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Honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen:

I am delighted to be with you today and honored that you've taken time out from your busy schedules to attend this talk. I would particularly like to thank Hally and Hugh Siddons for hosting this lovely event and so pleased to be sharing this panel with such distinguished guests and dignitaries.

We are here because we've either a professional or personal interest in Afghanistan. Many of us have both. My first encounter with Afghanistan was as a child, when I read the British writer Eric Newby's *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*.

I was immediately riveted, gobbling up everything I could about a small land-locked country that captivated my imagination with images of the Sistan wetlands, of the armies of Alexander the Great, the Blue Mosque and the Buddhas of Bamiyan.

The Silk Road became the very personification of what became a life-long yearning: to tread every inch of this amazing planet. I longed to hike the Pamirs

and to explore the ancient mountain-like fortresses that shimmer like a hallucination throughout the deserts of Farah Province.

I traveled backwards and forwards in time, dreaming of the day when I would finally set foot in a country that was as much the landscape of my imagination as it was a geographic reality.

After the Taliban took power, I donated to clandestine girl's schools, wrote editorials and watched from as distance as the country descended into darkness.

At the time, I was working at the *Vancouver Sun* as a design and photo editor. I'm not exactly prone to emotional excess, but some of the images that came over the wires almost left me in tears. I felt an attachment to the country for reasons that to this very day, I still don't quite understand.

It wasn't until 2009 however—and long memories of the hippy trail had faded into myth—that I finally set foot in Afghanistan.

I arrived full of preconceptions—some of which proved correct, others less so. By that time, I had already spent several years working in international development. Afghanistan still interested me—but more as a journalist and as an observer of human nature.

Of those preconceptions that turned out to be accurate, I'll name the most salient: that Afghanistan would never see peace and it will never see

stability, until women were full and equal citizens enjoying the very same rights as their husbands, brothers, fathers, uncles, cousins and sons.

It was former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton who was the first politician in human history to state that, “the subjugation of women is a threat to our common security or our world and the national security of our country”.

At the time her statements were met with disbelief. Critics accused her of hyperbole and of promoting an anti-male agenda. Despite the flurry of criticism, even Clinton’s sharpest critics had hard time disputing the fact that discrimination against women and girls represents the most pervasive human rights violation of our time; that it underpins every aspect of our worldview and the assumptions that spring from it.

But anecdote and instinct are insufficiently supported unless backed up by tough, replicable data. A 2009 survey of the most recent research undertaken by leading conflict expert Valerie Hudson for example, found that states with highest levels of violence against women are less peaceful internationally, less compliant with international norms, and less likely to enjoy good relations with neighbouring states.

The same researchers found that violence against women is a more accurate predictor of armed conflict than the level of democracy, wealth, or the prevalence of religious extremism.

High rates of gender inequality also correspond to a greater likelihood of authoritarian rule; the willingness to use force and the severity of the force deployed to resolve international disputes.

The opposite also holds true. Countries that score highest for gender equality—Norway, Sweden, Australia for example—also earn top billing for participatory democracy, transparency *and* development.

Okay, you might say. These are associations, but they don't necessarily speak to cause and effect.

Well, consider this:

When parents feed and school their boys at the expense of their sisters, it fuels both entitlement on the one hand and compliance and severely damaged self-esteem on the other.

Children who grow up exposed to such behavior will often learn that violence is an acceptable means by which to resolve disputes. Mary Caprioli is another researcher who linked high measures of non-violent domestic inequality to significantly higher levels of state insecurity.

Gender inequality subjects not only one half of humanity to a life of ignorance and deprivation, but also relegates societies that condone and celebrate such injustices to higher poverty rates, greater income inequality and

more violence. It also condemns them to higher fertility rates, an issue that I will revisit in a few minutes.

But to continue: Most of us are well aware of the fact that Afghanistan is becoming increasingly embattled: We read about bombings, about the newly resurgent Taliban and Daesh; about warlord militias and proxy wars.

Fewer however, know about the demographic threat now facing the country and how it amplifies existing gender inequalities, thereby contributing to greater insecurity.

According to the limited census data currently available, Afghanistan is now home to more than 32 million residents. Its population has more than doubled since 1979.

The UNFPA predicts it will leap to just under 56 million by 2050. Experts tell us these numbers are likely a gross under-estimate. Actual figures could be far higher. With an average fertility rate of five children per mother, Afghanistan's population will likely continue to surge in the coming decades.

Do any of you know what a youth bulge is? Good. When the population of people between the ages of 15 and 25 is larger than the generation that precedes or succeeds it, then that is demographers refer to as a youth bulge.

If jobs and opportunities are plentiful, then these young people can boost a country's economy through innovation, by establishing new businesses, and of

course, by contributing more taxes. By doing so, they can influence a country's domestic policies—most often towards the progressive side of the spectrum. We witnessed this with the post-war baby boom here in North America and the “Asian Tiger” economies of the 1990s.

In the absence of such opportunities however, a youth bulge holds the potential to destabilize an entire population—especially in countries characterized by unemployment and gender inequality (and we've witnessed this in the run-up to the Balkan Wars, the Iran-Iraq conflict, the Rwanda genocide and many other armed wars and insurgencies).

Unemployment amplifies risk, because it means men are far more likely to congregate in groups. Young men who collect in groups tend to become even more anti-social and self-destructive than when they are alone.

Gender inequality also increases the likelihood of mass violence because it predisposes a population towards autocracy and because they are more likely to accept violence as normal.

Biology also shows us that child-rearing, marriage and simply mixing with women and girls lowers testosterone rates. The opposite holds true for unattached men in groups—especially if they are young. Levels of circulating testosterone in the blood spike, leading to a greater propensity for aggression—including towards women and girls.

The risk is even greater where the sexes are segregated; where women and girls are confined to the home, and where men dominate the workplace and the street.

So where does this leave Afghanistan? Today, fully 75 percent of Afghanistan's population is under the age of 25. More than half are between the ages of 15 and 25: A youth bulge if ever there was one.

Although considerable progress has been made during the past 15 years to reduce child mortality rates, it has brought with it some unintended consequences.

Improved child survival rates translate into an even more prolonged youth bulge—especially if fertility rates do NOT undergo a corresponding drop.

Now, most of us are well aware, that one of the most accurate indicators of gender equality lies in a country's fertility rate. When women are unable to access contraception—either because of cultural or religious beliefs, geographical barriers, because of government policies or simple ignorance—they will bear more children, often at great cost to their own health.

Large families increase the likelihood of poverty, which leads to poorer educational and health outcomes. A lack of education and ill health leads to higher unemployment rates and so on. Extrapolate that to the population level and you can see where we're going.

Given the current fertility rate (an estimated five children per woman), it is likely that Afghanistan's youth bulge will take the form of long curve that will extend at least 15 years into the future.

In Afghanistan, we've seen how young men, many desperate to feed their families, will make common cause with well-funded extremist groups or will more easily fall into criminal enterprises. Given the choice between feeding one's family or earning \$500 dollars to plant an IED, many will opt for the latter

Moreover, supporting huge numbers of dependents can be hugely stressful; stress contributes to family violence and as we have seen, family violence contributes to a greater acceptance of violence within a society.

So to recap: Given the demographic reality, I think it is fair to say that Afghanistan is going to experience widespread instability for some time to come.

As I can testify from personal experience, Afghanistan's young people—like youth everywhere—hold incredible promise. They are often more open to new ideas, more willing to take risks and more adaptable to changing circumstances. They are also, as we have seen, extremely vulnerable—especially in the absence of work.

This is incredibly sad—and for Afghans downright tragic—but it also represents an opportunity to really focus on what we need to do. This includes

advocating for the full citizenship rights of one half the population, renewing the focus on maternal and reproductive health, ensuring the passage of the Eradication of Violence Against Women law, judicial reform, rule of law, youth employment and so much more.

It means ensuring that donor funds go to large infrastructure projects that will employ both men and women. That we finally bring Afghanistan into the 21st century—something that 16 years of engagement and trillions of dollars has somehow failed to do.

I have to admit that, although I don't feel always particularly optimistic about what lies immediately ahead for Afghanistan, I am heartened when I hear about young men demonstrating in support of their Afghan sisters and when UNFPA reports that contraceptive use has increased from three percent in 2003 to 25 percent in 2016.

I take comfort from conversations with former staff—male and female—who express views they wouldn't have dared to even six short months ago. I cheer when young women open cycling clubs and establish magazines and other media outlets.

The advances we are witnessing may be small and incremental, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't continue fighting for them.

And as we now know, the empowerment of girls and women goes far beyond ideology, human rights or even simple justice. It represents nothing less than the very bedrock of a peaceful and a secure future for all Afghans.

Many thanks all of you for coming out this evening.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'P. G. A.', written in a cursive style.