



Coming in Under the Radar: Promoting Women’s Economic Engagement During Talks with the Taliban

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Foreword by:



H.E. Ambassador Roya Rahmani
Ambassador of Afghanistan to the United States

We are at a historic juncture in Afghan history. With a negotiated deal that could end a 40-year conflict on the horizon, Afghan citizens of all walks of life have been pondering two important questions: What is peace, and who is it for?

To answer these questions and build a shared vision, numerous countrywide consultative processes involving thousands of Afghan civilians have taken place during the past years. Throughout these processes, the Afghan people have made it clear that they embrace democracy and all that comes with it—including the protection of women's rights— as a key component to building a long-lasting and sustainable culture of peace.

This is not surprising. We know from experience that women have a critical role to play in all that goes into peacemaking, peace building and, eventually, peace management. Women make up around 50 percent of the Afghan population.

During the past 18 years, they have worked hard alongside men to rebuild the country and create a prosperous future for all. As they have taken up their rightful places

within the public sphere—in ministries and legislative chambers, businesses, schools and orchestras—women have played a critical role in building government institutions and developing the economy.

When it comes to peacemaking, our practical experience of the importance of women's participation is mirrored in current research. A 2015 study by the International Peace Institute showed that when women participate in a peace process, the likelihood of the parties reaching an agreement increases and it is 35 percent more likely to last at least 15 years . This is because women usually broaden the issues discussed, increasing the chances that a deal will address the root causes of the conflict.

As this paper notes, women's rights are often the first to be traded away in a peace process. Current negotiations between the Taliban and United States have opened the possibility for an end to the violent conflict. Whether the deal could pave the way for a durable peace will depend on whether the right policies and strategies are in place to safeguard women's continued access to educational and economic opportunities.

Introduction

In conflicts between traditionalist and modern-facing parties, history does not usually come down on the side of women's rights. Traditionalists often establish "the treatment of women" – or cultural signifiers such as Sharia or customary law, a formal role for traditional leaders, or tenants that deny women the full exercise of internationally recognized human rights – as non-negotiables. The fact that these non-negotiables have a disproportionately negative impact on women makes them easier for modernist parties to concede given women's relative lack of political power during peace negotiations. If they are not conceded outright in the peace process, the fear of backlash from the traditionalist groups is often enough of a deterrent to prevent modernist parties from pushing too far to secure or strengthen women's rights. Therefore, it is not unusual that the issue of women's rights is left unaddressed in an effort to get, or keep, traditionalist parties at the negotiation table.

On the flipside, conflicts where modern-leaning parties have the definite upper hand, formal peace processes and the recognition of rights and redistribution of resources that often accompany them, can be an enormous boon for women's rights. With new language in the constitution, new political structures, quotas for women's representation and more equitable service delivery systems, women can exercise rights that otherwise would have taken decades to legislate. Greater access to education and public services, coupled with non-discrimination in employment can jump-start entirely new roles for women that would have been unimaginable if it were not for the conflict and its subsequent resolution. In such conflicts, peace processes provide the opportunity to correct past injustices between parties, and while women may not be the primary intended beneficiaries of these changes, they nonetheless benefit from the recognition of rights and the redistribution of resources among groups. The slate is wiped clean. The country rebuilds from scratch. This "new beginning" enables women to enjoy the rights of full citizenship unencumbered by traditional gender norms that circumscribed their rights and role in the past.

What will happen to women's rights in Afghan-

istan remains an open question. In many ways, the situation exemplifies a traditionalist/modernist conflict where the conservative parties will play a major role in the peace process. To this extent the outlook for women's rights is grim. However, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's government has made it clear that it is not willing to roll back women's rights in any effort to secure peace. Likewise, given the role of international donors in supporting the peace process and any subsequent post-conflict economic development, it hardly seems likely that women's rights will be "allowed" to be traded away – at least on paper.

While the conservative parties may not be able to maintain their previous stance on women's rights knowing they will have to some extent rely on the economic assistance of international donors, they nonetheless have some powerful means to limit what might be agreed upon on paper, or keep it from coming to fruition as the economic reconstruction begins in earnest. Chief among these means is the potential for backlash. If conservative forces are to remain engaged in the peace process and whether or not they will honor any commitments made in its aftermath when US troops can no longer there to hold them accountable, negotiators for the modernist parties will have to be prepared to strike a delicate balance between ensuring women have the ability to exercise their rights such that they can play a meaningful role in the post-conflict economy, and keeping the conservative parties at the table, by mitigating against any potential backlash.

Similarly, the backlash may not be limited to the extremist parties, but may also arise from ordinary Afghanis who might change their stance on women's economic participation when the realities of a shrinking economy and the pressure to find jobs for demobilized fighters, returning refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the estimated 400,000¹ to 600,000² youth entering the labor force each year, start to hit home.

The current economic circumstances make it unlikely that the country will be welcoming of development interventions that prioritize the economic engagement of women – especially if they are seen to come at the expense of groups upon which it is presumed that peace depends.

This is not to suggest that there is no role for donor governments or development organizations to play in preventing a potential rollback of the gains women were able to make in the post-conflict period. What it does suggest however, is that there will likely be limited space to maneuver.

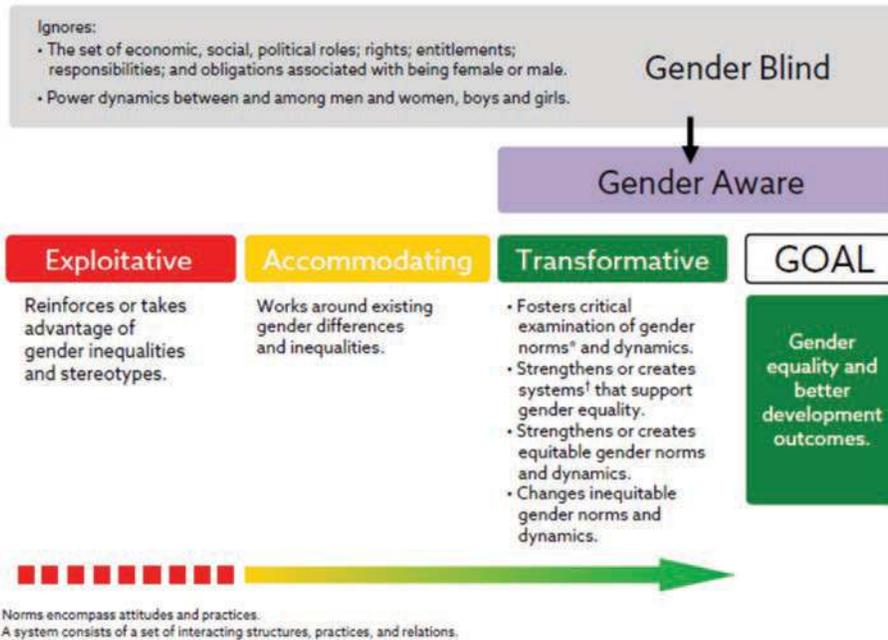
This paper un-packs why women's rights are so often the first to be traded away in peace processes or fail to be implemented in its aftermath. It explores the mechanisms that make these types of conflicts and their subsequent resolution so difficult to secure women a piece of the post-conflict economic pie. In doing so, it seeks to identify the points of intervention where change could be made that might tilt the balance in favor of women rights. After exploring some of the key dynamics at work in the current conflict in Afghanistan, it then offers some recommendations for the kind of economic policies and programming strategies that can mitigate the potential for backlash, yet at the same time sow the seeds for gender transformation.

While these approaches may appear "accommodating" at first, they are nonetheless central to positioning women in the labor market and income generating activities and have the built-in potential to allow women to overcome existing gender-based constraints and create an enabling environment for real transformation to occur. These "easy entry" approaches mitigate against the potential for backlash and can move economic programming for women in Afghanistan along the Gender Continuum from accommodating to transformative such that women will not only be able to meaningfully participate in the post-conflict economy but also so that will pave the way for women's economic empowerment to emerge organically.

1 USAID, Request for Information (RFI) on Planned Activity Titled "Market-Based Jobs for Peace (MJP)", 2019.

2 Izabela Leao, et al. Jobs from Agriculture in Afghanistan. The World Bank Group, 2018.p.23

Gender Integration Continuum



USAID's Gender Continuum: https://www.igwg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/FG_GendrIntegrContinuum.pdf

Economic Empowerment vs. Participation

Instead of the term "economic empowerment," the term "economic participation" or "integration" is used here. Integration implies that women are engaged in economic activities whether they be, as self-employed, unpaid, paid or family workers in the formal or informal sectors.

Women's economic empowerment entails that women are not only engaged in production, but also that women have decision-making power and control over production, their access and use of productive resources, their labor and time, as well as control over the returns to their labor. In agricultural settings it requires that they have the intra-household decision making power to make decisions regarding what crops are grown, how they are harvested, etc.

While it is clear women have made enormous gains in economic participation, the extent to which this participation has been able to translate into economic empowerment has not been measured and existing data suggests that women's economic empowerment is an aspirational goal that may result from their increased economic participation.

Gender, Women and Traditionalist/Modernist Conflicts

Sewall demonstrates that different conflicts and subsequent conflict management strategies have different impacts on women's human rights and state benefits available to women.³ In conflict management approaches such as Horowitz's "ethnic accommodation"⁴ or Kriesburg's "inter communal recognition"⁵ the "other side" is to be reckoned with rather than wished away. When accommodative conflict management strategies are employed the political or ideological divisions between the communal group and the state remain intact. Rather than trying to assimilate the less dominant group into the state, the key demands of the communal group are recognized or accommodated by the state in order to make, or keep, the peace. When such conflict management strategies are used, the outcomes for women are largely dependent on the degree to which the "treatment of women" is emblematic of the political assertive communal group's identity and the willingness of the state (or the dominant group) to challenge that identity.⁶

Moghadam among others notes that women become the symbol of a collective identity or cultural signifier when ethnic groups are feeling threatened or when modernization signals a threat to the status quo.⁷ In ethno-political conflicts where a "politically assertive" communal group is seeking power within the existing state, it is not uncommon for women to "constitute the actual symbolic figuration" of the collective group and serve as "signifiers of ethnic/national difference."⁸ Women become the "cultural signifiers" that serve as the ideological boundary between that group and the (usually) dominant state.

Charles and Hintjens point out that these signifiers tend to negatively impact women more than men, as communal groups seek to offer men a political benefit (e.g. more control over women) in order to gain men's allegiance to the

3 Sewall, Rebecca. Accommodating Injustice: Women and Conflict Settlement Processes. George Mason University Dissertation, 2004.

4 Horowitz, D. L. (1993). Conflict and the Incentives to Political Accommodation. Northern Ireland and the Politics of Reconciliation. D. K. M. H. Haltzel. Washington, DC, Woodrow Wilson Center Press: 173-188.

5 Kriesberg, L. (1999). Paths to Varieties of Intercommunal Reconciliation. Conflict Resolution: Dynamics, Process and Structure. H.-W. Jeong. Aldershot, Ashgate.

6 Nira Yuval-Davis. *Gender and Nation* in Ethnic and Racial Studies, Vol 16, 1993.

7 See Valentine Moghadam. Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement, 2001 and Nira Yuval-Davis. *Gender and Nation* in Ethnic and Racial Studies, Vol 16, 1993. Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis Eds. *Woman-Nation-State*, 1989. among others

8 Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis Eds. *Woman-Nation-State*, 1989.

community or political project. For example, in the Middle East and North Africa region, these cultural signifiers usually entail a retrenchment of restrictive gender norms such as the return of Sharia or customary law, restrictions on women's behavior and comportment. Women and men of the communal group are locked into these restrictive gender norms in an effort to maintain group cohesion. Women within the communal group cannot risk challenging these norms lest they be labeled a traitor or worse.⁹ In Afghanistan, the Taliban regime imposed an extremely repressive form of Islamic law which included forbidding education for girls, limiting their ability to work outside the home, and require that they leave the house only with a female relative, on its territories from 1996 to 2002.

As these cultural signifiers are often what demark the communal group from the "other" (e.g. the Taliban and other extremist forces v. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's government) they are emblematic of the group itself and are therefore usually understood to be non-negotiables in any bargaining process. Scholars Anthias and Yuval-Davis remind us that because the "treatment of women" serves as the cultural signifier of a given group, it becomes a divisive issue that is better left untouched – or at least not addressed in any significant way, lest it jeopardize the progress of the peace negotiations."¹⁰

Unfortunately, this is what often happens in traditionalist/modernist conflicts when accommodative conflict resolution mechanisms are used. Women's rights are often left off the table as the parties consider them too contentious to address. The dominant state wants to avoid sparking backlash or causing the communal group to walk out. Women's groups on both sides are told to subjugate their demand for rights to the "more pressing" demand of state building. Women advocating for their rights are told "...now is not the time...they must be patient...not now, later." However, more often than not, this "later" never comes.¹¹ Thus, women's rights are traded away in an attempt to make or secure peace.

The rationale for this is simple. For most parties, the goal is not inclusive development or



securing women's rights; the goal is to make or keep the peace. Women's rights have historically not been seen as "reason enough" to jeopardize a peace process. This is because women rarely wield significant political power such that they are seen essential to have a space at the peace table, let alone have to be offered political concessions to get them there. It is also because, in general, women do not usually make for good spoilers.

Despite the UNSC Resolutions 1325 and 1327 as well as the U.S. government's Women's Peace and Security Acts, with few exceptions, due to the dynamics mentioned above, women in entrenched traditional/modernist conflicts are generally unable pry open the space to put the issue of women's rights on the negotiating table. As a result, in traditionalist/modernist conflicts, inequalities between the conflicting communal groups are "managed" by the transfer of resources from the dominant groups to the less dominant groups. However, the failure to comprehensively address the inequalities that exist between men and women in each of the communal groups, far too often results in improved peace between communal groups, but it also can reinforce or exacerbate inequalities between men and women within the communal groups.

The State of Play in Afghanistan

That the Taliban will be a primary actor in any formal peace process is well established. Over the past year United States (US) has had over nine rounds of talks directly with the Taliban. The talks have focused mainly on the withdrawal of US/NATO troops as a precondition to the Taliban entering intra-Afghan peace talks, securing guarantees that the Taliban will not allow Afghanistan to become a safe haven terrorists groups or allow foreign troops to use the country to stage attacks, and that the Taliban enter into intra-Afghani peace talks, as well as a total ceasefire.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's government has been left out of the talks given the Taliban's refusal to negotiate with any Afghan party until the total withdrawal of foreign groups. There have however, been a number of informal meetings between the Taliban and different representatives of Afghan groups – including women's groups. The outcome of some of the meetings suggest that there may be some negotiating space on the issues of women's rights. For example, it has been reported that the Taliban no longer opposes girls going to school.¹² Last June and July, in informal intra-Afghan talks in Doha, Qatar the Taliban announced that

9 Nickie Charles and Helen Hintjens (Eds). Gender, Ethnicity and Political Ideologies, 1997.

10 Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis Eds. Woman-Nation-State, 1989.

11 Enloe, 1989:62.

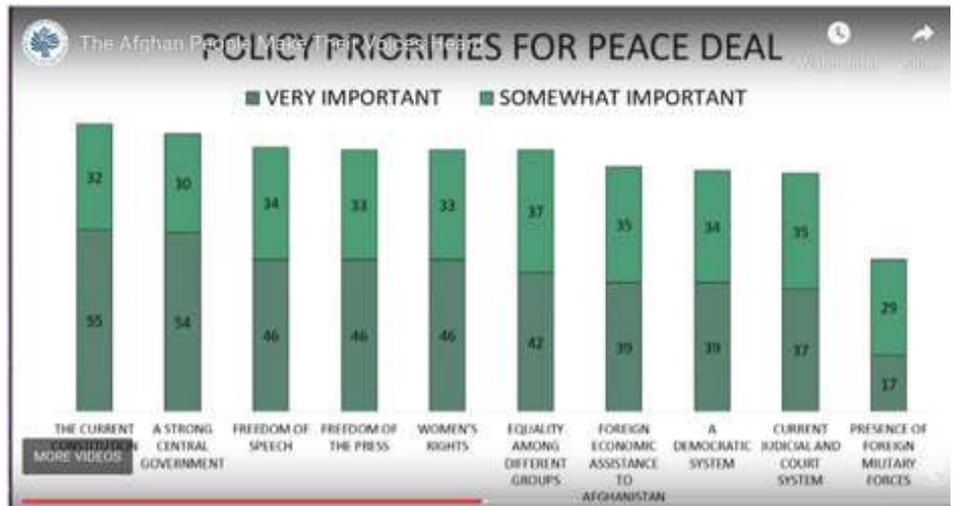
12 <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2019/09/03/afghanistan-peace-talks-taliban-women-stakes-column/2155196001/>

it would “assure that women’s rights would be upheld but “within the Islamic framework.”¹³ Afghan expert Johnny Walsh, from the US Institute for Peace notes, “Though still deeply conservative, they [the Taliban] now acknowledge women’s rights to work, own property, and be educated, among other things. In the context of a negotiation, they may concede more.”¹⁴ If other traditionalist/modernist conflicts are to serve as an example, it is also important to note that whatever the stance of the Taliban, there is nothing to prevent it from using women’s rights as a bargaining chip to secure other concessions during the peace process.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani’s government made it clear that it will not sacrifice women’s rights in order to secure a peace. Declaring that women’s rights are one of its “red line” issues that will not be negotiated, it gave birth to the social media campaign #MyRedLine where women in Afghanistan are seeking to ensure their rights are protected in the ongoing peace process. Other social media campaigns have sprung up to support women’s rights. After an informal meeting between Taliban and government officials in Moscow another social media campaign designed to raise awareness of the need to protect women’s rights in the peace process emerged entitled: #AfghanWomen-WillNotGoBack. Afghan First Lady Rula Ghani has championed the rights of women and spear headed the National Women’s Consensus for Peace, a campaign that traversed the country to gather and publicize women’s views of over 15,000 women to ensure their consideration in the peace process.¹⁵

Perhaps the most important reason to be optimistic about retaining women’s rights and their ability to function unencumbered in the post-conflict Afghan economy is that they are already playing an active role in the economy. As First Lady Rula Ghani noted, “Women are now visible in Afghanistan...That, maybe, is the most important observation I can make. They are in all spaces.” This may prove to be the most important stalwart against backsliding on women’s rights. Once the cat is out of the bag,

Chart 1. Policy Priorities for Peace Deal



(Asia Foundation)

Chart 2. Would You Vote for a President Who Will

Issue	(% WHO SAY DEFINITELY OR PROBABLY)								OVERALL
	CENTRAL/KABUL	EAST	SOUTH EAST	SOUTH WEST	WEST	NORTH EAST	CENTRAL/HIGHLANDS	NORTH WEST	
KNOW HOW TO IMPROVE THE ECONOMY.	89	85	84	87	75	86	85	79	84
FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION EVEN IF PEOPLE CLOSE TO HIM ARE INVOLVED IN CORRUPTION.	73	59	56	80	72	78	82	68	71
A PEACE AGREEMENT THAT ALLOWS THE TALIBAN TO JOIN THE ANDSF.	73	78	65	80	65	71	63	58	70
A PEACE AGREEMENT THAT ALLOWS THE TALIBAN TO JOIN THE GOVERNMENT.	68	72	66	75	56	69	58	52	65
GET A PEACE AGREEMENT WITH THE TALIBAN, EVEN IF WOMEN ARE NO LONGER ALLOWED TO GO TO SCHOOL.	23	38	27	54	35	40	31	32	34
GET A PEACE AGREEMENT WITH THE TALIBAN, EVEN IF WOMEN NO LONGER WORK OUTSIDE AFGHANISTAN.	26	38	30	55	35	38	27	28	34
GET A PEACE AGREEMENT WITH THE TALIBAN, EVEN IF THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT LOSES THE ELECTION.	24	40	27	43	38	40	33	30	33

(Asia Foundation)

13 <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2019/09/03/afghanistan-peace-talks-taliban-women-stakes-column/2155196001/>

14 <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/04/state-play-us-taliban-talks-and-afghan-peace-process>

15 <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/11/first-lady-rula-ghani-afghan-womens-consensus>

it is hard to put it back in. As the Asia Foundation's report, *A Survey of the Afghan People 2019*, notes:

According to the Afghanistan Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industries, investments by women now reach more than USD 77 million and provide jobs for 77,000 individuals nationwide. Women make up 27% of the national parliament and are politically active at lower levels as well, with one of Afghanistan's first female mayors entering office this year in Wardak, a traditionally conservative province.¹⁶

Another factor that is likely to bode well for preserving women's rights and economic participation in the post-conflict economy is the certainty of a high level of foreign involvement. Given the dismal state of the economy, it is likely that any post-conflict reconstruction will be largely funded from international donors. To that end, the US's President's Envoy to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad made clear that "...the U.S. would be forceful in standing up for and promoting its values in talks with the Taliban: "We will speak loudly and clearly for the values that we have—the values of human rights, values of freedom of the press [and] women's right."¹⁷ Likewise, Afghan Expert Johnny Walsh commented, "An Afghanistan that trades away democracy and basic freedoms—especially for women—is not one that the vital donors in the U.S. and Europe will bankroll."¹⁸

As the much-anticipated Asia Foundations' *A Survey of the Afghan People 2019* report was released, there was also cause for optimism that the rights of women would be maintained. The *Survey* asked "It is likely that to reach as successful peace agreement, all sides will have to make difficult compromises. How important would you say the following things are to protect as part of a peace agreement? Seventy-nine percent of people surveyed maintained that women's rights were somewhat important or very important. When asked, "Would you vote for a president who will get a peace agreement

with the Taliban even if women are no longer allowed to attend school" only 34 percent of those surveyed responded positively.

Likewise, 2019 marked a record high (out of the Survey's 13 years) of Afghans who support women working outside the home. In 2018, 70% of Afghans supported women working outside the home, while in 2019, that percentage was 76%. Similarly, the percentage of males who approve of women working outside the home increase eight points from 60% in 2018 to 68% in 2019.

Despite these encouraging data, the *Survey* cautions, "While it is tempting to see this as a sign of growing support for women's rights, approving of women's employment may be a measure as much of economic hardship as of support for women's rights and autonomy"¹⁹ Likewise, as Ambassador Newman commented at the release of the report, "You seem to have a considerable dichotomy between the peace people want and what one might suppose the peace that would be achievable."²⁰ Clearly not all Afghans are so optimistic about the future of women's rights and economic participation. As former U.S. Ambassador for Global Women's Issues, Merlaine Verveer, cautions on taking the Taliban at its word, "We have only to look at the state of Afghan women today in areas controlled by the Taliban. Their situation is grim."²¹

While 76% of Afghans may support women working outside the home, and male approval of women working outside the home stands at 68% – this might change as the country will be under extreme pressure to create jobs for the return of demobilized Taliban and other extremist fighters, as well as returning refugees, IDPs and the anticipated 400,000²² to 600,000 new jobs that will need to be created in the next two years to absorb the number of young people into economic-generating activities at a time when the economy is shrinking.²³ The fact that these groups are those upon which it is presumed that peace depends, makes it unlikely that the country will be welcoming of development interven-

tions that prioritize the economic engagement of women – especially if they are seen to come at the expense of other groups, like those above who are deemed more "deserving."

The potential for backlash by the Taliban and other extremist groups, as well as the perceived political need to give priority for jobs or income generating programming to ex-combatants, returning refugees and IDPs, youth lest they make trouble, suggest that efforts to advance women's economic participation, let alone attempts to advance their economic



16 The Asia Foundation. *A survey of the Afghan People Afghanistan in 2019, 2019.*

17 <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/04/state-play-us-taliban-talks-and-afghan-peace-process>

18 <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/04/state-play-us-taliban-talks-and-afghan-peace-process>

19 Asia Foundation. *A Survey of the Afghan People, 2019.*

20 <https://www.usip.org/events/afghan-people-make-their-voices-heard>

21 <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2019/09/03/afghanistan-peace-talks-taliban-women-stakes-column/2155196001/>

22 USAID, Request for Information (RFI) on *Planned Activity Titled "Market-Based Jobs for Peace (MJP)"*, 2019.

23 The USAID NOFO list 400,000, the World Bank 2030 says "With 480,000-600,000 Afghans reaching working age each year."

Chart 3. Providing Government Assistance, Jobs, and Housing to Antigovernment Elements Who are Willing to Reintegrate into Society

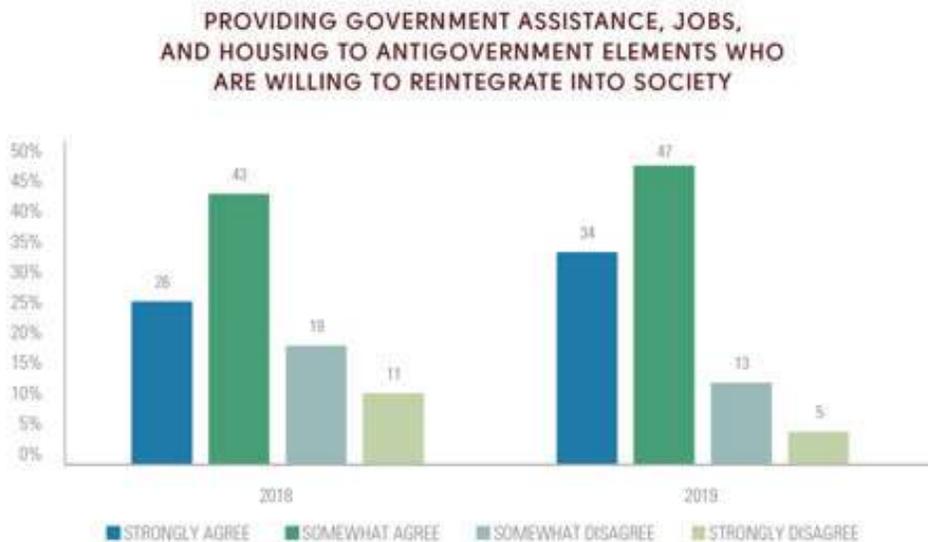


FIG. 6.15: Q-65. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree that those antigovernment elements who lay down their arms and express willingness to reintegrate into society should receive government assistance, jobs, and housing?

(Asia Foundation)

empowerment, will initially need to take a “soft entry” or what USAID terms, an “accommodative” approach. That is, such efforts will have to “work around existing gender differences and inequalities” and down-play any emphasis on “gender” or intent to advance women’s economic empowerment due to the potential of inciting backlash by conservatives or from ex-combatants, refugees and IDPs returning to the country, who will want to assert their right to the peace dividend.

However, this does not mean that development programming needs to remain “accommodating” forever. If it does, then we will have failed to make any fundamental progress in advancing women’s empowerment. Development interventions to advance women’s economic engagement can initially take a “soft entry” approach to avoid the potential for backlash and then should progressively include more transformative elements. The continuous

inclusion of more transformative elements into development interventions will help push development programming along the gender continuum so that “transformative” programming eclipses “accommodating” programming and fundamental changes can take place.

Recommendations

◆ Transform the Discourse from a Zero-Sum Game to Community Programming That Will Lift All Boats

In what is a decidedly sluggish economy, and given U.S. stabilization assistance premised on the move to a market-based economy, the country’s political and peace-building actors must find a way to satisfy the perceived needs of competing actors as they vie for state and

donor resources. With potential spoilers humming in the background, many observers worry what might happen if these distinct social groups are denied what they think is their rightful piece of the economic pie. My colleague Dean Piedmont reminds us of the dangers ex-combatants pose to any peace efforts in his excellent paper, *The Reintegration of Taliban Fighters into a Market-based Economy in Afghanistan* (2019).²⁴ Evidence that demonstrates increased conflict in communities hosting IDPs and returnees is already mounting.²⁵ Similarly, observers point out the need to step up job creation in an effort to manage “the security risks associated with Afghanistan’s upcoming youth bulge.”²⁶ It is estimated that between 400,000²⁷ and 600,000 new jobs will need to be created in the next two years to absorb the number of young people into economic-generating activities in an effort to staunch their interest in joining violent extremist groups.²⁸

Ethnic and tribal groups are pitted against each other; men pitted against women; returnees and IDPs pitted against hosting communities; and ex-combatants pitted against civilians, all in a battle to prove who is more deserving or more able to rock the boat. With the exception of agriculture, women have rarely played a significant role in the economy except for unpaid labor within the home. Therefore, any calls for women to receive their fair share of the economic pie will be a new ask — and one that will be undoubtedly seen as less deserving.

In many of these pairings, there are “embedded entitlements.” That is, some groups feel more entitled to receive the economic programming. High-ranking ex-combatants will expect to receive resources commensurate with their “earned” status.²⁹ Likewise, men are likely to see themselves as the more deserving recipients of such programming, given their role as breadwinners in the family.

24 Piedmont, Dean. *The Reintegration of Taliban Fighters into a Market-based Economy in Afghanistan*, 2019.

25 The World Bank Group. *Afghanistan to 2030 Priorities for Economic Development Under Fragility*, 2016.

26 The World Bank Group. *Afghanistan to 2030 Priorities for Economic Development Under Fragility*, 2016.

27 USAID, Request for Information (RFI) on *Planned Activity Titled “Market-Based Jobs for Peace (MJP)”*, 2019.

28 Izabela Leao, et al. *Jobs from Agriculture in Afghanistan*. The World Bank Group, 2018, p.23

29 Piedmont, Dean. *The Reintegration of Taliban Fighters into a Market-based Economy in Afghanistan*, 2019.

Chart 4. Biggest Problems Facing Women, by Gender

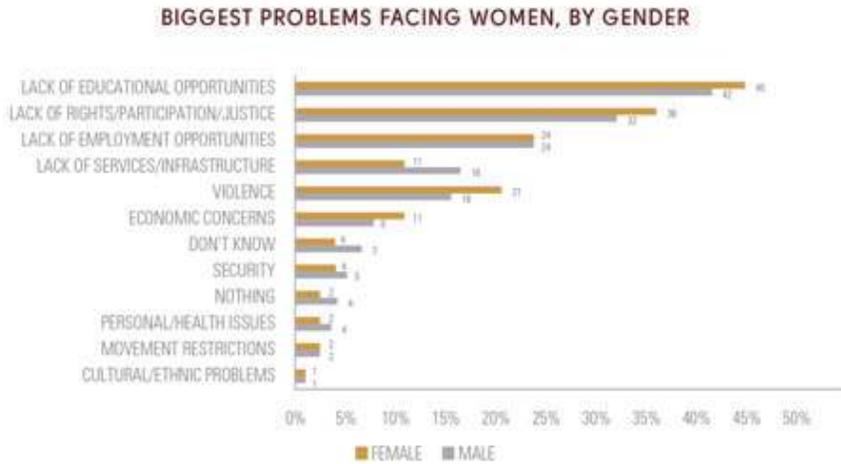


FIG. 8.25: Q-7. What, if anything, is the biggest problem facing women in this area today? What is the next-biggest problem? :

(Asia Foundation, 2019)

The Asia Foundation's 2019 *Survey of the Afghan People* shows that 81 percent of Afghans “strongly” or “somewhat” agree “that those antigovernment elements who lay down their arms and express willingness to reintegrate into society should receive government assistance, jobs, and housing?”³⁰ Thus, it is likely that the “antigovernment elements who

lay down their arms and express willingness to reintegrate into society” are most likely to receive a greater share of the government assistance, jobs and housing than women who post less of a threat to peace.

There are symbolic ways to appease these “embedded entitlements” — but directing land, skill training, job creation or resettlement packages to some groups and not others will likely exacerbate the conflict and create more artificial distortions in an economy that is already shaky. In the long run, this could end up creating inequalities among and within groups, impairing the potential of economic growth and jeopardizing the potential for peace in the long run. Echoing this dynamic, the World Bank observes, “Expanding economic opportunities may play a positive role in reducing conflict...But jobs -- on their own -- are unlikely to be unlikely to completely address conflict pressures, especially if such opportunities are unevenly distributed and exacerbate real or perceived inequities.”³¹

Meeting the expectations of all the different parties vying for economic programming, without causing backlash will be not easy if the current discourse remains framed within such zero-sum-game thinking. This is particularly

true with respect to carving out space for women’s more active role in the Afghan economy. The Asia Foundation aptly notes, “Many Afghans, including government representatives, still view progress for women as a zero-sum game, and therefore a loss for men.”³² This sentiment is echoed by Nabila Musleh, Afghanistan’s Deputy Minister of Women’s Affairs: “Women and men must benefit equally from government funding, instead of one benefitting at the cost of the other.”³³

Therefore, reframing the discourse away from a zero-sum game mentality and toward a community-based approach is one of the first steps donors and the international community can take to help women. The goal is to bring them a fair share of resources that will allow them to function meaningfully and permanently in the new economy. Also, these programs should not just benefit a few well-connected women, but all women. Economic programming must lift all boats and not just a selected few.

◆ Increase Women’s Human Capital

There is a recognition of women’s lack of education and illiteracy as a problem

Women’s marginalized position in the labor force and in the economy in general is largely a reflection of their low human capital. Their low human capital is, in turn, a reflection of traditional gender norms regarding women’s role in the country, as well as Taliban policies that prohibited girls from attending school between 1996-2001.

The Asia Foundation Survey shows that both men and women see women’s lack of educational opportunities as the greatest problem women face today. The recognition of the lack of educational opportunities as a major problem facing women, combined with relatively high popular support for girls’ education 84 percent in 2018 and 86.5 percent in 2019³⁴ suggests that focusing on getting girls in school and keeping them there will likely be a soft entry into improving women’s economic integration.

It is also relevant to note that lack of economic



30 Asia Foundation. *A Survey of the Afghan People*, 2019.

31 The World Bank Group. *Afghanistan to 2030 Priorities for Economic Development Under Fragility*, 2016.

32 The Asia Foundation. *A survey of the Afghan People Afghanistan in 2018*, 2018.

33 Nabila Musleh September 10, 2018.

34 The Asia Foundation. *A survey of the Afghan People Afghanistan in 2019*, 2019.

Chart 5. Earning Income, by Education Level (Female Respondents Only)

EARNING INCOME, BY EDUCATION LEVEL (FEMALE RESPONDENTS ONLY)

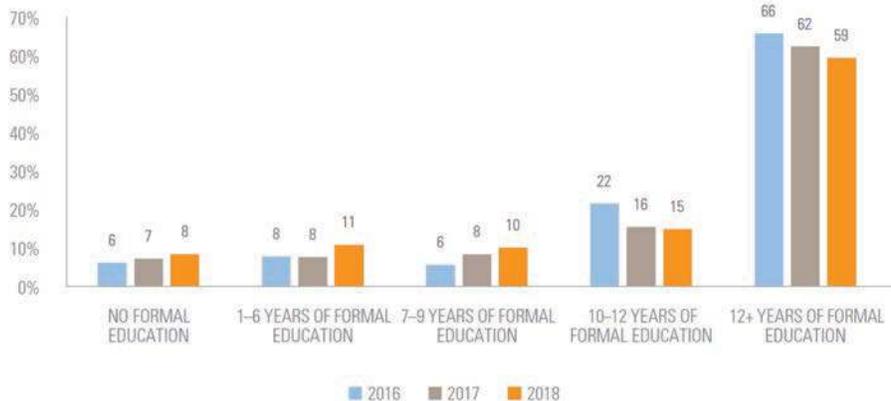


FIG. 3.8: D-3. Do you yourself do any activity that generates money? (Percent who say yes.)

(Asia Foundation, 2018)

opportunities ranks third in responses to the question of “what is the greatest problem women face today?” Likewise, it is interesting to note that the percentage of men and women who see this as a problem is the same (24 percent).

Afghanistan has one of the highest illiteracy rates in the world. It is significantly higher for women than it is for men. Only 19 percent of Afghan women are considered literate, compared with 62 percent of men.³⁵ These gender differentials are even wider in rural areas where the literacy rate for women is three times lower than it is in urban areas.³⁶ However, there have been some gains. Since schools were reopened for girls, roughly 39 percent of primary and secondary students are female³⁷ and in 2016, there were 45,000 females attending university representing 22.8% of total student population.³⁸

Women’s literacy is tied to their labor-force participation

Not surprisingly, women’s labor-force participation is closely linked with women’s literacy rates. An analysis by the World Bank demonstrates that literacy is a key driver for women to join the workforce. The labor-force participation rate (LFPR) among literate females is consistently higher than among illiterate females. Interestingly, the LFPR for men is much higher than it is for women regardless of male literacy levels. The 2013–14 data show that the labor force participation was 34 percent for literate women and about 28 percent for illiterate women.³⁹ Commenting on the difference in levels of participation, the World Bank analysis notes, “In general, literate people participate more.”⁴⁰

Women’s low levels of labor-force participation

stem from a variety of factors, and it would be hard to argue that women’s low levels of literacy are the sole cause of their low levels of labor-force participation. Traditional gender norms, power distribution within the home, the actions of the Taliban and a wide range of other cultural dynamics are all causes. However, the link between literacy and higher rates of labor-force participation of working-aged women is clear. In a review of *Lessons Learned on Operational Approaches to Women’s Economic Empowerment in Afghanistan*, the authors find, “Literacy and numeracy deficits hinder WEE. For the majority of Afghan women to benefit from WEE initiatives, literacy and numeracy education must be integrated into WEE.”⁴¹ Therefore, this paper echoes the recommendations of Leao et al. of the World Bank Group, as well as countless other organizations, in recommending “the government and policymakers should increase efforts to improve the human capital of Afghanistan’s female population.”⁴²

It is also important to note that earnings for women increase precipitously if a woman has a university degree. The table below from the 2018 Asia Foundation *Survey* shows that women who attend university are more than three times as likely to earn an income than those with 10 to 12 years of formal education.⁴³ It is mostly likely the women in urban areas where universities are located who are most likely to be active participants in the formal labor market.

Women’s literacy and foundational skills are central to the success of skill-specific and other capacity-building efforts

Another study notes that the success of capacity- and skills-building programs conducted by international development organizations has been limited by women’s lack of literacy. The study remarks, “many capacity-building interventions take basic literacy skills for granted when aiming to transmit skill-specific

35 The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. *Women’s Economic Empowerment National Priority Programme*, 2016.

36 The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. *Women’s Economic Empowerment National Priority Programme*, 2016.

37 The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. *Women’s Economic Empowerment National Priority Programme*, 2016.

38 Fred M Hayward, *Progress on gender equity in Afghan higher education*, 2017.

39 Izabela Leao, et al. *Jobs from Agriculture in Afghanistan*. The World Bank Group, 2018.

40 Izabela Leao, et al. *Jobs from Agriculture in Afghanistan*. The World Bank Group, 2018.

41 Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the World Bank Group. *Women and The Economy: Lessons Learned on Operational Approaches to Women’s Economic Empowerment in Afghanistan*, 2017.

42 Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the World Bank Group. *Women and The Economy: Lessons Learned on Operational Approaches to Women’s Economic Empowerment in Afghanistan*, 2017.

43 The Asia Foundation. *A survey of the Afghan People Afghanistan in 2018*, 2018.

training.”⁴⁴ The study “shows that again and again, capacity-building efforts do not achieve their intended skill-specific goals, because participants lack appropriate foundational knowledge.”⁴⁵ The learning outcomes of any skill- or capacity-building intervention will depend on the level of the foundational skills of the participants. It will also depend on the ability of women to use those skills. For example, training in new agricultural technology may not do a woman any good if she does not have a say in intra-household decision making such that she can decide to purchase or use these technologies without permission from her husband or another male family member.

The Afghani Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry found that more than 90% of women business owners were educated (having partially completed secondary school at a minimum). Approximately 50% of the owners had a working knowledge of English and were computer literate.⁴⁶

Keeping girls in school and providing opportunities for women to gain foundational skills are therefore critical for improving women’s integration in the labor force. Keeping girls in school also decreases the fertility rate, thus reducing demographic pressure to create new jobs in the future. It brings with it a host of other positive development outcomes, such as healthier and better-educated children and lower health costs due to the decreased complications of young women giving birth.

Women’s literacy and foundational skills are crucial for them to overcome gender-based constraints.

Use of the internet and other technologies is one of the fastest ways that women can overcome restrictions on their travel to source inputs or develop markets, find information on crops and develop market contacts. Use of the internet for these purposes requires literacy and knowledge of different technologies. In the short term, female “internet interpreters” (another job growth area for educated women) will be needed, but in the long term and as access to coverage grows, it will be vital for women who are subject to gender-based constraints that keep them within the home to have some



functional literacy that will allow them to use the internet. As there is evidence that male family members often disapprove of women’s internet usage, this will have to be done within the parameters of a do-no-harm approach.

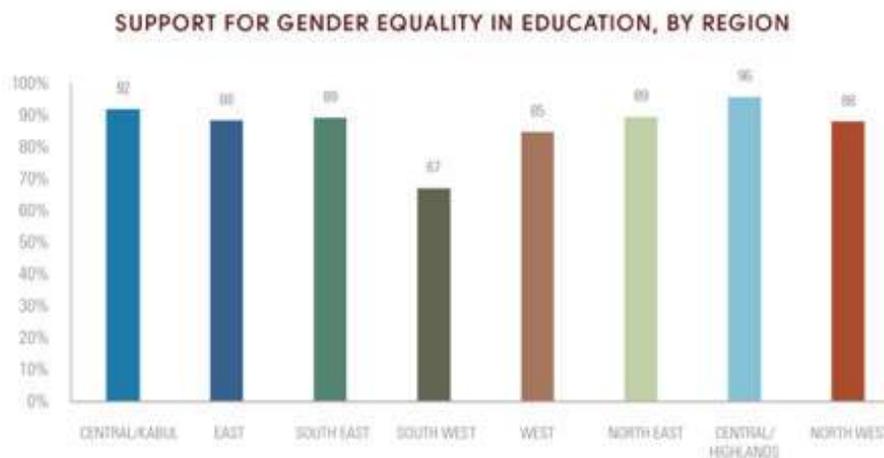
Literacy and foundational skills are also needed to process basic information — as mentioned above, capacity-building interventions for women often miss their mark because they do not start “where women are.” This does not mean that capacity-building efforts are wasted, but it does mean that development practitioners should design curriculum and training packages with the skill set of women in mind. As Nasrin Rafik comments on the need

for targeting programming to meet women’s skill needs:

One of the most significant barriers faced by women in Afghanistan especially at the rural and peri-urban areas the low level of literacy; education is key to achieving self-reliance and fighting poverty. Very early, most existing literacy classes and training programs were not adapted to the needs and capacities of poor and marginalized women. Therefore, needs to provide a wide range of literacy, technical and vocational programs designed around its members’ needs and capacities. It is also essential to train women in basic life skills (e.g. conflict resolution, bargaining and negotiating with contractors, operating specific equipment) that are relevant to the women’s skills and trades into their areas. The impacts of the literacy programs on women’s empowerment are visible.⁴⁷

Likewise, development practitioners might re-consider the type of information they are providing to women who are seeking to access the paid labor market. For example, a World Bank study found that women in traditional “female” occupations were unaware that they would make more money if they moved into

Chart 6. Support for Gender Equality in Education, by Region



(Asia Foundation, 2019)

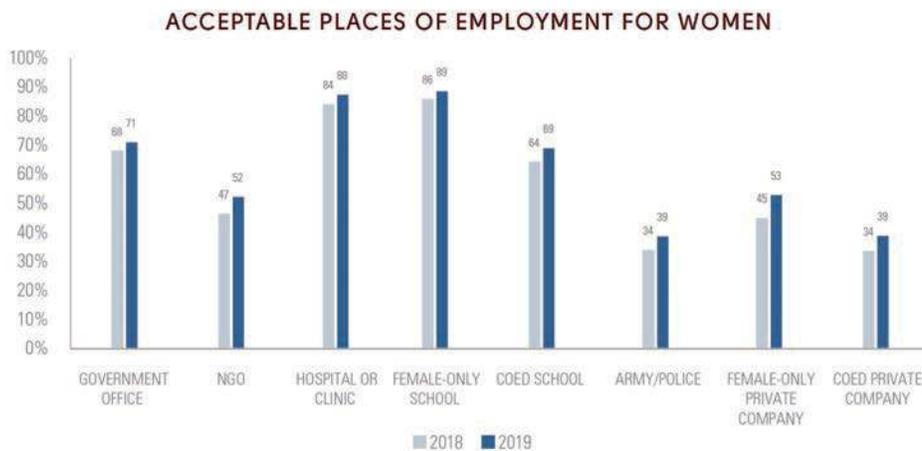
44 Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the World Bank Group. *Women and The Economy: Lessons Learned on Operational Approaches to Women’s Economic Empowerment in Afghanistan*, 2017.

45 Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the World Bank Group. *Women and The Economy: Lessons Learned on Operational Approaches to Women’s Economic Empowerment in Afghanistan*, 2017.

46 Wafeq, Manizah. *Internal Factors Affecting Growth of Women-Owned Businesses in Afghanistan*. Afghan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

47 Personal correspondence.

Chart 7. Acceptable Places of Employment for Women



(Asia Foundation, 2019)

traditional “male positions.” Most thought they would be paid the same as they earn in traditional female jobs. The study notes that “almost 80 percent of non-crossovers [women in traditional female jobs] that make less than crossovers [women in non-traditional jobs] think they make the same or more.”⁴⁸ This points to the need to provide women with basic information about the labor force and expected wages and opportunities available so they can make more informed decisions as they plan their entrance.

The data from Afghanistan show that young women are more likely to have better foundational skills than their older counterparts. They also may be more willing to test the boundaries of traditional gender norms — especially those in the urban areas. Young women thus find a market niche in serving as facilitators for older women who may not have the skills or the freedom to travel to develop markets or source inputs and new information.

It is important to remember that it is not just a question of keeping girls in school. There is a need to develop nontraditional learning centers or opportunities for women. For a soft-entry approach, these can organize around

mothers’ groups, women’s religious activities and charitable organizations, as well as other sanctioned female-only spaces. Radio and TV can also provide some men and women with basic literacy and numeracy skills in a way that will not cause backlash.

Transform the gender norms of teachers

While keeping girls in school will be essential to build their foundational skills and encourage their participation in the labor force, school can also be an important space to transform gender norms toward work and, in particular, transform the norms that keep women in a narrow range of low-paying, often vulnerable jobs. In looking for forces that encouraged women to enter more higher-paying, nontraditional, male-dominated jobs, the World Bank’s Gender Lab found that teachers had enormous influence.⁴⁹ Markus Goldstein, one of the study’s main authors, notes, “When we look at how girls decide which job, trade, or profession to pursue, we see that teachers are much, much more likely to steer girls in the direction of traditionally female jobs. That applies whether we’re talking about male or female teachers.”⁵⁰ Similarly, the authors write, “Teachers are one of the main sources of exposure to the

[traditionally ‘female’] non-crossover sectors... This suggests that the education system, as it now stands, is one of the reinforcing factors in maintaining the gender segregation of labor.”⁵¹

This also suggests that working with teachers and providing them safe space to critically reflect upon and challenge their own gender norms, or to at least ensure that their personal expectations of gender are kept out of the classroom, might go a long way to opening up the subjects girls study and eventually the sectors in which they work. These findings provide new interventions such as transforming the gender norms of the teachers themselves as well as expanding the curricula for girls that will have a positive impact on moving women into less vulnerable and higher-paying jobs.

Target interventions where support for girls’ education is highest

The Asia Foundation’s 2019 Survey finds that ethnicity is a “strong factor” in support for women’s education. Hazara respondents are the most likely to approve of girls’ education at all levels. Pashtuns are more likely this year than last to support girls’ education. However, the report notes that for all other groups the percentage of respondents from other groups remained the same or declined.⁵² There is a great deal of literature that discusses the challenges girls face in school attendance throughout the country and even in places where support for girls’ education is high⁵³ and it is a basic premise in the social sciences that it is easier to get people to do what they already agree to do than to encourage them to do something to which they do not agree. Therefore, as a practical matter, improving girls’ education in areas that already are supportive may offer programming some quick wins that will serve as examples to other regions as young women start to play a more active role in the economy.

Transform the gender norms of parents

48 Francisco Campos et al., *Breaking the Metal Ceiling Female Entrepreneurs Who Succeed in Male-Dominated Sectors*. Gender Cross Cutting Solution Area Policy Research Working Paper 7503, 2015.

49 Salman Alibhai et al., *Crossovers: Female Entrepreneurs: Who Enter Male Sectors Evidence from Ethiopia*

Gender Cross Cutting Solution Area, Finance and Markets Global Practice Group Policy Research Working Paper 8065, 2017. Center for Inclusive Growth. Expert View: *Women in Male-Dominated Markets*, 2015.

50 Center for Inclusive Growth Expert View: *Women in Male-Dominated Markets*, 2015.

51 Francisco Campos et al., *Breaking the Metal Ceiling Female Entrepreneurs Who Succeed in Male-Dominated Sectors*. Gender Cross Cutting Solution Area Policy Research Working Paper 7503, 2015.

52 The Asia Foundation. *A survey of the Afghan People Afghanistan in 2019, 2019*.

53 See for example, Human Rights Watch. *Afghanistan: Girls Struggle for an Education*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/10/17/afghanistan-girls-struggle-education>



The data above allows development practitioners to target their efforts to increase girls' access to fundamental skills in specific provinces. Interventions that promote safety and security within schools (such as having security and an enclosed fence) and secure female students particularly in rural schools, as well as programming to demonstrate the return on investment families can get by educating daughters, are important interventions that can demonstrate to parents that the costs of sending a daughter to school do not outweigh the benefits.⁵⁴ Similarly, exposure to positive female role models and efforts by donors and NGOs to de-link lack of girls' education and early marriage from serving as a cultural signifier also would go a long way to improve women's overall labor-force participation and engagement in income-generating activities.

Another way to transform gender norms within the school — eventually leading to more female-friendly schools and increased attendance at school, and thus increased labor-force participation — is through empow-

ering more women and progressive men to undertake activities such as those described above through the school-management committees as well as members of the Community Development Committees.

◆ Focus on the Sectors Where Women Are Already Active

The below chart from the Asia Foundation illustrates the rigid cultural norms that dictate what jobs are considered appropriate for women.⁵⁵ Another soft-entry “accommodative” approach would be to expand women's role in these sectors. This will be particularly relevant for women in the urban and peri-urban economy for the immediate future.

◆ Women in the Labor Market in Urban and Peri-Urban Areas

Ensure women do not get caught in the public-sector “trap” as traditional “male” and “female” jobs shift in the move to a market-based economy

Different ethnic groups people have very different ideas of what is “acceptable” work for women. According to the Asia Foundation, ethnicity and rural/urban demographics are the “strongest predictors of attitudes about certain types of employment.”⁵⁶ This is significant in that different ethnic groups could prove to be spoilers — either actively limiting women's engagement to a narrow segment of the labor force or forbidding it altogether.⁵⁷ Regardless, defining which jobs are considered acceptable or unacceptable for women will likely be contested space in post-conflict Afghanistan. Following trends that occur in other areas of the world, which jobs are dominated by women or men will likely shift as the economy becomes more market-based and competition stiffens for higher-paying jobs in the private sector. In such cases, spoiler groups often try to claim those jobs that are most rewarded on the grounds that women should not be working in environments in which both men and women are present — regardless of whether or not women work in such spaces in other sectors. Alternatively, Hall notes that barriers to private-sector employment for women are “likely to be more acute than for other areas because many of these activities are not household-related.”⁵⁸

Those jobs considered “acceptable” for women are in a narrow set of public-sector jobs that are seen as an extension of women's domestic roles as teachers and caretakers or those that do not demand interaction with men. Without efforts to transform gender norms and move women into new areas of the private-sector labor force that haven't yet been claimed as “male” or “female,” traditional sanctions against male/female interaction may provide men with the justification needed to edge women out of the higher-paying jobs in the private sector while women assume a greater share in the public sector, a phenomenon that has happened in several other countries (e.g. Egypt). With privatization of the economy looming on the horizon and the public sector shrinking, this might leave women with even fewer sources of

54 The World Bank Group. *Afghanistan to 2030 Priorities for Economic Development Under Fragility*, 2016.

55 The Asia Foundation. *A survey of the Afghan People Afghanistan in 2019*, 2019.

56 The Asia Foundation. *A survey of the Afghan People Afghanistan in 2018*, 2018.

57 Interestingly, the Asia Foundation found “Different ethnic groups have different correlates to support for women's rights. But support for women's rights does not necessarily have to the same correlates to whether a person supports a women's right to work outside the home.” Therefore, there is a difference between women's rights and approval of their working in specific occupations. The Asia Foundation. *A survey of the Afghan People Afghanistan in 2018*, 2018.

58 Hall, Samuel for JICA. *Country Gender Profile: Afghanistan Final Report*. 2013.



formal employment as public-sector jobs start to disappear.

However, many of these public-sector jobs are in high demand in the short term. For example, the World Bank reported that in 2000, there was a one-half to one-third decline in the number of female teachers, and it is well established that the need for female teachers is highest in rural areas.⁵⁹ The same report notes that an estimated 40 percent of basic health centers lack female staff.⁶⁰

Build out jobs that are extensions of women’s domestic roles

On a positive note, there is lots of space to build out businesses that align with women’s traditional gender norms. This is an obvious path of least resistance. However, focusing interven-

tions on developing private schools, after-school care or specialized training for children would all fall under the province of “female jobs.” Given the country’s youth bulge, employment in these areas is likely to continue to grow. Likewise, commodities and enterprises focusing on children and babies, while reinforcing women’s stereotypical role, could also be expanded without prompting backlash. Traditional crafts such as embroidery, gems and jewelry, and food processing are also areas where jobs can be expanded with little push-back.

Support women-owned enterprises

As Chart 7 reveals above, there is more support for women to work in private-sector companies that are female-only than those that are mixed-sex. This again provides a soft-entry approach to moving more women into the labor force.

Women already play a major role in Afghan industries, such as agriculture, jewelry, carpets, and embroidery, but their more in these industries is restrained by the lack of support for networking, skills building, and the role of government in promoting or deterring women in business. This is in addition to women’s lack of access to loans and financial support from banking institutions. Women-owned enterprises would also benefit from partnering assistance so they can partner with

“local educational, vocational, and technical training providers to offer workplace skills development, career counseling, internships and job placement to women.”⁶¹ Nasarin Rafik continues:

Female entrepreneurship has a strong impact on women’s empowerment and employment and therefore plays a vital role in social development and transformation. Women-owned businesses contribute to these changes in different ways. In terms of economics, by establishing their businesses and entering the formal economy women not only contribute to revenue generation in the country, but also create employment, especially for other women who may otherwise not have the option to be employed. By entering non-traditional businesses, they have increased professional choices for women. They have brought change in ways of thinking about women’s role in their home and in the society.⁶²

According to the Afghan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry, “In general, the findings indicate that women-owned businesses hire far more female employees than male employees.”⁶³ This provides a safe opportunity to argue for more support for women’s entrepreneurship and business-development services so women can move from micro-enterprises to SMEs. If public opinion and government officials are going to insist on segregated spaces for men and women, then the “ask” for women should be the provision of equal but separate resources and spaces. The Afghan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry is already growing women’s markets,

59 The World Bank National Reconstruction and Poverty. *The Role of Women in Afghanistan’s Future*, 2005.

60 Gender Entrepreneurship Markets International Finance Corporation GEM Country Brief Afghanistan, 2007.

61 Nasrin Rafik. Personal correspondence.

62 Nasrin Rafik. Personal correspondence.

63 Wafeq, Manizah. *Internal Factors Affecting Growth of Women-Owned Businesses in Afghanistan*. Afghan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

women's trade shows and so on.⁶⁴ They are also developing a certification process that will allow women's owned businesses to be certified as such and market them to a socially conscious niche market.

◆ Claim Sectors That Have yet to Be Taken Over by Men

It is clear from the Asia Foundation's Chart 7 that there is support for women working in areas that are traditionally seen as appropriate for women. The new influx of development funding will likely be geared for emerging enterprises such as information technology, media production and travel.⁶⁵ To date, these sectors are "unclaimed" as "male" or "female" jobs. While these jobs are not particularly associated with traditional female roles or conducted in single-sex environments, if women can get a foothold into these fields quickly, they are more likely to be seen as appropriate for women. They offer a much more lucrative and secure alternative than women taking over more jobs in the public sector as men move from the public sector in the private sector.

◆ Engage Men to Usher Women into Nontraditional Jobs

While women's labor-force participation lags well behind men's, another key factor in their unequal returns from labor is that women are segregated into low-paying, traditionally "female" jobs. Therefore, expanding the range of jobs that are considered appropriate for women to occupy is another approach to closing the enormous wage differentials between male and female workers.

In a groundbreaking study, *Breaking the Metal Ceiling: Female Entrepreneurs Who Succeed in Male-Dominated Sectors*, the World Bank found, "women who cross over into male-dominated sectors make as much as men, and three times more than women who stay in female-dominated sectors."⁶⁶ In

trying to pinpoint the push factors that allow women to enter traditionally male dominated fields, the authors write, "...[T]he influence of male role models and exposure to the sector from family and friends, are critical in helping women circumvent or overcome the norms that undergird occupational segregation."⁶⁷ In addition, the presence of "male role models and 'gate openers,' and the active engagement of these role models in engaging the female entrepreneur in the activities of the crossover sector and in breaking traditional norms," was the most important driver in moving women into higher-paying, traditionally male-dominated fields.⁶⁸



This approach is a riff on the "constructive engagement of men and boys" that was pioneered in the field of reproductive health and has now become a standard best practice in gender and development ventures. Again, it is an "exploitative" approach in that it reinforces traditional gender norms to deliver the project outcomes. It also reinforces the notion that women need

men's protection and the guarantee of their social credibility to make their way into non-traditional fields. However, it does give men an important role to play in supporting women's entrance into higher-paying sectors and therefore disrupting the occupational segregation that has disadvantaged women and circumscribed the range of jobs they can occupy.

Research shows that businesswomen are more likely to get startup money from family and friends than from financial institutions.⁶⁹ Given that men are more likely to control resources, this suggests that male family members are already supporting women's entrance into non-traditional fields. It is likely that those women

64 Wafeq, Manizah. *Internal Factors Affecting Growth of Women-Owned Businesses in Afghanistan*. Afghan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

65 LEAD cited in Wafeq, Manizah. *Internal Factors Affecting Growth of Women-Owned Businesses in Afghanistan*. Afghan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

66 Francisco Campos et al., *Breaking the Metal Ceiling Female Entrepreneurs Who Succeed in Male-Dominated Sectors*. Gender Cross Cutting Solution Area Policy Research Working Paper 7503, 2015.

67 Francisco Campos et al., *Breaking the Metal Ceiling Female Entrepreneurs Who Succeed in Male-Dominated Sectors*. Gender Cross Cutting Solution Area Policy Research Working Paper 7503, 2015.

68 Francisco Campos et al., *Breaking the Metal Ceiling Female Entrepreneurs Who Succeed in Male-Dominated Sectors*. Gender Cross Cutting Solution Area Policy Research Working Paper 7503, 2015.

69 Center for International Private Enterprise 2006 cited in Gender Entrepreneurship Markets International Finance Corporation GEM Country Brief Afghanistan, 2007. See also, Wafeq, Manizah. *Internal Factors Affecting Growth of Women-Owned Businesses in Afghanistan*. Afghan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

that their female relatives will not be taken advantage of economically or professionally. Male family members may also be a way to help businesswomen circumvent corruption, gain access to government contracts and gain entry into creating public-private partnerships.

Likewise, the job of ensuring women's credibility and protection in nontraditional fields could be undertaken by trade organizations, chambers of commerce and other organizations that would provide social capital, market introductions and information with women seeking to enter nontraditional jobs. These groups could act as informal market facilitators until the businesswomen get established.

While inherently accommodative, this approach may move to a more transformative approach in the future. The same World Bank study found that "female-owned enterprises in male-dominated sectors perform better on average than those in female-concentrated sectors, with firms achieving higher profits and having more employees."⁷⁰

Create a cadre of female market facilitators

In addition to trade organizations acting as "market facilitators" to women seeking to enter nontraditional sectors, there is no reason to expect that the new numbers of young women graduating from universities could not play such a role for smaller-scale producers. These university graduates could serve as market facilitators to those women in rural areas (see below) to use the internet to source cheaper inputs and to develop markets. While these markets are most likely to be concentrated around Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kandahar, Jalalabad and Herat, they can nonetheless be a vital resource for linking female producers in rural areas who may be confined by social constraints to produce their work at home.

◆ Rural Areas

Women and youth in agriculture work largely as unpaid family labor



Roughly 70 percent of the Afghan population lives in rural areas, and most are engaged in agriculture. At 29 percent, the female labor-force participation rate in rural areas remains low. Interestingly, women in rural areas have higher employment rates than do women in urban areas. However, most of these women work as unremunerated family laborers.⁷¹ Not surprisingly, the gender differentials in labor market participation become even more pronounced in the rural areas. For example, four out of five female rural workers work as unpaid family laborers, while that same rate for men is one out of every five workers.⁷² While women play an important role in household production, gender norms keep them from making significant decisions or "brokering trade exchanges with the market."⁷³

Increase women's production and market access

As in many parts of the world, there is a considerable gender segregation of tasks on family farms. Sixty percent of women are employed in livestock and in horticulture — tasks almost completely dominated by women and sectors with low market share and low returns.⁷⁴ Given women's unpaid status on family farms, it is not likely that they are able to negotiate within the household for resources that would allow them to purchase improved inputs in order to increase areas of their production. Similarly, traditional gender norms are likely to prevent them

from seeking out markets for their products. This is also an area where the international donor and development community can play an important role. According to a recent World Bank report, providing livestock and horticultural growers with technical assistance and financial support as well as increased access to markets would lead to the creation of sustainable and inclusive jobs.⁷⁵ One way to improve production would be to ensure that sufficient numbers of trained public- or private-sector female extension agents are available to provide female producers with information on new technologies and growing techniques. Similarly, this gap in access to market for rural female producers may open up space for female market facilitators to link rural producers to peri-urban and urban agro-processing facilities.

Form women's producer groups

Similarly, forming women's producer groups could help women develop social contacts, trust with other female producers that would allow them to start savings groups, share information and start to gear their products for external markets instead of limiting their products to the subsistence of the household. Finding number four of *Women and The Economy: Lessons Learned on Operational Approaches to Women's Economic Empowerment in Afghanistan* was that "WEE starts in the social sphere. Interventions should develop and strengthen social bonds among women; enabling and sustaining WEE in

70 Salman Alibhai et al., *Crossovers: Female Entrepreneurs: Who Enter Male Sectors Evidence from Ethiopia*. The World Bank Group. Gender Cross Cutting Solution Area, Finance and Markets Global Practice Group Policy Research Working Paper 8065, 2017.

71 The World Bank Group and Islamic State of Afghanistan Social Development and Gender *Women's Role in Afghanistan's Future – Taking Stock of Achievements and Continued Challenges*, 2013.

72 Izabela Leao, et al. *Jobs from Agriculture in Afghanistan*. The World Bank Group, 2018.

73 Izabela Leao, et al. *Jobs from Agriculture in Afghanistan*. The World Bank Group, 2018.

74 Izabela Leao, et al. *Jobs from Agriculture in Afghanistan*. The World Bank Group, 2018.

75 Izabela Leao, et al. *Jobs from Agriculture in Afghanistan*. The World Bank Group, 2018.

the long term.⁷⁶ Research from around the world has shown the nonmonetary gains women get from being members of producer/social groups in terms of gaining access to information, social, leadership and management skills. See this affirmed by a World Bank study:

Women's economic empowerment starts in the social sphere. Economic empowerment does not develop at the individual level, for either men or women. Fundamentally it is a collective phenomenon. Therefore, while WEE programming in Afghanistan must account for restrictions of women's public gathering and general mobility, it should also incorporate alternative vehicles through which women can develop the social networks required for WEE. The research shows that women's cooperatives and associations have the potential to offer this.⁷⁷

The other benefits of producer groups, such as being able to aggregate demand for inputs and develop markets, would also accrue to women. Perhaps one of the biggest benefits of having female producer groups is that they form an organizing unit through which international organizations can provide foundational skills training. Women's producer groups can become venues through which to develop women's legal-rights awareness, provide legal-advocacy training and promote demand for credit and borrowers' readiness. All of these skills would move the needle toward more transformational change for women.

Turn a disadvantage into an opportunity

A World Bank study on value chains in Afghanistan remarked, "[T]here are few or no women service providers in extension, credit, input

supply, or marketing....[T]here is little or no training on quality control, including hygiene, sanitation, and higher-value varieties."⁷⁸ These areas provide new opportunities for women to fill. International donors could help women fill these professional gaps by developing training packages for low literate environments training packages and rolling out a cadre of female extension workers and women-owned for-profit capacity-building organizations.

◆ Adapt New Models of Cooperative Decision-Making Regarding Household Resources

In many countries in which women and men perform differentiated tasks and men control the decision-making over resources, adaptations of "farming as a family business"⁷⁹ models have been particularly effective in not only building more cooperative decision-making among family members, but also increasing women's economic empowerment. Farming as a family business and its derivatives now used in other sectors bring all family members together and provide numeracy and financial-literacy skills so that families can calculate their production costs and see which crops or activities bring the highest economic returns to the household as a whole, not just to the individual producer. This enables households to make sound decisions based on the anticipated economic outcomes of household labor rather than based on the traditional (and often oppositional) division of labor between the sexes. The intention of this model is to foster men's appreciation for the financial gains made from women's work in the hope that they will be more willing to allocate household resources towards improved inputs for women's production. While on the surface these models appear "accommodative," they are fundamentally transformative as intra-household bargaining for women is a key element of these models. These models give women the skills to bargain for improved resources needed to increase or improve production and allow women more decision-making power over how household resources are spent.



76 Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the World Bank Group. *Women and The Economy: Lessons Learned on Operational Approaches to Women's Economic Empowerment in Afghanistan*, 2017.

77 Izabela Leao, et al. *Jobs from Agriculture in Afghanistan*. The World Bank Group, 2018.

78 The World Bank and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. *Understanding Gender in Agricultural Value Chains: The Cases of Grapes/Raisins, Almonds and Saffron in Afghanistan*, 2011.

79 Farming as a family business: participant workbook, USAID, DAI, 2012.

Another outcome of this model is the recognition that “women’s” productive activities are often more lucrative than those of men. There is evidence that men have taken to producing embroidery alongside their wives as new markets for traditional crafts open up.

Move women up in value chains

While women are active in several value chains, especially grapes, almonds and saffron, their participation in these value chains is low-paid or unremunerated given that women often perform functions that are seen as part of their household tasks. One World Bank study explains, “Because men and women perform different functions, the difference in their wages is not comparable. Rural women perform harvesting and post-harvest processing of raisins, almonds, and saffron as a part of household chores; thus, their work goes unpaid.” Traditional gender norms relegate women to the bottom level of the value chain and allow

men to dominate the highest levels. Men are the market facilitators securing inputs, linking the work of women with markets, interfacing with middlemen, retailers and exporters.⁸⁰

Samuel Hall, who conducted the analysis for Japanese International Country Agency *Country Gender Profile: Afghanistan*, puts it another way:

Women are mostly engaged in labour-intensive activities that are not highly valued because they involve production rather than trade or commerce. Extreme poverty throughout the country fosters an entrenched reliance on existing production systems, which are highly resistant to change. As a direct result of this very few women have commercial decision-making responsibility or financial autonomy.⁸¹

Likewise, carpet making is the second largest employer in Afghanistan after agriculture. Women comprise more than 90 percent of the

workers in the carpet sector, mostly as weavers. As the World Bank points out, this is because weaving can be done at home and women can work on it around their other domestic tasks. However, “weaving is one of the least profitable activities in the carpets value chain.”⁸² Here again, we see women’s engagement in production fit in around their primary tasks as wife and mother. We also see that cultural norms keep women from the actually buying of inputs and selling of carpets – the higher-paying domains left to men.

Food processing is another area where one sees this kind of segmentation of the value chain. It is estimated that 23 percent of female workers in rural areas work in the manufacturing and processing sector. These sectors offer potential for rural female entrepreneurs and workers to improve livelihoods and create sustainable employment.

Moving women up the value chain is likely to demand the transformation of fundamental gender norms: efforts donors and development agencies should be working on now but are not likely to yield short-term returns. In the meantime, creating programming where male family members or trade or other organizations act as women’s guardians and market facilitators that help move up the value chain seems to be a viable option. This was also a key lesson learned from the World Bank’s project, whose authors note, “Trusted intermediaries are likely going to be needed in the medium-term.”⁸³

◆ Engage the Private Sector

Calls for change in laws or mainstreaming gender into economic development plans might be seen as rocking the boat or un-Islamic. However, amplifying the voices of women and increased attention to gender dynamics within publicly funded organizations such as the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Afghanistan Investment Support Agency and the Export Promotion Agency of Afghanistan are likely to have a positive impact on what products are promoted, or who benefits from the investment that the government is trying to attract. Embedding these



80 The World Bank and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. *Understanding Gender in Agricultural Value Chains: The Cases of Grapes/Raisins, Almonds and Saffron in Afghanistan*, 2011.

81 Hall, Samuel for JICA. *Country Gender Profile: Afghanistan Final Report*. 2013. P:54.

82 Fair trade carpet exports for women’s empowerment?

83 Fair trade carpet exports for women’s empowerment?

discussions within overall efforts to engage the private sector may enable the issue of women's economic engagement to slip under the radar of any spoilers. In opening up the conversation of what kind of inclusive development needs to take place, "the issue of women" could be cloaked by other private sector demands and therefore go unnoticed.

Another tactic to include women in the groups for which private-sector firms are provided tax incentives. The Afghan Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry notes, "Except for the PPP Law that provides an incentive for women, other laws, such as the Investment Law, Banking Law, Income Tax Law, and Procurement Law, do not contain any incentives for women-owned businesses."⁸⁴ While the Taliban remains relevant in the peace efforts, it might be wise to ensure that all groups are included in these incentives rather than advocate only for tax incentives to hire women.

Implementation Recommendations

Donors and international development practitioners should keep in mind that historically, women's increased earnings have not always lead to direct benefits for women or to their "economic empowerment." Today, there is an exciting discussion taking place over what constitutes women's empowerment.⁸⁵ While women's empowerment in Afghanistan is likely to remain an aspirational goal, in the meantime, as long as the Taliban is able to exert its leverage in peace efforts, donors and development practitioners should have a clear idea of their short-term goals and how, though being "accommodating" now, they can evolve in time to be "transformative."

It is also important to not make any assumptions about the kinds of outcomes for women that might result from their increased labor-force participation or engagement in income-generating activities. First, women's increased participation in the paid work-



force does not necessarily lead to increases in income under women's control or even in women's income. Traditional gender norms may make it such that women are expected to hand over their earnings to the male head of household. The Demographic Survey of Afghanistan found that 40 percent of working women decided on their own how their money was spent.⁸⁶

Second, there is significant risk of increase gender-based violence and other forms of abuse as women's earnings increase unless they are accompanied by corresponding changes in gender norms. Therefore, any program's *Do No Harm* strategy should also include a complete risk assessment and identification of interventions the project will take to ensure that increased earnings for women (or any aspect of the project, such as women's use of the internet or new technologies) will not subject women to harm either from their husband or male family members or from conservative groups.

Third, expectations that increased production or sales of goods produced by women will result in higher wages for women should be kept in check. Examples from other countries where

men dominate the top of the value chains show that returns to labor for women are not likely to happen unless there are sound policies in place to ensure they do. As one World Bank document notes, "the increased revenue from direct-to-market exports of carpets will not necessarily translate into higher wages for women weavers without policies or programs in place to make it happen."⁸⁷

Finally, donors and development agencies might reconsider how they present their gender-related or women's activities. Women in Afghanistan, like women everywhere, are central actors in the economy. Their full integration into it is a standard best practice — not something that is extra or optional. It is necessary for national growth and inclusive development. Having separate activities aimed at women are often seen as coming at the expense of men and therefore are more likely to cause backlash that could otherwise be avoided. Similarly, separate activities (though many may need to be segregated by sex) "for women" reinforce the notion that the preexisting activities were designed for men, and those "for women" are afterthoughts or extra add-ons to the primary activities.

84 Wafeq, Manizah. *Internal Factors Affecting Growth of Women-Owned Businesses In Afghanistan*. Afghan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

85 See for example Buvinic, Mayra. *Measuring Women's Economic Empowerment: Overview* and the World Bank Group. *Voice and Agency Empowering women and girls for shared prosperity*, 2016. UN Women. *Paid work, women's empowerment and inclusive growth: Transforming the structures of constraint*, 2013.

86 The Demographic Survey of Afghanistan, 2016.

87 Fair trade carpet exports for women's empowerment?

Conclusion

After 18 years of war, Afghans want peace to prevail in their country, without losing the hard-won gains they have achieved. Though the current constitution and laws provide more protection for women today than before, a return of the Taliban—either as an opposition party or a political majority—do not bode well for women. Given the legitimacy the country the Taliban gained by negotiating directly with the United States, its capacity to use violence to gain leverage and its draconian position towards women, the Taliban are unlikely to change their tactics and platform unless mandated as part of the conditions for U.S. troop reductions. This significantly closes the space that other parties could negotiate for greater respect for women’s human rights and to ensure that women were able to claim their fair share of the economic development programming the post-process Afghanistan. In this context, donors will have to be creative in how they develop and present any funding to promote women’s economic engagement lest it sparks backlash from an organization that has been and continues to be hostile towards women.

Simultaneously, Afghans see that the biggest challenges facing women are their lack of education and economic options, signaling the country’s recognition of the need to address these concerns. The question is whether these sentiments will hold when competing groups start pressuring donors for resources as the peace efforts come to light in earnest. Donors and international development organizations can play a positive role in sustaining the gains made by women in the post-Taliban period.

This will require new ways of working in communities. It will require working with, not for, traditional leaders, and it will require a sensitivity to timing as traditional gender norms move in tandem with advances for women. It will also require solid commitment and oversight by women’s groups to stay on a forward-moving trajectory so that “addressing women’s issues” does not become a casualty of the conflict. Most important, it will require a solid commitment to inclusive development, because project designers and implementers cannot afford to let some boats rise while others sink. If they do, they will not only sink the women’s boat, but they may also jeopardize any prospect of a lasting peace.



About the Author

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About Creative

Creative Associates International works with underserved communities by sharing expertise and experience in education, elections, economic growth, citizen security, governance and transitions from conflict to peace.

Based in Washington, D.C., Creative has active projects in nearly 30 countries. Since 1977, it has worked in nearly 90 countries and on almost every continent. Recognized for its ability to work rapidly, flexibly and effectively in conflict-affected environments, Creative is committed to generating long-term sustainable solutions to complex development problems.

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