

2024



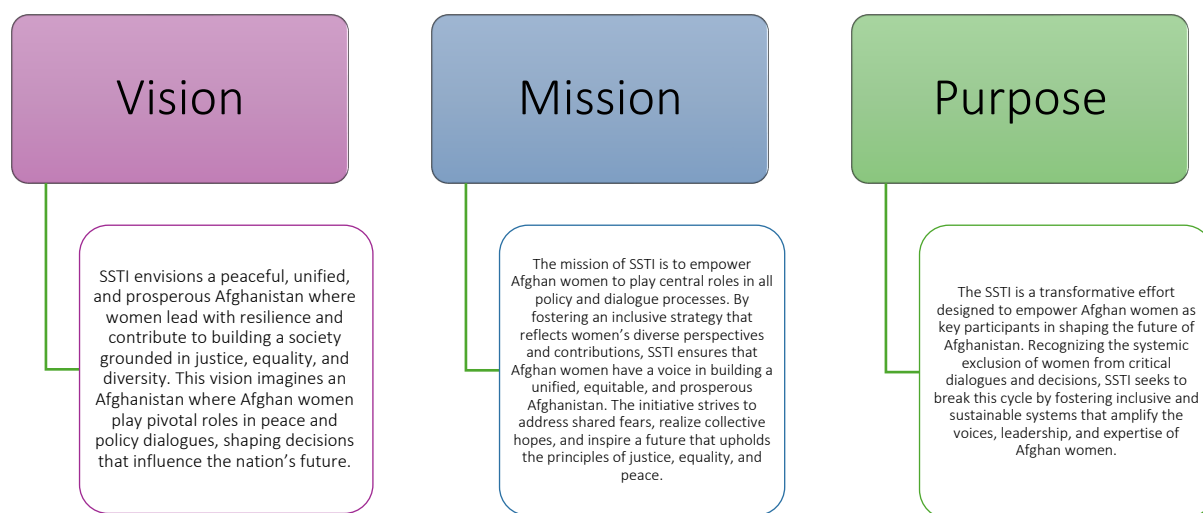
## STRATEGIZING A SEAT AT THE TABLE INITIATIVE (SSTI)

## Background

Afghanistan has faced profound challenges since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, plunging the nation into compounding political, economic, and humanitarian crises. These challenges have been particularly devastating for Afghan women and girls, who now face near-total erasure from public life. Sweeping restrictions have barred them from accessing education, participating in the workforce, and engaging in public spaces, effectively silencing their voices and excluding them from opportunities to shape their country's future.

This marginalization extends to critical national and international decision-making processes. Despite Afghan women's significant contributions to peacebuilding, humanitarian relief, and community resilience, they remain excluded from key dialogues such as the Doha Dialogue where decisions about Afghanistan's future are made without their participation. The exclusion of women from these spaces not only undermines efforts for inclusive peace but also perpetuates a system where the needs and aspirations of half the population are ignored.

The **Strategizing a Seat at the Table Initiative (SSTI)** emerged as a response to these systemic injustices and the shared determination of Afghan women to reclaim their rightful roles in shaping the nation's future. Through extensive convenings and collaborative efforts, SSTI has created a platform that reflects the diverse expertise, lived experiences, and aspirations of Afghan women. This initiative is a collective endeavour, born from the work and insights of leaders, advocates, and stakeholders who have committed to creating a more inclusive Afghanistan.



Since its inception in 2023, the Strategizing a Seat at the Table Initiative (SSTI) has grown from a conceptual framework into a dynamic and impactful movement. Initially focused on addressing the systemic exclusion of Afghan women from critical decision-making processes, SSTI has evolved into a robust platform that empowers women through capacity-building, strategic advocacy, and coalition-building. Over time, the initiative has expanded its reach, engaging diverse stakeholders and allies across national and international forums. Through collaborative workshops, advocacy campaigns, and the development of innovative tools like dynamic databases, SSTI has demonstrated its ability to adapt to Afghanistan's complex socio-political environment while maintaining a steadfast commitment to amplifying women's voices and leadership.

The SSTI is a transformative effort designed to empower Afghan women as key participants in shaping the future of Afghanistan. Recognizing the systemic exclusion of women from critical dialogues and decisions, SSTI seeks to break this cycle by fostering inclusive and sustainable systems that amplify the voices, leadership, and expertise of Afghan women.

SSTI is not just about representation; it is about creating lasting change by equipping women with the tools, networks, and platforms needed to lead with resilience. Through collaboration and strategic engagement, SSTI leverages collective strengths to build a cohesive ecosystem where Afghan women can thrive as decision-makers, advocates, and leaders. At its core, SSTI aims to inspire a future where women are architects of peace, equity, and progress, ensuring their contributions remain central to Afghanistan's recovery and development.

## Guiding Principles

The Strategizing a Seat at the Table Initiative (SSTI) is grounded in a set of guiding principles that shape its mission, strategies, and actions. These principles ensure alignment with the initiative's vision of empowering Afghan women and fostering a future of justice, equality, and peace. They serve as the foundation for all decisions, collaborations, and activities undertaken by SSTI:

1. **Inclusivity:** SSTI prioritizes the representation and participation of diverse Afghan women, ensuring that all voices—regardless of geography, background, or expertise—are valued and amplified in decision-making processes.
2. **Complementarity:** Recognizing the strengths of existing networks, SSTI promotes collaboration over competition. This principle ensures that efforts are mutually reinforcing, creating synergies across diverse platforms and actors.
3. **Sustainability:** SSTI is committed to building resilient systems and fostering long-term impacts, addressing immediate needs while laying the foundation for future generations of Afghan women to lead.
4. **Collaboration and Solidarity:** Strengthening alliances within and beyond Afghanistan, SSTI seeks to build trust and collective action among stakeholders who share a commitment to advancing Afghan women's leadership and inclusion.
5. **Cultural Sensitivity:** SSTI acknowledges the complexities of Afghanistan's socio-political landscape and works to navigate cultural nuances with respect, fostering trust and engagement with local communities and stakeholders.
6. **Adaptability:** In response to the rapidly changing environment in Afghanistan, SSTI embraces flexibility and innovation, ensuring its strategies remain relevant and impactful.

These principles guide SSTI's ecosystem-based approach, ensuring that the initiative's actions are rooted in shared values and geared toward creating a unified, equitable, and prosperous Afghanistan.

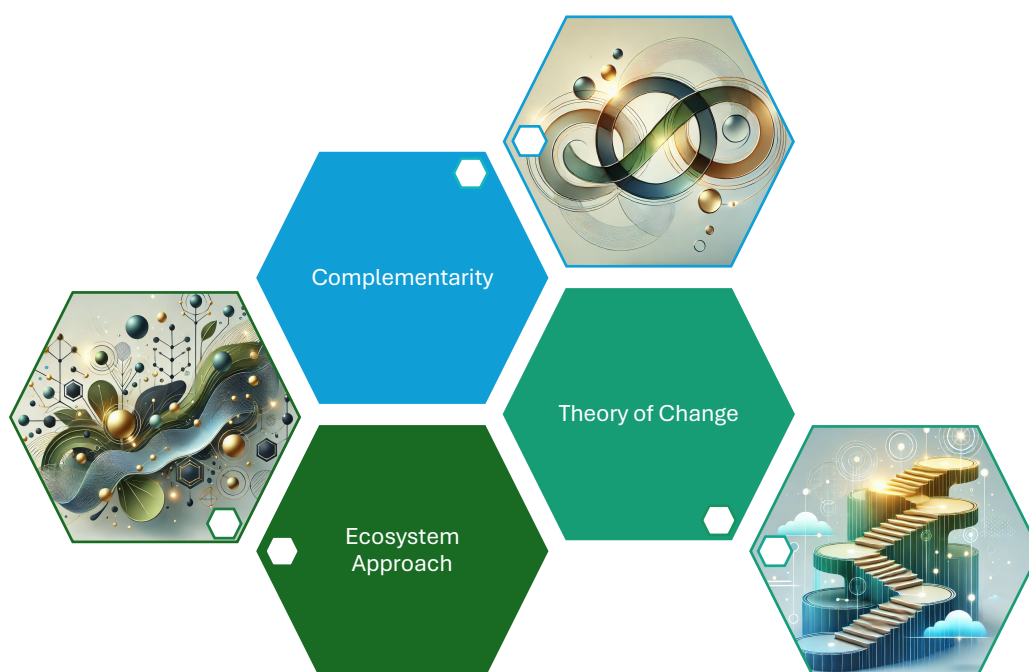
## Core Approaches

To achieve its purpose, SSTI operates through three foundational approaches that underpin its work:

1. **Ecosystem Approach** - SSTI recognizes that no single organization or network can address the complex challenges facing Afghan women in isolation. The ecosystem approach emphasizes interconnectedness, fostering strategic collaboration and complementarity across diverse networks and stakeholders. By pooling resources, aligning efforts, and creating a unified framework, SSTI ensures its initiatives are complementary, resilient, and impactful.



2. **Theory of Change** - SSTI employs a structured, data-driven framework to guide its efforts toward long-term, systemic change. This Theory of Change outlines clear pathways, starting with foundational activities like capacity building and advocacy. These lead to intermediate outcomes such as increased visibility, enhanced skills, and strategic engagement, culminating in systemic shifts where Afghan women occupy influential roles in governance, peacebuilding, and policymaking.
3. **Complementarity** - Recognizing the diversity within Afghan women's movements, SSTI ensures its strategies and actions are cohesive and mutually reinforcing. Complementarity focuses on leveraging the unique strengths, perspectives, and expertise of Afghan women to create synergies across different initiatives. By aligning its efforts, SSTI amplifies its impact, ensuring that each component of the strategy enhances the broader mission of empowering Afghan women.



## Strategic Framework

The **Strategizing a Seat at the Table Initiative (SSTI)** provides a comprehensive roadmap for ensuring Afghan women's leadership in shaping the nation's future. Rooted in collaboration, resilience, and empowerment, this framework responds to the systemic exclusion of women from critical peace and policy dialogues. It seeks to bridge gaps in representation while emphasizing women's vital role in fostering a peaceful and equitable Afghanistan.

The foundation of this framework is guided by SSTI's core principles: **inclusivity, complementarity, sustainability, and adaptability**. These principles ensure that every action and strategy aligns with the mission of empowering Afghan women, amplifying their voices, and creating lasting impact. Through these principles, SSTI not only addresses immediate challenges but also lays the groundwork for long-term transformation.

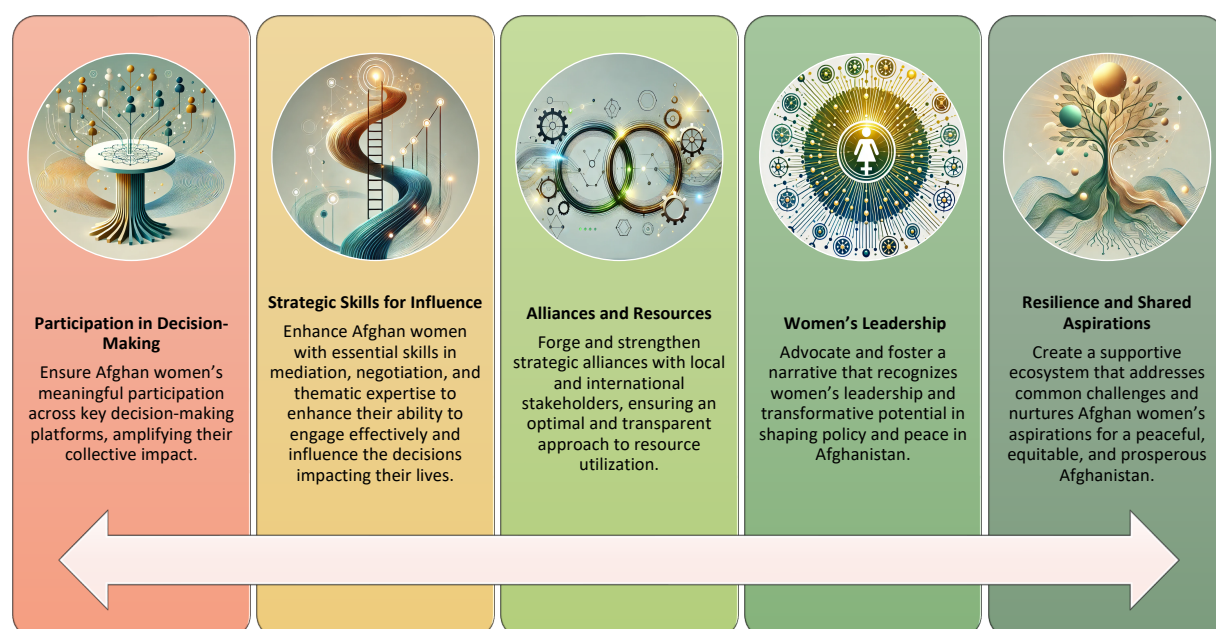


The framework's strength lies in its ability to harmonize the diverse contributions and lived experiences of Afghan women leaders. By fostering collaboration across sectors and geographies, SSTI creates a unified platform where women can engage meaningfully in national and international decision-making processes. This approach reinforces the importance of shared strengths and collective action, allowing women to overcome barriers and shape Afghanistan's future.

Additionally, the strategic framework is forward-looking, combining advocacy, capacity-building, and resource optimization to ensure sustained impact. By prioritizing Afghan women's participation in leadership roles, SSTI envisions an ecosystem where their agency drives change across governance, peacebuilding, and development processes.

This framework is more than a strategy—it is a declaration of intent and a pathway to action. It calls upon Afghan women, stakeholders, and allies to rally together, ensuring that women's leadership is not only recognized but also institutionalized across all levels of decision-making. Together, this unified effort strives to build a future defined by justice, equity, and peace for all.

## Key Achievements



The SSTI is a testament to the collective resilience and leadership of Afghan women and their allies. Over the past two years, SSTI has achieved several critical milestones, driven by a commitment to amplifying women's voices in Afghanistan and beyond:

1. **Advocacy Milestones** - SSTI has successfully brought Afghan women's perspectives into global forums, emphasizing their role as key actors in peacebuilding and decision-making processes. Advocacy campaigns, including efforts to address gender apartheid, have shifted global attention toward Afghan women's exclusion and galvanized international support.
2. **Capacity Building** - Through collaborative workshops, SSTI has equipped Afghan women with essential skills in negotiation, mediation, and advocacy. These efforts have prepared women to navigate high-stakes dialogues and strengthened their roles as leaders in shaping Afghanistan's future.
3. **Alliance Strengthening** - SSTI has built a robust network of allies, including international organizations, grassroots movements, and regional stakeholders. This ecosystem approach

has created a unified front to champion Afghan women's inclusion and amplify their impact.

4. **Operational and Community Impact** - On the ground, SSTI has implemented critical projects, addressing challenges in healthcare, education, and community resilience. These initiatives have demonstrated the transformative potential of women-led efforts in addressing Afghanistan's pressing needs.

## Risks and Opportunities

As SSTI works to advance Afghan women's meaningful participation in peace and policy processes, it navigates a complex socio-political landscape filled with risks and opportunities. These challenges and possibilities shape the initiative's strategies and highlight areas for resilience and innovation. Understanding these dynamics is critical to ensuring SSTI's long-term impact and adaptability.

| Risks                                                                                                                                                      | Opportunities                                                                                                                                              |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Political Instability:</i> Afghanistan's volatile political environment undermines efforts to secure Afghan women's roles in decision-making platforms. | <i>Global Advocacy:</i> Increased international attention on Afghan women's exclusion presents an opportunity to amplify their voices on global platforms. |
| <i>Resource Constraints:</i> Limited funding and access to essential resources challenge the sustainability of initiatives.                                | <i>Strategic Partnerships:</i> Expanding alliances with regional and international stakeholders can strengthen SSTI's ecosystem and extend its influence.  |
| <i>Exclusionary Practices:</i> Systemic barriers, including restrictions on women's access to education and public life, hinder progress.                  | <i>Resilience Building:</i> Developing mental health support and trauma-informed leadership can empower Afghan women and sustain their leadership.         |
| <i>Security Concerns:</i> The deteriorating security situation limits women's mobility and access to decision-making spaces.                               | <i>Local and Grassroots Movements:</i> Collaborating with grassroots organizations offers opportunities for in-country impact and global solidarity.       |
| <i>Cultural Resistance:</i> Deeply ingrained societal norms resist changes toward gender equity.                                                           | <i>Technology and Innovation:</i> Leveraging digital tools and platforms can facilitate engagement and bridge geographic divides.                          |

This balanced understanding of risks and opportunities ensures SSTI's strategies remain dynamic and responsive, enabling the initiative to advance its mission despite the challenges it faces.

## Priority Engagement Spaces

Historically, Afghan women have been excluded from critical national and international decision-making platforms, their voices sidelined in discussions shaping Afghanistan's future. Despite their significant contributions to peacebuilding, humanitarian relief, and community resilience, access to these spaces remains a key challenge. SSTI identifies specific priority engagement spaces that hold the potential to amplify Afghan women's influence and ensure their perspectives are integrated into key decisions.

## National Engagement Spaces

- **Local and Grassroots Networks:** SSTI actively collaborates with local organizations, grassroots movements, and community leaders to strengthen in-country efforts directly and through its members/participants. These networks are essential for engaging women at the community level, addressing immediate needs, and fostering leadership from within. By supporting grassroots dialogues, SSTI ensures that diverse perspectives from inside Afghanistan are heard and valued.
- **Provincial and Local Councils:** While national platforms may be limited, provincial and local councils offer opportunities to influence decisions at the subnational level. SSTI works to build alliances with local leaders, creating pathways for women's participation in discussions that directly impact their communities.

### International Engagement Spaces

- **Political Processes (Doha):** SSTI has prioritized influencing the Doha Process, advocating for a working group dedicated to reconciliation that includes women and other marginalized stakeholders. This ensures women's voices are represented in critical dialogues on Afghanistan's peace and future governance, while advocating and working towards participating both at the technical and political levels. The creation of new and women led processes, designed with the vision of inclusivity and impact is also a key priority that needs support.
- **Regional Forums:** SSTI recognizes the importance of regional players in shaping Afghanistan's trajectory. By participating in the Moscow Format and engaging with platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), SSTI aims to position Afghan women as key stakeholders in regional strategies.
- **United Nations Mechanisms:** Platforms such as the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the UN Security Council, and the Human Rights Council are vital for amplifying Afghan women's voices on the global stage. SSTI contributes to these forums by providing expert insights and advocating for policies that centre Afghan women's needs and rights.

### Thematic Priorities and Strategies for Effective Engagement

To ensure meaningful participation and influence, SSTI strategically aligns its engagement efforts with key thematic areas that reflect the most pressing needs of Afghan women and the broader Afghan context. Central to this approach is the recognition of Afghan women's invaluable contributions across reconciliation, economic development, and advocacy for human rights.

SSTI prioritizes **Reconciliation and Peacebuilding** as a cornerstone of its engagement efforts. This thematic area focuses on fostering inclusive processes that actively integrate women's perspectives into peace dialogues and negotiations. Recognizing the role of women as mediators and agents of reconciliation, SSTI works to amplify their contributions in shaping the nation's future governance.

Another critical focus area is **Economic and Humanitarian Development**, which underscores the necessity of addressing Afghanistan's economic recovery and urgent humanitarian challenges. Afghan women's leadership in rebuilding communities and addressing systemic inequities is pivotal to achieving long-term stability and growth. By highlighting women's roles in these efforts, SSTI seeks to challenge traditional barriers and foster economic inclusion.

Finally, **Human Rights and Gender Equality** remains a central priority, driving advocacy efforts to challenge systemic exclusion and elevate women's leadership within governance and



policymaking. This focus ensures that Afghan women's voices are not only heard but actively influence decisions affecting their lives and communities.



### Thematic Focus Areas

- Each engagement space aligns with specific thematic priorities, ensuring a comprehensive approach to advocacy and influence:
- Reconciliation and Peacebuilding: Advocating for inclusive processes that recognize women's contributions to peace efforts.
- Economic and Humanitarian Development: Highlighting the role of women in driving economic recovery and addressing humanitarian challenges.
- Human Rights and Gender Equality: Challenging systemic exclusion and advocating for women's leadership in governance and policy.

To translate these priorities into impactful outcomes, SSTI employs a suite of tailored strategies. A core component of this approach is **Capacity Building**, which prepares Afghan women leaders to navigate high-level dialogues with confidence and effectiveness. By equipping them with critical skills such as negotiation, advocacy, and systems thinking, SSTI ensures that women are well-prepared to engage meaningfully in decision-making spaces.

SSTI also emphasizes **Stakeholder Mapping**, a strategic tool to identify key actors within each engagement space and develop tailored strategies for outreach and collaboration. This approach allows SSTI to prioritize efforts and align resources effectively, ensuring maximum impact.

**Collaboration and Coalition Building** are integral to SSTI's strategy, enabling partnerships with aligned organizations to amplify collective advocacy efforts. By fostering synergies among stakeholders, SSTI enhances its ability to address challenges collectively and sustainably.

Lastly, the initiative leverages a **Dynamic Database** to coordinate and track engagement efforts. This tool provides real-time insights into key stakeholders, thematic areas, and available resources, ensuring that SSTI remains adaptable and responsive to changing circumstances. By aligning thematic priorities with effective strategies, SSTI is committed to creating a unified and resilient front, empowering Afghan women to take their rightful place in shaping the country's future.



### Strategies for Effective Engagement

- Capacity Building: Preparing Afghan women leaders to navigate high-level dialogues and advocate effectively.
- Stakeholder Mapping: Identifying key actors within each space and developing tailored engagement strategies.
- Collaboration and Coalition Building: Partnering with aligned organizations to strengthen advocacy efforts and amplify collective voices.
- Utilizing a Dynamic Database: SSTI's database tracks key stakeholders, allies, and thematic areas, ensuring coordinated and strategic engagement across all forums.

## Implementation Plan

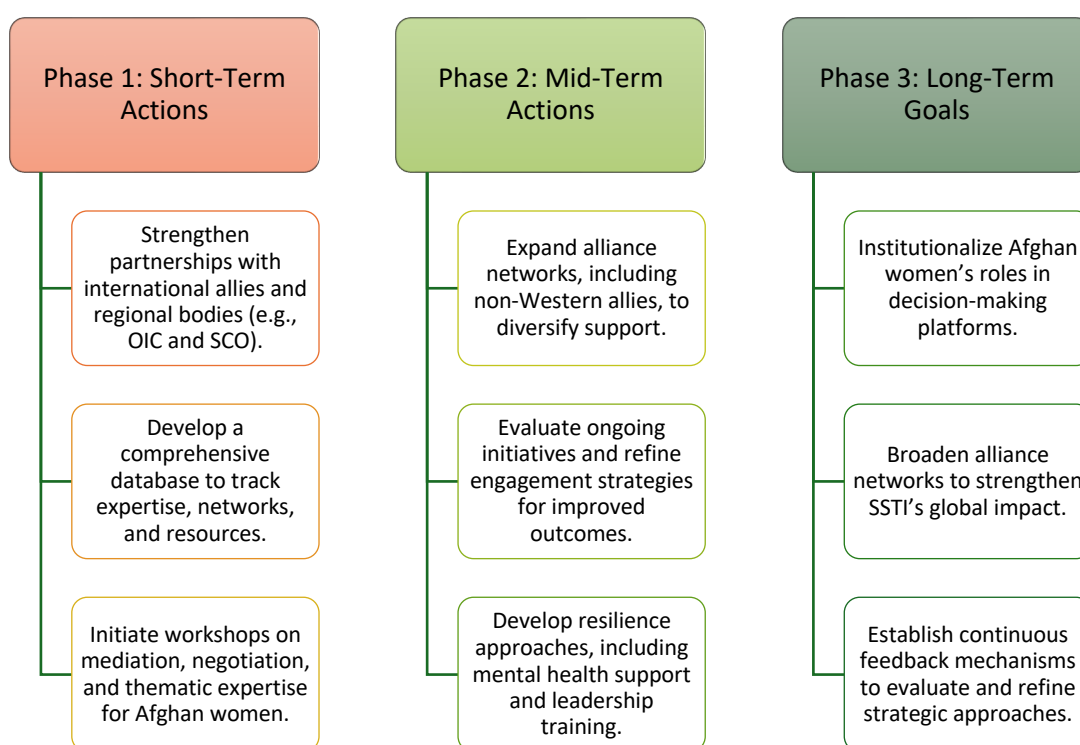
The **SSTI Implementation Plan** translates its strategic vision into tangible actions, ensuring Afghan women's leadership and participation are both impactful and enduring. This plan is divided into short-term and long-term priorities, addressing immediate needs while fostering a resilient foundation for future engagement.

In the **short-term**, SSTI focuses on building alliances, equipping women with critical skills, and developing tools such as a dynamic database to coordinate advocacy and resources. These efforts aim to strengthen Afghan women's preparedness for engaging in key dialogues and decision-making processes.

In the **long-term**, the plan emphasizes institutionalizing Afghan women's roles in governance and decision-making. It also prioritizes expanding networks, embedding resilience through continuous capacity building, and establishing robust evaluation mechanisms to refine strategies and ensure ongoing relevance.

To realize this ambitious plan, the participation and collaboration of diverse stakeholders are vital. Partners are encouraged to:

- **Support Capacity Building:** Contribute to programs that prepare Afghan women to lead and influence effectively.
- **Foster Alliances:** Work with SSTI to expand its ecosystem of allies and resources, amplifying collective efforts.
- **Champion Inclusion:** Advocate for Afghan women's rightful presence in both local and global decision-making spaces.
- **Share Resources and Expertise:** Provide funding, knowledge, and technical tools to sustain and scale SSTI's initiatives.



By aligning these efforts, SSTI ensures that Afghan women are positioned not only to participate but to lead in shaping a future of justice, equality, and peace for Afghanistan.

## Conclusion

The SSTI represents a transformative approach to ensuring Afghan women's meaningful inclusion in shaping Afghanistan's future. In the face of immense challenges, Afghan women have demonstrated unparalleled resilience, leadership, and determination. This strategy, co-created by a diverse coalition of women leaders and allies, builds on their collective strengths, aligning resources, skills, and networks to create systemic and lasting change.

SSTI is not just a framework—it is a movement that challenges exclusionary practices, fosters inclusive dialogue, and prioritizes the empowerment of women at every level of decision-making. By addressing immediate needs through short-term actions and building sustainable structures for long-term impact, SSTI paves the way for a future where Afghan women are integral to governance, peacebuilding, and societal transformation.

As this initiative continues to evolve, it remains guided by its core principles of collaboration, resilience, and equity. The success of SSTI depends on the unwavering commitment of its participants, allies, and stakeholders who believe in the power of Afghan women's leadership to create a peaceful, unified, and prosperous Afghanistan.

The time to act is now. With collective effort and a shared vision, we can ensure that Afghan women have not just a seat at the table, but a leading voice in shaping the nation's future. Together, we can turn this vision into reality.