



Women's Role in Afghanistan's Future

Taking Stock of Achievements and Continued Challenges

Women's rights, development, and participation in society have been at the forefront of international involvement in Afghanistan since 2001. The Government of Afghanistan has made a series of critical commitments to women, and many international actors have made women's issues central to the objectives of their aid commitments to Afghanistan. In some sectors, these commitments have been translated into demonstrable progress for women; this progress can be unpacked and learned from, and considered for expansion, cross-sectoral learning, and replication. In other sectors, advancement is less visible and requires reexamination and a refocusing of effort to address obstacles to progress for women.

For Afghanistan, the inclusion of women and the improvement of women's development indicators are critical to the country's overall well-being. The main message of The World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality

and Development (WDR) is that gender equality matters for development, because it is a core development objective in its own right, but also because gender equality is smart economics – gender equality can raise productivity and is a long-term driver of competitiveness and equity, a benefit that is critical in the midst of Afghanistan's transition. Economies with greater gender equality face fewer demographic stresses, providing an advantage over those that delay action.

In 2013, the World Bank prepared the report, entitled *Women's Role in Afghanistan's Future: Taking Stock of Achievements and Continued Challenges*, which was a follow-up to the *Country Gender Assessment of 2005*. The objective of this report is to assess progress in addressing gender issues across sectors and identify critical areas where gaps or obstacles to gender-responsive actions still hamper growth, poverty reduction, and human well-being. A wider objective is to highlight, both



to the Government of Afghanistan and to donors, key challenges to sustaining gender achievements in view of potential institutional and policy changes and expected aid reduction. The report also provides guidance on any gender-related activities or areas that may be critical to consider supporting, whether in the form of analytical work or technical assistance.

What can be seen from the findings of this report is that, in sectors where concerted and coordinated efforts have been made among a collection of key actors, significant

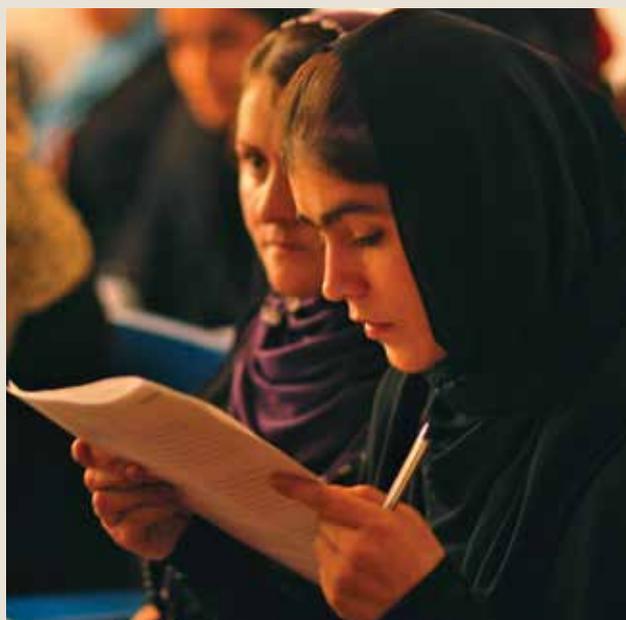
improvements have been achieved. Where well-planned systems have been designed, and consensus has been garnered for the support of these systems, services are indeed reaching more women and girls, and communities are becoming more accepting of these services also targeting women (most notably in health, education, and political voice). The report also highlights areas in which significant improvement has been lacking, and a systematic approach to addressing some issues is still missing. This is most pronounced in the justice sector, but can also be seen concerning women's employment.

Methodological Approach

This study has relied on national databases and quantitative surveys (where they exist), qualitative and perception-based surveys, program evaluations, and a set of qualitative research conducted in focused sites around the country. In addition, a series of key informant interviews were undertaken with actors in the Government, international community, among NGOs, and in Afghan civil society, in order to learn more about initiatives, approaches, and perspectives from programmers and implementers operating in various parts of Afghanistan. Key quantitative sources that have informed this report include the Health Management Information System (HMIS) at the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) and the Education Management Information System (EMIS) at the Ministry of Education (MoE); data tracked by the Central Statistics Organization (CSO); large surveys including the Afghanistan Mortality Survey (AMS), the Afghanistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (AMICS), and the National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA).

Preparation for the report involved comparisons among this series of available sources, with

the smaller, more qualitative research sources used to round out, corroborate, or modify what is learned from national surveys and databases. Once a draft was prepared, a workshop organized by MoWA was held in Kabul in May 2013, presenting the draft report to representatives from line ministries, and a further consultation was held with members of the donor community in June 2013. Major points from these discussions have been captured in the final version of this report.



¹ World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development. (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2011).

² Afghanistan: National Reconstruction and Poverty Reduction — the Role of Women in Afghanistan's Future (World Bank, 2005)

Work and Employment. Related to women in employment, the picture is less clear. Women tend to be employed in informal work that is often home-based, or takes place as an unremunerated contribution to the agricultural sector. They continue to be under-represented in other areas, such as in the private sector and as public servants. Qualified female professionals in social sector jobs (like health and education) have increased but are still scarce, and are a critical need for improving the delivery of social services to women. One area of success appears to be in microfinance, where women have readily participated and repayment rates are typically strong.

In order to improve women's employment opportunities, policymakers and program designers should: support agricultural value chains (or portions of value chains) where women's contribution is strongest and most valued; strengthen quotas and incentives for women to participate in the public sector and in social service delivery roles; and target key barriers to women's employment (i.e. childcare, mobility, etc.).

Legal Rights and Voice. While in the area of political voice, some space for women has been created and significant participation garnered, the area of justice remains one of the areas of greatest need. Change in women's access to justice is very difficult to measure, but it is clear that violence against women is widespread. Crimes against women are under-reported due to social stigma, and crimes which are reported are most often handled through local informal dispute resolution mechanisms, largely applying customary laws. Though some positive formal legal reforms have been adopted, their application is inconsistent at best. Women are severely underrepresented as professionals in the legal system, making access to justice even more difficult for female victims.



Much is needed to address issues of violence and access to justice: in the near term, more support is needed for providers of legal aid and emergency response for victims, and the reach of these agencies must expand. However, these are short-term solutions; in the long-term, thorough education on legal protections for women for all those involved in the legal process (including local justice bodies and police), as well as a more reliable and accessible judiciary, are critical. In addition, better data and qualitative information is sorely needed in this sector.

On the issue of women's public voice, women have been participating in the political process at unprecedented rates, both by turning out

for voting, and by running as candidates in presidential, parliamentary, and provincial elections. Women's participation in unofficial local governance and development bodies has also increased. However, evidence from recent elections and other studies demonstrates that their gains are restricted due to threats of violence and other barriers, including the apparent misapplication of quota systems.

Elections-related provisions for women (both voters and candidates) require review and strengthening, and women's meaningful participation in community-based leadership must be continually improved and strengthened.

Cross-cutting Challenges

While specific issues can be identified as critical within each of the above sectors, what is also notable is that some issues cut across all sectors as prevailing barriers for women. One of these consistent themes is that the lack of female professionals in key areas (namely in health, education, and justice) poses a barrier to other women and girls accessing these services. When a woman is able to access a public service from another qualified woman, she is more likely to be candid about her problems, access services more consistently, receive more detailed information relevant to her situation, and gain more community and family support to access that service. A lack of professional women has a negative downstream effect on other women.

Another cross-cutting impediment for women is insecurity, or the perception of insecurity. The NRVA 2007/08 looked at the linkage between service delivery and security, concluding that good security overall proved to be a significant predictor of children's

educational and health outcomes, positively correlated to literacy rates, school enrollment, and provision of vital health services, and that the opportunity cost for girls increases disproportionately with conflict, leading households to invest relatively more in boys/men. From girls dropping out of school on account of not being allowed to walk, to female political candidates receiving threats to remove themselves from political races, girls and women are restricted from services, opportunities, and participation due to a climate of insecurity.

Although it has been provided a dedicated section, violence against women is also a cross-cutting issue. High levels of violence against women can generate a severe physical and psychological impact. Coupled with the accompanying social stigma, violence against women impedes women's ability to access services and pursue opportunities across sectors.

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In each sector, issues of regional inequality and disparity between rural and urban areas can be seen across key indicators. This inequality is related to remoteness, insecurity, the availability of qualified human resources, and the uneven distribution of resources, among other factors. What is clear is that some provinces are far better provided for with social services than others, and that urban areas generally provide higher levels of services and opportunities than rural

areas. These disparities can fuel instability and conflict.

Barriers such as a lack of mobility, limited transportation options, inadequate infrastructure that omits women-friendly features, and the prevalence of early marriage, tend to be repetitive cross-cutting barriers in many sectors.

³ Ibid.

Recommendations

A Political Settlement Must Advance Gains for Women. In the key interviews undertaken to prepare this report, various development, humanitarian, and advocacy actors expressed concerns about the potential for women's place in society being used as a bargaining chip in a political settlement. Strongest concerns were expressed about the education and justice systems, and the contested space they represent. A political settlement is closely linked to security, which has been highlighted above as a major deterrent to women's access and participation. However, if greater stability is gained but rights are compromised to gain it, women may not be able to benefit from a more secure environment.

Security Underpins Development and Participation for Women Across Sectors. Lack of security remains one of the key barriers to women's access to services and attainment of societal participation. Security concerns affect women's and girls' access to health and education, their mobility, their comfort in public places and in the workplace, their physical safety, their ability to participate in public life, and their psychological well-being.

Within Declining Aid, More Internal Resources Must Be Allocated to Women's Needs. Another challenge to sustaining achievements to date and expanding them further will be to secure government funding to commit to programming that benefits women. The sustainability and expansion of services developed to date is critical, and external resources are set to gradually decline at a time when programs need to be built upon and scaled up. The programs in place at the moment have not

yet reached their intended commitments, particularly to women and girls, and must continue to expand further to do so (for example, there are still education and health facilities with no female staff, still high numbers of out-of-school children, and still extensive work needed in the justice sector).

Female Human Resources are Critical for Women Across Sectors. Across sectors, a major recurring theme is the negative effect of a lack of qualified female professionals in key sectors. In health, women have a more difficult time accessing healthcare and medical information where there are no or not enough female midwives, nurses, and doctors; in education, girls are often not permitted to attend school, especially in the higher grades, if there is no female teacher to instruct them; as related to employment, women face challenges in the workplace or struggle to develop successful businesses because they must operate in an environment with few women and without a strong professional network; in the justice sector, women have difficulty reporting cases or receiving due process, without qualified women to report to and be assisted by. Further workforce planning and human resource development is critical across sectors, linking higher education systems to various other sectors for cooperative planning. Affirmative action measures are needed to recruit students into key fields from far-flung provinces, with the requirement that they must practice in their home province upon completion of their training. This is particularly critical for women. Other provisions, such as secure accommodation and competitive salary packages are also needed to incentivize professionals in resource-rich areas to serve in areas of most need. Support for increasing

educated and professionally qualified women is a particularly strategic investment, given its potential to have a positive multiplier effect across sectors.

Targeted Action is Needed to Address Geographic Inequality. Related to human resources is the uneven distribution of qualified personnel in general, and in particular of female professionals, around the country. Women are strongly represented in some sectors in Kabul and other urban areas, but are virtually absent from remote or highly insecure areas. This is a difficult cycle to break; in those regions girls are likely to have less access to education, and therefore are less likely to attain professional qualifications. It is equally challenging to incentivize professional women from other places (i.e. urban centers) to go to work in very remote or insecure areas to fill this gap. Afghanistan needs creative solutions for training female professionals from challenging areas, and strongly incentivizing professionals

from other places to go to difficult areas as well.

The Religious and Traditional Establishment is Key to Issues of Women's Participation. They are still the people which communities are most likely to look to for advice and guidance in many areas, and as such are a critical community to be engaged in these processes.

Women's Access to Justice Requires Concerted Effort, Given Slow Progress. High levels of violence against women, along with social stigma, can cause physical and psychological impact, which impedes women's ability to pursue other opportunities across sectors. This problem is critical to all sectors, and should be treated as cross-cutting issue that should be mainstreamed in program design.

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