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Engaging Afghan Religious Leaders for Women's Rights

Summary

- As the economic, security and political transitions take place in Afghanistan, it is essential to work with religious leaders who have credibility and moral authority among large segments of the Afghan public.
- Religious leaders are among Afghanistan's traditional "gatekeepers" for making local decisions, especially on questions of women's rights, and they can be effectively engaged.
- Despite the very negative reactions by religious leaders to women's rights at the national political level, some at the local level have shown continuing interest in women's rights when they are involved within an Islamic framework and have participated in protecting such rights.
- Effective engagement with religious leaders starts with respecting their opinions and involving them directly in processes of changing strongly held social norms on women's rights and other sensitive topics, such as tolerance and peacebuilding.

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Introduction

As U.S. and NATO troops withdraw from Afghanistan, the next three to five years will be critical to prevent an erosion of gains made over the last decade in Afghans' increased rights, roles and freedoms. This period of transition offers a critical opportunity to strengthen and expand the network of influential actors who can address issues such as corruption, tolerance and the defense of basic human and women's rights.

Decades of conflict have torn the traditional social fabric of Afghan society, prompting some communities to embrace extreme beliefs. This has exerted severe effects on marginalized sections of Afghan communities—especially women. In this context, women's rights have become a highly sensitive and contested issue in Afghanistan, fueling feuds, cycles of revenge and war itself. Trying to bring change by using international frameworks of rights has not always been successful; in Afghanistan, it has often produced the opposite effect as such ideas are rejected as Western.

There are many examples in Afghan history where a push for an international ideal sparked a backlash that led to more brutalities against women and a clampdown on women's rights, similar to what took place under the Taliban regime. As far back as the 1930s, King Amanullah took a top-down approach to enforcing women's rights in laws, and his wife, Queen Suraya, appeared publicly without

a veil, causing an outcry among religious and tribal elders. That evolved into the Saqao Revolt, which unseated the king. The communist regime also tried a top-down approach to enforcing women's rights, which was manifest most violently when homes were invaded to pull out women and girls to attend communist-backed government schools. That prompted many Afghans to join the Mujahideen. More recently, in 2013, outspoken clerics in parliament denounced the Elimination of Violence Against Women law as "un-Islamic" and a "foreign project," and they thwarted approval of the corresponding presidential decree of 2009. Attempts to enforce women's rights have often alienated the public and catalyzed reactionary attitudes among the men who retain the power to deny women their rights.

Creating Positive, Sustainable Change

Given the weakness of Afghanistan's formal legal system and the breakdown of the traditional social fabric, it is imperative to consider the kind of engagement with the country's influential actors that can encourage them to foster broad-based, positive change on human and women's rights. That process begins with recognizing that Afghanistan remains a deeply traditional society. According to The Asia Foundation's Annual Survey of 2013, more than 60 percent of those polled said they have gone to traditional *jirgas* or *shuras*, which include *mullahs* (religious leaders), tribal elders and village heads (with such titles as *malik*, *khan* and *arbab*) to resolve their problems. Eighty percent consider them to be fair and trusted institutions. Furthermore, 66 percent of the people asked said they had confidence in religious leaders, a figure that was almost equal to that in electronic media (68 percent), such as radio, which is the most popular source of information for Afghans. In other studies that relate to patterns of power and gender in Afghanistan, the Foundation has found that traditional leaders play a critical role in deciding the fate of their community's members, especially women who have limited mobility and limited ability to seek recourse elsewhere. Analysis of trends in the survey data and community baseline surveys of local NGOs, including the Afghanistan Youth and Cultural Foundation, the Shuhada Organization and the Research and Cultural Center of Imam Shaibani, has also shown that among traditional leaders, religious figures possess the strongest moral authority in shaping attitudes and behaviors on questions like women's rights.

In developing programs to bolster women's rights in Afghanistan, identifying which groups to engage for different activities—and how best to work with them—is paramount. Women's rights advocates and practitioners in gender-related projects need to engage religious leaders and their institutions if they hope to influence their communities and the country as a whole. Many working in the field of women's rights avoid engaging with religious figures perceived as conservatives opposed to progressive change. This hesitation is based on experiences with local religious leaders hindering efforts to support women's rights. Yet, their support can result in more people accepting the importance of women's rights and in more enduring changes in behavior. That can yield greater gains in terms of the impact, sustainability and reach of a project.

A review of The Asia Foundation's research into programs implemented with religious leaders in Afghanistan between 2007 and 2013 by local Afghan NGOs suggests that two major factors contribute to successful engagement. First, religious leaders need to participate as genuine partners with a spirit of ownership in a project. Second, religious leaders need to be better informed about women's rights in an authentically Islamic moral framework that speaks to their understanding. If they are equipped with more knowledge and resources on women's rights from sources they trust, they can serve as positive agents of change in Afghan society. The right message coming from the right person makes all the difference. Some local NGO reports¹ describe situations in which a

human rights worker dressed in Western style was ineffective at training local religious leaders on women's rights in Islam. By contrast, a well-known local religious leader giving the same training was accepted.

The practical challenge has often been to bring in credible, local religious leaders as trainers. The first step is to document religious leaders' community work and influence in particular geographical areas and social networks. Next, begin building trust with those who were identified as already working to protect women's rights. They need to be engaged as equals in a dialogue—an approach that builds their sense of ownership and harnesses their role as authentic, local leaders. Relying on religious leaders does not require bringing in radical extremists or letting them take control of a program. Nor does it require winning them over to a new attitude about women's rights. Rather, it means finding moderate religious voices and working with them to strengthen indigenous movements of change on women's rights. In other words, it calls for working with voices that already exist in Afghan communities. It takes patience to build trust in such relationships, but it pays off. Engaging religious leaders as the agents of change on women's and human rights reduces the likelihood of a popular backlash to what might otherwise be perceived as pushing Western notions and morality.

The Asia Foundation research documents reviewed for this paper demonstrate that when NGOs adopt this more patient approach, traditional male leaders have often ruled in favor of women as a party to a dispute on such matters as inheritance, choice of spouse, child custody and divorce. Indeed, more than 500 documented cases were resolved in favor of women's rights over two years in nine provinces. These impact studies of various projects showed that rates for resolving cases in favor of women disputants improved three-fold. Such outcomes are remarkable in the Afghan context, and this success reflects the establishment of trust among religious institutions, scholars and those working on behalf of women's and human rights in both local and international groups.

Lessons Learned in Work with Religious Leaders

Effective engagement with religious leaders takes significant time, effort and funding to build the essential ingredients of trust and ownership. Afghanistan has witnessed the failure of multiple projects in which the international community offered large sums of money to traditional leaders as an incentive to gain their support for a particular ideology, an outside government or a nation-building exercise rather than embark on a process of true engagement and dialogue. Similarly, a quick but unsuccessful approach was tried in some projects and programs in which religious or traditional leaders were given documents on human or women's rights that were developed by scholars and schools of thought whom they did not know or understand. Documents like those were typically seen as selectively picking ideas out of an Islamic framework or worse—in their eyes—as a “foreign” human rights framework in a perceived attempt to coerce them into changing their attitudes on issues like women's rights.

Such strategies fail with Afghan religious leaders because they fall short of real consultation. They do not work when women's rights programs invite religious leaders and, in essence, supply them with messages to endorse rather than engage their opinion. The reasoning of these well-meaning groups is that the messages have been crafted with an Islamic philosophy and thus should be endorsed. But this strategy usually fails even when the religious leaders broadly agree with the message; they find ways to undermine it because they were not consulted in developing the messages. Religious leaders, therefore, need to be part of a process that is meaningful—and not superficial. All of that takes time to build an ongoing dialogue. Messages and programs that are plucked out of context will not be sustainable. Any outsider, even an urban resident of Kabul

visiting an Afghan village, will not be seen as having the credibility to argue for modifying old notions of class and gender.

Discussions² with development workers in Afghanistan indicate that it is more effective to first approach local leaders who are known to share a broad goal of women's empowerment and then work to expand that circle through trust-building. Before engaging with traditional or religious leaders, though, local stakeholders need to be interviewed carefully in order to find leaders with such common goals—a mapping exercise of sorts. The religious leaders who might be open to such collaboration are likely to be those who have already instigated research on their own about women's rights within an Islamic context, and those who have been champions of change for their own local initiatives. More broadly, for this sort of engagement to succeed, it must be made clear that support is being given for processes of change that local Afghan leaders themselves believe are needed. An externally-driven agenda will not generate much real change. Responding to needs that are identified by local traditional leaders—and by implication the local population—will naturally foster a greater sense of local ownership.

This approach is best pursued by working with trusted intermediary organizations, particularly Afghan faith-based organizations or individual religious leaders who are already trusted within their communities. Such organizations and individuals can become the face of projects and programs. Public trust can then grow over time by supporting an Afghan-led process.

Another lesson learned from years of working in this area is that women's rights and access to justice are not exclusively matters for any one sector. For instance, community gatekeepers on these issues do not generally represent the formal justice sector. For that matter, champions for women and justice have emerged across all sectors, including government, law, civil society and media. Participants from The Asia Foundation's pilot programs have suggested that incorporating the police and local court systems into informal or traditional justice mechanisms would increase women's overall access to justice, as well as produce more positive outcomes for women. Still, legal cases can be referred to the traditional or the state justice systems, depending upon which has the reach and ability to hold parties to an agreement. It is critical to foster opportunities for dialogue, learning and collaboration between local traditional leaders and state actors on these justice issues. Such an approach is the way to promote sustainable, positive change and long-term peacebuilding efforts.

Recommendations Going Forward

- Start by “mapping” the religious sector: Gather information about the roles of different religious institutions and individuals who could either support or hinder work on women's rights, tolerance and peacebuilding.
- Engage, though cautiously, with those religious leaders and institutions who have a track record of supporting women's rights over a lengthy period of time in order to build trust; then work through them to expand a like-minded network.
- Use dialogue and respect to work with traditional leaders to develop the intervention.
- Support processes of change that are identified locally and, if possible, that have been implemented by trusted local traditional or religious leaders.
- Establish local partners as having the leading role in the delivery of support and to serve as the public face of the program as much as possible. Do not seek recognition of the external support, because such publicity will disrupt the local sense of ownership of the process, along with its credibility.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

The author is a senior program officer for religion and peacebuilding at the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) and was formerly the Afghanistan director of The Asia Foundation's Women's Empowerment and Development program. The information here draws from research conducted by The Asia Foundation in Afghanistan, as well as discussions at USIP's series of Expert Dialogues on Lessons Learned and Best Practices for Women in Transition Countries and the ongoing Lessons Learned Gender Working Group. The opinions expressed in this article are solely the author's.

- Expect changes in attitude and behavior to evolve slowly. And support incremental change by listening to local partners and supporting what they are ready to take on instead of pushing them to risk their reputation, credibility and, possibly, their lives.
- Facilitate cooperation between religious leaders and state leaders on common issues or practical activities, including resolving cases related to women's rights, to increase trust and understanding.

Notes

1. For instance, see Shuhada Organization, "Quarterly Report: Women's Access to Justice," July 2010, p. 4.
2. Author's discussions with program staff of Oxfam, SwissPeace, ActionAID, United Nations Development Program and The Asia Foundation between 2010 and 2013.



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