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Women’s Business Programs and Their
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PEACE THROUGH BUSINESS: WOMEN'S BUSINESS PROGRAMS AND THEIR ROLE IN PEACEBUILDING IN AFGHANISTAN

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Summary

- Manizha Wafeq, the Co-founder and President of the Afghanistan Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry (AWCCI) offers with this article a case study of the PEACE THROUGH BUSINESS (PTB) program and the events which led to the creation of the AWCCI. She offers an analysis of the role of women's empowerment in business as someone who personally took part in all programs and events discussed in the case study.
- It will be argued that business can have a positive role in peacebuilding provided that local actors are sufficiently engaged and supported in the creation of local institutions and networks.
- Women in particular have faced issues in past business empowerment programs that proved not to have staying power. The PTB program provides a more successful case that could inspire other programs to better fulfil the peacebuilding needs of Afghanistan. Its mentorship program under American businesswomen and its Pay it Forward program (which keeps women participants involved both as mentors and women's business advocates) are particularly important components

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that ensure lasting impact and continued appeal to aspiring Afghan women entrepreneurs.

The private sector can have an important role in peacebuilding; it can look into exploring new places to invest in, adopt inclusive and sustainable practices, and work more closely with humanitarian and development agencies to link investments to peacebuilding objectives. This is especially true of local businesses within the area of conflict. Understanding how business can influence peace is central to improving their role in it. The role of women in business in particular will be looked at as part of this overall agenda.

In order for Afghanistan and for women in the private sector to play their respective roles in peacebuilding, women entrepreneurs established the Afghanistan Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry (AWCCI) in 2017 to elevate their voices, interests and concerns on policy matters and use this platform to ensure women are viewed as economic agents and not just beneficiaries of economic resources. This is the first policy advocacy organization promoting women's perspectives on the links between peace and inclusive business in Afghanistan. Its founders believe that development and business activities need to reach rural residents, women, and youth. The author, as a co-founder and current President of AWCCI, provides herein an analysis of the programs that led to AWCCI's creation and a view of the business-peacebuilding relationship more generally.

This paper explores how, in 2009, a group of Afghan businesswomen graduated from the American PEACE THROUGH BUSINESS® (PTB) program and formed the basis of the future AWCCI with the PEACE THROUGH BUSINESS® Network (PTB-N). This advocacy organization expanded to include many prominent businesswomen in Afghanistan in order to better serve as an advocacy organization for women in business. By 2013, PTB-N had built a larger group of allies and in 2014 transformed into the Leading Entrepreneurs for Afghanistan's Development (LEAD). On 12 March 2017, LEAD transitioned into what is known today as AWCCI. It is argued in this paper that the foreign aid initiative of the PTB program lead to a potentially replicable model of business development that can contribute to inclusive peacebuilding initiatives that are still sorely needed throughout Afghanistan to this day.

Business in Peacebuilding

The private sector's role in peacebuilding and even international development as a whole is still an issue under discussion between development actors. The idea of corporate responsibility and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) indicators have come into greater prominence along with increased discussion among major donor nations about how to count Private Sector Instruments in development aid statistics. €7 trillion in investments had been benchmarked by 2018/2019 for corporate progress on peace and development with respect to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).² However, even a Project Lead for the World Economic Forum wrote in 2019 that “business presence in itself is no guarantee of a positive contribution to peacebuilding,” noting that businesses have as much potential to exacerbate conflict.³

In a 2019 study for the Conflict, Security & Development journal, Jason Miklian and Peer Schouten noted the complexities facing businesses running business-peace projects and trying to check off UN SDGs in their practices. In the diverse countries where they study the application of the business role in peacebuilding, they note that business-peace projects that merely try to improve business access typically exacerbate inequalities favouring elite actors. Significant government and international regulation, aid, and oversight would likely need to play a substantial role in order to create real advancement in company interaction with conflict-ridden societies. On the other hand, the study concludes that local businesses in conflict situations are uniquely positioned to navigate conflict economies even if they tend not to be “eager to become overtly visible, for their own political, reputational and personal risk reasons.”⁴

Ultimately, scholarship on this issue is growing but still not advanced enough for current reports to state clearly one way or another if business (local or foreign) can fulfil a significant peacebuilding role. Even a publicly available brief to the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) —

2. Miklian, Jason and Peer Schouten. “Broadening “business”, widening “peace”: a new research agenda on business and peace-building.” Conflict, Security & Development. Vol. 19, 2019— Issue 1: Bringing Business and Peace up to the Mainstream— and Down to the Local. Pages 1-13. February 14 2019. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14678802.2019.1561612?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

3. Crawford, Victoria. “7 ways business can be agents for peace.” World Economic Forum. May 28 2019. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/05/7-ways-business-can-be-agents-for-peace/>

4. Miklian and Schouten. “Broadening “business”, widening “peace.”

the council of major national donors of international aid within the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) — notes an “insufficient demonstration and communication of the results of private sector engagement at project, programme and portfolio levels,” concluding on the need for more evaluations to assess development impact and effectiveness of current partnerships with business actors.⁵ Even the rules around statistical measures by which the DAC would fully weigh private contributions to development efforts are still under discussion.⁶

Overview of Women’s Role in the Afghan Economy and in Business Ownership

Historically, women have played a significant role in various economic sectors such as carpet production, dry fruits, dairy processing, and animal husbandry. They have been the majority of the over 1 million carpet industry workers in Afghanistan, yet it remains an industry that is hard to value even in recent evaluations. According to Afghanistan’s own 2018-2022 National Export Strategy (developed jointly between Afghanistan’s Ministry of Industry and Commerce and the International Trade Centre), 75% of carpet exports to the international market are not recorded with most exports actually occurring through middlemen in Pakistan.⁷ The effect is to obscure the potential of this women-driven industry even if it is one of the country’s largest export sectors.

Women have also historically worked in the regionally important trade of dried fruits and nuts and are heavily involved throughout the value chain. This sector was actually valued as being higher than any other export sector in 2016, accounting for almost 23% of the whole Afghanistan export basket. In that year, it had an export value of \$183 million.⁸ Women often play a significant role during the harvesting and processing stages, thereby

5. “Private Sector Peer Learning Policy Brief 3: Ensuring Results when Engaging the Private Sector in Development Co-operation.” OECD. <https://www.oecd.org/dac/peer-reviews/Policy-Brief-3-Ensuring-Results-when-Engaging-the-Private-Sector-in-Development-Co-operation.pdf>

6. “Private Sector Instruments.” OECD. 2018. <http://www.oecd.org/fr/cad/private-sector-instrument.htm>

7. “Afghanistan National Export Strategy 2018-2022: Carpets Sector.” International Trade Center. 2018. P 24. https://www.intracen.org/uploadedFiles/intracenorg/Content/Redesign/Projects/AAT/AFG_Carpets.pdf

8. “Afghanistan National Export Strategy 2018-2022: Dried Fruits and Nuts Sector.” International Trade Centre. 2018. P 24. https://www.intracen.org/uploadedFiles/intracenorg/Content/Redesign/Projects/AAT/AFG_Dried%20Fruits%20and%20Nuts.pdf

elevating their status as contributors to household incomes.⁹ In the National Export Strategy report, it was still noted that cultural norms surrounding the interactions between men and women hampered the ability of women to proactively maximize their potential throughout the dried fruits and nuts value chain.¹⁰ It was recommended that greater women involvement would allow for the kind of women-to-women interaction that would be more culturally feasible and productive within the local context.

Despite the position of women as important producers of exportable consumer goods, the World Bank's recorded labor force participation rate for Afghan women only rose to 21.7% in 2020 (based on the International Labor Organization's estimate)¹¹ which doesn't include the informal labor described above. In addition, Afghan women are very much the bearers of the infamous "double burden" or "second shift" of having to support the family both in difficult "public sphere" labor and family caretaking in the "private sphere" of the home with the two theoretical "spheres" often blending together. These difficulties carry over to women's business ownership.

According to AWCCI's own statistics (released to the Afghan press in early 2019) 1,150 women entrepreneurs invested in different Afghan businesses over the past 18 years. These investments by women totalled around \$77 million with 300 new women-founded businesses in 2018 alone. 77,000 new jobs were created by these businesses. This success is tempered by the fact that 50% of these investments were in Kabul.¹² A separate 2018 study by AWCCI randomly selected 248 women-owned businesses in Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, Kandahar, and Jalalabad, and it was found that in these areas (where most of the businesses created by women were appearing), 90% of women business owners were educated and 50% had a working knowledge of English and computer literacy which paints a picture of progress captured almost completely by educated urbanites. This might lend further credence to Miklian and Schouten's conclusion that business access improvement alone favours certain elites.¹³ At the same time, less than 50% of respondents

9. Ibid. P 1.

10. Ibid. P 37.

11. "Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modelled ILO estimate) – Afghanistan." The World Bank. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=AF>

12. Arman, Rohullah. "AWCCI Releases Figures on Women Entrepreneurs." Tolo news. February 10, 2019. <https://tolonews.com/business/awcci-releases-figures-women-entrepreneurs>

13. Wafeq, Manizha. "Internal Factors Affecting Growth of Women-Owned Businesses in Afghanistan." Afghanistan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry. P 4. <https://awcci.af/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/AWCCI-Research-Paper-Factors-Affecting-Womens-Businesses-Print-Layout-V2-Pages-Low-Res.pdf>

had business or marketing plans or a standard operating system or were familiar with quality control and financial management systems. A combination of external obstacles (deficient infrastructure, a weak legal system, lack of access to finance, lack of access to markets, and socio-cultural gender expectations) and internal obstacles (weak internal capacity) were significantly hindering Afghan women in business.¹⁴

The 2018 study was not optimistic about the future of Afghan women-owned business. Only 5% of all licensed businesses were women-owned, usually in handicrafts and food processing even if there was growing activity in restauration, information and technology services, and travel services (based on information collected when the AWCCI was still known as LEAD).¹⁵ It was noted that many women-owned businesses were stagnating, registering “little to no growth over several years.”¹⁶ The situation urgently calls for models that could help women overcome barriers to economic participation and contribute to peacebuilding by normalizing women’s participation in the public sphere and in leadership positions. The PTB program which eventually lead to the establishment of LEAD and then AWCCI could be one such positive model for local business actors acting in the interest of peacebuilding and women’s empowerment.

Case Study: The Peace Through Business Program

In 2006 Dr. Terry Neese, an entrepreneur from Oklahoma and advocate for women in business (co-founding the Women Impacting Public Policy (WIPP) in 2001), was asked by Laura Bush, former US First Lady, to put together a business training and mentorship program for Afghan businesswomen. Dr. Neese was trusted as an ally of the Bush administration (raising \$1 million for George W. Bush’s re-election in 2004 and offered a position in his administration in 2005)¹⁷ but also for the network she created in the U.S. among the women business-owner community boasting a database of 200,000 American women business owners.¹⁸ It was with this network that

14. Ibid. P 4.

15. Ibid. P 7.

16. Ibid.

17. Gold, Matea and Tom Hamburger. “In 2016 campaign, the lament of the not quite rich enough.” The Washington Post, March 25, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/in-2016-campaign-the-lament-of-the-not-quite-rich-enough/2015/03/24/f0a38b18-cdb4-11e4-8a46-b1dc9be5a8ff_story.html

18. Nance-Nash, Sheryl. “Women Business Owners Partner to Bring Prosperity and Peace.” Forbes. April 26, 2012. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sherylnancenash/2012/04/26/women-business-owners-partner-to-bring-prosperity-and-peace/>

she planned to create a unique program for training aspiring Afghan women. Dr. Neese founded the PTB program in 2007 which held the philosophy that businesses create jobs and jobs in turn create productive spaces for economic engagement between citizens. Looking back on the program in 2018, Dr. Neese continues to express her belief that strong democracies require stable economies in which women have a central role.¹⁹ This was a common theme in many of the private aid programs during the 00s decade though among them, PTB stands out as more of an exception than the rule. Unlike many other privately run women's empowerment in business programs taking place in Afghanistan at the time, PTB stands out for its more long-term success in terms of trained women's performance. It is therefore important to understand why PTB performed better than many of the other programs that shared its philosophy and objectives.

PTB launched in 2007 with a first cohort of 13 women which included the author of this article among their ranks. PTB evolved over time with the current program providing aspiring women entrepreneurs with a 10 week curriculum in Afghanistan developed with Northwood University on operations management, financial basics, marketing, promotion and selling, and human resources. 15 top Afghan students are then chosen to come to the US for a period of "entrepreneurial immersion" on Northwood campus (and more recently, AT&T University campus) and then a week with an American mentor (from within Dr. Neese's large network of American women entrepreneurs) in a matched profession.^{20,21,22} Program graduates are then taken on as PTB mentors in the "Pay it Forward" phase to teach new students in Afghanistan and to serve as speakers for women's organizations and advocates on "economic issues."²³

The program maintained an effective balance between theory and practice allowing Afghan businesswomen to learn directly from their American

19. Hall, Cheryl. "Terry Neese brings women entrepreneurs to Dallas to help end strife in Afghanistan, Rwanda." *The Dallas Morning News*. August 03, 2018. <https://www.dallasnews.com/business/entrepreneurs/2018/08/03/terry-neese-brings-women-entrepreneurs-to-dallas-to-help-end-strife-in-afghanistan-rwanda/>

20. Nance-Nash. "Women Business Owners Partner to Bring Prosperity and Peace."

21. Hall. "Terry Neese brings women entrepreneurs to Dallas to help end strife in Afghanistan, Rwanda."

22. "What We Do." IEEW. <https://ieew.org/our-impact/what-we-do/>

23. *Ibid.*

counterparts. The author of this article, as part of the first cohort of PTB graduates, later founded the Afghan PTB Alumni Association in 2009 in order to further develop networking and policy advocacy opportunities for local businesswomen. The “Pay it Forward” phase would later see graduates use the new AWCCI to fulfil their advocacy work. There was also a 2017 development of a “Pathways Course”— a 5-day version of the program for rural trainees to cover the basics of business planning and principles.²⁴ The author of this article serves as the main contact for this course.

The PTB program currently reports on its Alumna page that over 450²⁵ Afghan businesswomen have so far been trained. It also reports on its Impact page that around 80% of the PTB’s graduates in both Afghanistan and Rwanda (the other country involved in the program) are still involved in business today.²⁶ Media coverage of the program readily reports this number (citing the PTB’s statistics without further inquiry) though outside of the PTB’s own estimation, there are no publicly available in-depth evaluations of the PTB program’s impact or what exactly the statistic means by “still in business.” The PTB program can nevertheless be regarded as somewhat successful as 89% of graduates still stay on for the Pay it Forward phase and interest in participating in the program is increasing in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the PTB program’s managing non-profit— the Institute for Economic Empowerment of Women (IEEW) — continued education supports AWCCI’s growth as a platform for women’s advocacy in business.²⁷

The PTB-N, created by the first three PTB program cohorts for policy advocacy purposes, felt that they required a larger platform to bring significant policy changes for women in business in Afghanistan. To achieve this, the PTB-N joined prominent businesswomen to eventually found the Leading Entrepreneurs for Afghanistan’s Development (LEAD) in 2013, which itself turned into the first Women’s Chamber of Commerce and Industry (AWCCI) in Afghanistan on 12 March 2017.²⁸ Since its establishment, AWCCI has provided support to Afghan businesswomen on a national level. As it is a

24. “PTB/NU Pathways 5-Day Course: Afghanistan.” IIEW. <https://ieew.org/pathways-course/>

25. “Peace Through Business Alumnae.” IIEW. <https://ieew.org/students/ptb-alumnae/>

26. “Our Impact.” IIEW. <https://ieew.org/our-impact/>

27. Ibid.

28. “Our Organization.” AWCCI. <https://awcci.af/en/our-organization/>

very new organization, it is bound to take time to fully register any kind of impact but its existence is significant in its own right as a testament to the continued advocacy work provided by PTB graduates (and therefore the lasting impact of the PTB program).

Conclusion

Program design and approach require flexibility and evolution. The PTB program remained relevant due to its willingness to evolve and to work alongside Afghan graduates who used their agency to expand the program on their own initiative. The Pay it Forward phase, the development of a strong alumni network, and the recent establishment of AWCCI proves the importance of organic local participation and agency in the success of a program. Many other similar programs that benefitted from large-scale funding did not survive precisely because they did not take a longer-term view to their graduates and did not engage local interest in taking project ownership. As current research on the business-peace relationship shows, it is local actors that can help navigate conflict areas and locate the best ways to apply development objectives in specific contexts. More programs with the PTB's staying power and effective capacity-building practices are needed to end the status quo of unstable and unprofitable women-led business in Afghanistan.

Policy Recommendations

- Training programs should use long-term coaching and mentorship in order to transfer knowledge and skills and ensure they result in a real change in women's livelihoods and business management.
- Sustainable institutions with committed leadership should be given space to arise organically through Afghan women's efforts.
- Such organic organizations led by women can contribute to peacebuilding and should be provided political, technical and financial support over longer periods to give time for tangible results to appear.
- These organizations' governance and structure should be well-defined and laid out in their inception so that their operation is not interrupted by internal disunity.

- The design of the programs' content, methodology of delivery and trainer selection should be well-suited for the Afghan context. Knowledge of local languages is essential. Trainers for women should be women where possible.
- In countries beset by conflict like Afghanistan, programs should be developed with a focus on how they contribute to peacebuilding and inclusive development.