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**Paper Title: An Analysis of Women’s Empowerment in Afghanistan: A Case Study of Balk Province**

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**To cite this article (Chicago):** Khurram, Beheshta (2020) “An Analysis of Women’s Empowerment in Afghanistan: A Case Study of Balk Province.” *Afghanistan Women and Peacebuilding Journal*, Vol. 1 (2020): pp. 92-101. Accessed Month Day, Year. Retrieved from

**AFGHANISTAN WOMEN AND PEACEBUILDING JOURNAL  
(VOL. 1 – 2020)**

**Published by**

Organization for Policy Research and development Studies  
(DROPS)

and

UN Women Afghanistan

# AN ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN AFGHANISTAN: A CASE STUDY OF BALKH PROVINCE

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## **Summary**

- Thanks to a relatively secure first decade of peacebuilding and an easier time under the PRT system than other areas, Balkh was able to see progress in economic empowerment for rural women as civilian development workers were allowed greater countryside penetration. It also avoided having its development overly tied to wartime objectives though the war did result in a diversion of funding away from Balkh towards more unstable provinces.
- Many of the common issues like international preference for short-term projects and growing insecurity, especially in the second decade of the peacebuilding agenda, plague Balkh's empowerment programs as well.
- It is too soon to declare the success or failure of post-2014 women's empowerment programs that are ending in 2020 and many have not released detailed evaluations on their performance in Balkh. There is already unease among both locals and international observers regarding the sustainability of these programs.

The Balkh province in the north of Afghanistan has hosted a great number of women's empowerment projects under the peacebuilding banner

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since 2001. With its capital at Mazar-e-Sharif, the fourth largest city in Afghanistan, it is a significant regional base for peacebuilding projects and donor agencies. From 2006 to the 2014 transition, Balkh was part of the Area of Responsibility (AOR) of the Swedish Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). Sweden avoided the pitfalls suffered by other PRT AORs by mostly separating military goals from civilian peacebuilding work. Sweden also avoided the trap of creating large parallel structures by funneling most aid through government bodies. Peacebuilding continued after the end of the PRT system in Afghanistan in 2014 through the UN, World Bank, European, and American efforts. Up until recently, Balkh was unique in that development workers considered it safe enough to significantly expand into rural areas in ways that were not possible in other provinces. This allowed successful economic empowerment programs for women in agriculture. This safety paradoxically meant that funding was often channeled away from Balkh towards less safe areas to match up with counterinsurgency objectives. As with everywhere else, the results of the women's empowerment programs in Balkh are mixed with only rough estimates existing for the actual success of the programs (where such numbers exist).

The following research will attempt to give a provincial view of women's empowerment programs compared to other chapters which take a nationwide view of the matter. It will both look at the available reporting on Balkh empowerment programs and include original data derived from key informant interviews of Afghan women implicated in local empowerment programs in order to provide the views of those witnessing these programs on the ground, chiefly public servants, civil society organization members, and foreign aid agency workers. The combination of what currently is publicly available and what was derived from the interviews will show there has been significant progress in women's socio-economic situations but also major challenges. Women and girl's empowerment programs still lack significant resources and most crucially sustainability as there is a lack of clarity around whether government structures can or will still keep them in place should donor aid decrease.

### **The Peacebuilding Mission in Balkh under the Swedish PRT**

In 2008, a survey was conducted in the PRT AOR under Sweden for the

benefit of Sweden's development agency, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (shortened to "Sida").<sup>2</sup> The report itself admits its numbers are "rough estimates"<sup>3</sup> but its overview of Balkh remains an important resource in absence of an official census or other available peacebuilding-related data on the region from the time. It describes a Balkh that was in rapid expansion population-wise with its urban centers growing as Mazar-e-Sharif swelled with displaced, landless migrants (displaced not just from insecurity but also from drought which was reportedly serious in 2008). Even then, agriculture and livestock were still the main source of income for the vast majority of those living in Sweden's AOR (Balkh had a 66% rural majority). Somewhat encouraging is a 2007 ranking funded by the United Nations Fund for Population Activities ("UNFPA," known now as the United Nations Population Fund) where Balkh was the 9th most well off in socio-economic terms using indices that included education and government services but also access to shopping facilities and exposure to radio and television.

Among its advantages, Balkh maintained fertile agricultural land with high potential along with a strong dairy industry. Silk, carpet, and jewelry handicrafts are still widespread (and are all women-dominated craft industries) though even by 2013, the potential of a revitalized international market for such goods had still not been capitalized on (Germany in particular was attempting to help women create marketable carpets).<sup>4</sup> However, the introduction of saffron in 2006 did lead to a successful growth in women-led saffron cultivation which had a possible positive side-effect of helping displace poppy cultivation.<sup>5</sup> Trade, however, is still quite small-scale. Another advantage Balkh had going for it regarding women was a comparatively high literacy rate and a tradition of high educational standards, something still reported today.

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2. Larsson, Katarina. A Provincial Survey of Balkh, Jowzjan, Samangan and Saripul. November 2008. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Katarina\\_Larsson/publication/265288251\\_A\\_PROVINCIAL\\_SURVEY\\_OF\\_BALKH\\_JOWZJAN\\_SAMANGAN\\_AND\\_SARIPUL/links/5577096008ae7521586e1072.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Katarina_Larsson/publication/265288251_A_PROVINCIAL_SURVEY_OF_BALKH_JOWZJAN_SAMANGAN_AND_SARIPUL/links/5577096008ae7521586e1072.pdf). 1

3. Larsson. 8

4. Fishstein, Paul, Islamuddin Amaki, and Mohammed Qaasim. "Balkh's Economy in Transition." Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. August 2013. [https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1228946/1226\\_1377517446\\_1306-20ip-20balkh-20economy-20aug-202013.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1228946/1226_1377517446_1306-20ip-20balkh-20economy-20aug-202013.pdf). 32

5. Ibid. 40

According to the 2008 report to Sida, Balkh used to be among the provinces that received the most development aid due to its “good security situation and strong leadership.” Even before 2001, Balkh received important Soviet assistance and retained industrial infrastructure and Central Asian commercial links from that time.<sup>6</sup> But by 2008, trends were perceived to be changing. Both the Head of UNAMA at the time, Marguerite Roy, and Balkh Governor Atta Mohammad Noor expressed strong dissatisfaction with the fact that aid funding was increasingly flowing into “hostile” regions in the south and east of the country. They claimed money was now insufficient and that popular discontent was growing.<sup>7</sup> In any case, Balkh was facing serious issues affecting both its men and women: increased landlessness, very high drug use in the countryside (especially among women), and certain districts becoming hubs for local crime in absence of sufficient legal and social structures. Women’s issues were still among the most serious problems in the province. In 2005, the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) saw as the most urgent issues: early marriage and child labor (46.3% of women aged 20-24 were married before 18), promoting iodized salt to reduce physical damage to newborns, and provision of obstetric care to reduce the number of maternal deaths in childbirth.

There were significant positive features in the management of the AOR, however. Sweden and its partner Finland managed development in a markedly different way from other PRTs. Most of the funding by 2010 went (via various funding mechanisms) through the central government. This in itself is remarkable given the still widespread criticism against donor-created “parallel administrations” that weakened the government. Another key differentiator is the separation of civilian and military functions of the PRT, a reflection of Scandinavian coalition members’ unwillingness to use their militaries to conduct aid work, especially in light of negative experiences of that elsewhere in the country.<sup>8</sup> The relative security from the ongoing war also probably facilitated this civilian/military separation of duties though insecurity in the area persisted due to poverty and unemployment which

6. Fishstein, Paul and Andrew Wilder. “Winning Hearts and Minds? Examining the Relationship between Aid and Security in Afghanistan.” Feinstein International Center; Tufts University. January 2012. <https://fic.tufts.edu/assets/WinningHearts-Final.pdf>. 21

7. Larsson. 5

8. Fishstein and Wilder. 28

likely contributed to criminality.<sup>9</sup> The lack of fighting (and civilian casualties) also meant coalition members were not regarded with as much fear or apprehension and there was greater local willingness to engage with the PRT. Overall, this system meant greater civilian control of development and less subordination of development to war objectives.

Many development actors had made Balkh an important regional center of operations or focus of attention.<sup>10</sup> Under the European Union Commission's (EU) aegis, at least two development organizations were directly involved in women's empowerment, shelter, and legal support (the Cooperation Centre for Afghanistan and Medica Mondiale) with other actors involved in issues that crosscut with women's issues (income generation or access to justice, chief among them). This PRT AOR also received direct funding boosts from the EU. UNICEF meanwhile had projects with special focus on quality education for girls. The World Bank, as the main mechanism of international development funding for Afghanistan as a whole, was also active in providing local grants for boosting girls in education while its other programs also had benefits for women. The National Solidarity Program (NSP), which supports small-scale community projects and is involved in boosting rural women's social inclusion, is widely regarded as one of the most popular World Bank-funded development programs in Afghanistan and one of the best examples of cooperation by all major development actors including the government.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to multinational aid, there was also significant aid on a bilateral basis. Germany and Japan focused aid on Balkh and the Mazar-e-Sharif area in cooperation with Sweden and UN agencies on many issues that crosscut with "gender". Both Germany and Sweden gave gender issues special attention. While the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was the biggest funder of all aid activities in the country, the 2008 report to Sida noted no projects directly aimed at women's empowerment at the time though it listed many projects that in theory crosscut with women's empowerment such as education, skills trainings, and youth empowerment.

In spite of all of this activity, the report still concluded that women's issues

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9. *Ibid.* 34

10. Larsson. 35

11. Fishstein and Wilder. 52-53

needed far more attention across all sectors.<sup>12</sup> While Balkh is held up as a success in terms of trainings for public officials and civil servants, by 2008 (seven years after the beginning of the mission) it was still the case that far more progress was required with regards to women's equality and empowerment. In the 2010 Tufts University report, Afghan respondents expressed to analysts their dissatisfaction with the small scale of projects and their lack of sustainability.<sup>13</sup> Among both men and women, there was a marked desire for projects that provided long-term stability and employment. The lack of funding for these kinds of projects was seen as part of the "peace penalty" — the lack of funding due to lack of urgency in the security situation relative to other provinces. Aid was also universally seen as fragmented, incoherent, and poorly implemented owing to donor's lack of local knowledge and unfulfilled promises from previous PRT rotations. To counteract this, there was often the temptation among new PRT rotations to report greater success than their predecessors and were thus tempted to take short cuts like paying off local maleks (which worried both locals and aid agencies who feared this was fueling future destabilization).<sup>14</sup>

The upcoming end of the PRT system in 2013 in anticipation of the 2014 Transition created an atmosphere of uncertainty in Balkh. While the international military was seen as unobtrusive (compared to other PRTs), respondents to analysts at the time showed lower confidence in a full takeover by local officials.<sup>15</sup> The issue of poor governance by local authorities was unimproved and now exacerbated by new environmental issues of water scarcity, desertification, and overharvesting of natural resources.

### **Post-Transition: Empowerment Programs between 2014 and 2020**

Information post-transition specific to Balkh is harder to find. The experiences of the key informant interviews will come into play here to understand the empowerment programs in the eyes of those carrying them out.

Of the available evaluations, one of the most notable is the one by Sida and the International Labor Organization (ILO) regarding their collaboration on

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12. Larsson. 63

13. Fischstein and Wilder. 47

14. Ibid. 49

15. Fishstein et al. 2

the Road to Jobs (R2J) project (active in Balkh since 2015). The 2018 evaluation describes mixed success in women's inclusion in agricultural business (for example, success in women's empowerment in dairy but failure in poultry) though it claims success in stakeholder inclusion.<sup>16</sup> The ILO currently claims to have improved 52,162 jobs with 3,475 for women in both the Balkh and Samangan provinces as of its most recent available count.

USAID's massive Promote program for women's empowerment, meanwhile, also claims to have directed attention at Balkh between 2013 and 2020 though it did not yet publish a detailed evaluation of the latest results. In currently available evaluations or tallies of its targets and program graduates, Promote does not distinguish between the targeted regions.<sup>17,18</sup> Thus the actual effect of Promote on Balkh is currently unknowable. The US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) famously criticized the sustainability and overall effectiveness of the Promote program as a whole in its 2018 audit though again without specifying province-specific numbers.<sup>19</sup>

Germany's development agency (GIZ) is a major donor to programs between 2014 and 2020, chiefly SEDEP which was aimed at creating sustainable employment in six northern provinces including Balkh. It claims that since 2017, 9,700 people were reached with training, advice, and needs assessment measures of which 37% were women. Overall improvement in farming quality is also claimed to have been achieved.<sup>20</sup> This program has not yet published a public evaluation. One Afghan interviewee for this study who is an adviser and youth trainer for the GIZ in Balkh believes Germany's currently active training programs are effective at women's empowerment and especially help women form networks.<sup>21</sup> She also believes they

16. Watkins, Francis, Kimiko Hibri Pedersen and Naweed Rahmani. "Evaluation of ILO Road to Jobs (R2J), Afghanistan." Sida. 2019. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/documents/publication/wcms\\_705770.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_705770.pdf)

17. "PROMOTE: Women In Government." USAID. July 2019. [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1871/Promote\\_-\\_Women\\_in\\_Government.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1871/Promote_-_Women_in_Government.pdf)

18. "PROMOTE : Women's Leadership Development." USAID. July 2019. [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Promote\\_-\\_Womens\\_Leadership\\_Development\\_0.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Promote_-_Womens_Leadership_Development_0.pdf)

19. "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. September 2018. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/SIGAR-18-69-AR.pdf>

20. "More work and income in northern Afghanistan." Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/30881.html>

21. Joya, Gulbibi. Interview by the author. August 15 2020.



help the younger participants to build emotional intelligence, stronger communication skills, overall resourcefulness, and leadership skills.

Tahmina Gawhary, a public servant working at the Balkh Department of Women's Affairs (DoWA), highlights the largescale cooperation of government agencies with these activities. She equally notes the activities of other aid institutions such as the Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees (DACAAR) which, with the support of the EU, has set up training programs and provided agricultural and sewing equipment.<sup>22</sup>

According to Gul Chehrah Beheen, head of the Mobtada legal organization and member of a local women's organization (the Women's Voice Advisory Group on Civil Peace Policy), these empowerment programs have had success in increasing women's participation in social life. "Empowerment programs in Balkh have undoubtedly been useful and civil society organizations have worked harder in this regard" she states. "Unfortunately, government programs in this area have not been very effective." To address this, she urges women to use their newfound skills in literacy and advocacy to further push the cause of women's empowerment and even start their own civil society organizations.<sup>23</sup> According to Beheen, civil activists for women's empowerment recognize that insecurity can hinder the effectiveness of empowerment programs but emphasize that these programs have helped reduce violence and strengthen the peace process in addition to making women more socially active.

Another interviewee believes the empowerment programs have boosted women's interest in business and sales. In her view, there has been an increase in market saleswomen and female shop owners which in turn made it easier for women to easily buy the goods they need.<sup>24</sup> Yalda Bari, Women Economic Empowerment Project Officer in GIZ, explains that close consultation with participants, attentiveness to their feedback, and special sessions with businesswomen speakers helps participants improve their businesses. However, special attention to illiterate women should be given through a combination of educational and practical business training.

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22. Samar, Nadia. Interview by the author. June 30 2020.

23. Beheen, Gul Chehrah. Interview with the author. July 22.2020.

24. Samar. Interview.

Ensuring their participation in exhibitions and setting up free booths for them is also one of the activities undertaken by women's economic empowerment institutions.<sup>25</sup>

Complaints about the short-term nature of development and empowerment projects (already noted by the Tufts report in 2010) persist to this day. However, according to Beheen, the short-term nature of these programs has not impeded their effectiveness. She goes further, saying they have proceeded in accordance with the will of society.<sup>26</sup> In the beginning, there were problems with how these programs were implemented, owing to lack of security and the lack of professional trainers in the empowerment sectors who could actually transfer this knowledge. However, in recent years, the implementation of these programs has risen and the number of experienced teachers has increased.

Other interviewees see the opposite progression: in earlier years, achievements could be seen all parts of the province while in recent years, these achievements are more limited as insecurity has increased. Gawhary, however, still believes women can be force multipliers in spite of the current context. She observed that when a girl participates in empowerment programs, she can then empower about 20 other people (which can include family and friends).<sup>27</sup> As a DoWA worker, Gawhary reckons that even with the recent Covid-19 pandemic, about 2,000 women from the Balkh DoWA and affiliated institutions managed to increase the number of capacity-building empowerment sessions in 2020.

The main challenge identified by interviewees is the quality of the programs—ensuring the inclusion of specialized teachers, programs with a scientific standard, and a professional approach.<sup>28</sup> Security is another challenge. Many women's empowerment programs in the districts are stopped due to lack of project security leading to uncompleted programs. Finally, one must also contend with possible lack of motivation to participate in these programs.<sup>29</sup>

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25. Bari, Yalda. Interview with the author. August 12 2020.

26. Beheen. Interview.

27. Gawhary, Tahmina. Interview with the author. June 30 2020.

28. Beheen. Interview.

29. Gawhary. Interview.

## Conclusion

The perspectives of the interviewees provided human elements to fill in the gaps between the numbers and long lists of programs provided by international onlookers. There is a strong desire among Afghan women implicated in empowerment programs to promote their usefulness. Some even demand more impressive efforts from their fellow women to use their new skills to further boost the cause. Surveys from other sources covering the region reveal a Balkh that is weary of the government's performance and actual will to sustain programs like women's empowerment. It is also highly demanding of the international community and critical of their current efforts which are seen to be insufficient. In this way, Balkh is much like the rest of Afghanistan.

The international evaluations largely align with the Afghan people in terms of weariness around the actual sustainability of current projects should donor support end. While there is projected optimism around the number of women trained and increased participation of women in the workforce and social life, Balkh has not entirely escaped the pitfalls seen in many other provinces: lack of local knowledge on the part of donors, lack of adequate funding and sustainability, rising insecurity, and environmental catastrophes (notably droughts) among other issues. However, Balkh has also enjoyed better penetration of development into its countryside to a degree that was not possible in other provinces as well as better management under the PRT system which helped avoid the worst of the parallel aid structure systems. Some improvements will be proposed for Balkh empowerment programs for women and girls.

## Policy Recommendations

- Implementation of women's empowerment programs based on quality educational materials approved by reputable academic institutions, a regular program, and specialized teachers.
- Long-term and sustainable programs that can provide training for increased number of women.
- Provision of security to programs to ensure that women in remote areas can benefit from empowerment programs and in turn pass on those teachings.