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PROMOTE: A CASE STUDY OF WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM IN AFGHANISTAN

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Summary

- Promote-WIE was launched by the US as one of the most important (if not the most important) programs targeting Afghan women's economic empowerment. In spite of some success, the lack of sustainability and follow-up to the project seriously hampered its effectiveness. It was widely criticized as wasteful with no monitoring that could produce evidence of its supposed helpfulness to women.
- Promote-WIE's issues are emblematic of the flaws in many aid programs targeting women. On the donor side, better on-the-ground assessments of women's needs and better follow-up of participants are required. On the government side, there needs to be strong cooperation to ensure that socio-cultural norms do not become barriers and that the programs are sustainable past their official end dates.

Afghan women's status witnessed remarkable improvement with the end of the Taliban regime. A new republic backed by the international community supported women's rights and political engagement through legal frameworks and strategic planning such as the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) and the National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA- 2008-2018).

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During the Taliban regime (1996-2001), prohibitive decrees prevented women from having any role in public life.² In 2002, shortly after fall of the Taliban regime, the Human Development Index (HDI) ranked Afghanistan 173 among 177 in the health, education and standard of living indicators. As such, the international community pushed Afghanistan to commit to improving women's socio-economic status and making it a priority by establishing gender sensitive legislation and regulatory frameworks that promoted gender equality including access to inheritance, property, labor law protections, access to skills development programs, vocational trainings, and income generative activities.³ At the beginning of internationally supported peace-building efforts (especially 2003-2009), economic growth in Afghanistan had been volatile but rapid.⁴ In spite of this growth, women faced many challenges: (a) illiteracy, (b) socio-cultural barriers, and (c) inaccessibility of financial resources and capital. This last challenge especially affected women's economic empowerment programs. Many initiatives were taken by international agencies, governmental and non-governmental institutions to ensure women were given the tools and space to participate in this economic growth and thereby improve their socio-economic status. Reports as recent as 2019, however, show that women still only make up around 16.2% (1990-2019) of the total national work force.⁵

Women's empowerment and participation are crucial for economic development. However, empowerment and participation are only possible when there is enhanced gender equality in the workforce. In this paper, by focusing on the United States' initiative for women's economic empowerment— "Promote Gender Equity in National Priority Programs Project (Promote 2015-2020)" — as part of their peacebuilding mission in Afghanistan, the question of the overall importance of women's economic empowerment to Afghanistan's economic development will be explored. This analysis will also include discussion around the status quo for women

2. Benard, Cheryl, Seth G. Jones, Olga Oliker, Cathryn Quantic Thurston, Brook K. Stearns and Kristen Cordell. "Women and Nation-Building." RAND Corporation. 2008. Pp: 81-106 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg579imey-cmepp.13>

3. National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan: 2007-2017. Ministry of Women Affairs. P. 61 <http://extwprlegs1.fao.org/docs/pdf/afg149120.pdf>

4. "Business and economic data for 200 countries." TheGlobalEconomy.com, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Afghanistan/Economic_growth/

5. Ibid.

in the economy generally and the obstacles that make government and international community cooperation on this issue critical. It will be argued that improvements to the sustainability of empowerment programs and to their ability to overcome social barriers are a vital consideration for future programs. It will also be argued that future programs require better monitoring and on-the-ground analyses of women's actual needs. As Promote is one of the most recent and well-funded initiatives specifically targeted at women's empowerment, it will make an ideal case study for why such features are necessary to positively impact the socio-economic status of Afghan women.

The Importance of Women's Economic Empowerment for Peacebuilding

The UN, US, and other international partners implemented a number of initiatives which covered all development areas with the goal of bringing sustainable peace in Afghanistan.⁶ After 23 years (1978-2001) of war, the newly established government, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GoIRA), committed to improving women's status and included equal rights for women in the country's 2004 Constitution.⁷ After signing onto the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs-2004), GoIRA integrated them into its National Priority Programs (NPP) which fall under the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS).⁸

In 2002, the Asia Development Bank (ADB), the UNDP and World Bank (WB) estimated between \$14.6-\$18.1 billion dollars were needed for the next decade of reconstruction in Afghanistan's. ⁹But reports assessing living conditions on the ground show that there is a significant disparity between the amount of aid allocated to Afghanistan and the progress achieved. GoIRA received only 45% of the \$25 billion in funds from donors' disbursements for the period of 2002-20011¹⁰. This issue received particularly more attention

6. محمد رضا صحرايي، غلامعلي چنگيززاده. ۱۳۹۴. «ارزيابي فرايند صلح سازي در افغانستان پس از توافق نامه بن ۲۰۰۱». فصل نامه پژوهشهاي راهبردي سياست. شماره ۱۴. سال چهارم

7. "Bonn Agreement-Dari; Constitution." Afghanistan Independent Election Commission. http://www.iec.org.af/public_html/Civic%20Education%20Material/Flipcharts1/Dari.pdf

8. "Afghanistan Millennium Development Goals Report 2012." Ministry of Economy. December 2013. P. 29 <https://www.af.undp.org/content/afghanistan/en/home/library/mdg/MDGs-report-2012.html>

9. Fayez, Hikmatullah. "The role of foreign aid in Afghanistan's Reconstruction: A Critical Assessment." Economic and Political Weekly. Vol. 47 No. 39, September 29, 2012. Pp: 65-70 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41720193>

10. Ibid.

since 2014 as discussions around ending the international intervention in Afghanistan gained momentum, donor funding began declining, and poverty rates were increasing.¹¹

Following the 2015 Paris climate conference, donors agreed to features covering the new 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with 169 targets to end poverty, inequalities and protect the environment by 2030.¹² “Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment” also featured as an SDG and is recognized as an essential component of all other SDGs¹³. GoIRA signed on to the SDGs in December 2015. As the 2017 SDG’s Progress Report for Afghanistan noted, 36% of Afghans in 2015 were living below the poverty line while discrimination against “vulnerable groups” such as women and ethnic minorities remained a “concerning challenge, despite significant progress made in the context of the MDGs.”¹⁴ It became apparent in this report that without the continued support of “international partners, civil society organizations, private sector, and regional cooperation,” Afghanistan would not be likely to achieve its SDGs’ by 2030.¹⁵

In spite of being identified as critical to the Afghan workforce, women’s continued absence as a human resource has led to a slow-down of the country’s development.¹⁶ Women often face the most severe economic exclusion in fragile and conflict-affected countries, yet these nations have a crucial need for their economic participation.¹⁷ The Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey Report¹⁸ (2016-2017) showed a 29% participation rate of

11. Thomas Rutting, Jelena Bjelica. “The State of Aid and Poverty in 2018: A new look at aid effectiveness in Afghanistan.” Afghanistan Analysts Network, May 17, 2018.

<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/economy-development-environment/the-state-of-aid-and-poverty-in-20018-a-new-look-at-aid-effectiveness-in-afghanistan/>

12. “The 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development.” UN Women. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/post-2015>

13. “SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.” UN Women. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs/sdg-5-gender-equality>

14. “Voluntary National Review at the High-Level Political Forum: SDG’s Progress Report Afghanistan.” HLPF, July 2017. P.13. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/16277Afghanistan.pdf>

15. Ibid.

16. فرزام، رضا. «زنان، فرصت های اقتصادی و کاهش خشونت» ویژه نامه توانایی و تنهایی ویژه زنان. روزنامه اطلاعات روز، سنبله، ۱۳۹۳

17. Klugman, Jeni and Yvonne Quek. “An overview of challenges and prospects: Women’s Financial Inclusion and Economic Opportunities in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States.” Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security 2018, April 2, 2019. <https://giwvps.georgetown.edu/event/womens-economic-empowerment-in-fragile-and-conflict-affected-states-the-role-of-the-private-sector/>

18. “Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey 2013-2014: National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment.” Central Statistics Organization, 2016. P. 190. <https://catalog.ihsn.org/index.php/catalog/6557/study-description>

women in the Afghan labor market (versus men's 81% participation rate).¹⁹ Between 2011 and 2012, the share of non-agricultural labor actually dropped from 11.1% to 10.3%. However, more than 40% of women aged 25-60 were active in agriculture at the time of reporting. Only 3.4% were engaged in a business or organization that did not belong to the family household. The more recent 2017 Survey of Afghanistan People by the Asia Foundation shows 10.9% of women report being engaged in income-generating activities (compared to 79.2% of men), with 12.4% of female urban respondents versus 10.5% of female rural respondents²⁰, which denotes that the development process has been dilatory. Among women reporting an income, teaching is the most commonly cited income-generating activity.

The US, as a key ally of Afghanistan in international peace-building efforts, funded one third of all economic support in the development sector²¹ and took important initiatives for women's economic empowerment. One was the Women Enterprise Development (WED 2005-2008) which provided 10 small grants of \$10,000 to women business associations. There was also the Agricultural Credit Enhancement I & II (ACE 2015-2019) which lent \$1.4 million to 270 female entrepreneurs with the cooperation of religious authorities (ensuring the program's availability in more conservative regions). Another example is the Financial Access for Investing in the Development of Afghanistan (FAIDA 2011–2016) which provided \$3.2 million to 1,756 female-owned or operated businesses while also providing skills development programs, advocacy and technical assistance. In spite of some improvement to women's economic status resulting from such programs legal constraints, socio-cultural barriers, unjust disparities in access to financial resources and opportunities, and illiteracy have continued to remain keys challenges to women's economic empowerment.

19. Junussova, Madina, Mariia lamshchikova, Naveen Hashim, Mohammad Ajmal Khan, Pakiza Kakar, Freshta Wardak, Shukria Rajabi. "The Role of Women in the Economic Development of Afghanistan." Working Paper #53. 2019. P. 7. <https://www.ucecentralasia.org/Resources/Item/2342/EN#:~:text=The%20Role%20of%20Women%20in%20the%20Economic%20Development%20of%20Afghanistan,-Type%3A%20Working%20Papers&text=With%20the%20assistance%20of%20donors,participation%20in%20the%20country's%20economy>.

20. "Afghanistan in 2017: A Survey of the Afghan People." The Asia Foundation, 2017. P. 69 https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2017_AfghanSurvey_report.pdf

21. Faye, Hikmatullah. "The role of foreign aid in Afghanistan's Reconstruction: A Critical Assessment." Economic and Political Weekly. Vol. 47 No. 39, September 29, 2012. Pp: 65-70 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41720193>

Promote-Women in Economy (WIE)

USAID announced the Promoting Gender Equity in National Priority Programs (Promote) on July 2013, describing it as its largest single investment to advance women globally. The goal was to secure the gains made by Afghan women up to that point and make further positive impact.²² Promote reaffirmed the US' commitments to Afghan women (made at Bonn and restated in other agreements) with a promise of meeting new performance targets and sustainability.²³ It was a five-year project valued at \$216 million targeting 75,000 young women (aged between 18-30) from all levels of society with the objective of improving their status by 2020.²⁴ The four components of Promote were aimed at strengthening their participation in civil society, the economy, governance leadership and business management.

Women In Economy (WIE July 2015-June 2020), is one of the four components of the Promote program. Valued at \$71.5 million,²⁵ it was aimed at helping at least 40,000 Afghan women and increasing their participation in the private sector through employment opportunities, increased income growth, viability for women-owned businesses, and businesses whose workforces are composed of at least 10% women.²⁶ It was implemented in five economic zones.²⁷

Three years after Promote's launch, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) released an audit report finding that USAID/Afghanistan deviated from the original intent of the program when it "modified the WIE contract to increase the number of participants by 7,500 (to a total of 9,500) while also shortening the period of performance by 1 year."²⁸ According to SIGAR, "these changes slowed the component's

22. Promoting Gender Equity in National Priority Programs (Promote): USAID Needs to Assess This \$216 Million Program's Achievements and the Afghan Government's Ability to Sustain Them: SIGAR 18-69 Audit Report. SIGAR. September 2018. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/SIGAR-18-69-AR.pdf>

23. Ibid.

24. "Promoting Gender Equality in National Priority Program (Promote)." USAID, November 15, 2017. <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/fact-sheets/promoting-gender-equity-national-priority-programs>

25. Promote— Women in The Economy, Overview. September 2019.

https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1871/Promote_-_Women_in_the_Economy.pdf

26. "Promoting Gender Equality in National Priority Program (Promote)." USAID, November 15, 2017. <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/fact-sheets/promoting-gender-equity-national-priority-programs>

27. Kabul, Herat, Mazar-e Sharif, Jalalabad and Kandahar

28. "Promoting Gender Equality in National Priority Program (Promote)." USAID, November 15, 2017. <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/fact-sheets/promoting-gender-equity-national-priority-programs>

progress towards meeting its performance indicator targets.” The result was that by the end of 2017, WIE was considered to have missed its target for the number of women receiving new or better employment. The report spread rapidly through national and international media who echoed many of SIGAR’s criticisms.²⁹ SIGAR found that \$89.7 million was spent but USAID/Afghanistan had not fully assessed the extent to which Promote was meeting its overarching goal of improving the status of more than 75,000 young women in Afghanistan’s public, private, and civil society sectors.³⁰ In that same report, SIGAR reports that USAID itself did not expect the Afghan government to sustain Promote, contradicting USAID’s own 2014 analysis that Promote met all required elements for sustainability. SIGAR’s own analysis did not support this 2014 analysis. John L. Sopko, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, said: “we can’t find any good data that they’re helping any women.”³¹

Rod Nordland of the New York Times gave different figures than SIGAR for Promote, reporting an original budget of \$280 million as opposed to \$216 million. One of the few concrete results of Promote being cited in 2018 was the promotion of only 55 women to better jobs. Nordland reported Special Inspector General Sopko’s multiple critical statements along with Afghan criticisms (from both government officials and women’s groups) of the program’s poor design and USAID’s misleading characterizations of what it could do. Sopko accuses USAID of lying to American taxpayers and Afghan recipients.³² The Guardian covered SIGAR’s criticism but also USAID’s response to the criticism as “unfounded”, saying much work had been done on outreach and that consultation with the government and women’s organizations is “significant.”³³ Even so, The Guardian also reports that Amnesty International overall agrees with SIGAR’s report stating that

29. Nordland, Rod. “U.S. Aid Program Vowed to help 75,000 Afghan Women. Watchdog Says It’s a Flop.” The New York Times, September 13, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/13/world/asia/afghanistan-women-usaid.html>

30. “Promoting Gender Equality in National Priority Program (Promote).” USAID, November 15, 2017. <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/fact-sheets/promoting-gender-equity-national-priority-programs>

31. Nordland, Rod. “U.S. Aid Program Vowed to help 75,000 Afghan Women. Watchdog Says It’s a Flop.” The New York Times, September 13, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/13/world/asia/afghanistan-women-usaid.html>

32. Ibid.

33. Rasmussen, Sune Engel. “Afghanistan: US Watchdog Criticizes Aid Scheme of Women’s Rights.” The Guardian, April 7, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/apr/07/afghanistan-us-watchdog-criticises-aid-womens-rights>

aid towards women's rights have been "piecemeal and ad-hoc, and much of the aid money is drying up" with far too much focus on short-term gains.

USAID's own September 2019 updates for Promote-WIE did however go ahead and claim important accomplishments. For instance, it reported that 17% of Promote-supported businesses moved from small to medium size and 50% of all Promote-supported businesses grew by 289% within two years of receiving assistance. Wages or income improved by at least 10% for 9,003 women and 12,521 women obtained new or better employment. It even claims credit for political change in Afghanistan such as the Women's Rights, Inheritance and Ownership policy adopted by the Ministry of Women.³⁴

Two months before WIE's official end date of June 30th 2020, SIGAR's quarterly report to the United States Congress concluded that \$64,514,152 were disbursed out of WIE's contract value of \$71,571,543.³⁵ In that same report, 16,058 women were calculated to have graduated WIE's Forward Together scholarship program (which offered job skills courses) while a total 29,112 out of 73,534 Promote beneficiaries found employment. Of these, 1,757 joined the public sector while 10,599 are in private sector internships (though SIGAR warns of double-counting which happens when those counted as interns are also counted when they secure permanent employment).

Conclusion

The absence of women in income generating activities has led to a slow down in the country's overall development. Traditional social norms have often been cited as a key factor contributing to this. Even for graduates of WIE, these norms are often cited as barriers they would face regardless of their certification from the program. In spite of noted interest by certain government officials in ensuring the program's success, SIGAR and other observers fret over the sustainability of the program due to a perceived lack of will in the Afghan government in sustaining it.

34. Promote— Women in The Economy, Overview. September 2019.

https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1871/Promote_-_Women_in_the_Economy.pdf

35. "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress." SIGAR, April 30, 2020. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2020-04-30qr.pdf>

Therefore, those who aim to support Afghanistan's economy should help the government to strengthen the fundamentals of economy and ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of their supporting strategies.

Women's empowerment and economic development are closely interrelated. Any program for Afghan women's empowerment should not be confined to only short-term training projects but should provide all required tools to make them capable of contributing to the formal economy. It is the Afghan government who must provide women opportunities to contribute to the economic development of their country by combatting factors inhibiting their economic growth, chiefly the cultural and social barriers along with the inequality of resources and opportunities between men and women. Widespread corruption, lack of rule of law, insecurity, and extremism should all be addressed by inclusive policies and strategies. Until these are addressed, feeble outcomes like those of WIE should be expected. However, it is also the role of foreign aid agencies to improve their monitoring and follow-up and design of their programs to ensure long-term success for their participants. The most important tool for development plans and assessment is real and accurate data that would help policymakers in their decisions to achieve positive outcomes and impacts. This type of monitoring is a vital tool that has always been absent in programs and projects aimed at 'empowering' Afghan women.

Policy Recommendations:

A better working relationship and improved coordination mechanisms between funding agencies and local/international implementers under the supervision of the Afghanistan government may decrease the risk of failure and help increase of effectiveness as it will avoid repetition, cost reduction and secure transparency.

Accurate statistics of women in formal and informal economic activities will help policymakers and advocates be more precise and effective in decision making

- Baseline studies and needs assessments should include accurate statistics around gender. The terms and conditions of education, age limitations, and the geographical scope of economic zones of past

programs did not account for the nature of Afghan women's socio-economic status.

- Economic empowerment programs for women must help remove legal, social, cultural and political constraints against their economic participation. Part of efforts for women's empowerment must include strengthening the judicial system to prevent economic violence against women and protect their economic rights. Women are in unfair competition with men as there is gender-biased discrimination to resource access and development opportunities, especially education and skills development. There should be concrete policies and legal protection of women's right to access justice along with financial resources with which to enter the formal labor market.
- The government must show determination in supporting women's empowerment programs and coordinating the assessment of the different program stages during implementation. It should also ensure the sustainability of program results.