portfolio. There were some lists of women activists and leaders that were fed into relocation efforts. It was up to me to figure out how to create systems within the Department to streamline our efforts to relocate Afghan women and girls.

Very early in my tenure, I visited many of the platforms, both in the United States and overseas. This helped me see and assess conditions on the ground. During those visits, I met with Afghan women at each platform, which helped shape my view of the issues they faced and their needs. Based on those visits, I developed guidance for embassies and consulates for how they should think about protection needs for women and girls arriving from Afghanistan. This was sent in an ALDAC (all posts and offices) cable across the entire Department.

Q: Just to lay the backdrop, we had Afghans in relocation in a variety of ways. We had people in the United States. We had people in Doha, in Qatar. We had people around the world who had gotten out of Afghanistan and we have people coming out of Afghanistan still. So there was a whole range of living situations that people were in.

FOSTER: Right after the fall of Kabul in August 2021, about 75,000 Afghans resettled in the U.S. Since the initial wave, and at the time of this interview, there have been at least another 10,000 or 12,000 Afghans who have been relocated here. Afghans came to the U.S. through different pathways: humanitarian parolees; holders of Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs); or refugees. Those with SIVs had worked for the U.S. government. A large number of these Afghans came with their immediate families.

When I first got to the CARE office, relocation had been going on for about four months. Initially, in August 2021, many Afghans came to the U.S. after a brief stop at a military facility overseas, called a "lily pad." The official lily pads were in Qatar, Kosovo, and Germany.

Private organizations had also arranged flights from Kabul. Many of the people on those private flights ended up in the United Arab Emirates, at a place called Emirates Humanitarian City (EHC) or in Albania. These were not official lily pads and were run by those governments. Thousands of Afghans ended up in these places. As a result, the CARE office had to work with the Emirati and Albanian governments on establishing relocation processes even though these were not U.S. government-run facilities. A lot of Afghan women leaders—activists, Parliamentarians, judges—ended up at EHC or in Albania.

From August 2021 to February 2022, when Afghans came to the U.S., they were temporarily housed on a U.S. military base, also called a "safe haven." There were eight bases used in various parts of the country as safe havens and one civilian conference

center in Northern Virginia. After February 2022, the safe havens were phased out and Afghans were relocated directly from the lily pads overseas to the U.S.

At both lily pads and at safe havens, Afghans filled out paperwork for social security numbers and immigration and underwent medical tests. Once at a safe haven, they were also navigating the process of where they would be resettled in the U.S., so they could begin to plan for their new life in the United States.

Q: At the bases and in the lily pads, what were you ensuring was in place? Did the women and men of families get separated? What were the important considerations?

FOSTER: Unfortunately, some families were separated as they left Afghanistan—as you recall, the airport was chaotic. Throughout the relocation process, staff in the CARE office and at other U.S. government agencies worked very hard to reunite families. It was and is very nuanced and complex.

In terms of the lily pads and safe havens, families were housed together, although there were separate housing facilities for single men and for single women (or single women with children). In some cases, there were separate areas of the cafeteria for women, but mostly, everyone used the same cafeteria facilities. There were women-only spaces at many safe havens or lily pads, but not all. These spaces made it easier for women to communicate with each other and with staff, and it gave the women a safe space to ask questions about their day-to-day experiences and also about life in the U.S.

It was important that people working at platforms understood the Afghan context. Not every base had a cultural or gender advisor. The Department of Defense has a cadre of gender advisors and when they were deployed, it made a difference.

As an example, the bases often held town halls, but mostly men attended, and when women did attend, they often were not called on or did not speak. Men also controlled cell phones in most families, making it harder for women to get information about relocation or even what was going on at the platform. That also assumes women could read. Literacy rates are not high overall in Afghanistan, and they are markedly lower for women. There needed to be other ways to communicate with women.

When there was a domestic or family violence incident, the staff (lawyers, MPs, or other officials) often approached the issues based on legal norms and practices of the United States. Many of the women did not want to report abuse because they feared their family would be sent back to Afghanistan. Also, most of the women were not the principal applicant for an SIV or refugee status. They perceived their relocation status was more tenuous and tied to not upsetting their husbands, even if their husbands were abusers. Family pressure to stay in an abusive relationship also played a role. Conversations with women had to be non-judgmental but include discussions of the U.S. legal framework and their rights.

As it became clear that relocation was going to continue over time, it was important to develop a standardized set of protection guidelines that would be used and usable. At the U.S. safe havens, there were some excellent staff from across the government doing protection work. Then that ended after February of 2022 when Afghans came directly to the U.S. from overseas. Developing and strengthening protection guidelines took some time since the State Department and other agencies were involved.

Q: Some people were in temporary situations for a long time. Were you in the teams that CARE also tried to set up schooling preparation, learning English or any of the other kinds of things to help people in advance to be ready once they got to the States?

FOSTER: Yes, but this was more platform specific. One challenge was that we collectively assumed that relocation would move faster than it did, and that Afghans would not be at these lily pads or safe havens for very long. As a result, initially there wasn't as much focus on education either for the children or adults. This changed as it became clear that some Afghans were going to be at lily pads in particular for longer than anyone thought. The need was great. The challenge was how to get enough resources to address the need.

It was different at each lily pad or safe haven; it was a bit of a patchwork. In Qatar, for example, the platform was run by the U.S. military, but the Qatari government did provide some resources for children's education and a small number of English language classes. In Albania, there were more classes and activities because there were more outside NGOs and groups involved. There were also different approaches at the safe havens. At Fort Dix in New Jersey, for example, there were classes for children to help get them ready for school in the U.S.

Of course, there were lots of individual cases that came up all the time. They made their way to the CARE office and the cases of women and girls came to me. We learned about them directly, sometimes through the Hill, sometimes through advocacy groups, family members, or other actors. We worked with NGOs that were in contact with Afghan women at every stage of the relocation process. You think about it—people fled their homes with very little and were traumatized. Understanding these dynamics was very important.

There was a sense (and it was reality in many cases) that there was a void of information available about relocation. In order to address that need, I started a bi-weekly call open to NGOs and other individuals working with Afghan women and girls. I would always have a high-level official talk about their portfolio, including Ambassador Beth Jones (the head of CARE), Special Representative Tom West, Special Envoy Rina Amiri, Chief of Staff Suzy George and other high ranking officials from Consular Affairs, the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, or Homeland Security.

There were always lots of questions. Why is it taking so long? How does the SIV process work? What's going on with refugee status? Why isn't this particular group coming to the

United States? Is there a sufficient focus on protection? How can families be reunited? Why is the definition of family narrow?

This type of outreach helped us get the word out about what we were doing. People didn't have to agree with everything we were doing, but they heard directly from US government officials. In addition, it created and strengthened relationships that we had with those groups so they could come to us with particular cases or things that they heard. People will say different things to an NGO contact than to a U.S. government official. Sometimes what we learned was a concern to be addressed; sometimes it wasn't completely accurate. Either way, these were very helpful conversations. This call started off with ten people and when I left, we had around 150 people on the call list.

Q: These issues that you mentioned they were raising are very important. I want to do a deeper dive into that. One of the issues that occurred as we were trying to bring people to the United States was that a prioritization needed to be established. It appears that people who were direct hires of the U.S. government had a higher priority than people who might have been involved in grants and programs. Am I capturing that correctly?

FOSTER: Yes. For context, Afghans came to the U.S. as humanitarian parolees; as holders of Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs); or as refugees. Those with SIVs had worked for the U.S. government in some capacity.

The majority of Afghans who initially got themselves to the Kabul airport and on planes came to the U.S. on humanitarian parole. Some of them were SIV holders. Some got on planes even though they didn't know where they were going. As a result, Afghans ended up in far-flung places like Iceland, South Korea, and Mexico.

Q: Ukraine too, I think.

FOSTER: Yes, some Afghans ended up in Ukraine. There was a group in Kyiv and the CARE office did not find out about them until Russia invaded Ukraine and Embassy Kyiv asked what to do.

After the initial phase of relocation, humanitarian parole was phased out as a pathway. There was a lot of push from the Hill and from within the Executive branch to ensure that the people who worked directly for the U.S. and were eligible for SIVs were prioritized for relocation over others, who were eligible for refugee status.

There was a gender dimension to this prioritization. When I got to CARE, I asked for sex-disaggregated data, that is how many men and women were SIV holders and how many were refugees. On SIVs, the first answer was that half were women or girls. But when you looked closer, the numbers were actually very different. The overall breakdown was 50-50 but the overwhelming number of SIV principal applicants (around 90%) were men. Understanding this is important because the principal applicant is the person who has the agency or power in terms of the family and those relationships. Family members receive an SIV as well, but that visa is dependent on the principal applicant's status. The

people compiling data were conflating these two data points and missing an important part of the picture.

It makes sense that such a large percentage of SIV principal applicants were men. While there were Afghan women who worked for the civilian agencies at the Embassy, there were very few Afghan women who worked for the Department of Defense. Battlefield interpreters were overwhelmingly men. People who worked at Provincial Reconstruction Teams were overwhelmingly men because they were out in the middle of Afghanistan working with the military. More men had excellent English language skills, given the educational structure, and families did not want their daughters working in these kinetic situations surrounded by men.

Conversely, many more of the Afghans who were referred to the refugee program were women who would not have qualified for an SIV. They did not work directly for the U.S. government. They worked for the Afghan government, they were prosecutors or judges, they worked for NGOs or universities. We knew them, and often funded their NGOs with grants, but they did not work for us. This was also a sharp gender differential.

There was criticism from outside groups, from Afghan women, and from the Hill, about why we weren't relocating more Afghan women. At the same time, the Hill also pushed CARE to prioritize relocating SIVs. These were competing imperatives, and the challenge was to prioritize who gets on an airplane. That was hard for the people who manifested Afghans on planes because there were so many people on the Hill, the Executive Branch, the White House, the State Department, USAID, or DoD, saying "manifest this family or group" and vouching for how critical they were.

Q: And the challenge from those women, or those people who were in the refugee status, was there a limit on numbers or just bandwidth?

FOSTER: The system is complicated, frustrating and opaque. US Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) processing takes a minimum of 12-18 months in a best-case scenario. Further, a person is not eligible for USRAP until she or he arrives in a third country. This is true for anyone claiming refugee status from any country, not just Afghans.

There are certainly bandwidth issues. The capacity to process refugees is challenging because it involves lots of resources. Those responsible for refugee processing are working with applicants from numerous countries. They face competing imperatives, and the world is not static. In the midst of these efforts around Afghanistan, Russia invaded Ukraine and there were thousands of Ukrainian refugees.

Further, there are numerous steps to vetting a person seeking to come to the U.S. Not only do those steps take time, but when people flee a war, they often don't have the necessary documents and records. Some Afghans destroyed any evidence they worked with the international community. That made things more difficult.

Q: Can you describe what P1 and P2 are?

FOSTER: There are different ways people can get referred to the US Refugee Admissions program. The two referral pathways relevant to Afghans are P1 and P2 referrals. The P means "priority." These referrals are not visa applications, but essentially are an entry point to USRAP once a person is able to leave Afghanistan. There is no self-referral.

A current U.S. government employee at a senior level can make a P1 or P2 referral; the most senior person at a U.S.-based media organization or NGO can make a P2 referral. A P1 referral was relevant for many women because there had to be compelling protection concerns for that referral category.

The people eligible for these referrals are often people the US government official knows personally. But, given the length of time that the US was in Afghanistan and the staff turnover, there had to be ways to refer someone to the refugee program without personally knowing that individual. The solution was to allow referrals as long as the person being referred belonged to a group or category known to the U.S. The groups most relevant to women and girls were prosecutors, judges, parliamentarians, members of women's or girls' athletic teams, computer cyber teams. Many of these were people we worked with in Afghanistan or were grantees of USAID or State Department programs.

I hope that you can talk with someone from the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (or PRM) because PRM manages USRAP. I don't want to speak for them, but it's a very challenging situation. I was on a lot of phone calls where PRM staff explained the nuances of the system and how long the process takes from start to finish.

Q: It sounds like it takes several years before they can come to the United States.

FOSTER: Yes, at least several years. Overall, refugee processing takes a minimum of 12-18 months in a best-case scenario. This is true not just for Afghans. Also, as difficult as it is to be in Afghanistan, you're leaving your country and your support systems for months or years, and you have to figure out how to support yourself.

Q: I understand from one of my Phase I interviews that there was a decision made to bring individuals in as refugees rather than parolees. But at the time the decision was made, it wasn't clear that this could slow down the relocation process. The U.S. CIS (Citizenship and Immigration Service), the part of DHS that does those interviews, has a slower process for several reasons. I don't know if there was any progress on how CIS operated for Afghans while you were working in CARE.

FOSTER: This was a continuing issue. For vetting, the CIS teams needed to go out to the field and there were resource and logistical questions. How do you get the right team together to go to where the group of Afghans are? There were always challenges because there were numerous places with groups of Afghans, such as Camp as Sayliyah in Qatar, Albania, Kosovo, the UAE. At the same time, there were Afghans in other places like Mexico or Spain. How do they balance all those needs?

I was stunned that there was one Afghan woman judge and her family who ended up in Iceland and another in South Korea. How did they fit into this prioritization? It is CIS's job, so I'm respectful of their competing needs of ensuring proper vetting of people wanting to come to the U.S., and the need to process large numbers of applications.

Having said all of that, it was very hard to explain the process and these nuances to Afghans in the midst of a crisis. If you think about it, most Americans don't understand the roles that these various government agencies have in our immigration and refugee processing systems. If someone is facing a crisis, traumatized, and fearful for their life, and you say, "this is what the State Department does, this is what DHS does," they get frustrated. I often felt Afghans thought we were trying to hand off responsibility, but the reality is that our systems are complicated.

Q: You said the first six months there was a lot of work on this setting up of the systematic protection guidelines for the various platforms. Were there other lines of work that you were doing then or after this?

FOSTER: It took about a year to get one uniform set of protection guidelines in place for the overseas platforms. At the U.S. safe havens, a group led by DHS and HHS had developed a set of protection guidelines, which were very good, but they weren't issued until late December 2021, about two months before the last domestic safe haven closed. At the last remaining safe haven, in Northern Virginia, there was an excellent DHS officer who took every situation seriously and made such a difference.

We had a weekly call with this officer, so that as Afghans were coming to the U.S., we could coordinate around potential cases coming from lily pads overseas where there might be a protection concern. It wasn't just where there were allegations of abuse, but we flagged when we saw a very large age gap in married couples because early, forced and child marriage was a concern. We had heard stories of forced marriages at the Kabul airport and about documents being falsified to show a girl was over 18.

These calls gave her a heads up so she could assess the situation herself and, if needed, take action as soon as the Afghans got to the Northern Virginia site. These calls ended when that final safe haven closed in February 2022.

At the lily pads, it was a matter of having more consistent guidelines and making sure they were implemented. We wanted to create a strong framework but not have a document that was so long and in the weeds that staff would not use it.

I was very aware that Afghan women were scared to report abuse because of their fears that their family would be sent back to Afghanistan. At the lily pads, it was important to separate the abusers from the person subject to abuse, but also to understand what she wanted. (And, yes, some of those abused were men and boys, but very few.) What action did she want to take? Did she understand her rights and what would happen? Did she understand that domestic abuse was considered a crime in the U.S.?

From the perspective of being in Washington, you know that people are doing the work on the ground and are juggling many responsibilities and needs. All you can do is provide a framework that addresses issues as well as talk them through the options. We faced some very difficult situations. Luckily, I had visited the lily pads and some of the safe havens, and I had a sense of things. I could visualize where something had happened and what was being discussed.

A second line of effort was the bi-weekly meeting that we did with NGOs, and it grew to a large number of people who attended. We also did outreach to networks, including the U.S. - Afghan Women's Council.

The calls and outreach were helpful as we got to talk to people about what the USG was doing. We were able to develop or deepen relationships so people felt comfortable emailing or calling us. From those relationships, we learned about conditions at platforms or in relocation overall. We learned about cases where there seemed to be a problem and what Afghan women were facing on a daily basis. We learned about unintended consequences of decisions—like holding town halls where Afghan men dominated the conversation with little effort to reach out to women, or the lack of women-only spaces, or the lack of sanitary products.

Strengthening these connections and doing targeted outreach to women's groups and advocates for Afghan women was part of the impetus for the creation of this job. At the very beginning of the evacuation/relocation, right after the fall of Kabul, people at the State Department were inundated. They received literally thousands of emails and calls. They did not have enough capacity to talk to people or answer emails.

I made it a point to answer as many emails and calls as possible. There was an excellent young staff person in CARE, Grace Mason, who helped me, being a key point of contact and responding to the inquiries. I could not have done the job without her. It is very time intensive to respond, and it can be very emotional.

The third line of effort was talking with other parts of the State Department, other agencies, and with the Hill talking about what we were doing and continuing to advocate for a focus on women and girls, a focus on collecting sex-disaggregated data so that we understood who was coming through the various platforms, what their needs might be, who they were, and using that information to help guide the work of the office. Near the end of the time I was in CARE, I spearheaded a "protection convening" to capture lessons learned from staff at safe havens and lily pads. Officials from State, USAID, DHS, HHS, and DoD participated.

Q: Was there some legislation that would have made the job easier if you could have gotten it through?

FOSTER: It would have been helpful to have a legislative mandate to collect and publicly report sex-disaggregated data across all of the various ways people came to the U.S. (by

immigration status and by location). It also would have helped to have legislative clarity around prioritizing the relocation of Afghan women—whether they came here as refugees or as SIV holders.

The Afghan Adjustment Act was being considered throughout my time in CARE. It would have provided more clarity and regularized more of these pathways for Afghans, especially those who came under humanitarian parole. In some versions of the bill, it called for gender analysis and gender data. But in general, it wasn't very specific around women.

There was a coalition called AfghanEvac that lobbied for this bill and focused on interpreters and people the military worked with in Afghanistan. They did help us some on gender, but it wasn't their primary focus. Their work was helpful to women in that they made sure that information about various pathways was available; they worked on family reunification and pushing for a better and clearer system.

Q: Did you work with the resettlement agencies here in the States?

FOSTER: Not really. I know they were understaffed, with their resources cut in the last Administration, and were overwhelmed. The PRM Bureau is the primary interlocutor with resettlement agencies.

Q: But there wasn't any need for or opportunity to provide guidelines on gender to help them as they did their work.

FOSTER: Yes, there was a need for that. Staff at PRM dealt with resettlement agencies and I believe they had a gender focus in that work.

CARE worked on relocation, not resettlement. It is confusing because one part of the State Department is responsible for relocation and another for resettlement. I tried to keep on top of what was happening in resettlement, for awareness, but I didn’t have any direct responsibility.

Q: Can you define the difference between relocation and resettlement?

FOSTER: The work CARE did was on relocation; getting people out of Afghanistan and to the United States. Resettlement is what happens once the person or family is in the U.S.—where you live, what type of housing you are allotted, enrolling your kids in school, getting healthcare, figuring out how to go to the bank. It's a very distinct line.

It is also confusing for the Afghans, as you develop relationships as they are coming to the U.S. and get to know them. They then have a resettlement question, but you send them to a different office. We had good relationships with PRM, so we could make that connection easily, but I am sure that was frustrating.

Q: Are there still a lot of Afghans in Qatar?

FOSTER: Yes. The State Department took over the platform in Qatar, Camp as Saliyah, in September 2023.

Q: They're still coming. There's still a constant attempt to help vulnerable people get out?

FOSTER: Yes. There is a commitment to do this over a number of years.

Q: Anything else that you think would be important to highlight about your time working with CARE?

FOSTER: This effort was unprecedented. We were able to relocate a lot of people. We helped both Afghans who were well known to us and Afghans we didn't know.

I remember one case where a woman had been separated from her developmentally disabled daughter at the Kabul Airport. Her daughter was in her 20s but could not travel alone.

We had to figure out how to get her a passport; how she would travel; who would accompany her from Afghanistan. Once all of the paperwork was done and she was able to fly, technically, she was to go from Qatar to the safe haven in Northern Virginia. We made the case that there was no need for her to make this additional stop in Northern Virginia and that given her situation, it could be an additional trauma. We were able to get her directly to her mother in California. But, besides her family, I am not sure anyone else ever learned about our effort. We didn't talk about it publicly because we did not want to breach privacy or make it harder for this family.

Q: I was going to ask you if you had a favorite story, so I guess that might be it. What were we able to do to help them?

FOSTER: We really made the case for her to travel directly to California, where her mother was located. Otherwise, she would have landed at Dulles airport, gone through all of the processing by DHS, and been transferred by bus to the National Conference Center in Leesburg, Virginia. I argued there was no need for her to do that: to what end? The reason that Afghans went to safe havens—in part—was to fill out needed paperwork and attend orientation sessions about life in the U.S.

She didn’t need a green card for a job because she wasn't going to be working. So we were able to argue, successfully, that when she landed at Dulles, all the various agencies would make sure the paperwork was done correctly, and then she got on a commercial flight to her mother. This is a good example of understanding that while the rules are important, some situations call for injecting common sense into the system.

Q: I like the story. Thank you very much. We appreciate this window into what it was like as the relocation, resettlement started to take hold.

One line of work that I know is very important was the female judges. Tell me what that issue was and what you were able to do.

FOSTER: By 2021, there were about 300 women judges in Afghanistan. A lot of them had been part of State Department or USAID programs to strengthen the judicial system. Many of the women judges, but not all, fled Afghanistan with their families under the threat of death. One of the women had been nominated for the Afghan Supreme Court but never confirmed. She was often called the Ruth Bader Ginsburg of Afghanistan.

We spoke earlier about how people left Afghanistan right after the fall of Kabul. Some left on official government flights; some left on private charters. Many women judges left Kabul in early Fall 2021 via private charter and ended up at Emirates Humanitarian City (or EHC) in Abu Dhabi. Women judges were in other places too: Poland, Spain, Greece, Italy, Germany, Iceland, Korea. Two of the most prominent ended up in Poland.

Many of the women judges were very active with an international network called the International Association of Women Judges (IAWJ). The past president of IAWJ lived in Vermont. She had served for five years as a judge in the War Crimes Chamber of Bosnia and Herzegovina and had organized legal training seminars in Vermont for women judges from Afghanistan. She was close to Senator Leahy, who has since retired, but who was a senior senator very active in foreign affairs and appropriations. He and his staff became engaged in these cases and wanted to know why these judges were not yet here.

Everything took time, often more time than you could imagine. CARE and PRM spent an inordinate amount of time on these cases.

One of the challenges was that they were geographically dispersed. There was intense interest in the two most prominent women who were in Poland, including the RBG of Afghanistan. But others were in countries where they could be vetted more easily. The biggest group was at EHC. A few of them would get through the vetting and leave, but unfortunately, a lot of the more prominent women did not get through the vetting quickly.

Second, some of the judges were cleared to come to the U.S., but their entire families weren't at the same time. We had to figure out what was going on and we weren’t privy to CIS’s vetting information. Asking about their status only got us so far.

The women, especially the more well-known women, often had a teaching position or a fellowship at a university in the U.S. already lined up. They had something in the U.S. to anchor them here, but that isn't how CIS makes decisions about clearing someone to come to the U.S. It's based on completing their vetting process. This was a good example of having to navigate the system on behalf of these judges. I worked on their cases for the entire time I was in CARE.

Q: 150 sounds like a more manageable number than 10,000 or 100,000. Were you able to make headway?

FOSTER: Yes, but we encountered lots of issues along the way. Some ended up in third countries where DHS initially determined that they didn't have an avenue to the U.S. because the country was considered safe. The problem was that these women did not choose to go to a country like Spain or Italy. They got on an airplane in Kabul, and they ended up where the plane did. It's my recollection that this determination was reversed but I can't recall the exact details.

There were all of these challenges overlaid with the fact that there was intense interest from the Hill, the IAWJ, and the media. It was very hard to manage this situation knowing, first of all, there were some things we didn't know, and secondly, some things we couldn't disclose due to privacy concerns,

I saw that in late 2023 the most prominent women spoke at a public forum in Vermont talking about their experience and talking about their role in the judicial system in Afghanistan, so they did make it here.

This was a good example of a particularly complex set of cases. These cases took a tremendous amount of time, but it wasn't necessarily apparent to the world outside the Department of State or the U.S. government. The advocates for the women, the IAWJ, and the people in that community knew how hard we were working, but everything took time.

Q: It also seemed to me that we had bad timing. For the first few months there seemed to be a unified push throughout the U.S. government to help the Afghan relocation and resettlement, but then we had such a deluge of migrants on the border with Mexico, that maybe DHS got stretched beyond its capacity, on the one hand. Then the U.S. military started getting stretched with Ukraine. So it always struck me that some of the inability to try to facilitate things for particular people was related to this bandwidth because of other events. The priorities were getting dispersed among other crises.

FOSTER: I think that was true. But anyone who came in the initial wave, during Operation Allies Welcome or OAW, was more easily able to get to the U.S. Those people had a clearer path.

There were many moving pieces. The cases of the women judges reflected almost every possible challenge. Some came during OAW, but most came after the OAW deadline. There were medical requirements. We had a spreadsheet by country where we tracked each person's status. Had they passed the medical exam? How long did a particular medical test outcome last? If the test or the visa expired at midnight, could they get on a plane at 11 p.m.?

There was another State Department official outside CARE who worked with IAWJ, and the women judges, early in the relocation. They knew and trusted him. We went back and forth with him all of the time, and all of a sudden, we'd find a woman judge in Korea! I would contact the Embassy and explain what was going on, so that somebody could reach out to the judge and her family. There were a lot of these individual cases.

Q: Did we have any special programs or special grouping or priority for female members of the Afghan government?

FOSTER: We prioritized SIV holders. Women members of the Afghan government did not work for the U.S. government and were not eligible for an SIV, unless a family member worked for the U.S. There were women parliamentarians who ended up in various places, including Albania.

Q: You say the parliamentarians got to safety?

FOSTER: Most of them did. There were also parliamentarians who had stayed in Afghanistan and were being beaten up by the Taliban. The issue of parliamentarians ballooned because we didn't know about every parliamentarian. Some had identified themselves but some had tried to keep that status quiet.

Q: If you think of any other special groups that you want to add on, just let me know.

I would like to give you a chance to reflect on the work and how did you feel about the work? I know it must have been exhausting and stressful.

FOSTER: I'm glad I did it. I felt I made a difference. I stayed longer than I thought because I wanted to make sure that someone replaced me to continue the work, and someone did. It was a plus that I knew a lot of Afghans and a lot of Afghan women. People felt comfortable reaching out to me. But it made the job emotionally challenging at the same time. These were real people I know whose lives were affected by what happened. I found it hard to distance myself from that.

Q: Did those people that didn't make it to the U.S. get resettled? Did you find out how they are doing?

FOSTER: I do talk to some of them. It's a mixed bag. Some of these women had already been in the U.S. and they were maybe going back and forth to Afghanistan. Others came through the relocation efforts. They've been upended from their country. I put myself in their shoes and think what would it be like for me if tomorrow I was told you have to leave the place you lived for your whole life. I think it's a hard and challenging thing and very traumatizing.

A lot of Afghans say what I think every group of immigrants say, it's going to be better for my kids. And I think that's true. At the same time, it's hard.

Q: Thank you so much, Stephenie. It's wonderful to meet you.

End of Interview