

Separating Discourse from Practice:

What Does the Future Hold for Women in
Afghanistan?

Edited by

Mariam Safi and Aziz Koshan



DROPS

ORGANIZATION FOR POLICY RESEARCH
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Email: info@dropsafghanistan.org

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Preface

The Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies has dedicated the 6th volume of its flagship *Women and Public Policy Journal* to the analysis of Afghan women's achievements in the past two decades. This volume comes at a time when the Afghan peace process—aimed at ending the four decades long conflict in the country—is now in motion, following the February 2020 US–Taliban Agreement and the September 2020 launch of the Intra–Afghan Negotiations between the Afghan government's negotiation team and Taliban representatives in Doha, Qatar. The stakes are high for the people of Afghanistan, and for Afghan women in particular. The outcome of these talks would determine whether gains made since 2001 would be preserved or whether the country would return to the era of Taliban rule which was characterized by women being confined and restricted to their homes.

Besides counter–terrorism related objectives of the 'Global War on Terror', protecting women's rights was one of the main agendas that were stated as being the motivations for the 2001 US–led military intervention in Afghanistan. Since then, some aid and efforts have been directed towards women's empowerment and increasing women's engagement in public life. With strong advocacy by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and other human rights activists, the Afghan government has, without any reservations, signed and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Domestically, it has developed the National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA). For first time in Afghanistan's history, domestic violence against women has been criminalized; the country now has a Law on Elimination of Violence Against Women, enforced via a presidential decree issued in 2009; and has a National Action Plan for implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which calls for women's meaningful participation in conflict prevention, resolution, and implementation of any peace agreement.

2020 also marks the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform of Action and the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325. These international

commitments and domestic policies have enabled improvements to women's rights and their contributions in the society; and at present, Afghan women are actively engaged in various spheres of society. Yet, despite the progresses that have been made vis-a-vis women's rights, Afghanistan is still considered to be one of 'the most dangerous countries for women'. Violence against women is an all too familiar reality in most parts of the country, and is, unfortunately, often practiced with impunity.

Essays in this volume of the WPPJ attempt to address a central question: where are Afghan women after 18 years? To that end, the authors examine the roles and contributions of women in social, political, legal, security and economic spheres. Each article analyses women's achievements in specific sectors in Afghanistan. Essays in this volume also offer a refreshing change from stories of Afghan women always being told by 'others'. In this volume, young Afghan women themselves have taken the lead and conducted research on women's roles in various sectors of public life. Based on their research, they have formulated policy recommendations for all stakeholders and policymakers, both in the Afghan government and the international community, to factor in while drafting policies pertaining to Afghan women.

The authors of the WPPJ's 6th volume and their research findings demonstrate that Afghan women are capable of playing positive and constructive roles in the reconstruction of the country. This is the current reality of Afghanistan and it should be recognized. Stability, development, and sustainable peace in Afghanistan will not be possible without full and meaningful participation of Afghan women.

Dr. Sima Samar

Afghanistan's State Minister for Human Rights and International Affairs; Member, UN Secretary-General's High-Level Advisory Board on Mediation; and Member, High-Level Panel for Internal Displacements of UN Secretary General.

9 November 2020

Editor's Note

The phrase “the Afghanistan of today, is not the Afghanistan of 2001” is a common refrain among women activists, human rights defenders, civil society actors, and public officers in Afghanistan. While this new reality is unambiguously evident given the immense scale of achievements made towards the promotion and protection of women's rights in all social spheres, much still remains to be done. These efforts began immediately in the aftermath of the fall of the Taliban regime, a regime during which women and girls were discriminated against in several ways. When they ruled Afghanistan (1996–2001), the Taliban enforced their version of Islamic Sharia law. They banned women and girls from attaining education; working; and leaving the house without a male chaperone. Moreover, since the Taliban prohibited women from accessing healthcare delivered by men, healthcare was virtually inaccessible to women. Today, Afghan women comprise a little over 17% of the total national work force, and 1.4% of the personnel in the security sector.

Aimed at presenting a clearer and more grounded picture of how far Afghan women have actually come in the last two decades (post-2001), each of the 10 research papers and one book review contained in this volume of the *Women and Public Policy Journal (WPPJ)*: a) takes stock of the achievements; and b) highlights the gaps and barriers that continue to create major impediments to consolidating the gains. Each contribution also provides concrete policy recommendations to assist national and international policymakers in plugging these gaps as the country enters a new decade, one that will be unapologetically measured against how it achieves self-reliance and local ownership in its pursuit for sustainable peace.

This year also marks the 20th anniversary of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, which was adopted on 31 October 2000. As a member state, Afghanistan was obligated to follow its provisions. However, its trajectory in upholding these provisions has been chequered, as it was not until 2015 when it adopted its first National Action Plan on the implementation of 1325. In the first five years following the fall of the Taliban and beginning of the international intervention in Afghanistan, the objectives and standards outlined in UNSCR 1325 were not specifically referred to in any document guiding the country's democratization and reconstruction process. The only exceptions were a handful of provisions echoed in documents such as the Berlin Declaration (2004) and the Afghanistan Compact (2006). However, by 2006, conditions on the ground began to change drastically, presenting a challenging environment for the full realization of the reconstruction process, including that of UNSCR 1325.

The re-emergence of the Taliban as an insurgent group, rising insecurity and civilian casualties, a growing rural-urban divide caused by ad hoc development initiatives, and corruption rendered many, especially women, trapped in a cyclical process of traumatization, all of which collectively resulted in the (re)erection of old and new barriers. This meant that Afghans' will to build peace and the complex forces that were now at play against peace made it extremely difficult to engender real change for women. In 2011, Afghanistan was named 'the most dangerous country' to be a woman in. Consequently, while initially progress came, and quickly for Afghan women, such as the promulgation of the new constitution of 2004, by the time the country adopted its first National Action Plan in 2015, the environment had already become highly restrictive and oppressive.

After a little over a decade of international and local reconstruction efforts, women's participation in politics, especially at the sub-national level (which had risen considerably in the early phase of the reconstruction process) stagnated; and key barriers including insecurity (especially targeted attacks), societal traditionalism, entrenched patriarchal structures, violence against women, and workplace harassment continued to impede progress. While the barriers become evident, in retrospect, one could

argue that these merely reflected symptoms rather than the actual cause. From 2018 to 2020, following the commencement of talks between the US and Taliban, the mobilization of women from across all sectors demanding equal participation and say in the process led to women being given a seat at the negotiating table of the Intra-Afghan Negotiations, and to their inclusion, albeit marginal, in all peace oriented structures. Presently, women neither lead any of these structures nor are their numbers equal to those of their male counterparts in the negotiation team. In fact, despite considerable evidence demonstrating the positive impact of women's meaningful participation in peace processes, in Afghanistan's peace process, women's rights and meaningful involvement was relegated to the margins and that too by the very same peace-building agenda that initiated their empowerment in the post-2001 democratization and reconstruction efforts.

Views expressed by women are still placed in silos and treated as "women's issues;" and the concerns they raise segregated from so-called hard-line issues like the cessation of hostilities and troop withdrawal, among others. Often, the international community too questions the legitimacy and representativeness of women's perspectives, while at times offering de facto legitimacy to the Taliban. Hence, although the gains made in women's rights have largely been an outcome of the post-2001 efforts, when Afghan women assert themselves to preserve those very gains, the peace-building agenda tends to lose steam.

In retrospect, what is discernible is that the democratization and reconstruction process—within which women's empowerment was a cross-cutting theme—has consistently been undermined by two fundamental factors: the Taliban insurgency, and the approaches taken to fight it. It has laid bare the limitations of reconstruction in an in-conflict environment, one which Afghanistan fell into a little after 2001. Therefore, although it is indeed true that "the Afghanistan of today is not the Afghanistan of 2001," the country and society as a whole still have a long way to go to strengthen democracy and systems of accountability, equality and equitability. Achieving this requires security and stability, which is essential to create the necessary conditions to engender good governance,

economic growth and human security, which are necessary for the creation of an environment conducive to strengthening the achievements made so far while allowing locals the space to develop approaches that could address the gaps. These are often viewed as the potential outcomes of a sustainable peace agreement, one that can only be reached if women and girls are part of its every process.

To that end, each article in this iteration of the WPPJ stresses upon the importance of investing in education, training, raising awareness, and ultimately engendering stronger political will in every sector—including but not limited to governance, sports, economy, music, filmmaking, journalism, security or peace-building—to ensure that achievements made by women are consolidated and the struggle for equal rights, access and opportunity progress towards their intended outcome.

Mariam Safi

Executive Director

Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies

December 2020

Women's Inclusion in Afghanistan's Civil Services

Anisgul Khadimi¹

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.

1. Anisgul Khadimi is a Programs Officer in the Strategic Development and Communication Unit at Kateb University.

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.

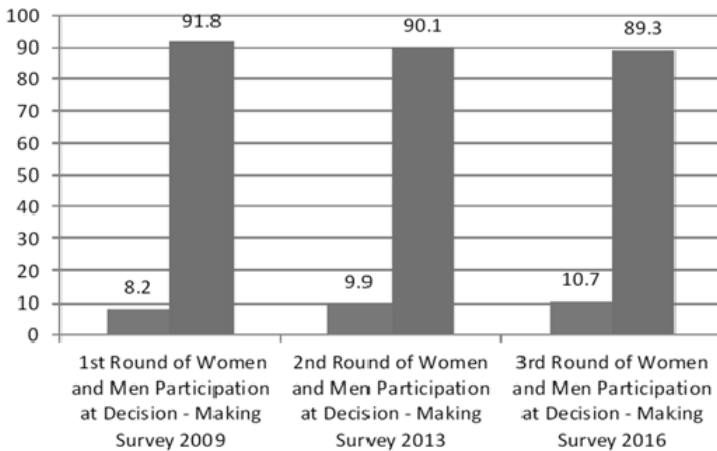
9. CSO, NSIA, “Women and Men in Afghanistan 2016.

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.

Afghan Women in Sports: Achievements, Challenges and Opportunities

Khushgul Sultani¹

After the collapse of the Taliban regime, in the new framework of governance in Afghanistan, women were provided opportunities to express themselves and participate in various sectors such as media, politics, sports, social activism etc. While Afghan women have made several strides in a wide range of sectors, they have not yet made significant achievements in professional athletics. Several challenges such as the ongoing insurgency, conservative traditions and cultural practices etc. have prevented women from making substantial progress in this sector.

This essay attempts to explore why there are only a handful of female athletes in Afghanistan despite 18 years of investment in women's empowerment. To do so, the essay explores the importance of sport for empowering women; Afghan women's sporting achievements in the past 18 years; the challenges they have faced; and support available (from government or international sources) for Afghan women's sporting activities. As part of the study, this essay relies on existing literature as well as key informant interviews with young Afghan female athletes.

The Relevance of Sports for Women's Empowerment in Afghanistan

In 1978, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) described sport and physical education as a 'fundamental right

1. Khushgul Sultani is a Junior Research Fellow at Assess Transform Reach (ATR) Consulting in Kabul, Afghanistan.

for all.² The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes sport as an important enabler of sustainable development, especially its growing and innovative contribution to the empowerment of women and young people, individuals and communities, as well as health, education and social inclusion objectives.³ A 2013 article published by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) articulated how sport is about participation, and about inclusion and citizenship, and contextualises how it stands for human values such as respect for the opponent, acceptance of binding rules, and teamwork and fairness, all of which are principles contained in the UN Charter.⁴

At a February 2016 event, titled "The Value of Hosting Mega Sport Events as a Social, Economic and Environmental Sustainable Development Tool," former UN Assistant Secretary-General and UN Women Deputy Executive Director, Lakshmi Puri, stated that "every time women clear a hurdle or kick a ball, demonstrating not only physical strength, but also leadership and strategic thinking, they take a step towards gender equality."⁵ This characterization is relevant given how Afghan women's sports related choices are shaped by the prevailing traditions in the community. Afghan women mostly prefer sports that are practiced indoors rather than outdoors because they feel safer inside than outside.⁶ While the professional sporting sector in Afghanistan is still dominated by men in terms of rate of participation, for those girls who participate, athletics has become a safe public space to grow and come into their own.⁷ In 2004, female athletes Friba Razayee and Robina Muqim Yaar represented Afghanistan at the Summer Olympics in Athens for the first time in the country's history.⁸ Farzana Mohammadi, a member of the National Wheelchair Basketball team, stated that more women participate

2. "Mainstreaming of Sport as a Tool for Girls' and Women's Empowerment." Olympic organization, November 15, 2017. <https://www.olympic.org/news/mainstreaming-of-sport-as-a-tool-for-girls-and-women-s-empowerment>

3. Ibid

4. "Afghan Women Break New Ground Through Sport." UNAMA, June 02, 2013. <https://unama.unmissions.org/afghan-women-break-new-ground-through-sport>

5. "Sport has huge potential to empower women and girls." UN Women, February 16, 2016. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2016/2/lakshmi-puri-speech-at-value-of-hosting-mega-sport-event>

6. Rezaie, Zeinab, Afghan women athlete. Interview by author on January 20, 2020, Kabul, Afghanistan.

7. Middle East Institute. "The Evolving Role of Afghan Female Athletes". May 2010. Accessed on April 6 2020. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/evolving-role-afghan-female-athletes>

8. Ibid

in sporting activities and that the number is increasing.⁹ On the other hand, the Afghan society too is slowly becoming more flexible about women's participation in sport, since more people are getting educated and gradually becoming more open minded.

There are greater numbers of Afghan sportswomen today than in the past. Afghanistan's women's national football team was formed in 2007 and in 2012, the team won its first official international match by defeating Qatar.¹⁰ International organizations too have stepped in to support women and sport in Afghanistan. Farzana and her teammates were supported by an international NGO to travel abroad to compete with East Asian countries in wheelchair basketball tournaments. Zeinab Rezaie, a professional triathlete, is the first Afghan to have ever competed in the Ironman 70.3 Triathlon, which took place in Dubai in February 2020. She completed a 1.2 mile (1.9 km) swim, 56 mile (90 km) bike, and 13.1 mile (21.1 km) run.¹¹ Being able to compete on an international level is also a way of becoming empowered via sport and is a step towards changing people's mindset about women's ability to perform in different sports as men.

More achievements have been recorded by women once they were given the opportunity to demonstrate their skills. In 2011, Afghan female powerlifters won three gold and two bronze medals at the 2011 Asian Winter Games in Kazakhstan. In 2012, a team of 18 Afghan powerlifting athletes, including two women, participated in the first Asian Classic Powerlifting Championships in India. The two female athletes, Freshta Hassani and Sadia Ayoubi, won eight gold medals (four each).¹² As of 2013, female Afghan athletes had won around 100 medals at regional and international tournaments,¹³ and have continued making greater achievements in the subsequent years. For instance, in 2015, team Asma'i (Nelofar and Zainab), the first all-female ultramarathon team

9. Mohammadi, Farzana, Member of the Afghan women's wheelchair basketball national team.. Interview by author on March 13, 2020, Kabul, Afghanistan.

10. "Afghan Sports History." Afghanistan Online, July 27, 2020. <https://www.afghan-web.com/sports/afghan-sports-history/>

11. "Breaking Records and Taking Names." She Can Tri, March 03, 2020. https://shecantri.org/ironman-703-dubai-recap?fbclid=IwAR0gy_ktzFECCOiciY-DVjH9B6bdYY9XNb_7AmvZXTg_gGKn94-PjplyJWc

12. "Afghanistan Witnesses a Surge in Female Athletes Signing up for Powerlifting." UNAMA, February 18, 2013. <https://unama.unmissions.org/afghanistan-witnesses-surge-female-athletes-signing-powerlifting>

13. "Afghan Women Break New Ground Through Sport." UNAMA, June 02, 2013. <https://unama.unmissions.org/afghan-women-break-new-ground-through-sport>

from Afghanistan, completed The Gobi March 2015, one of the toughest endurance competitions in the world.¹⁴ In 2018, Hanifa Yousoufi became the first Afghan woman to scale the Noshaq summit, the highest point in Afghanistan; and in the same year, Samira Asghari became the first Afghan to join the International Olympic Committee as an elected member.¹⁵

Key Challenges Faced by Sportswomen

Afghan sportswomen face several challenges, namely lack of equipment and professional female trainers, objections from their families, cultural norms, threats and violence, harassment and corruption in sport facilitating organizations, and a lack of interest among women themselves. The following sections discuss these challenges and how these factors play out.

Infrastructure: The Afghan government has not been proactive in terms of providing the necessary equipment and sporting infrastructure for women in the country. Most existing sporting platforms are made available by individual investors and businesspersons, or women themselves own their own clubs to train others. To illustrate, when Zeinab was training for the Dubai Triathlon, there were no swimming instructors. She had to self-learn most of the swimming techniques relying on YouTube videos. Furthermore, since Afghanistan has very few swimming facilities, Zeinab and her teammates had to travel abroad to receive training, relying on the sponsorship offered by an NGO called She Can Tri.

Cultural Norms: In Afghanistan, traditionally, public spaces are dominated by men, with women 'tolerated' only when they are as invisible as possible. Even private spaces like homes witness a degree of negotiation between men and women on decisions made within homes.¹⁶ Cultural and traditional outlooks and practices in Afghanistan regarding gender roles, use of public spaces etc. heavily shape women's access and involvement in sport.¹⁷ For example, Zeinab highlighted how women find it difficult to run or cycle

14. "A Chronological History of Sports in Afghanistan". Afghanistan Online, July 27, 2020. <https://www.afghan-web.com/sports/afghan-sports-history/>

15. Ibid

16. Ayub, Awista. "The Evolving Role of Afghan Female Athletes." Middle East Institute, May 02, 2010. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/evolving-role-afghan-female-athletes>

17. Ultra Runner Girl. "Exploring women in sports in Afghanistan." Ultra Runner Girl, December 12, 2012. <https://ultrarunnergirl.com/2012/12/12/exploring-women-in-sports-in-afghanistan/>

in public areas due to cultural sensitivities. “Most of the conservative men would like women to only look after children, sit at home and do the household chores. They think that a woman’s physique is not made for sport,”¹⁸ she stated in an interview. In a video posted on social media in 2019, a woman explains that they cannot indulge in sports or exercise without wearing burqas because men from the neighbouring houses stare at them.¹⁹ In this video, women can be seen doing aerobics while wearing burqas in a park in Maimana city.

Harassment and Corruption: Corruption and sexual harassment in the country, especially in government departments dealing with women’s sport has also created distrust among people towards the government. The sexual harassment scandal at the heart of the Afghanistan National Olympic Federation is one such case. Khalida Popal, Shabnam Mobarez and Mina Ahmadi were the first to expose the widespread sexual harassment and abuse in the Federation which also forced Popal, a former head of the women’s football department at the Afghanistan Football Federation, to ultimately flee the country in 2016 and seek asylum in Denmark.²⁰

Women’s Mindsets: Men are not the only section of society preventing women from participating in sports. Women too can be a barrier to other women. Farzana Mohammadi stated that “besides men suppressing women, there are women against women too. In our team, I have witnessed girls saying that their mothers ask them why they practice sport while they suffer disability, and tell them to just sit at home and do nothing.”²¹ To overcome these challenges, Zeinab emphasized that “we need to fight for our rights and gender equality in a way that we do not face more limitations and barriers. Gradually, and considering the religious and cultural norms, we should act according to our family values and practice sport in a way that convinces our family and the society.”²²

18. “Exploring women in sports in Afghanistan.” Ultra Runner Girl, December 12, 2012. <https://ultrarunnergirl.com/2012/12/12/exploring-women-in-sports-in-afghanistan/>

19. Sorush, Rohullah. “Afghan Sportswomen: Courage, hurdles and harassment.” Afghanistan Analysts Network November 25, 2019. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/rights-freedom/afghan-sportswomen-courage-hurdles-and-harassment/>

20. Wrack, Suzanne. “FIFA Examining Claims of Sexual and Physical Abuse on Afghanistan Women’s Team.” The Guardian, November 30, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2018/nov/30/fifa-examining-claims-sexual-physical-abuse-afghanistan-womens-team>

21. Mohammadi, Farzana, Member of the Afghan women’s wheelchair basketball national team. Interview by author on March 13, 2020, Kabul, Afghanistan.

22. Rezaie, Zeinab, Afghan woman athlete. Interview by author on January 20, 2020, Kabul, Afghanistan.

Sporting Gear: Women's sport relevant clothing is another factor that poses a challenge because in Afghanistan, women are expected to cover themselves in a manner that is acceptable to the society and does not violate Islamic rules. For instance, most people in Afghanistan do not find swimming costumes acceptable because the outfit's fit highlights the wearer's physique. Therefore, swimming is not yet viewed as an acceptable sport for women since it has to be performed in front of an audience and/or covered by the media.

Government Initiatives

After the fall of the Taliban, with the support of donor organizations, the Afghan government built new playgrounds for school girls.²³ In 2008, the government of Afghanistan adopted the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) to empower women and achieve gender equality. Published in 2007 and enforced until 2017, this NAP was the government's main vehicle for implementing policies and commitments to advocate the status of women, and included recommendations regarding budgetary allocations for gender related work in various agencies' annual budgets. Section III of this NAP states that "the fundamental right of Afghan women, as for all human beings, is life with dignity," and lists 10 specific rights, which includes "the right to participate in cultural activities including theatre, music and sports."²⁴ However, Farzana Mohammadi pointed out the inadequacies in government support for female athletes and argued that there has not been much support in practice.²⁵ Zeinab echoed the same view and stated that the government has not been very cooperative in promoting women in sport. Both Zeinab and Farzana are part of sports programs funded by international organizations such as 'Free to Run' and 'She Can Tri'.

The numbers of active female sportspersons are considerably lesser than those of males. Afghanistan's General Directorate of Physical Education

23. Nawrozi, Marzia. "Afghan Women are Paving the Way for Future Athletes." Free Women Writers, August 16, 2016. <https://www.freewomenwriters.org/2016/08/16/kimia-yusufi-afghan-women-sports/>

24. "National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan." Government of Afghanistan, 2007. <http://extwprlegs1.fao.org/docs/pdf/afg149120.pdf>

25. Mohammadi, Farzana, Member of the Afghan women's wheelchair basketball national team. Interview by author on March 13, 2020, Kabul, Afghanistan..

and Sports recorded 752 women among the 3,662 national team members in 52 Olympic and non-Olympic sports federations (around 21%).²⁶ Only two sports federations are led by women: badminton and table tennis. Robina Jalali, a sprinter (now also a parliamentarian), is the second deputy of Afghanistan's National Olympic Committee for Women's Affairs.²⁷ Overall, there is still a long way to be paved to get a satisfactory level of women sport practitioners in Afghanistan.

International Organizations' Support For Afghan Women In Sport

Several international organizations are active in Afghanistan focusing on helping Afghan women progress in sport. Zeinab, who is currently learning professional swimming, is one of the women who have been empowered by She Can Tri, a foreign NGO. She Can Tri has enabled Zeinab to practice swimming, cycling and running, and to participate in international competitions. She Can Tri and Free to Run are among the international NGOs that enable Afghan sportswomen with financial support, equipment, and access to training essential for competing at the international level. ASCEND and Shirzanan are some other international organizations operating in Afghanistan with an aim to support female sportspersons. ASCEND aims to empower women through mountaineering²⁸ and Shirzanan aims to empower Muslim women in sports by amplifying their work in global media.²⁹ Overall, support from international NGOs has enabled Afghan women to participate in international competitions. However, such support alone is insufficient to transform social and institutional obstacles to engender a favourable environment for women in sport in the country.

Conclusion

At present, several women and young girls practice different types of sport in Afghanistan. Many own their own clubs and gymnasiums as

26. Soroush, Rohullah. "Afghan Sportswomen: Courage, hurdles and harassment." Afghanistan Analysts Network, November 25, 2019. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/afghan-sportswomen-courage-hurdles-and-harassment/>

27. Ibid

28. ASCEND Website. <https://www.ascendathletics.org/about-us>

29. "Player Profile|Hajar Abulfazl, Afghanistan". Equal playing Field, April 25, 2017. <http://equalplayingfield.com/blog/2017/4/25/player-profile-hajar-abulfazl-afghanistan>

well.³⁰ However, international NGOs are the ones currently plugging the gaps to enable talented Afghan women to partake professionally in sport. Sustainable support from the government is essential for Afghan women to not only be able to compete on the domestic and international levels but also to transform prevailing stereotypes about women's participation in sport.

Policy Recommendations

- The Afghan government must create more sporting programs and hire more women and girls for key positions at sports organizations.
- The Afghan government should make sport mandatory for girls in school in order to empower them from the early stages of their lives.
- The government should allocate a reasonable portion of the aid funds it receives, for women's sporting activities and programs.
- Afghan women's sporting achievements should be highlighted via mass media until individuals even in the remotest parts of the country get to know about it. This way, women's abilities, efforts and achievements will have a better chance of appreciation, and in turn, people's mindsets about women will gradually change, especially in terms of their participation in sport.
- International organizations and NGOs must conduct more sporting activities and programs for women in the capital cities of various provinces.
- Investments should be made for sports related infrastructure for women in rural areas as well. Both the Afghan government and international organizations should pay more attention to women's sport in all other provinces of Afghanistan as well, instead of concentrating a bulk of their efforts on Kabul and other major cities.
- Regular capacity building programs must be carried out to attract more women to partake in sports.
- Women in positions of authority, be it in government or in the private sector, should pay serious attention to women's empowerment through sports.

30. Rezaie, Zeinab, Afghan women athlete. Interview by author on January 20, 2020, Kabul, Afghanistan.

Women's Economic Participation in Post-2001 Afghanistan

Hanifa Yari¹

Afghan women's overall agency and economic participation were immensely affected due to incessant instability arising from the civil war, and later during the Taliban rule in the 1990s. This state-of-affairs began to change in the post-2001 period. During this period, women's engagement with and participation in the economy improved dramatically in a short span. Women's participation in the labor force reached 21.6% in 2019 from around 14.6 in 2000.² According to the latest figures, in the post-2001 era, around 1,150 female entrepreneurs have invested in different businesses across Afghanistan.³ All these achievements have occurred due to the conducive legal, political, and financial climate that was cultivated after 2001 and with the presence and support of the international community. Nevertheless, Afghan women do still face obstacles that make it challenging for them to thrive in the economic sector.

This essay examines the legal context for women's economic participation and provides a brief overview of the status of women's involvement in the Afghan economy. It also explores the challenges women still face in these areas and offers policy recommendations for the Afghan government and the private sector to address the challenges.

1. Hanifa Yari holds an undergraduate degree in economics from the American University of Central Asia.

2. "Labor force participation, female." World Bank, September 2019. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TL.F.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=AF>

3. Arman, Rohullah. "AWCCI Releases Figures On Women Entrepreneurs." Tolonews, February 11, 2019. <https://tolonews.com/business/awcci-releases-figures-women-entrepreneurs>

Legal Context

Since 2001, significant efforts have been made to make the legal conditions and context conducive for women's participation in the economic sector. Article 22 of the 2004 constitution prohibits all forms of discrimination among citizens, including on the basis of gender. Article 10 prescribes ensuring the safety of capital investment and private enterprises in accordance with the provisions of the law and market economy.⁴ Article 40 stipulates that every individual is permitted to own and acquire property, with the government responsible for its protection.⁵ Sharia law (albeit Sharia could be subject to different interpretation) too recognizes women's right to own property.⁶

In addition to constitutional provisions, there have been several other legislations, strategies and policies that have helped make the legal and administrative context more conducive for women's economic participation. The Private Investment Law (adopted in December 2005) supports and protects private investment and enterprises based on the free market economy system. Article 4 of this Law stipulates that all foreign or domestic persons are eligible to invest in all sectors of the economy.⁷ Article 16 of this Law provides a legal guarantee vis-a-vis protection of enterprises against discrimination, including those of women's businesses.⁸ Under Article 19 of this Law, all registered enterprises are entitled to use banking facilities in Afghanistan.⁹

In 2001, the Afghan government developed the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) and implemented it from 2007 to 2017. Pillar Three of NAPWA focuses on women's socio-economic development by providing opportunities such as access to education, vocational training and employment, legal protection, promoting recognition of women as economic agents, promoting women's leadership in the economic sector, and developing and adopting policies that address

4. The Constitution of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Article 10.

5. The Constitution of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Article 40.

6. "Women and Property Rights." Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan. https://www.cw4wafghan.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/pages/cw4wafghan-womenspropertyrights-factsheet2_0.pdf

7. "Private Investment Law." World Trade Organization December 21, 2005. https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/acc_e/afg_e/WTACCAFGSA1_LEG_3.pdf

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

the particular needs of women.¹⁰ The action plan had set four indicators to gauge the goal of creating “an enabling economic and social environment that is conducive to the full development and realization of women’s economic potential,” which made NAPWA more practical from a project perspective.¹¹ It also calls for legal protection and promoting recognition of women as economic agents, addressing particular needs of women working in the informal economy.¹² Despite shortcomings in implementation, important achievements have been made in women’s access to education, health services, employment, and justice.¹³

In early 2019, the Ministry of Women’s Affairs developed the Policy on Women’s Access to Inheritance and Property Rights with an implementation period from 2019 to 2023.¹⁴ This policy focuses on raising public awareness on women’s right to owning property, facilitating women’s access to property rights, ensuring accessibility of legal assistance to women with regard to property rights, strengthening a safe system of property rights for women, and empowering women to tackle customary obstacles to women’s access to property rights. Since the implementation of this policy is a work in progress at present, no assessment has been conducted to evaluate its success.

Nevertheless, in Afghanistan, there tends to be a difference between the laws as they stand on paper, and their implementation on the practical level. Rule of law remains weak, corruption is widespread, accountability is shaky, and a general perception of impunity remains high.¹⁵ Moreover, there is no systematic report or comprehensive data on the extent to which

10. “National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan.” Government of Islamic Republic Afghanistan, 2007. <http://extwprlegs1.fao.org/docs/pdf/afg149120.pdf>

11. p 62.Ibid.

12. pp68-70.Ibid.

13. Anil, Ahmad Shaheer. Karimi, Nafasgul. Karlidag, Melike. Nasery, Farid. Parto, Saeed. Saadat, Ehsan. Sabir, Mohammad and Saifi, Zarghona. “Implementation of the National Action Plan for Women in Afghanistan: An Assessment.” APPRO, March 2014. pp. 12-15. <http://appro.org.af/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/214589487-NAPWA-Assessment-March-15-2014.pdf>

14. “پالیسي: مسترسي زنان به حق ميراث و مالکيت.” [Policy: Women’s access to inheritance and Property Rights]. Ministry of Women Affairs. <https://mowa.gov.af/sites/default/files/2019-09/%D9%BE%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%B3%DB%8C%20%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%B3%DB%8C%20%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86%20%D8%A8%D9%87%20%D8%AD%D9%82%20%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AB%20%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%DA%A9%DB%8C%D8%AA.pdf>

15. “The Rule of Law in Afghanistan: Key Findings from the 2016 Extended General Population Poll & Justice Sector Survey.” World Justice Project, 2016. page 6. https://worldjusticeproject.org/sites/default/files/documents/WJP_Afghanistan%20GPP%20%20JSS%20Report_2May2017%20%283%29.pdf

these policies and strategies have been effectively implemented in practice, a shortcoming that makes it difficult to assess the extent to which these laws have been implemented, and/or the degree to which they have been effective. All these factors make it difficult for the laws to translate into substantial difference on the ground.

Women's Engagement in the Economy

There are over 15 banks operational in Afghanistan, and a majority of them offer loans and financial services. Nevertheless, due to various reasons—including women's inability to provide collateral due to lack of possession of property and gender discrimination—81% of female entrepreneurs run their businesses in the absence of access to credit or financing.¹⁶ A large majority of women remain excluded from the economic sphere. In 2019, only 18.6% of Afghan women contributed to their family's income, which was slightly less than 19.1% in 2018 and 20% in 2017.¹⁷ Furthermore, 86.5% of women in urban areas and 79.6% in rural areas do not contribute to their family income.¹⁸ Unemployment among women stands at 41%.¹⁹ It is important to note that according to the Afghan government, employment for women is largely restricted to agriculture, manufacturing and services sectors.²⁰ 32.8% of the workers in agriculture and 58.6% in livestock sectors are female.²¹ In the manufacturing sector, they comprise 64.4% of the workers.²² 89.9% of women are in vulnerable employment,²³ and 71.3% of them are employed in non-agricultural informal economy.²⁴

Women's role in the business and entrepreneurship sectors remains limited. Registered women-owned businesses account for only 5% of all licensed businesses in Afghanistan.²⁵ Another qualitative difference is the

16. UCA, (Butler & McGuinness, 2013).

17. "A Survey of the Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2019." Asia Foundation, 2019. page 96. https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2019_Afghan_Survey_Full-Report.pdf

18. Ibid. P 96.

19. Ibid. p 95.

20. "Afghanistan's Living Conditions Survey 2016-17." Central Statistics Organization (CSO) of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2017). page 77. <https://washdata.org/sites/default/files/documents/reports/2018-07/Afghanistan%20ALCS%202016-17%20Analysis%20report.pdf>

21. Ibid. p 77.

22. Ibid. p 77.

23. Ibid. p 73.

24. Ibid. p 76.

25. Ganesh, Lena. "Women's Economic Empowerment in Afghanistan: Creating Spaces and Enabling the Environment." Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, August, 2013. p6. <https://areu.org.af/publication/1313/>

fact that 78% of these businesses are small businesses (1–10 employees).²⁶ Moreover, the majority of women-owned businesses are located in Kabul province, followed by Herat and Balkh provinces.²⁷

Challenges and Prospects

Achievements that women have made in the post-2001 period are several, when compared with the position and status of women in the economy prior to 2001. However, these achievements are not substantial enough yet, and continue to face a range of challenges. These challenges and their contexts can be understood by examining them via six broad categories.

Socio-cultural Problems: Afghanistan lags behind many countries that have mainstreamed gender equality across social, political, and economic arenas. Women's economic participation is restricted due to the prevalence of negative social attitudes and perceptions. Therefore, even if women start businesses—which itself remains a difficult undertaking—the likelihood of them being able to expand their financial initiatives is low because small businesses are more convenient for them. According to a 2015 study, 78% of women-owned businesses are small enterprises with 10 or fewer employees.²⁸ Traditionally, women have been dependent of their male family member/s. Women who make visible progress in business tend likely to be exposed to reputational risks,²⁹ resulting in men likely disallowing them to do so, or withholding their cooperation. Additionally, in the Afghan society, men enjoy more opportunities and are allowed to freely exchange information about their career without any limitation of when or where. In contrast, Afghan women are often restricted to their homes due to the lack of culturally acceptable places to congregate.³⁰

Economic Problems: In Afghanistan, rules abound on paper but the reality on the ground remains significantly different. Access to financial

26. Butler, Ainsley, and McGuinness, Kate. "Afghan Women's Economic Participation. Survey report. Kabul, 2013: Building Markets. page 9.

27. *Ibid.* p 10.

28. Sabri, Najla. "From Invisibility to Visibility: Female Entrepreneurship in Afghanistan". A Thesis Presented to the Department of International Studies and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, June 2015. https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/19333/Sabri_oregon_0171N_11358.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

29. *Ibid.*

30. Wafeq, Manizha. "Internal Factors Affecting Growth of Women-Owned Businesses in Afghanistan". AWCCI, July 2018.

institutions, loans and poor market information, insufficient access to raw materials etc. are other problems women face in Afghanistan.³¹ For women, lack of access to assets and property that can be offered as collateral for loans have made their access to finance even more difficult. Women's access to property is not limited by laws but law enforcement mechanisms have failed to implement laws comprehensively.³² Recent data shows that only 17% of Afghan women independently own a house, compared to approximately 50% of Afghan men.³³ Additionally, only 9% of the population holds accounts at financial institutions and 3% save at a formal institution.³⁴ As of 2019, only 7% females had accounts in formal financial institutions compared to 23% males.³⁵ Even those who could secure loans did not find borrowing attractive, as the terms of loans were very brief and interest rates, high.^{36 37}

Lack of Relevant Skills, Awareness and Knowledge: Women entrepreneurs in Afghanistan often lack basic knowledge and skills required for running a business, such as marketing, branding, proposal writing, etc. Lack of familiarity with the legal system adds to this problem. Long-term business management and business development training for women has been inadequate,³⁸ and this is particularly true for women in rural areas.

Security Problems: Afghanistan continues to be one of the most difficult places in the world for women,³⁹ with the Taliban exercising control in

31. Nehad, Freshta. "Women Entrepreneurship in Afghanistan and Success Determinants of Afghan Women Entrepreneurs: Case Study of Kabul City." Afghan Economic Society, 2016. <https://www.afghanecomicsociety.org/Nehad.pdf>

32. Akbar, Shahrzad. and Pirzad, Taiba. "Women's Access to Property in Afghanistan: Law, Enforcement, and Barriers." Qara Consulting, May 2011. <http://harakat.af/pdf/research/977758d76a84de77b.pdf>

33. "only 17% of Afghan women independently own a house, compared to approximately 50% of Afghan men" UCA, 2016. p 24.

34. "Barriers to Women Entrepreneurs' Access to Markets." Equality for Peace and Democracy, December 30, 2015. <http://www.epd-afg.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/RMA-English-Revised.pdf>

35. Noshier, Wahidullah. "A pathway to financial inclusion in Afghanistan." World Bank Blogs, February 19, 2020. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/pathway-financial-inclusion-afghanistan>

36. Sabri, Najla. "From Invisibility to Visibility: Female Entrepreneurship in Afghanistan". A Thesis Presented to the Department of International Studies and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, June 2015. https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/19333/Sabri_oregon_0171N_11358.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

37. Up to date data on this is unavailable.

38. Wafeq, Manizha. "Internal Factors Affecting Growth of Women-Owned Businesses in Afghanistan." AWCCI, July 2018. p 18.

39. Boh, Lauren. "We're All Handcuffed in This Country: Why Afghanistan Is Still the Worst Place in the World to Be a Woman." Time, December 08, 2018. <https://time.com/5472411/afghanistan-women-justice-war/?fbclid=IwAR04jdrXUU2F8bBbjMf4eJVWBQVJBMytQ681t1vUwriEzDXtqX5bKwTkc>

large swathes of the country.⁴⁰ Persistent insecurity presents one of the biggest barriers for women entrepreneurs as it restricts their mobility and activities. Challenges posed by the security situation affect women in rural and remote areas more severely as government presence and control is overstretched or absent, and that of the Taliban prevails.

The Urban–Rural Divide: In the past 18 years, both the Afghan government and the international community have focused their women empowerment programs mainly in the urban areas, particularly in Kabul, Herat and Balkh provinces. Women in rural areas were not given much attention, and consequently women in rural areas considerably lag behind their urban counterparts. This is further exacerbated by the fact that women in rural areas remain more financially dependent on their male relatives. Moreover, women in rural areas remain mostly limited to agriculture and livestock sectors.

Corruption: Corruption is rampant across the Afghan government, and to a certain extent in international organizations working in Afghanistan.⁴¹ Afghan government has always featured at the top of corruption indices, coming in as the fourth most corrupt country in 2018,⁴² with the 172nd rank among 180 countries in 2019.⁴³ Corruption affects women more acutely for two reasons. Firstly, it is economically less affordable for women–owned businesses to pay bribes because their businesses are small. Secondly, women have a relatively limited network in the government as compared to men, and as a result, more prone to other forms of corruption in offices. Another discouraging factor is the uncondusive environment in offices providing critical services to businesses, such as licensing and taxation, where women are barely visible.⁴⁴

40. Chughtai, Alia. “Afghanistan: Who controls what?” Al Jazeera English, June 24, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2016/08/afghanistan-controls-160823083528213.html>

41. “Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan.” SIGAR, September, 2016. p 11, and p 76. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-16-58-LL.pdf>

42. “Afghanistan Ranked 4th Most Corrupt Country For This Year.” Tolonews, 2018, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/afghanistan-ranked-4th%2%A0most-corrupt-country-year>

43. “Corruption Perception Index.” Transparency International, 2019. <https://www.transparency.org/country/AFG#>

44. Wafeq, Manizha. “Internal Factors Affecting Growth of Women-Owned Businesses in Afghanistan.” AWCCI, July 2018. p 13.

Conclusion

After the fall of the Taliban, important legal steps have been taken to make the environment conducive for women's economic growth. The Afghan constitution, other laws pertaining to economic activities and investment, and policies regarding inheritance and women's property rights all have created a relatively conducive legal environment for women's economic engagement. However, there are challenges as to the implementation of these laws, which render these legal provisions less useful in practice. A set of financial institutions have been set up to support economic empowerment of women and to facilitate their access to loans and finance. The United States Agency for International Development, Aga Khan Development Network, and FINCA are some of the international organizations operating in Afghanistan and among the few financial institutions with specific focuses on women's economic empowerment. These organizations have made loans available/affordable in the country.

Nevertheless, compared to men, women face many challenges and obstacles. Most importantly, gender equality is far from an accepted norm in Afghanistan. Women who dare to go out and work still face problems. Their access to resources and loans remain limited. Lack of family support and harassment in public places make their mobility difficult and constrained. Women are mostly not allowed to travel alone. They also face the brunt of insecurity, corruption, and cultural restrictions. Moreover, at present, the future prospects of women's economic participation seem uncertain due to uncertainties arising from peace related talks and frequent domestic political crises.

Policy Recommendations

The Afghan government and the international community must prioritize safeguarding the achievements made in the past 20 years and commit to building upon them.

- The Afghan government should offer more incentives for women-owned and women-operated businesses and entrepreneurship. This could include measures like temporary or conditions-based tax exemptions and other similar measures.

- The Afghan government and international organizations should work on policies, programs and initiatives aimed at improving access to loans for women's businesses, start-ups and entrepreneurship initiatives. These measures should also include specific provisions for lower interest rates, or if possible, loans without interest rates. Most of all, these loans should be made accessible to women in rural areas as well.
- The Afghan government and financial institutions should ease the conditions for collateral that women are required to present when applying for loans. The Afghan government and financial institutions can assess feasibility of other options such as providing loans to women in a conditions-based and phased manner, or allowing pledging of business licenses as a collateral instead of a property documents that women find difficult to provide.

Afghan Women in Music

Nadia Qasimi¹

Prior to the Taliban rule, Afghanistan produced renowned musicians and singers. Women were free to pursue careers in music. However, during the Taliban rule which lasted from 1996 to 2001, the group decreed music as being un-Islamic and officially banned it across Afghanistan both for men and women.² No one was allowed to pursue careers in music or even to listen to music. Those caught doing so were severely punished by Taliban's Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.³ Due to the hostile environment, most Afghan musicians either emigrated to other countries or completely stopped practicing music during those years.²

However, the post-2001 period in Afghanistan witnessed several changes. Laws were reformed, human rights, gender equality and women's empowerment have been considered the most important mandates of the Afghan government and the international community's intervention in Afghanistan. It was during this period that women regained their right to pursue a career of their choice.

This essay explores Afghan women's achievements in the field of music. To do so, this essay relies on the story of Zohra Orchestra, the only all-female orchestra in Afghanistan, as a case study. In so doing, this paper analyses the background of women's involvement and contribution to

1. Nadia Qasimi is a Member of the Afghan Women Welfare and Development Association.

2. Najafizada, Eltaf. "We Won't Be Silenced! Afghan female musicians tell Taliban." Time, April 2019. Accessed on January 3, 2020. <https://time.com/5573842/afghanistan-female-women-musicians-music-taliban/>

3. 2 AFP. "Afghan Taliban burn musical instruments: radio", May 2, 2001. Sept. 29, 2020 <http://www.rawa.org/music2.htm>

the field music after 2001; their achievements in the last 18 years; and opportunities and challenges to their pursuits.

Zohra Orchestra

The Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM) was established in 2010 by an Afghan–Australian musicologist, Ahmad Sarmat, with the help of various international institutions. The ANIM was established with the objective of transforming lives and societies, bring social changes, and promoting gender equality, open mindedness, and democracy through music. ANIM aims to revive the culture of music and to encourage investment in the arts.⁴ Established in 2014, the Zohra Orchestra (ZO) is part of the ANIM. It is comprised of 35 female members, all of whom are the first in their families to study music professionally in over 30 years.⁵ ZO members come from various parts of Afghanistan, including Nooristan, Bamyan, and Kabul provinces.

Since its establishment in 2014, ZO has made tremendous achievements. It has represented Afghanistan in various international platforms and has won prestigious international awards. ZO's conductor, Negin Kheplwak, has performed in Dubai, India, Germany, Switzerland, and the US. In 2007, ZO also performed for an audience of over 2000 political and business leaders from across the world, at the World Economic Forum, during which they performed a combination of western and traditional music. ZO members have also been awarded the Polar Music's Award in 2018 for international recognition of excellence in the world of music.⁶

ZO's journey is a story of female Afghan musicians. They have continued with their hard work and have pursued their calling with resilience, despite security risks, cultural barriers and familial restrictions. Some of the members are orphans and some, from economically disadvantaged families. By performing on various platforms, ZO expresses hope and embodies a message of peace, harmony and a new face of Afghanistan to the world. Through their work, ZO members have confronted and sought to

4. Forest, David. Interview with Ahmad Sarmast. The Afghanistan National Institute of Music. June 24, 2013

5. DAS, Ria. "Meet Afghanistan's First all-female Orchestra-Zohra." *Shethepeople*, March 2019. Accessed on April 3, 2020. <https://www.shethepeople.tv/news/meet-afghanistan-female-orchestra-zohra/>

6. Dawod, Vincent. "Afghanistan's first all-female orchestra Zohra visits the UK." *BBC*, March 15, 2019.

transform the conservative norms prevalent in Afghanistan.⁴ While ZO's journey is inspiring, pursuing a career in music is still not straightforward for most Afghan women. To understand why, it is necessary to understand the existing opportunities for women in music; the general public perception regarding women's participation in music; key challenges female Afghan women musicians (and aspiring musicians) face; and legal limitations to their pursuits.

Opportunities

Several opportunities for Afghan women emerged in the field of music after the fall of the Taliban regime. At the beginning of the post-2001 period, with the advent of a democratic form of governance and the promulgation of the new constitution, media platforms such as TV channels began hosting singing programs. Afghan women were able to participate in programs like *Afghan Star* which was broadcast by *Tolo TV*. This show had its first female winner in 14 years when Zahra Elham won in 2019.⁷ The Afghan rapper duo, 'Paradise' and 'Diverse', (who comprise 143Band) won the best rap artist award in 2015 from Ariana Television Network (ATN), and headlined at the International FeminEast Fest in Sweden in 2016. Paradise was conferred with the Best Rap World Music Rumi Award in 2014.

In terms of legal frameworks, Article 22 of the current constitution of Afghanistan states that "Any kind of discrimination and distinction between citizens of Afghanistan shall be forbidden. The citizens of Afghanistan, man and woman, have equal rights and duties before the law."⁸ Legally, Afghan women have an equal right to participate in music and there are no legal barriers and restrictions. Article 34 of the Afghan constitution upholds freedom of expression for all and states that "freedom of expression shall be inviolable..."¹⁰ Over the years, the Afghan public's perception also seems to have transformed to some extent with regard to women's participation in music. In relative terms, there is greater acceptance of Afghan women musicians.

In terms of institutional support, in 2010, Dr. Ahmad Sarmast established

7. "Art of Now." BBC, May 11, 2019. July 4, 2020 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0004sf7>

8. "The Constitution of The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan." Diplomatie, June 20, 2020. https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/The_Constitution_of_the_Islamic_Republic_of_Afghanistan.pdf

the ANIM with the assistance of the World Bank, the National Association of Music Merchants, and other donors.⁹ The ANIM operates under the authority of the Ministry of Education and receives financial support from the Afghanistan Second Skills Development Project.¹⁰ The Project is funded by the World Bank. The Afghan government played a facilitating role in setting up the ANIM. The then Minister of Education, Farooq Wardak, provided space for the institution and Dr. Sarmast, to actualize the plan.¹⁰ Later, the British Council funded the ANIM for three years (until 2015) to enable increasing capacity-building, accessing material and as well as updating syllabus for the ANIM students who are mostly orphans, street children, and young girls.¹¹

Challenges

Although acceptance has gradually increased, female Afghan musicians continue to face severe cultural barriers to their pursuit of a career in music. Culturally, female musicians are not looked upon favorably, and some even encounter threats to life and limb due to their choice of careers. For instance, Afghanistan's first female music conductor, ZO's 22-year-old Kheplwak, frequently receives threats and faces resistance from relatives. Those opposing her prefer that she pursue a career other than one in music. Expressing her resolve in an interview with *Time*, Kheplwak stated that the Taliban can outlaw music and break instruments but they cannot take music out of Afghan people's hearts, and that Afghan women will not return to the dark days of the past.¹

ZO members too have received threats from the Taliban. The Taliban has repeatedly threatened Marzia Anwari's parents, demanding that they stop her from learning music by arguing that music is haram (forbidden) in Islam.¹² Bashir Mobashir, a lecturer in the department of law at the

9. "Afghanistan National Institute of Music." The Kennedy Center, Sept 15, 2020. <https://www.kennedy-center.org/artists/a/aa-an/-afghanistan-national-institute-of-music/>

10. "Girls Find their Place in Afghan's Music Institute." The World Bank, Sept 2, 2015. Aug. 5, 2020. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2015/09/01/girls-find-place-afghanistan-music-institute>

11. "Afghanistan National Institute of Music" British Council, Aug. 10, 2020. <https://www.britishcouncil.af/programmes/arts/leadership-skills/afghan-national-institute-music>

12. Sahel, Baber khan. "All-female Orchestra braves threats to revive Afghan Musical Heritage." Agencia EFE, June 2019. Accessed on Oct 19, 2019. <https://www.efe.com/efe/english/life/all-female-orchestra-braves-threats-to-revive-afghanistans-musical-heritage/50000263-3992973>

American University of Afghanistan, highlighted that Article 3 of the Afghan constitution states that “[n]o law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of the holy religion of Islam in Afghanistan.”⁸ Mobashir added that as long as the legal system and civil law is concerned, there is no provision setting limitations on Afghan women participating in music or banning their freedom of speech.¹³ Some Islamic scholars would perhaps interpret Afghan women’s rights on freedom of speech with several restrictions and would not grant many right to Afghan women. However, some may support and encourage their participation in freedom of speech and music.

Afghan women often end their music career or hide from families when attending music school due to threats from neighbors, relatives, and conservative critics. For example, a female student who learnt to play guitar at Nazir Khara music school and often performed in public eventually quit after receiving threats of acid attacks from neighbors.¹⁴ Another female musician (who preferred to remain anonymous) successfully learned to play the guitar but had to hide it from her parents and relatives because her family did not view music favorably. According to this musician, carrying her guitar was problematic, especially in public places, as people unknowingly suspected her of doing something dangerous.

It must be noted here that novice and aspiring musicians are not the only ones who face obstacles. Well-known musicians too encounter cultural barriers. For example, Aryana Sayeed, a famous Afghan pop musician has received several death threats. Yet she persisted and followed her passion.¹⁵ Sayeed has broken several stereotypes and records vis-a-vis women in Afghanistan’s conservative social structures. Her performance during the national football tournament and the Afghan Premier League was well received by her fans. Afghanistan’s first female rapper, ‘Paradise’ (of Paradise and Diverse), is another well-known female Afghan musician who has faced major obstacles. In one instance, she was brutally beaten

13. Mobashir, Bashir. Interview by author. Kabul, Afghanistan. Sept. 2020.

14. Nawa, Fariba. “Afghanistan: Female Musician put their lives in danger.” FREEMUSE, January 2008. Accessed on Feb 1, 2020. <https://freemuse.org/news/afghanistan-female-musicians-put-their-lives-in-danger/>

15. Kumar, Ruchi, “Afghan Pop Star Challenges Cultural Norms.” The Lily, August 11, 2017. <http://www.ruchikumar.com/2017/08/11/afghan-pop-star-challenges-cultural-norms/>

up by strangers. When her fiancé, 'Diverse', took her to the police to file a complaint, the police personnel recommended that she stop singing, instead of enforcing the law.¹⁶

Conclusion

Overall, due to death threats, some female musicians were compelled to relocate abroad to pursue their career and studies in music. Essentially, female Afghan musicians are persisting despite barriers but often at great risk to their lives. There are no legal barriers to Afghan women pursuing a career (or even simply indulging) in music. However, various other obstacles such as security risks (including death threats, threats of rape, acid attacks etc.) and cultural limitations are widespread. The Afghan society has been evolving over the past few years and this has played a facilitating role in encouraging Afghan women to pursue careers in music and other arts. At present, people in even the most remote villages of the country listen to music. This demand could be harnessed to further encourage and facilitate Afghan women's pursuit of careers in music.

Policy Recommendations

- The Afghan government should establish more institutions for music, especially for women.
- The Afghan government should provide space for musicians to conduct concerts and to showcase their art.

16. Stein, Eliot. "Afghanistan's First Female Rapper: If, I stay silent, nothing will change." *The Guardian*, Dec 1, 2016.

Women and the Afghan Filmmaking Sector

Masoma Ibrahimi¹

While film industries create jobs and contribute to economic development, they also have an immense impact on social life. In today's world, cinema is considered one of the most important tools for initiating social change. However, in Afghanistan this industry is not functional or has yet to take off substantially. When compared to the other fields of arts that have taken off in the past 19 years, the Afghan government and the international community have not focused much investment in this sector. In today's Afghanistan, women are active in literature, fine arts, and other forms of art, but very few are active in filmmaking.

Given how women comprise nearly half the population of the country, what has been their contribution in filmmaking (feature films as well as documentaries)? This essay attempts to examine the role of Afghan women in filmmaking over the past two decades, and the challenges and opportunities that exist in this sphere.

Women in Afghanistan's Filmmaking Sector

Afghan women have contributed to various forms of art and literature. Some well-known figures include poets such as Malalai, Sultan Razia, and Rabia Balkhi, and politicians such as Soorya. However, a cursory glance at the history of Afghan cinema reveals that there were very few Afghan women in the filmmaking industry before decades of conflict commenced in the 1980s. Among them was actress Anisa Wahab.²

1. Masoma Ibrahimi is an Afghan filmmaker and the Founder of Arastoo Film.

2. Heath, Jennifer; Zahedi, Ashraf. "Children of Afghanistan: The Path to Peace." University of Texas Press, November 15, 2014. pp. 300

Motion pictures were introduced to Afghanistan for the first time in 1926, when the then monarch, King Amanullah Khan, brought a projector. The first silent movie was aired to the public in Paghman and later the first Afghan film ‘*Love and Friendship*’ was produced in 1946.³ However, later, due to opposition from the society, Afghanistan’s first movie theatre, ‘Behzad Cinema’, was shut down in 1934.

During King Zahir Shah’s reign, Behzad Cinema reopened. Between 1965 and 1975, cinemas halls were established in the cities of Kabul, Kandahar and Herat. These theatres mostly screened Indian movies. Between 1965 and 1972, the numbers of movie theatres in Afghanistan increased to 54.⁴ After the communist regime came to power in 1978, the numbers of movie theatres did not increase but movies were strictly censored and the content was completely under the state control. With the spread of the civil war, invasion by Soviet forces, and the rise of the Taliban, all cinema halls were destroyed and eventually banned across country.⁵

In the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 too, the presence of women in the cinema and visual arts was lacking. With an improvement in the security situation and the relative improvements in freedoms that women in big cities were able to gain, women were able to make films and to participate in filmmaking to highlight issues of women’s rights, and to contribute to society at large.⁶ In the recent years, especially since 2012, Afghan women have made short documentaries, short films and feature films. These include *A Letter to the President*; *Afghan Women Behind the Wheel*; *Hava, Maryam, Ayesha*; *The Wolf and Sheep*; and *The Orphanage*. These films have been screened in many local and international film festivals and have received numerous awards. However, these movies (as well as those by foreign filmmakers) depict Afghan women as victims who do not have any rights and ignore the fact that Afghan women play important roles in all spheres of life.

3. “A Brief History of Afghans and Films.” Internet Archive Way Back Machine, June 17, 2005. https://web.archive.org/web/20050617033335/http://www.3continents.com/f3c2004/eng_afghanistan.html

4. “Brief history of Cinema in Afghanistan.” *Afghan Paper*, October 23, 2014. <http://www.afghanpaper.com/nbody.php?id=82088>

5. Ibid

6. “Afghan women in cinema and literature.” *BBC Persian*, March 06, 2015. https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan/2015/03/150306_hn_women_art_package_bbc

Women in Filmmaking in Afghanistan: Post 2001

As Afghan women expressed their keen interest in working in filmmaking as directors, actors and in other positions, some international organizations provided support to female artists and filmmakers in the country. For instance, the British Council has been providing filmmaking training for women since 2010. As part of this training, young Afghan women and men were trained in filmmaking in Kabul, Herat, Balkh, Bamyan and Kandahar, where they made short films and documentaries.⁷

Various embassies in Afghanistan supported the development of the Afghan film industry by providing filmmaking projects and festivals, in which women were encouraged to make films and television series. For instance, the US embassy in Kabul supported female Afghan artists by funding some private television stations to make television series on women's rights, security, and children. For instance, a television series titled 'Secrets of this Home' depicting women's rights was broadcast by Tolo TV. In many cases, the precondition for the implementation of these projects was that they had to be women-led.

Afghan Film is the state-run film company which was established in 1968. Since 2001 this company has been overseen by the Ministry of Information and Culture. Its main mandate is to support Afghan filmmakers. For several years this department received a lot of assistance from various agencies, but these benefits were limited to the purchase of film production equipment for this department only, whereas the filmmakers did not utilize these equipment to produce films in the past. In May 2019, the Afghan government appointed Sahraa Karimi, a female Afghan filmmaker, as the head of Afghan Film.⁸ It was under her leadership that this state-of-affairs began witnessing a transformation. It was only in 2020 that the Ministry of Finance allocated funds to Afghan Film to make 10 documentaries and feature films and a comedy series. Additionally, Afghan Film is mandated with preparing and compiling the cinema policy for Afghanistan.⁹

7. "Young filmmakers." British Council. <https://www.britishcouncil.af/programmes/arts/leadership-skills/young-filmmakers>

8. "Sahraa Karimi to Lead Afghan Film as First Female Chairperson." Tolonews, May 19, 2019. <https://tolonews.com/arts-culture/sahraa-karimi-lead-afghan-film-first-female-chairperson>

9. Morning Magazine, 1 TV, Interview with Sahraa Karimi, Head of Afghan Film. YouTube, August 10, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXIEPJ8eUHM&feature=youtu.be>

One of the ways in which Afghan women can enter this field is by enrolling in the Department of Fine Arts of Kabul University to formally learn film making. It was only after the fall of the Taliban that many young girls (after passing the entrance exam) enrolled in the Department of Fine Arts. On the other hand, since 2001, many female Afghan filmmakers have made films relying on their own funds and some financial support from international organizations. For instance, Roya Sadat produced her film, *A Letter to the President*, with her own funds. Similarly, in 2018, Sahraa Karimi produced *Hava, Maryam, Ayesha* with her own funds. The abovementioned films, namely *A Letter to the President*, and *Hava, Maryam, Ayesha* were screened at various major international film festivals around the world and received prestigious awards.¹⁰

Women's presence in the filmmaking sector is not limited to producing and directing roles alone. In the post-2001 era, Afghan women have contributed to the world of cinema as actors in domestic and international movies. These women have performed in movies, television series etc. and have demonstrated their skills despite the restrictive cultural norms prevalent in the country. Some of these actresses have encountered several threats, including threats to life, due to their participation in this sector.

In terms of relevant infrastructure, at present, many movie theatres are unused and some have not been rebuilt since the end of the Taliban regime in 2001. Cinemas are run and controlled by municipalities, which outsource the task to private sector companies/individuals under specific contracts, and the relevant person or body is entitled to use the theatre to screen films and to generate income. Three decades ago, before the civil war, there were 54 movie theatres across Afghanistan, including 23 in Kabul, which screened movies. Today, most of these buildings have been demolished or have been turned into commercial centers, warehouses or conference venues. In the past 19 years, only five theatres (*Ariana, Pamir, Park, Khairkhaneh* and *Teymourshahi*) have been active, and the numbers of their patrons is low as a result of these theatres not screening newly released movies, Afghan movies, insecure environment for the families, and people's negative perceptions about cinema.

10. Boyd van Hoeij "Hava, Maryam, Ayesha": Film Review | Venice 2019" *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 16, 2019. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/hava-maryam-ayesha-1239710>

Currently, watching movies in cinema halls is not suitable and as a result, movie theatres have taken on a masculine face and the presence of women is extremely low. But some filmmakers have established small movie theaters for families, such as the I-Khanoum family cinema theater and the Kabul-based Noma Rasana. However, movie theatres are non-existent in most provinces.¹¹

Challenges to Afghan Women in the Filmmaking Sector

Although the current state-of-affairs in Afghanistan is somewhat conducive for the Afghan women to participate in filmmaking and other arts, many challenges still exist. One of the most important obstacles is the patriarchal culture and traditional beliefs among Afghan people *vis-a-vis* women's active role in the society, especially in cinema. This obstacle exists both in rural areas and major urban areas. Only a handful of women currently produce films and documentaries.

The other key obstacle is the unstable security situation, which prevents Afghan women from partaking fully in the filmmaking sector. While Afghanistan has many untold stories that can be transformed in to feature films, documentaries and historical series, security problems hamper women's ability to carry out filmmaking activities in remote provinces, and these activities are thus limited to urban centers. To address this hurdle, filmmakers (men and women) are required to acquire permits from the Ministry of Interior Affairs, who can then provide security for the film crew. While this is useful in the capital city or in provinces that are relatively less insecure, in most parts of the country, the security situation is not conducive for filmmakers to opt for any such projects.

For instance, in 2014, Fio Aladag, a female German filmmaker came to Afghanistan to make a German film on Afghan translators working with German troops stationed in Afghanistan. She brought a German team and equipment worth hundreds of thousands of dollars and hired an Afghan team¹² to work with her during the making of the film. Despite the presence of security forces during the filming, when the team was working in Balkh

11. "Women and girls went to Movie Theater for the first time." Afghanistan Sputnik, July 22, 2019. <https://af.sputniknews.com/opinion/201907223654381-زنان-و-دختران-برای-بار-اول-سینما-رفتن-و-دیدن-1>

12. This author was a member of the Afghan team hired by Aladag.

University, students threatened them by saying that the content of the film was un-Islamic. All teams left the area with the support of security forces leaving the project incomplete.

Filmmaking is among the most expensive enterprises in the world. Today, Hollywood and Bollywood movies are made with massive budgets. Having a producer and a financial investor is one of the most important prerequisites to make films. In Afghanistan, most female filmmakers (or aspiring ones) do not have the financial resources to make movies. Furthermore, due to the security situation, the absence of insurance companies or the absence of Afghanistan in the list of foreign insurance companies, disincentivizes producers from investing in this sector, resulting in many Afghan filmmakers making their films either with the financial support of international agencies (which is very limited) or at their own expense.¹³

In some developed countries, special policies and laws have been adopted to support independent filmmakers and the country's film industry. Countries impose taxes on foreign films so that those funds can be used to support domestic film industries.

Conclusion

The continuous conflict of over three decades has immensely affected every aspect of Afghan society, and cinema has not been spared either. On the other hand, the film industry and associated artists have always been looked down upon in the Afghan society. Cinema halls were destroyed during the wars of 1980s and 1990s as they were viewed as un-Islamic, and the society did not endeavor to preserve them. Even after the establishment of a democratic government after the fall of Taliban regime, cinema halls were not reconstructed. While millions were poured into the country in aid, very less attention has been paid to this field. This has created a vacuum wherein indigenous filmmaking is scant. Consequently, the cinema experience in Afghanistan is dominated by foreign movies that do not contribute much to Afghan culture and do not tell the stories of the Afghan people.

13. Eran Fraenkel, Emrys Schoemaker, and Sheldon Himelfarb, "Afghanistan Media Assessment." USIP, 2010. https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/PW68_Afghanistan_Media_Assessment1.pdf

At the same time, the role of the Afghan women has been very much restricted by the Afghan cultural norms. Consequently, the aspirations of Afghan women are either misrepresented, or underrepresented in the international media and the foreign filmmakers have never been able to depict the reality experienced by Afghan women. In most cases, Afghan women are depicted as victims and their stories too have been narrated from the lens of victimhood.

Policy Recommendations

- The government of Afghanistan must establish a fund financed by the government to support independent filmmakers, especially women, and thereby enable an increase in the production of films in the country.
- Films made by women must be supported by facilitating their screenings in different countries and festivals around the world.
- A committee tasked with ensuring the safety of filmmakers, especially women, must be established.
- The government must record and take action to address instances of violence and challenges that female filmmakers face.
- Increase taxes on foreign films and series and utilize the additional funds to support the Afghan film industry.

Protecting Afghan Women's Participation in the Public Sphere

Sanaa Talwasa¹

Afghan women have been rendered a legally vulnerable group due to nearly half a century of protracted armed conflict in the country. The conservative culture in Afghan society has compounded this further. Collectively, these factors have impeded women from participating freely and meaningfully in public spheres of life such as in politics, sport, art, and the economy. Shortcomings in current policies and legislation (many of which are an outcome of the past) highlight the need for an overhaul not only to ensure protection of women's fundamental rights but also to ensure that women across the country are able to sustainably utilize the opportunities they present.

This essay briefly explores the key challenges Afghan women encounter in public life, and argues that the Afghan government must formulate and implement 'work family reconciliation policies' to facilitate equal opportunities and legal support for the Afghan women in public and private sphere of life. To that end, this essay relies on Turkey's experience as a case study and as a suitable model for Afghanistan to develop work-life balance related policies and to pave the path for the development of Afghanistan's welfare system. The essay concludes with specific policy recommendations to that end.

1. Sanaa Talwasa is a Legislative Drafting Officer at the Department of Civil Law, Ministry of Justice, Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Afghan Women's Rights and Challenges in the Socio–Political Context

After the Taliban regime was toppled, Afghanistan's 2004 constitution guaranteed basic rights and freedoms, including gender equality, for all citizens.² Nevertheless, implementation of legal protections for women's rights and women's empowerment continue to encounter several challenges. For instance, Afghan society, especially in the rural areas, does not enthusiastically welcome women's participation in public spheres of life due to prevailing traditional and conservative norms. Several women have been assassinated or have received threats to life and limb in public for their roles as human rights activists, public servants, or politicians.³ Furthermore, it is a socio–cultural taboo to address women by their names in the public sphere.⁴ One of the consequences of this seemingly harmless norm was the non–inclusion of mothers' names in their children's ID cards until a September 2020 amendment to legal provisions introduced inclusion of mothers' names.⁵

Additionally, Afghan women are expected to provide unpaid care giving roles and carry out household work in the domestic sphere,⁶ all of which are considered their fundamental responsibilities. These tasks require considerable investment of time and energy, often resulting in women giving up participation in socio–political and economic aspects of life.⁷ For example, 62% of Afghan girls drop out of school between 13 and 15 years of age⁸ due to several obstacles that negatively affect their future in social and political spheres. Unemployment rate among women is at 41%, and 23.9% of Afghan women cited unemployment as a key concern in Afghanistan.⁹ In this regard, the Afghan government has failed to formally

2. Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Article 22.

3. "Afghanistan: Keep Promises to Afghan Women." Human Rights Watch, December 06, 2009 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/12/06/we-have-promises-world/womens-rights-afghanistan>

4. "Access to Tazkera and other civil documentation in Afghanistan." Norwegian Refugee Council, and Samuel Hall, 2016. http://samuelhall.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/af_civil-documentation-study_081116.pdf

5. Soroush, Rohullah. "What's in a Women's name? No name, no Persona." Afghanistan Analysts Network, March 08, 2019. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/whats-in-a-womans-name-no-name-no-public-persona/>

6. "Women's Access to Property in Afghanistan Law, Enforcement and Barriers." Qara Consulting, 2011. <http://harakat.af/pdf/research/977758d76a84de77b.pdf>

7. "Women and Girls in Afghanistan." Razia's Ray of Hope Foundation. <https://raziasrayofhope.org/women-and-girls-in-afghanistan.html>

8. Nikzad, Khalid. "Findings of the Women and Children Legal Research Foundation (WCLRF)." TOLO News December 24, 2019. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/60-afghan-girls-leave-school-age-15-wclrf>

9. "A Survey of Afghan People, Afghanistan in 2019." Asia Foundation, 2019. <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/afghanistan-in-2019-a-survey-of-the-afghan-people/>

enable all women to utilize the opportunities to enjoy life beyond their domestic roles. This is where a comprehensive ‘work family reconciliation policy’ could benefit Afghan women by enabling them to actively overcome challenges.

Work Family Reconciliation Policies

The ‘work–family reconciliation policy’ concept pertains to reconciling employment and family responsibilities.¹⁰ It refers to a “process of seeking accommodation between the needs and interests of employers, employees, and those for whom they care,” which can result in social and economic prosperity of a society performing jointly rather than in silos.¹¹ The nature of employment and its effects go far beyond the employer–employee relationship by influencing families, markets, and societies.¹² Employment has a direct relationship with economic prosperity and social welfare.¹³ As a result, many countries adopt policies that holistically reconcile the interests of the family and those of the workplace and economic activities rather than by focusing policies on men or women separately. In such cases, social and economic policies seek to provide similar duties and support for fathers in the family and mothers in the workplace. Reconciling family life and work life, i.e. enabling work–life balance, offers a tangible path for social policy to pursue social welfare and quality of life.¹⁴

The Current Status of Work–Family Reconciliation Policies in Afghanistan

Afghanistan’s prevailing labor law regulations consider the minimum standard advised by the International Labor Organization (ILO), such as three months maternity leave, official breaks for nursing mothers, and recommendations to build public kindergartens for working mothers, among others. While these are some positive measures, Afghan labor

10. Kazanoglu, Nazli. “Work and Family Life Reconciliation Policies in Turkey: Europeanisation or Ottomanization?” *MDPI Social Science Journal*, 2019. <https://ideas.repec.org/a/gam/jscscx/v8y2019i2p36-d201232.html>

11. Moss, Peter. “Reconciling Employment and Family Responsibilities: A European Perspective.” *The Work-Family Challenge; Rethinking Employment*, 20, 21-22. New York: 1996.

12. Jonathan W. Fineman, “A Vulnerability Approach to Private Ordering of Employment,” *Vulnerability and the Legal Organization of Work* 13, 14-15. New York: 2018.

13. European Commission, *European Social Policy: Options for the Future (Green Paper)*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 1993.

14. Peter Taylor-Gooby, *Paying for Welfare: The View from the Europe*. *Political Quarterly* 116–26, 1996.

policies still fall short of providing the necessary legal and institutional support for women to actively play a role in socio-political activities alongside responsibilities in the domestic sphere of life. For instance, Afghanistan is a member of the ILO but has not ratified the Maternity Protection Convention of 2000,¹⁵ which recommends 14 weeks maternity leave as a standard. In Afghanistan, public sector institutions enforce minimum requirements of labor law regulations related to maternity leave and childcare facilities. Public sector institutions fail to grant public access to kindergartens and only public sector employees avail this benefit.

Meanwhile, private sector employers are not required by law to offer flexible employment contracts. Moreover, private sector employers require employees to work full time in the office and even dedicate their off-work hours at home being responsive to any email and message regarding their work life. Employees aim to please the employer instead of implementing work-life balance norms and standards, in order to be successful in their careers. Thus, it is essential to consider updating existing policies to ensure a degree of standardization across the board. Relevant recent developments in some Asian countries such as Turkey and Singapore could offer useful models for Afghanistan.

Work Family Reconciliation Policy in Turkey

Turkey's experience in developing work-family reconciliation and public welfare policies could be a useful point of reference for Afghanistan due to shared cultural practices as well as similar low economic participation of women. Under Turkey's work-family reconciliation policy, employment contracts offer significant flexibility for new parents, especially new mothers in the formal sector. Another recent development in Turkey that has gained international attention since 2017 is the country's 'Grandma Allowance'. Under this approach, the government offers US\$ 100 as stipend for grandmothers taking care of grandchildren,¹⁶ so that working mothers are not obliged to send their children to expensive private day care centers. The government claims that the Grandma Allowance is a

15. International Labor Organization, Maternity Protection Convention, (Geneva: ILC, 2000).

16. Didar Yusra Dilruba Oz. "Turkey's Grandmother Projects Aims to Help Working Moms." Anadolu Agency, February 08, 2019. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/todays-headlines/turkeys-grandmother-project-aims-to-help-working-moms-/744348>

significant step towards social welfare development since ultimately, it has multiple beneficiaries such as new mothers, grandmothers, and children.

The Grandma Allowance enables a safe environment and a trusted caretaker for children, essential help for full-time working mothers, and financial support for elderly women¹⁷ for taking care of grandchildren. The last two outcomes of the approach fulfill one of the most important goals of the Turkish government, i.e. increasing the numbers of working women in paid employment, and in turn achieving women's economic empowerment and gender equality in the country.¹⁸

Furthermore, the costs of implementing the Grandma Allowance initiative is a very low for the exchequer as compared to the costs of establishing new day care centers around the country. Some in Turkey even called it an "the ultimate win-win."¹⁹ Furthermore, the Turkish government highly encourages families to enroll kids into pre-school programs and provides support such as flexible employment, extending maternity leaves, Grandma Allowance etc., to encourage and support women's participation in the labor market. Similarly, the government supports and incentivizes the private sector to establish new day care centers by offering tax benefits for the first five years. Any private company disobeying the rules is issued a financial penalty.²⁰

Conclusion

This essay explored how Afghan women's participation in public life can benefit from legal protection and governmental involvement through work-family reconciliation policies. The outcome of an employer-employee relationship is not limited to the two legal entities (the employer and the employee) alone. On the contrary, it has a direct bearing on the market, the institution of family, and social welfare. In other words,

17. Kazanoglu, Nazli. "Work and Family Life Reconciliation Policies in Turkey." MDPI Social Science Journal., 20198. <https://ideas.repec.org/a/gam/jscscx/v8y2019i2p36-d201232.html>

18. Farooq, Umar. "Women Key to Democracy: Turkish Minister." Anadolu Agency, March 13, 2019. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/women-key-to-democracy-turkish-minister/1416462>

19. Matthews, Lauren. "This Country is Paying Grandmas to Take Care of their Grandkids." Hearst Digital Media, January 20, 2017. <https://www.womansday.com/relationships/family-friends/a57675/turkey-paying-grandmas-to-babysit/>

20. Kazanoglu, Nazli. "Work and Family Life Reconciliation Policies in Turkey." MDPI Social Science Journal., 20198. <https://ideas.repec.org/a/gam/jscscx/v8y2019i2p36-d201232.html>

work–family reconciliation policies empower women and contribute to economic benefits by generating employment. For example, work family reconciliation policies and relevant legal protections in favor of women generate new employment opportunities such as care giving as paid work in a society.

Similarly, an absence of gender based discriminative policies in the social welfare platform pave the path for standardization of women rights and status in the private sphere of life as well. For instance, any policies that avoid imposing free care giving duty on women could be a step toward gradual social change rather than rapid change through compulsory law in Afghanistan. That said, such policies are likely to meet with some resistance from traditional or conservative sections of society. To sustainably address such resistance, policies need to be designed by keeping in mind Afghan socioeconomic and cultural realities. Furthermore, the Afghanistan government needs to consider essential supplementary measures through executive organs as Turkey has done, by making the employer liable to pay penalties in case of any violations. This means the success of these policies will depend equally on enforcement. Afghan women need to gain greater access to equal rights, duties, opportunities, and legal support as citizens through laws and policies. Adopting work–family reconciliation policies could be a significant move toward women’s empowerment and legal support.

Policy Recommendations

- Considering the obstacles women face in Afghanistan, creative initiatives are required to strengthen women’s participation in public life; to secure gender equality in domestic life; and to pursue gradual social change through work–family reconciliation and social welfare policies rather than policies directly targeting women.
- The Afghan government must make it mandatory for employers to consider flexible employment policies and contracts for employees, especially new parents, to ensure a healthy and balanced family and work life. Maternity and paternity leaves would allow new mothers and fathers to have adequate time to raise their newborn children and handle paid work as well. Additionally, policies must be included

to introduce essential features for welfare of employees and their families (such as different types of insurance) to enhance the social welfare system in general.

- It is noteworthy that the policy adaptations need to cover several groups of the society such as children, elderly, disables, men, employees, and even employers, beside Afghan women. This means that the policies should be developed within social welfare framework to avoid opposition from the conservatives that other laws such as the Law on Elimination of Violence Against Women received.²¹ Nevertheless, the new policies legally supports women as active citizens of the society and a member of a given family in the public and private sphere of life, that would not arise resistance from the conservative group against the collective interest of these policies.
- It is essential that the government and communities cooperate closely to change the traditionally unpaid care-giving responsibilities that women deliver on, into a paid jobs that could be performed by either gender. This means adaptation will require collaboration between governmental, non-governmental, formal, and informal sectors in the country.

21. Bjelica, Jelena, and Ruttig, Thomas. "Widespread Violence yet Perpetrators go Unpunished." Afghanistan Analysts Network, May 29, 2018. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/widespread-violence-yet-perpetrators-go-unpunished-a-new-un-report-on-violence-against-afghan-women/>

Women's Economic Empowerment in Afghanistan: A Case Study

Batol Hashimi¹

Women's empowerment entails improvement of women's economic, political and social status as well as authority, which collectively contributes to increasing women's self-esteem, reliability and decision-making abilities. If women perform effectively, the economy performs well; if women advance, the economy operates sophisticatedly (Esther, 2012).²

After the fall of Taliban regime in late 2001, national and international agencies along with the Afghan government worked to support the country's economic infrastructure to create opportunities to enable Afghans to actively participate in the country's economic development. Women's economic empowerment was among the key goals of these efforts. Consequently, the national agenda focused considerably on providing opportunities for Afghan women to actively participate in economic activities in Afghanistan. One of the women who utilized these opportunities is Sadia Taj, the Founder and CEO of Tawoos Clothing Company. With a vision to become an entrepreneur, she started her company with financial support in the form of a small loan from the bank. Relying on Taj's case as an illustrative example, this essay explores economic activities of female Afghan entrepreneurs.

This essay examines the Taj's journey to becoming an entrepreneur in

1. Batol Hashimi is the Founder and CEO of the Organization for Rehabilitation and Optimal Development, and an Adjunct Instructor of Biology Lab at the American University of Afghanistan.

2. Duflo, Esther. "Women Empowerment and Economic Development." *Journal of Economic Literature*. 2012, 50(4), 1051–1079. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1257/jel.50.4.1051>

the Afghan context—where interest rates on loans are high, the security situation poses risks, cultural realities pose hurdles, and government attention is lacking³—by investigating the opportunities and challenges that new entrepreneurs in the country encounter. The other issue explored in this essay pertains to specific aspects of Afghanistan’s business environment and patterns relevant to women-owned businesses, i.e. why do women-owned businesses experience slow growth? To that end, this study relied on interviews as well as findings published in scientific journals and official publications.

This study found that some sections of Afghan society are more open to female entrepreneurs than others. Families are gradually becoming more supportive; they create opportunities for the female members of the family, and people have been beginning to trust women’s effective participation in economic activities compared to 2010–2015. However, it must be noted that the situation may vary between urban and rural contexts.

Entrepreneurship and Networks

The emotional thrust which motivates one to accomplish something often has its roots in childhood experiences and social conditioning. Support from and presence of families and friends, especially parents, tends to have a bearing on a person’s drive to achieve something. This was true for Sadia’s ambition of becoming an entrepreneur. Watching her mother weave (*cherma dozi*) inspired Sadia to start her own business. Prior to establishing her business venture, she researched other similar small businesses in the textile industry to familiarize herself with the processes and applied for a bank loan to launch the business. Although families play an important role while starting a business, it is only one component of one’s network. It has been proven by studies that successful entrepreneurs are those who can tap wider social and economic networks to optimally utilize resources and insights.⁴ This plays a role in increasing the probability of growth and

3. “The benchmark interest rate in Afghanistan was last recorded at 14.84 percent.” Trading Economics. <https://tradingeconomics.com/afghanistan/interest-rate#:~:text=Interest%20Rate%20in%20Afghanistan%20averaged,the%20first%20quarter%20of%202017>

4. Brüderl, Josef, and Peter Preisendörfer. “Network Support and the Success of Newly Founded Businesses.” *Small Business Economics*. 10, no. 3 (1998): 213-25. www.jstor.org/stable/40228947

survival of the newly founded business.⁵ The networks are divided into two broad categories: the first involves personal networks comprising families and friends; and second involves the business network of the industry. Therefore, entrepreneurship is not merely an standalone decision or activity but one that is embedded in social, political and cultural contexts of a particular country. Sadia's case shows how entrepreneurship is not isolated from social networking and is in fact a combination of sharing, reciprocity, collaboration and coordination of resources within networks and social interactions.

To illustrate, Sadia gained valuable support from her family, especially from her husband who works in one of the financial institutions in Afghanistan and helped her gain access to a bank loan. The family also provided her with the space to conduct the business. The Afghanistan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry (AWCCI) helped Sadia sell her products and showcase them at exhibitions. The AWCCI is a business organizational network established with the support of the Afghan government as a non-profit and non-governmental organization to enhance the capacities of women-owned businesses in Afghanistan.⁶

Consumer Demand as an Opportunity

As Afghan traditional costume embroidery began gaining consumers on a global level over the past two decades, Sadia recognized this demand and invested in this industry. The clothing industry was immensely affected during the civil war and the Taliban period, but regained momentum in the post-2001 period. Research shows that prior to 2013, there were no garment manufacturers in Afghanistan.⁷ All garments were imported from the foreign countries.⁸ It is thought that “[t]his part of supply chain of [t]extile & clothing industry is profitable because of huge demand and lack of local production,”⁹ and consequently, the clothing industry is an emerging industry in Afghanistan.

5. Ibid

6. “Our Organization.” Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce. <https://awcci.af/en/our-organization/>

7. “Investment opportunities in textiles and clothing industry”. Accia.com. <http://iccia.com/sites/default/files/library/files/Final%20Afghanistan%20Textile%20Industry%20Paper%20-%20MA.pdf>

8. Ibid

9. “Our Organization.” Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce. <https://awcci.af/en/our-organization/>

Microloans and Women Entrepreneurs in Afghanistan

After decades of internal conflict since the 1970s, the textile manufacturing industry in Afghanistan has been gradually picking up, especially since 2013. However, textile industry imports have remained high. In 2018, it was reported that Afghanistan imported US\$ 500 million worth of textiles and fabric from Iran, Pakistan, China and India¹⁰ even though analysts contend that the Afghan textile industry has vast potential.¹¹

Over the recent years, most reliable banks have offered microloans for women entrepreneurs. These banks offer small-scale loans for female-run startups with a repayment schedule of one to two years at a marginal return interest especially for 'safe' businesses such as clothing. Recently, one of the private banks in Afghanistan announced a specially designed product called RIFA for women-owned businesses at a monthly installment of a minimum interest rate of 5–6%. Female entrepreneurs possessing valid business licenses are eligible to benefit from this with a collateral of equitable mortgage of property.¹² However, it must be noted that many women in Afghanistan do not own property.

Sadia's initiative showed that investment in the textile industry is worthwhile due to high consumer demand, and Afghan garments are well sought on the international level due to indigenous designs, high quality cotton, domestic embroidery and beautiful silk fabrics. To harness existing opportunities in the textile business to sustain and grow her business, Sadia considered the following criteria:

1. Huge market for clothing in Kabul and across the country in Afghanistan.
2. More investment opportunities for female startups, especially in the handmade accessories segment.
3. Accessibility of large numbers of people to the Internet and social media platforms like Facebook.
4. Cheap raw materials and abundant industry-relevant labor force.

10. Arman, Rohullah. "Afghanistan Imports \$500m Worth of Textiles Annually". Tolonews, December 07, 2018. <https://tolonews.com/business/afghanistan-imports-500m-worth-textiles-annually>

11. Ibid

12. "RIFA Lending Scheme for Women". Azizi Bank <https://azizibank.af/pages/RIFA-Lending-Scheme-for-Women>

Challenges

Generally, regardless of gender, newly founded businesses in Afghanistan tend to face finance related shortages, and Sadia's business was no exception. She often faced financial shortages in the early stages of her business, to the extent that she even considered shutting it down. She explained that the shortage of funds she experienced (be it in terms of availability of capital or status of sales and resultant proceeds) was partly due to lack of innovative marketing strategies and efforts; and partly due to recent intense competition in the textile and clothing industry and economy of scale that impacted her ability to accept offers from potential customers. Moreover, the fashion industry is highly dynamic and given how consumer demand constantly changes along with fashion trends, newly founded businesses in this sector find it challenging to keep up a supply that matches the demand. However, this study found that financial shortage is experienced more by female-owned businesses as compared to male-owned businesses and that a lack of networking and security for women to engage in market activities is among the key contributing factors. Another common challenge is the shortage of persons with specialized skills. For instance, in the beginning when Sadia's manufacturing unit commenced production, she struggled to find professional designers.

Conclusion

Different types of networks individually and collectively play an important role in the creation and growth of businesses since they influence entrepreneurs' access to resources and insights. Equally important are contributions and support from the government and private agencies to newly founded businesses in the economy. In Afghanistan's context, at present, direct support from families has a key role to play in determining the success of women-owned small businesses. On a more fundamental level, personal drive and motivation of the aspiring entrepreneur also makes a considerable difference.

Today, Sadia is a successful businesswoman who not only generates her own income but also creates jobs for women. Sadia and other Afghan women like her are role models who observed problems and challenges

in the context of the Afghan society and tapped into their own and their country's potential by taking an entrepreneurial approach.

Afghan women have made a long and arduous journey to reach where they are now. From being relegated to domestic life as “homemakers” or being denigrated for being “career-oriented” social actors, they are now pushing their limits and shaping the economy. Sadia's case demonstrates how women with motivation and courage explore and optimally harness economic opportunities in Afghanistan and offers a strong case for greater proactive effort to support women's economic empowerment.

Policy Recommendations

In Afghanistan, activities aimed at women's economic empowerment often face challenges due to prevailing cultural dynamics, the security situation, skills related shortcomings among women, lack of essential business knowledge, and financial shortage. The Afghan government has been making efforts to bring greater parity.¹³ Studies¹⁴ in other countries show how reliable policies and national schemes for women's entrepreneurship activities can support newly founded women-owned businesses.

- For example, the Indian government framed different types of schemes that provide financial support and relaxation/waivers for women-owned businesses.¹⁵ Afghanistan could explore such schemes and adapt them to the country's context. For instance, it can develop schemes like India's 'Trade Related Entrepreneurship Assistance and Development (TREAD)' scheme for women, schemes for women-owned businesses, special benefits for women entrepreneurs in micro and small enterprises segments, and schemes and marketing funds for women.
- Supportive schemes and sustained support need to be provided for women-owned businesses in order for them to thrive in the market. Experiences of other countries, such as India, has been positive in

13. “Women's Economic Empowerment National Priority Programme.” Ministry of Finance of Afghanistan (2016). http://policymof.gov.af/home/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Women_s-Economic-Empowerment-NPP.pdf

14. Rani, Sandhya. “Women Entrepreneurship: Government and Institutional Support.” *International Journal of Research in Commerce & Management*. No. 6 (2015), Issue No. 11 (November).

15. *Ibid*

this regard and can be helpful in the context of Afghanistan as well. In India, these schemes are aimed at supporting and encouraging women-owned businesses by facilitating subsidies up to 30% of the total project costs; involve attractive loans such as with an annual interest rate of 0.25 to 1% with seven-year payment schedules; providing special services and helping women-owned business in marketing strategies etc.¹⁶

16. Rani, Sandhya. "Women Entrepreneurship: Government and Institutional Support." *International Journal of Research in Commerce & Management*. No. 6 (2015), Issue No. 11 (November).x

Afghan Women's Achievements in the Security Sector Post-2001

Mina Nowrozi¹

When the Taliban regime was in power in Afghanistan, they imposed severe restrictions on women, excluding women from nearly all spheres of life such as social, political, cultural, economic, and security. The US intervention in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks freed Afghan women from the severe Taliban-imposed restrictions, and steadily, women began to resume participation in various aspects of society with the help of the US and the international community. Article 22 of the new Afghan constitution, which was promulgated in 2004, guarantees equality for all citizens, men, and women.² This provides the legal foundation for women to participate in all spheres of society as equals to men, including in the security sector. While this has enabled substantial participation of women in the security sector, some challenges do still persist, as “in a conservative society like Afghanistan, where female participation in the public domain is not widely accepted, female presence in the security sectors remains taboo.”³

This essay explores the role of women in Afghanistan's security sector; analyzes how the post-2001 era has helped women participate in the

1. Mina Nowrozi holds an undergraduate degree in international and comparative politics from the American University of Central Asia.

2. The Constitution of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan chapter2, Article 22.

3. Sabet, Zarifa. “Improving Female Participation in Defense and Security Institutions in Afghanistan,” Geopolitical Monitor, June 22, 2019, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/improving-female-participation-in-defense-and-security-institutions-in-afghanistan/>

sector; and how, despite challenges, women have made contributions in the security sector. Finally, this paper offers policy recommendations aimed at improving the role of Afghan women in the security sector.

The Need for Women's Presence in the Security Sector

Women comprise half of Afghanistan's society, and consequently, Afghan women's participation is essential for all sectors of governance, economic and other activities. It is especially vital in the security sector, given how security related issues are a key concern in the country. However, ensuring robust participation of women in this sector is still a challenging task, and women's presence in it continues to be taboo due to the conservative nature of the society.⁴ Normalizing women's participation in this sector depends partly on placing greater emphasis on increased participation of women in the sector.

Not only is equal access to participation in the security sector (or any sector) a legitimate right of Afghan women but it is especially necessary given how gender equality is a cross-cutting issue for the overall development of society. Women's inclusion in this sector will help bring more balance in a society that has been affected by the brutal male dominated system of the Taliban. Women's presence in the security sector helps institutions in this sector function better and in a more nuanced way. For example, on a practical level, while insecurity affects both men and women, due to some traditional and cultural barriers, most women do not feel comfortable reporting security incidents to male members of security forces. Women can communicate with women more easily. For instance, women are more likely to feel comfortable to report incidents of harassment and domestic violence to female police personnel than male officers.⁵

Similarly, women are needed in Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). When the armed forces have to carry out security operations in people's homes, under Islamic traditions, men cannot frisk

4. Sabet, Zarifa. "Improving Female Participation in Defense and Security Institutions in Afghanistan," *Geopolitical Monitor*, June 22, 2019, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/improving-female-participation-in-defense-and-security-institutions-in-afghanistan/>

5. "Situation of Women Employed in Defense and Security Sectors." *Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission*, Autumn 2017, p. 3. http://azil.rs/azil_novi/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Situation-of-Women.Employed-in-Defense-and-Security-Sector.pdf

women, or, when there are female victims of the operations, men are not allowed to touch women or interact with them. In circumstances like these, female personnel are necessary to handle the situation. Furthermore, in rural areas, women might sometimes have accurate and vital security information but are unlikely to speak to male strangers. Female personnel are needed in such cases to communicate with them.⁶ Moreover, there have been cases where some male drug traffickers were disguised in women's clothes, hiding drugs and weapons under their Burqas, but were nabbed when they were identified and arrested by female security personnel.⁷

Challenges Faced by Women in the Security Sector

Before the Taliban era, Afghan women served in the military and other security services for decades. For instance, the first group of women (six in total) joined the Afghan National Police in 1967. Their numbers were gradually increasing but began dropping during the civil war and dropped to zero during the Taliban period.⁸ In 1991, Col. Latifa Nabizada became Afghanistan's first Afghan female helicopter pilot.⁹ In the 1980s, Khatoon Mohammadzai became the first woman to be commissioned in the Afghan army, and was also Afghanistan's first female paratrooper.¹⁰ Even though the military and security services have tended to be considered a 'male domain', she also became the first female Afghan general in the post-Taliban period.¹¹

It is important to note that the Taliban was not the first entity to introduce or enforce gender discrimination in Afghanistan; they simply made the norms that has existed for centuries a key component of their governance system.¹²

6. Bryce, Hannah. "Could More Women Soldiers Make the Army Stronger?" BBC News November 27, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-41969817>

7. سند پالیسی: توانمندی زنان افغان در سکتور امنیتي. [Policy Document: The Ability of Afghan Women in the Security Sector]." Afghan Women's Network, (Kabul: AWN, June 2016), 2.

8. "Situation of Women Employed in Defense and Security Sectors." Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Autumn 2017. p. 12. http://azil.rs/azil_novi/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Situation-of-Women.Employed-in-Defense-and-Security-Sector.pdf

9. Jones, Sophia. "The Many Dangers of Being an Afghan Woman in Uniform." The New York Times, October 05, 2018. [nytimes.com/2018/10/05/magazine/afghanistan-women-security-forces.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/05/magazine/afghanistan-women-security-forces.html)

10. Izazullah. "Afghan Army Seeks to Recruit More Women." Salaam Times April 03, 2017. https://afghanistan.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_st/features/2017/04/03/feature-01

11. Craig, Jill. Sorosh, Hikmat. and Seerat, Samsama. "Afghan Women Work to Increase Military Presence." Voice of America, March 23, 2018. <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/afghan-women-work-increase-military-presence>

12. Kouvo, Sari. and Levine, Corey. "Who Defines the Red Lines? The Prospects for Safeguarding Women's Rights and Securing Their Future in Post-Transition Afghanistan." The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Conflict, Oxford University Press 2018, p. 487.

The Taliban's imposition of misogynistic principles caused tremendous damage to women's progress in all sectors, especially the security sector. The Taliban's ideology furthered normalization of gender discrimination and devaluation of women's abilities and social contributions. Consequently, even two decades since the fall of the Taliban regime, women continue to suffer from the Taliban's legacy, and it is a big challenge for women to be in the military or police forces. The major challenges women face include:

Harassment: Countrywide, harassment is one of the major challenges Afghan women face in almost all types of workplaces, be it public or private, and is a deterrent to their participation in social affairs. Due to widespread occurrence of harassment, families are less likely to 'allow' their female relatives (wives, daughters etc.) to work in any public or private offices, particularly where they need to work with men.¹³ According to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), Afghan women face the following the categories of harassments:

- **Verbal Harassment:** This involves the use of sexually suggestive words, sexual offerings, comments on the appearance and clothing choices of a person, lewd humor, sarcastic speech and other sexual expressions.
- **Non-verbal harassment:** This involves winking, leering, lewd glances and sexual gestures.
- **Physical harassment:** This involves touching a woman, forcibly holding her hands, touching with shoulders, getting close to the woman's body etc. without consent.¹⁴

AIHRC studies have found that 13.20% of the women in ANDSF, 20.40% in the Afghan National Police (ANP), and 18.30% in the ANA experienced sexual harassment.¹⁵ These numbers show that harassment is a huge challenge to women's participation in the security sector, to the extent that it even causes women to quit their jobs.

13. Duncan, Dennis. "Sexual Harassment Law Passes Afghan Houses." DAI, January 05, 2017. https://dai-global-developments.com/articles/law-to-criminalize-sexual-harassment-passed-by-afghan-parliament-awaits-presidents-approval?utm_source=daidotcom

14. "Situation of Women Employed in Defense and Security Sectors." Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Autumn 2017. p. 20. http://azil.rs/azil_novi/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Situation-of-Women.Employed-in-Defense-and-Security-Sector.pdf

15. Ibid

Illiteracy and Conservative Norms: Col. Latifa Bayat, Deputy Director in the Ministry of Interior's Gender Unit, said "Our customs do not allow women to work in the police force. Women have no access to education."¹⁶ Traditional and conservative norms that discriminate against girls is another big impediment for Afghan women. Even today, many Afghan families prioritize their sons over their daughters.¹⁷ Consequently, those families do not value their daughters and wives and do not believe in them and do not count on their abilities. Under the prevailing conservative norms in Afghanistan, social duties are allocated based on gender. The security sector is considered the domain of men and it is often assumed that women are not capable of carrying out military operations, even though these capabilities ultimately depend on training. Consequently, there is a correlation between lower numbers of women in the security forces and women's limited and/or low access to education and career opportunities. Even training within security institutions is insufficient because most of the trainings are short-term. Short-term training allow is insufficient to build women's capacity and professional skills. Short-term training also results in fewer opportunities for promotions.¹⁸

Lack of Law Enforcement: In the post-2001 period, Afghanistan has promulgated several laws to guarantee gender equality. Unfortunately, enforcement is extremely weak, and till date, patriarchal norms are practiced more than formal laws. In fact, patriarchy exists even among highly educated officials such as members of parliament. This is also why the Law on Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) has yet to be officially approved by the parliament since 2009. Consequently, women are being suppressed and violence against women has been increasing. In 2019, the Ministry of Public Health recorded 30,000 cases of violence against women in hospitals all around the country, which shows a 50% jump from the numbers recorded in 2018.¹⁹ The increasing trend of

16. Moetsabi, Titus. "Afghan Police Force Recruits Women to Fight Crime and Stigma." UNDP. <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/ourstories/afghan-women-join-police-force.html>

17. Fahimullah. "Afghanistan: The Shame of Having Daughters." Institute for War and Peace Reporting, January 30, 2017. <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/afghanistan-shame-having-daughters>

18. "گزارش سالانه خشونت علیه زنان در افغانستان." [Annual Report on Violence Against Women in Afghanistan]." Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, 2019. p. 4. [https://www.aihrc.org.af/media/files/AIHRCAnnual_Women_Report_\(2018-2019\).pdf](https://www.aihrc.org.af/media/files/AIHRCAnnual_Women_Report_(2018-2019).pdf)

19. "TOLONews 6pm News 08 March 2020." YouTube, Tolonews, March 08, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wx7l2deed3Q>

violence against women highlights the lack of enforcement of those laws. In a society where a large section of women face violence, discrimination, and unfair treatment despite the existence of laws and policies aimed at ensuring gender equality, non-discrimination, and elimination of violence against women, the security sector is not an exception. Lack of (or inadequate) law enforcement causes people to lose trust in the government and law enforcement mechanisms, which in turn discourages women from joining the security forces as well.

Women's Achievements in the Security Sector

Despite numerous challenges, the latest statistics of female forces in the security sector gives hope for more achievements. Progress has been slow, but it has been on an upward trend. The US, NATO and the Afghan government have been undertaking different measures to increase the numbers of female employees in the security sector. Some of these measures include budgetary allocations to increase the numbers of female forces and providing female advisors and trainers for women in security institutions. Between 2014 and 2016, the US spent approximately US\$ 160 million to support women in the Afghan security forces.²⁰

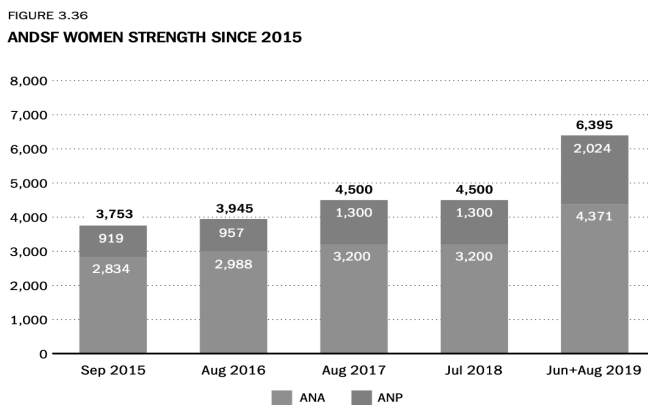
The Afghan government has largely pursued legal measures as the basic need. Article 22 of the current Afghan constitution guarantees equal rights for men and women. This is one of the legal grounds for equal access of women and girls to social services and rights to work in all public and private sectors, including security. The Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is another international measure that supports women's participation in the Afghan security sector without discrimination. In particular, Article 11 of the CEDAW obliges state parties to ensure women's rights to work and employment without discrimination.²¹ Afghanistan is bound by this treaty since it ratified it in 2003. Furthermore, the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) is another policy aimed at eliminating all forms of discrimination against women and improving their human capital and

20. Jones, Sophia. "The Many Dangers of Being an Afghan Woman in Uniform." *The New York Times* October 05, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/05/magazine/afghanistan-women-security-forces.html>

21. Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against, Part 3, art 11.

increasing their inclusion in all aspect of life. Since harassment is one of the countrywide challenges that impede women from freely participating in most social activities, the Afghan parliament passed the Anti-Harassment Law in 2017. Since the negative effect of harassment is more perceptible in security sector, in October 2018, Afghanistan’s Ministry of Defense adopted the Sexual Harassment and Assault Prevent Policy.²²

All measures taken by the Afghan government, the US and other donor countries for women in the security sector aim to encourage and support their engagement in the military, army, police, and other security sector institutions. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction’s last quarterly report for 2019 found that the numbers of female members of the ANDSF had increased from 4,495 in 2018 to 6,395 in 2019.²³



Source: CSTC-A response to SIGAR data call, 9/19/2019; SIGAR, Quarterly Reports to the United States Congress, 10/30/2015, 10/30/2016, 10/30/2017, and 10/30/2018; SIGAR, analysis of CSTC-A-provided data, 10/2019.

In 2015, there were a total of 3,753 women in the Afghan security sector. In 2019, the numbers increased to 6,395. This is a promising increase, especially given the wide range of social, cultural, and traditional barriers

22. “Report to Congress: Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan” Department of Defense, June 27, 2019, p. 29, <https://cutt.ly/Ptxjmbq>.

23. “Report to The United States Congress,” SIGAR, no 45, 2019. pp 84-86. <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/12/2002156816/-1/-1/1/ENHANCING-SECURITY-AND-STABILITY-IN-AFGHANISTAN.PDF>

that women face. However, these numbers are still far below the goals that the Afghan government and NATO had set in 2010. At that time, they had set the goal of increasing the numbers of female ANDSF members to 10% of the total force strength by 2020.²⁴ Realizing the slow pace of women's enrolment, in 2015, the government changed the benchmark for the next 10 years to 5000 females in the army and 10,000 females in the police force by 2025.²⁵ Among the women in the security sector, some women are in higher ranking positions. For example, Khatol Mohammadzai is the first woman in Afghanistan to attain the rank of a general.²⁶ Major Safia Ferozi is another woman who is working in the Afghan Air Force. She is the second female Afghan pilot in the post-Taliban era, after Nelofer Rahmani.²⁷

Conclusion

Prevailing socio-cultural and structural barriers pose several deterrents to Afghan women's participation in different spheres of life. Afghan women's participation in the security sector has been especially challenging since military services and army operations are often considered a male domain. Nonetheless, at present over 6000 women are employed in the Afghan security forces—over 4000 female personnel in the Afghan National Army and over 2000 in the Afghan National Police. Overall, this number is low, but given the context, it is a positive achievement.

Policy Recommendations

- The primary issue that needs to be addressed is people's mindsets. Several measures need to be taken to normalize women's participation in the security sector. These could include:
 - a) Developing a series of TV programs and advertisements that treat the security sector as equal to any other profession, such as medicine, businesses, or politics.

24. Zawulistani, Jawad. "A Battle of Several Fronts: Afghan Women in the Security Forces." *The Diplomat* May 01, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/a-battle-of-several-fronts-afghan-women-in-the-security-forces/>

25. Jones, Sophia. "The Many Dangers of Being an Afghan Woman in Uniform." *The New York Times*, October 05, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/05/magazine/afghanistan-women-security-forces.html>

26. Craig, Jill. Sorosh, Hikmat. and Seerat, Samsama. "Afghan Women Work to Increase Military Presence." *Voice of America*, March 23, 2018 <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/afghan-women-work-increase-military-presence>

27. "A Short Documentary of Afghan Female Army" YouTube, TOLOTV, February 28, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1citQvCPlqA>.

- b)** Advertising the successes of the women who are already in the security sector, to encourage other women to join.
 - c)** Engaging with religious figures and other entities influential in Afghan society. The government must develop a policy for the Ministry of Interior to register all the Mullah's who give sermons in mosques and make sure they all are educated. The government could ask them not only to stop promoting misogynistic principles but also to encourage the families to be supportive of their sisters, wives and daughters' participation in all spheres, especially the security sector.
- The other key issue that needs to be addressed on a priority basis is the inadequacies in law enforcement. This can be achieved by:
 - a)** Implementing all laws and policies aimed at gender-equality and well-being of women earnestly.
 - b)** The principle of non-discrimination must be enforced strongly. Women must be treated as equals to men within institutions; they must have access to all facilities, equipment and training as men.
 - c)** The anti-harassment policy must be implemented rigorously.
 - d)** Accountability mechanisms as well as mechanisms facilitating access to justice must be institutionalized.
- The Defense Ministry should hold long-term training for female personnel who newly join the security sector. It will be more helpful to enhance their skills and capacities.

Women's Participation and Portrayal in Afghan Media

Fatema Hosseini¹

The rise of independent media is one of the greatest achievements in post-2001 Afghanistan. According to reports, at present, nearly 1,741 women work in various Afghan media outlets.² However, with rising threats against women in various parts of the country, many female journalists have felt compelled to quit their jobs. In the past four years alone, at least six Afghan women working in the media industry have been killed.³ A large number of women are subjected to verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and discrimination. Yet, despite challenges, the presence of women in the mass media sector is a promising sign and is evidence of the fact that they would fight for their rights. Women's participation also demonstrates the representation of half the country's population, which helps unheard voices getting heard and increases the possibility of their conditions getting improved.⁴

This essay explores women's participation in Afghan media and the nature of their participation. To that end, this study relies on existing literature as well as in-depth interviews with six participants (four women and two men).

1. Fatema Hosseini is a News Reporter with Kabul Now Online.

2. "Some 1,741 women journalists working across Afghanistan." Center for the Protection of Afghan Women Journalists, March 08, 2020. <https://www.cpawj.org/en/2020/03/08/some-1741-women-journalists-working-across-afghanistan/>

3. Ibid

4. Ibid

Afghan Women in Mass Media

In a society affected by a combination of protracted conflict and conservative norms, lasting changes cannot occur overnight. One way to effect lasting positive change would be by harnessing the potential of mass media. Mass media plays a significant role in most Afghan women's lives.⁵ Through mass media, whose operations resumed after the fall of the Taliban regime, positive changes towards gender equality have been engendered. However, bringing about these changes has not been an easy task because many media persons, particularly women, have lost their lives and have suffered various harms in the process. Unfortunately, Taliban members, many religious leaders, and other conservative sections of the population who have withheld women's freedoms for many years are also part of the broader Afghan society, and strongly oppose transforming cultural norms to ensure women's equal rights and freedoms.⁶

After the fall of the Taliban and establishment of democracy, mass media operations were allowed once again in Afghanistan. Today, nearly 1,000 media outlets are in active operation as compared to 15 media outlets in 2000.⁷ Privately owned radio and TV stations comprise a bulk of these outlets. A broad range of issues from security to weather forecast, news, TV dramas, and other entertainment shows are broadcast by these outlets. Due to the media's persevering observations and critiques of most of the government's performance and activities, the Afghan government has become more responsive towards media and people in the society.

At present, approximately 12,000 people are employed with privately owned media outlets.⁸ However, despite substantial achievements, the mass media sector in Afghanistan faces some challenges, particularly when it comes to women's overall inclusion and provision of key responsibilities to female employees. Despite protests by religious scholars, the Afghan government has supported provision of space for women in media.

5. Page, David, and Siddiqi, Shirazuddin. "The media of Afghanistan: The challenges of Transition." BBC Media Action, Mar. 2012, http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/policybriefing/bbc_media_action_afghanistan_is_in_transition.pdf.

6. Mashal, Mujib. "Vibrant Lives of Afghan TV Crew, Erased in a Taliban Bombing." The New York Times, January 21, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/22/world/asia/afghanistan-tolo-tv-bombing.html>

7. Khalvatgar, Abdul Mujib. "Freedom of Expression Under Threat in Afghanistan." Stability International Journal of Security & Development, November 20, 2014. pp. 1-4. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/sta.e1>

8. Ibid

Unfortunately, however, women often continue to be tasked with non-serious roles and used as entertainment to increase viewership.⁹ There is also a mindset issue and women are mostly considered to be incapable of conducting political analysis or developing serious analytical content.¹⁰

In an interview with this author, Fatima Amiri,¹¹ a human rights activist, compared the role of women in the foreign media with those in Afghan media. She argued that “we have very few influential women, who are leading the media. When we talk constantly about women in media, the first things that come to our mind are TV hosts, singers and actresses. When one discusses women in the media in other countries, one can see women working in a variety of roles such as producers, analysts, actors, singers, and other artists. However, this is not the case in Afghanistan.”

Women’s Portrayal in the Afghan Media

Although most national TV programs provide information about gender roles and ideal life, women’s roles are still misrepresented and women are often objectified.¹² Indian and Turkish soap operas that are mostly broadcast on national TV channels in Afghanistan are an example here. In most of these series, women are considered as decorative objects and play passive characters of housewives reliant on men’s financial, emotional, and physical support.¹³ One of the factors influencing this is the fact that the media industry is mostly run and created by men, in men’s tastes and for men.¹⁴

Media is one of the powerful tools that can facilitate change. Therefore, instead of investing money on foreign and Afghan soap operas in which women are portrayed as passive, different national TV channels could arrange more TV shows on empowerment, education, economics, politics, and art which would be led by women. This would indeed challenge the

9. Nijat, Aarya and Murtazashvili, Jennifer. “Women’s Leadership Roles in Afghanistan.” USIP, 2015, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR380-Women-s-Leadership-Roles-in-Afghanistan.pdf>

10. Ibid

11. Amiri, Fatima, Women and Human Right Activist. Interviewed by author February 02, 2020. Kabul, Afghanistan.

12. Ceulemans, Mieke, and Fauconnier, Cuido. “Mass Media: The Image, Role, and Social conditions of Women.” UNESCO, 1979, <http://dergipark.ulakbim.gov.tr/intwojde/article/viewFile/5000149378/5000135817>

13. Gevorgyan, Anna Davtyan. “Women and Mass Media.” Heinrich Boll Stiftung South Caucasus: Feminism and Gender Democracy, April 08, 2016. <http://www.feminism-boell.org/en/2016/04/08/women-and-mass-media>

14. Ibid

pervasiveness of domestic violence, gender discrimination and draw attention to issues related to gender equality, culture, education and health.¹⁵ Although, there have been many positive changes since fall of the Taliban, a large number of women working in the media industry in Afghanistan still face a constant threat to life and limb.

One of the main reasons for this is the enforcement of strict traditional norms, particular on women. In an interview with this author, Zahra Yegana, Hela Mahmood,¹⁶ and Asad Ahmadi¹⁷ said that “it is about men, their roles, and their rights; very little is mentioned about women. If the media industry is largely and only filled with men, the messaging will naturally also be primarily from their perspective and perhaps mostly related to them.”

The Taliban interpreted Sharia Law to their preference and forbade women from being seen in public ‘unnecessarily’, and from getting educated.¹⁸ Psychologically, this may assure the conservative segments of the Afghan society who do not want to see any interaction between ‘their’ women and other men either directly or indirectly. Moreover, the concept of ‘code of honor’ has continued to exist among men even in the post-Taliban period. For instance, there is still a common notion that men should protect and take care of ‘their’ women, especially their wife. In general, the conservative interpretation of Sharia Law places Afghan women in a position lower than those of men. This is one of the main factors holding women back from raising their voices or defending their basic rights.

Conclusion

This essay explored two issues: women’s participation as well as portrayal in Afghan media. A majority of the people in Afghanistan continue to be heavily impacted by the rules and policies that were enforced during the Taliban regime.¹⁹ Most of those rules and norms enforced on women,

15. Frogh, Wazhma. “The Emerging Afghan Media: Beyond the Stereotyping of Women?” Middle East Institute, April 23, 2012. <http://www.mei.edu/content/emerging-afghan-media-beyond-stereotyping-women>

16. Mahmood, Hela, University student. Interviewed by author on February 02, 2020, Kabul, Afghanistan.

17. Ahmadi, Asad, University student. Interviewed by author on February 03, 2020, Kabul, Afghanistan.

18. Barakat, Sultan, and Wardell, Gareth. “Exploited by Whom? An Alternative Perspective on Humanitarian Assistance to Afghan Women.” *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 5, 2002. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3993395>

19. Abirafeh, Lina. “Lessons from Gender-focused International Aid in Post-Conflict Afghanistan...Learned?” FRIEDRICH-EBERT-STIFTUNG, n.v, n.i, 2005, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/02978.pdf>

including those on how to act, walk, and talk as a woman continue to be practiced in some of the provinces where majority of the Taliban, conservative religious leaders, and other similar-minded people live. More efforts and studies are needed to improve the situation of women in Afghanistan. Moreover, changing conservative norms takes time and effort to deliver tangible, lasting results. However, the prospects of achieving lasting change also depends on approaches taken to do so. In other words, change can occur as a result of individuals using traditional ways recognized and accepted by people as well.

Policy Recommendations

- Culturally responsive gender rights education should be arranged for entire families and not for women alone. Efforts aimed at reducing the gender gap often tend to be limited to focusing only on women and their roles, which is an inadequate approach. In Afghanistan, much like in other patriarchal societies, gender roles are mostly shaped by socio-cultural factors based on considering women as men's 'honor keepers'.²⁰ Therefore, men cannot be excluded from the programs intended to empower women. As an Afghan man once claimed, "women don't exist in isolation."²¹
- In order to promote a culture of respect and togetherness, different events and school programs must be carried out, including science olympiads among different boys and girls' schools, or story writing competitions among boys and girls schools, etc.
- Another way to increase public awareness would be by harnessing the power of mass media. This could include inviting female activists and women leaders on shows etc. Employing more women in leadership roles in the media sector and in positions of responsibility such as TV anchors, producers etc. would pave the way for more women to work in this sector, and contribute to breaking glass ceilings.

20. Manganaro, L. Lynne, and Alozie, O. Nicholas. "Gender Role Attitudes: Who Supports Expanded Rights for Women in Afghanistan?" Springer Science+Business Media, January 15, 2011. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11199-011-9931-6>

21. Abirafeh, Lina. "Lessons from Gender-focused International Aid in Post-Conflict Afghanistan...Learned?." FRIEDRICH-EBERT-STIFTUNG, n.v, n.i, 2005, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/02978.pdf>

- Informative programs—be it entertainment, ‘info-tainment’ or news related—must broadcast on different TV and radio channels that focus on women in Afghanistan rather than merely broadcasting foreign TV series in which women are mostly portrayed in passive roles.
- Women must be treated equally as men when it comes to responsibilities, salaries, and authorities.
- While there are laws prohibiting discrimination and violence against women, their enforcement has been inadequate. This is one of the reasons why large numbers of women do not report violence and/or discrimination they face. In the absence of implementation, laws end up being mere rhetoric.

Strengthening Afghan Women's Participation in Peacebuilding

Shabnam Nasimi¹

Despite substantial achievements in the process of emerging from two decades of war and oppression, Afghanistan still has a long way to go before it achieves peace and stability. Of particular concern are the significant barriers that women continue to face vis-a-vis their full and meaningful participation in political and other national processes. The 2003 UN Commission on the Status of Women report on post-conflict peace building made a number of recommendations, including the need to ensure “gender balance in the composition of ... delegations in [peace] negotiations ... [and] adherence to gender balance in appointments to senior government administration and judiciary positions.” Women’s meaningful participation in every stage of the process is crucial for reconstruction and reconciliation efforts to succeed.

This essay examines some of the changes to women’s voices, leadership roles and presence in decision-making that have taken place in Afghanistan over the past two decades. To do so, it attempts to answer two questions: a) what are the enabling factors that amplify women’s voices, leadership roles and access to decision-making in Afghan political processes?; and b) what do we know about whether and how women’s voices, leadership roles and presence in decision-making roles within these processes indeed result in greater gender equality for Afghan women? To answer these questions, this study explores the role played by international actors in this regard and identifies lessons learnt.

1. Shabnam Nasimi is the Executive Director of Conservative Friends of Afghanistan, UK.

Overview

Contemporary Afghanistan is a useful case study for examining the growing demand for women's rights within a tribal, Islamic and modernising framework. Since 2001, women in Afghanistan have gained a share in political activities and political participation. For instance, Afghan women have taken part in creating legislation and in enforcing the rule of law. According to International IDEA, in 2018, 67 of the 248 members of the lower house of the Afghan parliament were women.² More women have access to health services, and laws have been promulgated to protect and promote women's rights.

But these hard-won gains are being steadily undermined by rising insecurity and persisting gender inequality. Over the past four decades, women and girls' interests in Afghanistan have been shaped by and have been at the mercy of the shifting dynamics of violent conflict. While indeed the progresses made in the post-2001 period is undeniable, these gains are under threat amid efforts by the Afghan government and the international community to engage the Taliban for a negotiated settlement to the conflict. There are legitimate concerns that gains made so far vis-à-vis women's rights in Afghanistan might be at a risk of dilution as a trade-off for an end to the conflict.

Existing Challenges Faced by Afghan Women

There are certain ground realities that must be factored in, while developing strategies to ensure women's meaningful participation in peacebuilding.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing Afghan women is making themselves heard. Afghanistan's 2004 constitution stipulates that 25% of the members of parliament must be female. In 2013, the Afghan parliament quietly passed an amendment which reduced this to 20% for provincial councils. Women are also often ignored in key decision-making areas. In 2014, only four of the 25 cabinet ministers were women. Women comprise only nine of the 70-member High Peace Council, the institution tasked with negotiating with the Taliban, and have complained of being side-lined in major negotiation decisions. In 2015, a female judge was introduced as

2. "Gender Quotas Database | Country Data." Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/country-view/44/35>

a Supreme Court High Council Member for the first time in Afghanistan's history; but while this is an important milestone, there is still a long way to go before substantial gender parity is achieved throughout the judiciary.³

The current Afghan constitution guarantees women's equality before the law, the right to education and the right to work.⁴ However, laws introduced to protect women and their rights have come under attack over the years. In 2009, the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) law was enacted, criminalising several harmful traditional practices such as child marriage, forced marriage, beating and rape. In 2013, the Parliamentary Commission on Women's Affairs, civil society, and AIHRC brought the EVAW law to the parliament with the stated purpose of strengthening it. This process, however, resulted in many MPs rejecting some sections of the Law as "un-Islamic" and not compliant with Sharia. This debate negatively impacted what was already a weak enforcement of the Law across the country. In many instances where violence against a woman has been reported, the situation often continues to be 'resolved' by traditional practices of mediation rather than adherence to the EVAW law.

Women's rights and agency are further at risk due to rising insecurity. In a 2016 review of the annual civilian casualty figures, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) found a 37% increase in women civilian casualties in 2015, compared to 2014.⁵ In fact, on an average, over 24 women were killed or injured in conflict-related violence each week in 2015. In the preceding year's review, UNAMA interviewed 60 Afghan women whose civilian husbands had been killed or seriously injured in conflict-related violence. They found that "women who were left as sole income-providers for their households after the death or injury of their husbands experienced long-lasting social and economic consequences, with poverty forcing many women to give their daughters in marriage in exchange for debts or to take their children out of school often to work. Widowed women were often particularly vulnerable to other forms of violence and abuse from family and community members."⁶

3. Fitri, Khawaja Basir. "1st woman judge nominated to SC high council." Pajhokw Afghan News, June 18, 2015. <https://www.pajhokw.com/en/2015/06/18/1st-woman-judge-nominated-sc-high-council>

4. The Constitution of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Article 25.

5. "Afghanistan Annual Report 2015, Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict." UNAMA, February, 2016. https://www.baag.org.uk/sites/www.baag.org.uk/files/resources/attachments/unama-protection-of-civilians-annual-report-2015-final_0.pdf

6. Ibid

Another obstacle Afghan women and girls face is their restricted role in society. Afghan girls face many challenges to completing their education, including early or forced marriage, shortage of female teachers, prohibitive education costs etc. The grim security situation also prevents many parents from sending their daughters to school. For some Afghan women, restrictions begin at home, where they have no say in decisions affecting their lives or their family's needs. Others struggle against social and cultural norms that hinder their movement and activities outside their homes. Very few women enjoy the financial, social and psychological benefits of meaningful employment. This is problematic not only for Afghan women but also for the economic development of the entire country.

Afghan Women at the Negotiating Table: Opportunities and Challenges

Democracy can only be ensured through full participation of women in the political process, especially in a country where women comprise at least 48% percent of the population.⁷ As a recent panel discussion held by the Conservative Friends of Afghanistan on 16 July 2020 showed, Afghan women's rights activists and international NGOs legitimately fear that women could be excluded from the peace process, and that women's rights might be traded away, and in turn be undermined by the decisions of the new government.

A recent study by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute showed that women's inclusion and meaningful participation in peace processes is central to ensure a gender perspective in peace processes.⁸ Women's inclusion in a peace process is not necessarily limited to direct representation at the negotiating table alone. There are a variety of layers, levels and modes of participation in peace processes that can help increase women's inclusion. As the SIPRI report articulated, "[t]hese range from direct representation, consultative mechanisms, commissions and high-level problem-solving workshops, to public decision-making and mass action." Furthermore, a peace process is more likely to be successful and

7. "Afghanistan Demographics." Worldometer. <https://www.worldometers.info/demographics/afghanistan-demographics/>

8. Cobar, José Alvarado, Bjertén-Günther, Emma, and Jung, Yeonju. "ASSESSING GENDER PERSPECTIVES IN PEACE PROCESSES WITH APPLICATION TO THE CASES OF COLOMBIA AND MINDANAO." SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security, November 2018. <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/sipriinsight1806.pdf>

lasting when a combination of modes of inclusion are introduced throughout the process.

This is in line with another study published in the *International Interactions* journal, which demonstrated that collaboration between female delegates and women civil society groups contributes to higher implementation rates of agreement provisions.⁹ Those linkages are seen in many cases, such as in Papua New Guinea, UK/Northern Ireland, El Salvador and Guatemala. This outcome has special implications for Afghanistan given how Afghan women in the post-Taliban period have engendered active collaboration among women civil society groups.

Prior to the ongoing Intra-Afghan Negotiations, women in Afghanistan had been represented in peace talks between the government and various armed groups in different ways. For example, in 2010, the High Peace Council, comprised of nine women (out of a total of 70 members) including two on the Executive Board, created broader communication networks with women's groups, civil society, gender focal points and girl's schools around the country.¹⁰

Provincial peace councils and the Afghan Women's Network (AWN)—a network of over 125 organizations—have also served as consultation mechanisms to lead local peacebuilding efforts, raise public support for the process, and to broker deals for the reintegration of former combatants.¹¹ A recent example was in early 2019, where the AWN gathered opinions from a broader constituency in a document titled *Afghan Women Six Point Agenda for Moscow Peace Talks*, thereby bringing together women from urban and rural areas of Afghanistan as well as the diaspora.¹²

That said, in the journey up to 2019, gains made for women's rights had not translated into opportunities for women to participate in the peace

9. Krause, Jana. Krause, Werner, and Bränfors, Piia. "Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations and the Durability of Peace." *Journal: International Interactions*, August 10, 2018. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03050629.2018.1492386>
10. "Gender Brochure." High Peace Council of Afghanistan. http://hpc.org.af/english/images/Media/PdfFiles/HPC_Gender_Brochure_English.pdf

11. "Recommendations on Afghanistan's Reconciliation, Reintegration, and Transition Processes." The Institute of Inclusive Security & Afghan Women's Network. http://awn-af.net/editor/uploads/files/2090_recommendations_on_afghanistan_s_reconciliation_reintegration_and_transition_processes.pdf

12. "Afghan Women Six Point Agenda for Moscow Peace Talks." Afghan Women's Network, February 04, 2019. http://awn-af.net/index.php/cms/press_detail/1500/12

process.¹³ For example, in the 23 rounds of talks between 2005 and 2014, women were present at the table only two occasions:¹⁴ the 2010 talks in the Maldives (comprising 9% of the delegates),¹⁵ and the 2011-2012 talks in France (comprising 10% of the delegates).¹⁶ When officials from over 25 countries gathered for the Kabul Process in February 2018, an Afghan-led peace conference, women remained underrepresented.¹⁷ Given that a combination of different modes of participation is a positive factor for the quality of peace, inadequate representation of women in the formal peace process could undermine any effort to achieve sustainable peace in the Afghan context.

The exclusion of women in the peace processes has serious repercussions for women's rights in the post-conflict/settlement period. This risk is especially high in Afghanistan's case because women's rights are often at risk already. Shortcomings in women's inclusion, representation and meaningful participation in the peace process will therefore run the risk of reinforcing gender inequality and injustice. Including women at the negotiating table and during consultations beyond the formal talks is a necessary step towards lasting and legitimate peace in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

At present, efforts aimed at achieving peace in Afghanistan are largely dominated by men, but women have been making inroads in this regard. In fact, women's roles have been changing steadily, as underscored by their aspirations for greater participation in the public space and their growing visibility in a largely restrictive society. However, women's greater access

13. Chonghaile, Clár Ní. "Taliban peace talks a threat to women's rights in Afghanistan, Oxfam warns." *The Guardian*, November 24, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/nov/24/taliban-peace-talks-a-threat-to-womens-rights-in-afghanistan-oxfam-warns>

14. "Afghan women frozen out of peace talks, in danger of losing gains made since fall of the Taliban." Oxfam International, November 24, 2014. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/afghan-women-frozen-out-peace-talks-danger-losing-gains-made-fall-taliban>

15. "Afghan peace talks in a holidaymakers' paradise." *BBC News*, November 23, 2010. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11811285>

16. "Behind Closed Doors." Oxfam Briefing Paper, November 24, 2014. https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/bp200-behind-doors-afghan-women-rights-241114-en.pdf

17. "Afghan women frozen out of peace talks, in danger of losing gains made since fall of the Taliban." Oxfam International, November 24, 2014. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/afghan-women-frozen-out-peace-talks-danger-losing-gains-made-fall-taliban>

to decision-making roles within parliament has had a limited impact on gender equality. Informal norms still determine the outcome of formal processes, and it is largely men who control these processes. When women control them, they tend to be individual women with their own political ambitions, which generally overrides any concern to promote gender equality.

Policy Recommendations

- Ensure that women's rights are prioritised at future donor and Senior Officials Meetings on Afghanistan, including violence against women, women's participation in the police forces, and women's participation in all levels of peacebuilding efforts.
- Provide accessible long-term funding for Afghan civil society, especially those with proven experience and expertise on working for women's rights, agency, inclusion etc.
- While the inclusion of men is essential to any effort to address patriarchy and reshape norms, values, roles, and expectations, it is necessary to overcome the current constraints through the creative use of technology that enables women to engage more. Simple efforts, such as creating and fostering online and offline community groups to work in the peace-making and peacebuilding sphere may be effective as first steps. Such communities can be created through moderated groups on Facebook and other social media platforms; and via facilitated discussions on women in peace-making and peacebuilding in traditional and non-traditional spaces where women actively gather.
- Afghan media should project positive and encouraging images of credible women leaders, not only by developing profiles of women leaders in politics, business, and civil society but also by embodying their value in media programs, such as by increasing the role of women in serious political analysis programs.
- Active sourcing and presenting of women's perspectives in televised and other media-based discussions related to both violent extremism

and peace-making should be encouraged. Within this content development and engagement effort, it is important to factor in women who are caught on the violent extremist side or who live in areas restricted by violent extremist groups. The idea of creating formal and informal opportunities for women on the countering violent extremism side to engage with women associated with violent extremist actors could help enlarge this space. This effort could take the shape of non-media events involving women of public stature and activists engaging women who are in the violent extremist orbit.

- Women's empowerment activities must be actively pursued in rural areas. Civil society organizations must keenly engage with religious groups and thought leaders. Relatedly, the international community needs to understand that religious thought will continue to be a more important organizing and legitimizing principle for the people of Afghanistan than UN resolutions and declarations. Such engagement must move beyond lip service and quick fixes to more sustained engagement and dialogue with men generally as well as with religious and traditional leaders.
- As the space and need for countering violent extremism activism grows, attention should be paid to enhancing the visibility of leading activists in peacebuilding so as to inspire and invite imagination. Developing greater knowledge of comparative case studies in other countries, and highlighting inspirations from relevant situations where women have played influential and effective roles in steering communities away from extremism and toward peace, are essential for impact.
- It is essential to depolarize the flow of information and recognition of challenges and resolutions from the current urban versus rural setting to a more interactive engagement between the two spheres. This will require bridging the urban-rural gap and initiating engagement in urban settings for activists from rural areas while also encouraging urban activists to reach out directly to rural Afghanistan.

Book Review: Hanging by a Thread: Afghan Women's Rights & Security Threats

Husna Jalal¹

Title: Hanging by a Thread: Afghan Women's Rights & Security Threats

Authors: Dr. Masouda Jalal and Dr. Mario Silva

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Hanging by a Thread by Dr. Masouda Jalal and Dr. Mario Silva shares perspectives and lays bare the pressing security and civil liberties issues that Afghan women face as the country attempts an ambitious transition to sustainable peace.

The first part of the book discusses the history of women's struggle in Afghanistan before and after the fall of the Taliban, covering human rights challenges and the need to engender enduring peace with the full participation of Afghan women. It illustrates how the fates and lives of the women of Afghanistan are hanging by a thread, and how the country itself is at a critical juncture in its history. Yet, even as the country has gradually begun to move forward, Afghans are expected to accomplish a monumental task, unaided, i.e. putting an end to war—something that was not achieved even with a decade of massive international support.

1. Husna Jalal is the Deputy Director of Jalal Foundation.

The second part of the book addresses issues of state failure and reconstruction, application of international law, application of domestic law, terrorist threats, and the US–Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement. State failure in Afghanistan has especially created several humanitarian, security, and legal challenges for the international community. During the Taliban regime, violence and criminal economic activity thrived, and terrorists benefited from the prevailing anarchy. The question of whether the international community responded effectively to deal with state failure and whether the NATO and its allies provided the Afghan National Security Forces with necessary tools to prevent future security threats is yet to be answered. The conflict in Afghanistan is one of the most protracted ones in contemporary times. Substantial investment has been made and thousands of lives have been lost in the effort to end the violence. However, Afghanistan's reconstruction requires long-term investment and commitment by Afghanistan and its willing partners.

The current situation in Afghanistan, which continues to be a source of great concern, presents a multitude of challenges for the new administration as well as the international community. Afghan women know that democracy and Talibanism cannot go hand in hand because the two phenomena are the antithesis of each other. Democracy is based on rule of law, human rights, peaceful coexistence, the protection of human life and dignity, and people's participation. Conversely, Talibanism is based on despotism, repression, tyranny, and the glorification of violence. Democracy can only thrive where peace is present, whereas Talibanism can only thrive where violence reigns. Thus, to assume that the Taliban will embrace peace is would be a major blunder. Furthermore, to hope that the Taliban will make peace under democratic terms while ignoring their ideological makeup would be another folly. Expecting Afghanistan to make peace with the Taliban, a group that operates in Afghanistan and has safe havens in Pakistan is akin to expecting the world to make peace with al Qaeda.

Some Afghans do not realize that the concept of peace promoted by the Taliban and al Qaeda contradicts the democratic concept of peace. Today Afghan women face the nightmare of a resurgent Taliban regime. Afghan women are bewildered by the sudden obsession among elected leaders in

favor of negotiating peace with the Taliban using a two-pronged strategy involving paying off the 'moderate' Taliban to return to mainstream life, and offering political concessions to the 'hard core' ones. Every Afghan woman knows that there is no such thing as a moderate Taliban.

Life experiences of those who became Taliban members have been as uniquely edifying and compelling as the experiences that have made the rest of the Afghan people seek peace and democracy. Nothing can genuinely convince a Talib that terrorism is unacceptable, and that democracy is good for everyone. To make peace with the Taliban is to allow them to erode the very foundations of democracy.

Afghans believe that a peace process should be pursued from a position of strength. Today it appears that the Afghan government has been granting concessions to the Taliban without receiving anything in return. If the Taliban are committed to achieving peace, they should be asked to immediately halt all armed hostilities. Afghans need peace to make peace. Every concession that the government gives to the Taliban should be reciprocated with an equivalent act of peace.

Hanging by a Thread is a very good socio-political study of women's situation in Afghanistan. It not only outlines the causes and effects of the appalling situation of Afghan women but also sheds light on governmental efforts and failures. It is a groundbreaking book as far as realities experienced by Afghan women are concerned. Importantly, it succinctly articulates the ways in which Afghan women's rights are violated. That being said, understandably, it does not cover every aspect of society. Some matters—such as the rights and the plight of Afghan women—are highlighted more, and some others—such as how to deal with the Taliban—are not included. However, this does not render this book entirely imbalanced or unhelpful.

Yet the Taliban are a reality in Afghanistan and ousting them from the country alone is not the solution. An inclusive and prosperous Afghanistan needs to be built, one where no section of the society is left behind, and in this regard, there cannot be a one-sided solution.

Peer Reviewers

Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahim is a Lecturer in International Relations at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. Dr. Ibrahim holds a degree in politics and international relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science, and a PhD from the Australian National University. He has published extensively on Afghanistan's politics, history and security dynamics. He is the author of *The Hazaras and the Afghan State: Rebellion, Exclusion and Struggle for Recognition* (London: Hurst & Co. 2017), and the co-author (with Professor William Maley) of *Afghanistan: Politics and Economics in a Globalising State* (London: Routledge, 2020).

Abbas Farasoo is a Ph.D. candidate at Deakin University. He holds an undergraduate degree in journalism from Kabul University, Afghanistan, and postgraduate degree in peace and conflict studies from Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Japan. Mr. Farasoo's research examines the impacts of proxy war on the dynamics of civil war. Previously, he served as the Chargé d'Affaires and Deputy Ambassador at embassy of Afghanistan in Australia (2014–2017) and as the Deputy Director-General for Regional Cooperation in Afghanistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2013–2014). He taught at Gawharshad Institute of Higher Education (2013–2014) and at Afghanistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Institute of Diplomacy (2013–2014). He is a frequent contributor to various newspapers on socio-political affairs.

Editorial

Editors

Mariam Safi is the Founder and Director of the Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies, Afghanistan. As a researcher and field trainer, she has contributed extensively to the field of peace-building, peace processes, rule of law, countering violent extremism, and human security. She is also the Co-Director of the Afghanistan Mechanism for Inclusive Peace (AMIP). AMIP was launched in September 2020 and is an open, accessible, Afghan-driven mechanism that will provide a structured, neutral and non-partisan way for the Afghan public to play an active and central role in building a significantly more inclusive peace process and peace. Since becoming an active member of the think-tank community in Afghanistan in 2010, she has led various in-depth research projects that have provided the first baseline data on some of these topics. She has authored numerous chapters in books, journals, policy briefs and articles, and has been quoted in various national and international platforms. She is a Senior Member, Afghan Policy Group; Member, Board of Directors, Afghanistan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industries; Columnist, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, India; Senior Fellow, Institute of National Security Studies, Sri Lanka; Afghan Counterpart, Afghanistan-Pakistan Women's Forum for Peace; and a Peace-building Expert, Peace Direct, UK. Her contribution to the field was recognized by the Diplomatic Courier, which listed her as one of the 100 Top Global Women in 2014. She has also been a Beyond Borders Women in Conflict 1325 Fellow.

Aziz Koshan is a Senior Research Officer at DROPS. Previously, he worked as a Research Consultant with the International Development Law Organization

(IDLO), and as the lead researcher of sadroz.af at Impassion Afghanistan. Prior to this, he worked as a Research Assistant at the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU). He holds a postgraduate degree in conflict analysis and peacebuilding from the Jamia Millia Islamia, India.

Copy Editor

Rajeshwari Krishnamurthy is the Deputy Director at the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), New Delhi. Her research focuses on issues in foreign policy and international security, such as armed conflict, peace processes, rule of law, political stability, geopolitics and grand strategy in South Asia, and where relevant, Central and West Asia. Concurrently, she works on the interpretation and implementation of UNSC Resolutions 1325 and 2250 in the South Asian context. At IPCS, she also coordinates the Centre for Internal and Regional Security (IReS). She also an Advisory Board Member at the Women & Peace Studies Organization-Afghanistan (formerly RIWPS). She has been a Visiting Fellow at the Henry L. Stimson Center, Washington, DC; and a Beyond Borders Women in Conflict 1325 Fellow.

Authors

Anisgul Khadimi is a Programs officer in the Strategic Development and Communication Unit at Kateb University. Prior to this, she worked as an Audit Officer at Advanced Accounting LLC. She has also worked as an Admin Assistant at KaPul Group of Companies. She holds a postgraduate degree in economic governance and development from the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

Khushgul Sultani is a Junior Research Fellow at Assess Transform Reach (ATR) Consulting in Afghanistan. Previously, she worked as a Program and Business Development Officer at Asra Consulting. She holds an undergraduate degree in business administration from the AUAF and is currently nominated for the Fulbright scholarship cohort of 2021–2022.

Hanifa Yari is a Junior Project Assistant at the ATR Consulting in Afghanistan. Prior to this, she interned at Afghanistan's Ministry of Finance, and at the Porsesh Research and Studies Organization (PRSO). She holds an undergraduate degree in economics from the AUCA. She has also collaborated on a PRSO research study, titled Leishmaniasis Outbreak in Kabul: Case Study of 13 District — 2017.

Nadia Qasimi is a Member of the Afghan Women Welfare and Development Association. Previously, she taught English as a Second Language (ESL) at the Star Educational Society. She is currently pursuing an undergraduate degree in business administration at the AUAF. She is also an award-winning athlete.

Masooma Ibrahim is the Founder of Arastoo Film. Ms. Ibrahim has over a decade of experience in the media, and holds a degree in management from

Azad University, Kabul. She was also trained in filmmaking and leadership in Afghanistan, Ireland, and the US. Among other roles, Ms. Ibrahimy was a script writer for Roya TV Series and Golden Hill Radio Drama (815 episodes). She has also directed and produced one long documentary and two short films on women. Her films have been screened at several national and international film festivals have received awards. Recently Masooma directed and produced a feature film by name “Kabul Girls”. Since 2017, Ms. Ibrahimy has been a Board Member of AWCCI.

Sanaa Talwasa is a Legislative Drafting Officer for Family Law in the Department of Civil Law at the Ministry of Justice, Afghanistan. Previously, she worked as an Assistant Lecturer at the Faculty of Law & Sharia at Herat University. Ms. Talwasa holds a postgraduate degree from the Emory University Law School, the US.

Batol Hashimi is the Founder and CEO of the Organization for Rehabilitation and Optimal Development (OROD) and an Adjunct Instructor of Biology Lab at the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF). Prior to this she worked as an HMIS Assistant at the BARAN Bu Ali Rehabilitation Aid Network (BARAN). Previously, she has worked as a Project Consultant at the Afghan Women News Agency Organization (AWANAO). She holds an undergraduate degree in business administration from the AUAF and an undergraduate degree in medical science from the Kabul University of Medical Science.

Mina Nowrozi holds an undergraduate degree in international and comparative politics from the American University of Central Asia (AUCA). She is also the co-author of a research report on the Sikh and Hindu communities in Afghanistan, which was published by Global Voices in 2017.

Fatema Hosseini is a News Reporter with Kabul Now Online newspaper. She has written extensively on social and political issues in Afghanistan. She holds an undergraduate degree in liberal arts from the Asian University for Women, Bangladesh.

Shabnam Nasimi is the Executive Director of the Conservative Friends of Afghanistan, UK. Previously, she worked as a Director of the Afghanistan and

Central Asian Association. She holds a postgraduate degree in international security and global governance from the Birkbeck University, UK, and an undergraduate degree in law from the University of Law, United Kingdom.

Husna Jalal is the Deputy Director of the Jalal Foundation. She has worked extensively on conducting capacity building trainings, workshops, and seminars for women and the youth. In her capacity as a Trainer and a Youth Leader at the Afghan Women Empowerment and Capacity Building Center, she implemented various capacity building projects. Ms. Jalal has also been a vocal speaker on, and an activist for, ending violence against women. Since 2016, Ms. Jalal has been involved in the regional One Billion Rising (OBR) Campaign for Ending Violence Against Women in Afghanistan. As an Indian Council for Cultural Relations scholar, Ms. Jalal earned her undergraduate degree in political science and sociology from Jamia Millia Islamia University, India.