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Women's Inclusion in Afghanistan's Civil Services

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During the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Afghan women were the primary victims of the group's *Sharia* laws. These laws deprived women of their fundamental rights such as access to education, healthcare, and participation in politics, economy, and public life. Following the collapse of the Taliban regime, a new chapter began for Afghan women. The new Constitution that came into force under the new government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan granted equal rights to education, access to healthcare, and economic and political participation to men and women. However, challenges exist to its meaningful enforcement. Social and cultural sensitivities and norms, as well as religious beliefs related factors continue to obstruct women's access and ability to exercise their fundamental rights. Nonetheless, over the past two decades, Afghan women have engaged in various sectors, including in the civil services, which is an important sphere of governance and governmental operations in the country. However, women's inclusion in the civil services has not been an easy task.

This paper examines women's inclusion in Afghanistan's civil services over the period of 20 years; factors contributing to gender inequality in the Afghan civil services; and opportunities and challenges for women's greater inclusion in the Afghan civil services. To do so, this essay relies on existing literature and as well as interviews with female employees of the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Defense.

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Women's Inclusion: An Overview

Civil service in Afghanistan includes all governmental administrative works excluding the military services. In Afghanistan, civil servants participate in politics and have significant role in decision making. As Table 1 shows, the percentage of female employees in the Afghan civil service has fluctuated between 21% and 25%. The level of women's participation in the civil service has not reached the 30%—i.e. the threshold set by the Nation Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) as the minimum level of female representation on all levels of governance, including civil services, health, education, security sector etc.²

Table 1: Women's Inclusion in Afghanistan's Civil Services (2005-2018)

Year	Percentage of Women in Afghan Civil Services
2005	22%
2009	25%
2012	21.4%
2013	24.2%
2014	22.2%
2015	21.9%
2016	22.5%
2017	22.6%
2018	21.5%

Source: National Statistics and Information Authority, and Central Statistics Organization, Afghanistan³

Data from the Central Statistics Organization (CSO) report, titled '*Women and Men in Afghanistan 2011-2018*', also indicates that of all ministries and government organizations, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, and the State Ministry for Martyrs

2. Government of Afghanistan, "National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan, 2007-2017," Government of Afghanistan, accessed on Feb, 28, 2020, at <http://extwprlegs1.fao.org/docs/pdf/afg149120.pdf>

3. The Central Statistics Organization, "Women and Men in Afghanistan", 2011, 2014, 2016, 2018 .

and Disabled Affairs have highest ratio of female employees, and have achieved the gender equality goals (of 30% minimum participation) outlined in the NAPWA. Some other ministries and government organizations such as the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Public Health, the Red Crescent Society, and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) have witnessed an increase in the numbers of female employees, albeit the overall percentage of female employees has remained below 50%. On the other hand, there are some ministries and government institutions which have had the lowest percentage of female employees since 2005. The Ministry of Haj and Religious Affairs, the Independent Directorate of Local Governance, and the Ministry of Interior Affairs are some examples.⁴

On the provincial level, in 2014, Kabul province recorded the highest number of civil servants. Of the total 88,267 female civil servants, 39.7% percent were in Kabul, and of the total 309,928 male civil servants, 24.8% were in Kabul. Among the Kabul-based civil servants, the ratio of female civil servants was 30% in 2012, 31.3% in 2014, and 32.5% in 2017.⁵ Following Kabul province, Herat, Balkh, Badakhshan, Baghlan, and Nangarhar provinces recorded the highest shares of female civil servants. Data from the CSO report, titled '*Women and Men in Afghanistan 2011*', points to a significant increase in the growth rate of female civil servants between 2007 and 2009. For example, between 2007 and 2009, the average growth rate of female civil employees was around 11.6%, whereas that of male civil servants was around 1.8%.⁶

4. CSO, NSIA, *Women and Men in Afghanistan 2011*. CSO, NSIA, *Women and Men in Afghanistan 2014*. CSO, NSIA, *Women and Men in Afghanistan 2016*. CSO, NSIA, *Women and Men in Afghanistan 2018*.

5. Ibid

6. CSO, NSIA, *Women and Men in Afghanistan 2011*.

Table 2: Percentage of Women in Various Wings of the Afghan Civil Services (2016 and 2018)

Sectors	Percentage of female participants in 2016	Percentage of female participants in 2018
Meshrano Jirga (Upper House)	31.8%	22.4%
Wolesi Jirga (Lower House)	25.9%	– ⁷
Provincial Councils	20.9%	21.3%
Local Development Councils	38.7%	– ⁸
Members of Associations	19.4%	19.5%
Judges	11.5%	12.7%
Prosecutors	8.2%	13.9%
Lawyers	18.2%	12.5%
Provincial Governors	3.0%	0
Deputy Governors	–	7.7%
District Governors	0.3%	0.3%
Legal Advisors	7.5 %	7.6%

Source: National Statistics and Information Authority and Central Statistics Organization, Afghanistan⁹

Data from CSO reports, titled ‘Women and Men in Afghanistan 2016’ and ‘Women and Men in Afghanistan 2018’ provides information on the percentage of women in the National Assembly, Provincial Councils, and the judiciary (See Table 2).¹⁰ Data illustrated in Table 2 points to a relatively better level of female representation in decision making bodies. Female participation in all levels of governance, especially decision making bodies, has a direct influence on policy making, policy evaluation, and implementation processes.

7. The Women and Men in Afghanistan 2018 report does not provide information about the numbers of females in the Wolesi Jirga in 2018.

8. The Women and Men in Afghanistan 2018 report does not provide information about the numbers of females in the Local Development Councils in 2018.

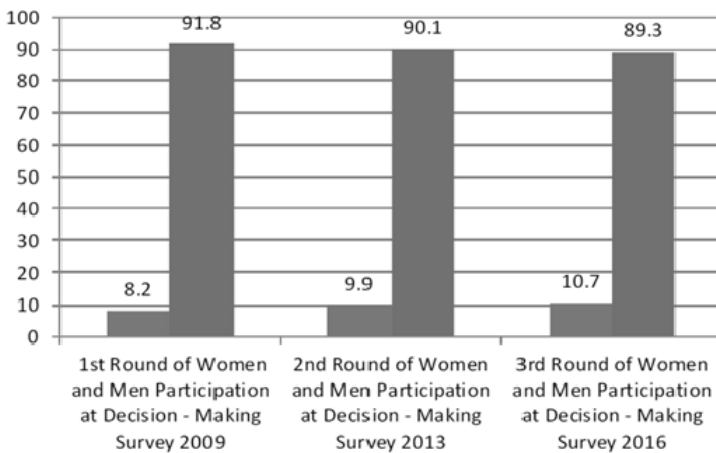
9. CSO, NSIA, “Women and Men in Afghanistan 2016.

10. CSO, NSIA, Women and Men in Afghanistan 2016. CSO, NSIA, Women and Men in Afghanistan 2018.

Civil Servants in Decision Making

The level of gender imbalance in decision making positions in civil service sector is higher than the level of gender imbalance in lower rung positions. In 2008, a survey to identify the number of civil servants involved in decision making positions in ministries and other government institutions was conducted for the first time.¹¹ The outcome of the survey was published in the CSO Statistical Yearbook 2008/09, which revealed that there were a total of 4,393 civil servants involved in decision making positions. Of those, only 359 (8.2%) were female. The second round of the survey, which was conducted in 2013, showed that Kabul province had the highest share of civil service decision makers and that the numbers of employees in decision making positions rose to 7,177, of which only 9.9% were female. The third round of the survey, which was conducted in 2016, showed that there were a total of 8,797 civil servants at decision making levels and that the ratio of female civil servants in decision making positions was around 10.7%.¹²

Graph 1: Women and Men in Decision Making in the Afghan Civil Service (2009, 2013, 2016)



Source: Central Statistics Organization, Afghanistan

The data discussed above reveals that gender imbalance in decision making positions is extremely high. Although CSO reports reveal that

11. Ibid

12. Ibid

Afghanistan's Gender Inequality Index (GII)—which shows the level of women's development in economic, social, and political life—has improved since 2008, Afghanistan still has the highest rate of gender inequality (See Table 3) compared to other South Asian countries.¹³

Table 3: Gender Inequality Index of Afghanistan: 2008–2017

Year	Gender inequality index in Afghanistan
2008	0.797
2014	0.705
2015	0.693
2017	0.653

Source: National Statistics and Information Authority and Central Statistics Organization, Afghanistan

Data in Table 3 shows a decrease in the rate of Afghanistan's GII since 2008. This means even though Afghan women's access to education, healthcare, economic and political participation has improved, the goal of gender equality has not been achieved.

Factors Contributing to Gender Inequality in the Afghan Civil Services

A growing body of literature demonstrates that different socio-cultural factors such as religious beliefs and cultural norms, inadequacies in education and skills, safety issues at the provincial level, and lack of efficient frameworks for empowering women, profoundly undermine gender equality. These very factors also play a key role in creating challenges to women's participation in civil service bodies.

Education and Skills: A shortage of qualified and skilled female labor force is one of the major factors contributing gender inequality in the civil services. This shortcoming is a direct consequence of women's exclusion from social and political life during the civil war and subsequent Taliban era in Afghanistan. During the mujahideen period, some Afghan women lost their occupation or source of income; some were forsaken; and some

13. CSO, NSIA, Women and Men in Afghanistan 2011. CSO, NSIA, Women and Men in Afghanistan 2014. CSO, NSIA, Women and Men in Afghanistan 2016. CSO, NSIA, Women and Men in Afghanistan 2018.

migrated to other countries. Women's situation worsened under the Taliban era, because the group banned women from all forms of social and political participation and prohibited them from attaining education and even teaching at schools.¹⁴ During this period, males had a slow pace of progression in terms of literacy levels and employment skills, which has contributed to today's uneven progression. Thus, today, many women lack sufficient qualifications and skills that could have otherwise enabled them to compete with men for civil services jobs, especially in decision making/managerial positions. This shortcoming contributes to lower participation of women in decision making processes.

Social and Cultural Factors: Patriarchal culture and socio-economic conditions are structural factors contributing to low participation of women in civil service and other governance related roles. In Afghanistan's male dominated society, not every woman enjoys the privilege of attaining education and working outside their homes; women are raised to become dependent on men. Working outside one's home is viewed as a means to generate income, and the need for women to work outside their homes is viewed as unnecessary if there is a male who can fulfill this need. The importance and role of women in government bodies is underestimated. Indulgence in highly conservative religious beliefs results in a situation where women working outside their homes is not preferred until and unless there is no male 'breadwinner' for the family.¹⁵ Consequently, many women are unaware of their social and political rights. In other words, they are unaware of their right to participate as equal citizens in political and social activities freely and without discrimination.

Safety Concerns: Safety concerns in terms of physical, social and healthcare is another factor influencing female participation in Afghan civil services. As a consequence of rampant insecurity, a large percentage of female employees in civil services are in Kabul and other big cities like Balkh and Herat. However the number of female civil servants are

14. Serat, Muhammad Zaman, "Waziyat seyasi zanan dar dawra Taliban wa pas az Taliban," Subh-e-Kabul, March 20, 2020. <https://subhekabul.com/%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%E2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7/%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%85-%DA%86%D9%87-%DA%A9-%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D8%AF/afghan-women-taliban-afghanistan/>

15. Khadimi, Anisgul, 2019, "Determinants of Child Labor in Afghanistan." Graduate diss, OSCE Academy in Bishkek.

dramatically low in other provinces.¹⁶ Additionally, instances and reports of verbal and sexual harassment of women, lack of safety and security on travel routes, and improper accommodation for female employees in remote provinces discourages women from serving in government bodies, and families from being supportive of women serving in government institutions.¹⁷

Lack of Efficient Structures for Women's Empowerment: Lack of cooperation and collaboration among organizations working towards women's empowerment also influences gender inequality. According to the AIHRC, there have been several development and capacity-building programs/courses implemented by national and international organizations to empower women, and to decrease gender inequality, but that there is a lack of platforms or mechanisms for these organizations to share their information, knowledge, experts, experiences, resources, and technology.¹⁸ Integrated cooperation will help government and non-government organizations to better implement capacity-building projects, efficiently follow up on trained participants, and accurately report the outcomes so that other organizations, government wings, and other bodies can utilize their best practices and build on lessons learnt. Coordination and collaboration among national and international organizations working towards women's empowerment can serve a higher number of female employees, increase the impact of capacity-building projects, and ultimately result in a higher numbers of qualified women who can participate in economic, social, and political activities.

Afghan Women in the Civil Services: Key Challenges and Opportunities

As part of this study, this author conducted interviews to gain perspectives from female employees of the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of

16. SO, NSIA, Women and Men in Afghanistan 2011. CSO, NSIA, Women and Men in Afghanistan 2014. CSO, NSIA, Women and Men in Afghanistan 2016. CSO, NSIA, Women and Men in Afghanistan 2018.

17. Hussaini, Sitara, interviewed by Anis Khadimi, Kabul, April 10, 2020.

18. Samimi, Nasrat, "Naqsh wa hozor zanan dar idarat dawlathi wa faliyat hai siyasi kahish yafta ast," Pazhwok Press, accessed on Feb 29, 2020, at <https://www.pajhwok.com/dr/2012/03/07/%D9%86%D9%82%D8%B4-%D9%88-%D8%AD%D8%B6%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%89-%D9%88-%D9%81%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%B4-%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA>

Defense. Based on the interviews, the following insights were discerned regarding opportunities and challenges:

The main opportunities for female employees in every sector, including the civil services and the security sector, are capacity building programs like free English language and computer skills courses; free or discounted undergraduate programs in universities; and short-term workshops and trainings. Capacity building programs are designed to improve knowledge and skills of employees and have been impactful *vis-a-vis* women's inclusion in decision making; but those programs' impact essentially depends on the respective female civil servant's desire and commitment.

Based on the 'Labor Code of Afghanistan', the Ministry of Defense requires fewer qualifications and skills in criteria such as work experience, educational background etc. for female applicants as compared to male applications. This offers another opportunity for women who possess lower academic qualifications and skills. In addition to the abovementioned opportunities, internship opportunities for women in civil service; paid maternity leaves; free kindergartens for female employees' children; and public awareness programs on the importance of women's participation in the civil services and the Afghan National Army are some of the measures that have been implemented to increase women's participation to 30% as set by NAPWA.¹⁹

With regard to key challenges, lack of adequately educated and skilled female labor, and families' preference of men being employed rather than women are among the main factors contributing to lower numbers of women in decision and policy making positions.²⁰ Another challenge that women face *vis-a-vis* participation in the civil services is the high dependency of females on males in making life decisions. Unsafe work environments for women is another challenge. Very few victims of verbal or sexual harassment dare to complain; and when complaints are registered, the aggressors are not prosecuted properly. Deputation to/ recruitment in remote provinces is another challenge for women seeking to work in government. Due to restrictions imposed by families and security

19. Hussaini, Sitara, interviewed by Anis Khadimi, Kabul, April,10,2020.

20. Ibid

related problems, women employees are often unable to travel to provinces other than those of their residences. Nepotism, patronage networks, and lack of transparency in recruitment and promotions also pose challenges. Recruitment is often influenced by parties/support from within the recruitment team, and since male employees tend to have wider networks, they tend to get prioritized over female employees for better positions.²¹

Impact of Policies and Programs Aimed at Women's Inclusion in the Civil Services

The Afghan government has introduced several policies and programs to support women's inclusion in all sectors, including the civil services. The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) pertaining to women's health, education, and gender equality also included objectives such as increasing women's inclusion in government up to a minimum of 30%, and decreasing inequality of women's access to justice by 50% by 2015.²² In a continuation of its commitment to the MDGs, Afghanistan also committed to pursue gender equality and decrease inequality in all forms under the MDG's successor framework, the Sustainable Development Goals. In addition to the Afghan government, several international aid agencies and development organizations have implemented women's empowerment programs to increase women inclusion in economic, social, and political spheres. However, reports indicate that while these programs have achieved significant success in health and education, they have not achieved a similar level of success in the economic sphere.²³ Meanwhile, established national policies lack proper methodologies and tools for implementation and follow up activities.²⁴

The successes and failures of policies and programmes aimed at women's inclusion/empowerment in different sectors including the civil services provide insights that can help improve these efforts. Given the prevailing conservative cultural norms, new policies and approaches need to be

21. Sultani, Fatima, interviewed by Anis Khadimi, Kabul, April, 8, 2020.

22. Ibid

23. Independent Evaluation Group. 2010. An Evaluation of World Bank Support, 2002-08: Gender and Development. Washington, DC: World Bank.

24. Azizi Hamid, "Investigating Policies to Increase Women's Participation in Afghan Civil Service Offices," Khama Press Persian, accessed on Feb, 27, 2020, at <https://www.khaama.com/persian/archives/69381>

developed with localized focuses, customized to Afghan culture and social norms, to transform religious and cultural sensitivities.

Conclusion

This study shows that Afghanistan's current constitution places considerable emphasis on women's empowerment and inclusion in governance. Women's representation and participation in all sectors is crucial for the development of Afghanistan's human capital. However, the role and importance of women's participation in all sectors, especially at leadership and management levels, is often underestimated in the country. Despite challenges, today, Afghan women are involved in every government wing, including the civil services, but their representation in the civil service is very low, especially in leadership and decision making positions.

Policy Recommendations

Listed below are a set of recommendations to increase women's representation in the civil services, especially in decision making positions:

- **Education and Professional Training:** Many Afghan women lack adequate education, professional knowledge, and skills that can enable them to influence governance, and decision making. Educating women and providing professional training can increase the capabilities of women in the society, thereby enabling them to participate more actively and substantially in every sector including the civil services.
- **Awareness Programmes:** A vast majority of Afghans believe that males are running the entire country and that women's representation does not deliver much impact. On the other hand, some Afghan women are unaware of their political rights. Sustained awareness programmes on the importance and role of women in governance will enable a change in the societal mindset. This in turn will encourage women to join the civil services and other sectors, and also help encourage their families to be supportive.

- **Efficient Monitoring and Evaluation of Capacity Building Programmes:** Efficient monitoring and evaluation of capacity building programmes will enable authorities to accurately assess the impact of implemented programs. This in turn will help fine-tune policies and implementation strategies to address challenges and gaps.