



SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines the state of women's leadership in Afghanistan. It is based primarily on interviews and focus group discussions with more than two hundred academics, politicians, entrepreneurs, journalists, teachers, students, and civil society activists, as well as Afghan and international experts in Kabul between January and March 2015. The research is part of a partnership agreement between the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and USAID aimed at supporting policy relevant research on Afghanistan, targeting national and international policymakers, in particular USAID strategies and programs such as PROMOTE.

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Women's Leadership Roles in Afghanistan

Summary

- Since 2001, the Afghan government, in partnership with the international community, has invested vast resources seeking to ensure the emergence of women as leaders in politics, business, and civil society.
- The adaptive leadership framework used in this analysis stresses contextual awareness and a leader's sense of purpose, and views leadership as mobilizing people to tackle collective challenges. Authority is only one of many tools leaders have at their disposal.
- Many women have emerged in positions of national significance in politics, business, and civil society. However, women's space for leadership remains limited, donor dependent, and primarily urban; interventions aimed at promoting women's leadership primarily focus on raw counts of women in political positions.
- Women are underrepresented in the private sector and have no active role in economic production. Insecurity, harassment, immobility, religious extremism, and corruption are common. Concepts such as gender equality remain largely misunderstood.
- Women in positions of authority are perceived as symbolic, lack political support, have weak decision-making and enforcement power, and lack access to sources of financial and human capital.
- Bottom-up efforts to engage women have led to pressure groups and a culture of democratic advocacy but have also created donor-dependent entities that behave like rentier organizations and offer few incentives for widespread social mobilization, which is critical in developing enduring leadership.
- Men remain largely disengaged and often alienated from efforts to promote women's leadership, which they associate with physical or sexual attributes rather than intellectual capacity. Engagement with religious groups has remained limited to quick fixes.
- Supportive family, credible and relevant female role models, and quality education—including religious knowledge—help generate an enabling environment for women's leadership.
- Effective support of women's leadership demands gender-inclusive approaches, creatively redefining leadership, facilitating women's mobility, and strong political will.

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Introduction

Women's rights have become symbolic of the fate of Afghanistan. A desire on the part of the international community to "rescue" Afghan women from their social, political, and economic fate was key to mobilizing global support to topple the Taliban regime in the days after September 11, 2001.¹ Since 2001, the Afghan government and the international community have invested vast resources seeking to improve the status of women. Chief among these were programs to support women leaders in politics, business, and civil society.

This research seeks to understand factors that contribute to the emergence of women leaders by identifying and assessing the past decade and a half's efforts to promote women's leadership. The findings are for the most part based on interviews and focus group discussions with men and women in Kabul. Interviews targeted prominent women in a wide range of fields, including politics, business, and civil society, to understand the factors that have contributed to their success but also the constraints. Prominent men in the private, public, and academic sectors also shared important insights into the trends affecting the emergence of women leaders in the public sphere.

Weak institutions and ineffective leadership hinder Afghanistan's capacity to identify, own, and address challenges. Although international support has placed the issue of women's leadership squarely on the domestic political agenda, interviewees indicated that Afghans themselves must shape the goals and strategies for the future. Women are an integral part of this group of change agents.

Fifteen years ago it would have been unthinkable to consider the wide scope of women in positions of national significance across the country and in so many diverse sectors. Several women have shattered glass ceilings, emerging outside the scope of conventional roles. Women have served as ministers, like Dr. Sima Samar and Dr. Suraya Dalil; provincial governors, like Habiba Sarabi; and parliamentarians and senators, like Shukria Barekzai, Fawzia Koofi, Sabrina Saqeb, Belquis Roshan, and Dr. Anarkali Honaryar. They have led businesses, like Sima Ghoryani and Roya Mahboob; established civil society organizations, like Shinkai Karokhail and Nargis Nehan; run large-scale media operations, like Najiba Ayubi; and spearheaded anticorruption campaigns, like Seema Ghani. They have organized nationwide voting campaigns, like Wazhma Forough; led large-scale humanitarian assistance organizations, like Fatima Gailani; and served as journalists and artists of national recognition, like Shakeela Ibrahimkhel and Aryana Saeed.

In interviews with both men and women, however, the consensus was overwhelming that women's space for leadership remains limited, donor-dependent, and primarily urban. Many grassroots organizations—especially in rural areas—remain unknown nationally and lack English-language skills usually required to attract donor support. People we spoke with also believed that although the intervention since 2001 has promoted opportunities for women's participation in the public sphere, it has also generated conflicts between liberal notions of human rights—promoted by the international community and Afghan civil society—and existing value systems in the Afghan society represented by religion and custom.² Promotion of women in such spheres has catapulted women to positions of authority, but at the same time left them in a state where they are frequently removed from the realities of most men and women, leading to what one women's rights activist described as a "dual identity in several women in leadership roles."³

The consensus among research participants was overwhelming that women in the public sphere lacked self-confidence and the ability to overcome dilemmas for collective action. In the words of one women's rights activist, "A major limiting factor is that women do not connect to each other. Women lack a sense of belonging, have difficult and complicated personal lives, and yet do not speak about it, out of fear of loss of face. So they pretend,

play double roles. Women leaders are incapable of helping themselves. They need saving more than anyone.”⁴ This inability to engage with one another to foment political and social change is reflected in women’s failure to be accessible to each other and the citizens they seek to serve. To one female entrepreneur and civil society activist, “accessibility meant actively seeking and serving as mentors.”⁵ To an anticorruption activist, it meant “forming purposeful partnerships.”⁶

As we discuss, most efforts to promote women’s leadership in Afghanistan generally do so in a technical manner, assuming that the women’s empowerment deficit is an issue that can be resolved with fixes such as quotas or training programs. Increasingly, however, development practitioners and policymakers have adopted “adaptive” frameworks that respond to the needs and goals of society, rather than taking top-down approaches based on cookie-cutter models adopted from other countries.⁷

This research takes such an approach. Instead of measuring leadership in terms of the raw number of women in positions of authority, we see it as a purpose-driven tool or activity. In doing so, this research differentiates between two key terms: authority and leadership.⁸ Leadership is the act of mobilizing people, over whom one may or may not have authority, to tackle a collective challenge.⁹ Although some leaders may have authority in public office, authority is not a prerequisite for leadership. Similarly, individuals in formal positions of authority may not exhibit leadership characteristics. In fact, we found this to be a common but unfortunate result of efforts to promote women’s leadership in Afghanistan: women in positions of authority with very little capacity to effect meaningful change. Authority is just one of many tools leaders can use. The focus on placing women in authority without examining their leadership skills may undermine efforts to empower women because women who come to positions of authority by virtue of their gender alone cultivate an impression that women leaders are tokens in their positions.

Before analyzing the nature of women’s leadership in Afghanistan, we first offer a definition of leadership—based on an adaptive leadership framework—that allows us to more precisely measure its emergence.

Defining Leadership

Despite efforts to promote women’s leadership, most policy literature and discourse provides little guidance as to what constitutes leadership in Afghanistan. Aside from raw counts of women in political positions, the number of women advocacy organizations, or the number of trainings provided to women, little effort has been undertaken to measure the concept of leadership in any meaningful way. Here we define the adaptive leadership framework and illustrate why it is an appropriate vehicle to understand the status of women’s empowerment in Afghanistan. If policymakers adopted an adaptive approach to leadership, initiatives intended to support women would be more likely to endure because they would most likely reflect the will of mobilized groups within society rather than goals of the donor community or an individual or group within the government.

What Is Adaptive Leadership?

The adaptive leadership framework, pioneered by Harvard University professors Ronald Heifetz and Dean Williams, is useful because it helps us define leadership in ways we can measure and offers useful tools for impact analysis. The model has four key characteristics. First, it views successful leadership as an activity that involves mobilizing groups. Second, it differentiates between leadership and official authority. Third, it stresses the importance of contextual awareness. Fourth, to promote mobilization, individual leaders should have

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a strong sense of purpose. We elaborate on each of these characteristics in the Afghan context. Based on our findings, we believe that an adaptive approach to leadership—one that stresses prolonged engagement and mobilization—will be more effective helping the women’s movement in Afghanistan achieve sustained results than persisting as a donor-dependent and largely insular group of organizations focused on pleasing the international community instead of mobilizing citizens for effective long-term change.

This framework views leadership as an activity that contributes to improving people’s lives through informed mobilization. Rather than as a solitary effort promoted by a single individual, we view leadership as a collective process that facilitates the active role of individuals and groups in defining problems, identifying solutions, and adapting to change. Through this perspective, leadership is a purposeful activity that requires active participants rather than silent followers. Leaders do not develop visions, set goals, or define ways forward in isolation, but instead serve as a mirror for others, helping individuals prioritize issues and mobilizing them to find solutions. Generating participation in the process rather than gaining adherents or followers is the heart of leadership.

A second important component of the framework is that it differentiates between authority—formal or informal—and leadership. Authority is an important aspect but not necessary for leadership. Figures of authority provide direction—in the form of vision, strategy, goals, or techniques—protection from threats, and order by defining individual and institutional roles, controlling conflict, and maintaining norms.¹⁰ An adaptive leader, on the other hand, mobilizes people to question long-lived habits and deeply held beliefs. Equating leadership with authority makes it difficult for leadership to be conceived as a skill that can be taught and learned. It makes leadership a privileged possession of the elite rather than a responsibility that anyone with a stake in an issue can shoulder. It makes leadership something one can have rather than an activity that any individual can engage in. Afghanistan’s political context offers several examples of sons inheriting their fathers’ power perceived as leadership, a pattern that is repeatedly reinforced by social norms as well as by government authority.¹¹

Contextual awareness is the third main component of adaptive leadership. In Afghanistan, women leaders must be aware not only of the political context but also of the social norms and values in society as these values often shape citizen loyalties. Most informants believed that feelings related to these values are strong enough in Afghanistan even to “risk committing violence in order to protect the value and honor the loyalty.”¹² Understanding people’s loyalty to values is critical in helping leaders build partnerships required to mobilize social change.¹³ Afghan women leaders’ inability to form networks of mutual support can be explained on the basis of their inability to read each other’s value loyalties and thus their “inability to relate to one another’s perspectives,” as one activist reflected.¹⁴

The framework also suggests that most effective leaders mobilize others to engage in meaningful change and do not impose it—a process that takes time as well as extended engagement. Effective leaders must have patience and a sense of purpose to study the context, appreciate its elements, and maintain a broad lens as they engage in their work.¹⁵

A fourth and final component of the framework suggests that successful leaders should have a clear sense of purpose. Leaders, like everyone else, have stakes in issues, loyalties to certain belief systems and value sets, and above all weaknesses and needs. Being observant of one’s weaknesses, needs, and trigger points are equally critical to remaining anchored in a purpose, because human needs, as legitimate as they are, can also be weaknesses that obstruct a clear sense of purpose. The need for power can drive women leaders into believing that they can change the world by being appointed to a position of power. For example, as one former member of parliament (MP) said, a group of female MPs spent “three years choos-

ing the head of the Commission on Women's Rights in the Parliament."¹⁶ They spent this time because they believed whoever held this position of authority would have tremendous power over the women's rights agenda.

How Is Leadership Commonly Perceived?

Most of those we spoke with saw leadership in binary terms, believing that to be a leader an individual had to have a formal position of authority. In this view, authority should be used to command followers rather than mobilize them toward a common goal. Most thought that formal positions of power were what produce leadership. In the words of a student at Kabul University, "Authority is a prerequisite for leadership."¹⁷ Research participants were familiar with the term *leader*, but often used it to describe people holding formal positions of power. They repeatedly used phrases such as "jihadi leaders," "civil society leaders," "women leaders," or "religious leaders," often referring to individuals with formal offices in respective sectors, where the authority was either formally granted by virtue of an official appointment or informally gathered through followership.

Reflecting long-standing social norms that privilege men and have historically barred women's access to prominent positions, conversations with students, journalists, imams, and members of political parties typically saw men as most qualified to serve as leaders. Women—who often lack access to sources of power, such as wealth, education, followership, political capital, or social status—were seldom associated with authority or leadership. This situation is compounded by the fact that international organizations and donors contribute to this perception by largely relying on male hires for senior leadership positions. The exceptions were those women who had official appointments in government.

Others defined leadership as a set of personal characteristics, such as the capacity to influence and persuade. Persuasive skills reflected in leaders' "power of oration" or "charisma" were among the factors influencing their choice of an ideal leader. Although women were not seen as masters of persuasion, their oration skills received commendation by many male informants. For example, a university student said, "I can't think of a man who speaks as well as Shukria Barezai; she clearly is a great leader."¹⁸

Both men and women described women's presence in the public sphere as largely symbolic. The consensus among interviewees was that many women who hold positions of authority are not able to lead because they have little or no political support, weak decision-making and enforcement power, and little or no access to sources of both financial and human capital. However, while fulfilling the functions of authority necessitates these essential elements, leadership requires credibility. Lack of connection to and understanding of the Afghan social context by women appointed in positions of authority for cosmetic purposes further delegitimizes women's role in people's eyes.

Efforts to Promote Women's Leadership

Most efforts to promote women's leadership in Afghanistan relied on top-down programs implemented by the Afghan government in partnership with the international community. Most of these programs focus on placing women in positions of political authority, but do not usually emphasize the kinds of leadership skills required to navigate a challenging social terrain and develop consensus on issues. We found that such strategies tend to isolate women in these positions rather than enable them to mobilize those with common interests. Some efforts have been made to mobilize women from the bottom up, but frequently such programs engage individual leaders or organizations rather than create the opportunity for the kinds of broad societal conversations that might generate enduring social change.

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Government and International Community

Some of the most visible interventions to promote women leadership since 2001 emerged from top-down efforts, such as the creation of the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) in 2002 and gender units within each ministry in 2004, the appointment of women in executive positions, and quotas for elected office at national and subnational levels. The assumption behind such efforts, though disputed by some Afghan women organizations who do not see the ministry as an effective and useful vehicle, was that women in formal positions of power would represent women's perspectives, promote issues important to women, and serve as inspirational role models for society.

The assumption behind these top-down strategies equates leadership with the authority to impose change. In the case of the MoWA, an anthropologist who conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the ministry over the course of several years, made similar conclusions in 2012, finding that the institution reflected a "top-down modernization model."¹⁹ MoWA's existence has had "symbolic value" and, some of the research informants believed, has "helped keep [the] women's agenda alive in domestic politics."²⁰ Most informants, however, believed the establishment of the ministry had less to do with the cause of promoting women's leadership and more with, in the words of an institutional development expert, "appeasing the international community as an intentional buffer."²¹ At the domestic level, one former Afghan minister explained, the "appointment of MoWA's senior management has largely been driven by interests of major financial players."²² This has resulted in appointments who lacked technical and professional credibility and thus did not meet the basic foundational assumption behind top-down efforts to promote women's leadership.

According to heads of these gender units, these units became marginalized within their ministries. Their activities became limited to token efforts as "organizing gifts ceremonies on International Women's Day or Mother's Day."²³ Heads of gender units interviewed for this research complained of their inability to make themselves heard in their respective ministries, even in socially sensitive cases of "sexual molestation or harassment of female staff by senior directors," underlining the limits of female authority in Afghan society even when holding official positions.²⁴ They described a lack of "political will of senior officials, budgetary support, and decision-making role in particular with regards to recruitments, and even access to office space and equipment."²⁵ In response to the realization of this ineffectiveness, the Afghan government has decided to move ahead with a structural or technical reform, granting gender units increased executive power with a change in grade—from grade 3 to grade 2—per civil service norms.²⁶ This move, unfortunately, only addresses the authority dynamics of the role without focusing on the leadership aspects of these offices.

Despite protests by religious clerics, the National Unity Government has fulfilled its promise to appoint one female justice to the Supreme Court and four female ministers to the cabinet (although the appointment of the female justice was rejected by the National Assembly).²⁷ The impact of such appointments—and their ability to mobilize both women and men behind a common cause—remains to be assessed.²⁸

Although women are in positions of authority at the national level, for the status of women to change in Afghanistan women must be empowered throughout the bureaucracy. Women's leadership in the civil service is crucial, because the civil service and subnational governance are the face of the state to communities at the local level. Women serving in the civil service are closer to citizens, both men and women, who must be engaged for social change to take place. Unfortunately, women remain vastly underrepresented in the Afghan civil service.²⁹ A 2013 USAID gender analysis of subnational governance, for example, found that "women are a small minority of the civil service at the SNG [subnational government] level, typically employed in menial positions such as cleaners or guards."³⁰ Furthermore, sexual harassment remains "a serious hindrance to recruiting and retaining female staff."³¹

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The 2004 Afghan Constitution introduced a 25 percent quota for women's representation in parliament (reduced to 20 percent in 2013), which automatically generated a cadre of women in elected office at national and subnational levels. That women's vote in the parliament carries equal weight has the potential for effecting top-down change through legislation. However, a former Afghan MP and civil society activist thought that the "ethnic, religious, political, and financial loyalties of female members of parliament limited their capacity to promote women's cause."³² Because it did so, it weakened their sense of purpose in exercising leadership in their role as legislators, resulting in relatively little success in bringing their issues into the legislative agenda.³³ In some instances, women MPs are forced into providing lip service for male agendas, whether in response to implicit threats or explicit acts of microphones being turned off.³⁴ Such sentiments are consistent with other cross-national research that has found the employing female quotas do not alter gender compositions of legislatures.³⁵

The international community has played an important role supporting top-down efforts to promote women's leadership. Despite important investments, informants felt that donor efforts were most noticeable and targeted at triggering change in urban areas. Although many informants were grateful for the support of the international community, they also criticized donors for inconsistency in their stance on women empowerment, which was reflected in what a prominent woman politician described as "fixation with the Taliban and tendency to ignore Taliban-like mentality prevalent in most groups in power."³⁶ For example, although the international community associates Afghanistan's most serious cases of gender-based political violence as occurring under the Taliban, such behavior was also common among the warlord groups and political parties supported by the United States during the 1980s and early 1990s.³⁷

Several informants believed that the top-down approach the international community promoted failed to generate broader sustained social change—especially in areas outside Kabul—because the donors engaged only a few prominent groups, leading to perceptions of favoritism and selective engagement. Most informants believed that this limited engagement was in large part related to donor travel constraints and thus an inability to support or monitor organizations in rural areas. Others felt that the international community was satisfied to surround itself with those who would docilely accept grants without challenging international strategies. Such a sentiment was echoed by a Kabul-based international expert on women's leadership, who acknowledged that "we [members of the donor community] are aware of the perception that lesser known organizations receive less support."³⁸

"Donors are obsessed," the same expert observed, "with putting more women in senior positions in the government, civil society, or businesses, as reflected in leadership capacity-building programs, including the upcoming USAID program PROMOTE."³⁹ Trainings, often tailored along this perception, encourage a drive for gaining power by persuading followers to buy into the leader's preconceived vision, a pattern also evident in civil society organizations' leadership training curricula.⁴⁰ But authority-driven models in contexts like Afghanistan are not enough to generate social change on their own. Instead, in such environments, it is more appropriate to think of leadership as a sustained effort by a group of individuals rather than assuming that individuals, by virtue of their authority position, will be able to drive consensus to foment change. Many of those interviewed for this research believed that the focus on quotas and appointments of women to positions of authority undermined the ability of these women to lead. The explanation was simple: Women became disconnected from the population they sought to serve and frequently got caught up in webs of government corruption.

Corruption is a major impediment for the emergence of leadership in the public sector. When it is widespread, both women and men in the public sector find it difficult to be credible, gain people's trust, and mobilize them to participate in a collective intervention for change—

one of the primary purposes of leadership. As one young woman in a senior position in the government revealed, “I think our new generation is committed, but survival in the system often comes at the cost of loss of commitment and clinging to power only.”⁴¹ This situation by definition leaves neither space nor energy for initiating people-focused, participatory processes of change. Systemic corruption encourages narrow focus on individual interests at the cost of a collective sense of shared value that a leader must carry and reflect.

The sentiment that women’s role in the government is symbolic, lacks credibility in people’s eyes, and is not backed by the political will of the senior government leadership was one of the major trends that emerged from interviews and focus group discussions. Several women who have served in senior government positions or are serving in ministries confirmed this perception with regret. Prominent women interviewed for this research confirmed reports of systemic harassment or even violence against women in the government. As one of them told us, “I am often advised to expect harassment, conspiracy, character assassination, and be ready to face them, which I have, even physical attempts at hurting me.”⁴² This pattern compels most of the few women in senior positions to focus on survival in the system rather than making a difference. As a result, as an Afghan legal expert explained, women executives are “unable to embody the values they claim to represent” and are reduced to mere symbols in others’ eyes, including men.⁴³ Given that most female appointments do not target key service delivery institutions, women’s role in those positions remains irrelevant to the needs of most people and is thus dispensable.

Civil Society, Media, and the Private Sector

Women’s role in the burgeoning Afghan civil society, in the words of a senior Afghan sociologist, has contributed to “valuable visibility and the existence of the discourse of equality, at least in urban areas.”⁴⁴ According to a former MP and civil society activist, women leaders in this sector have been a “pressure group,” keeping a check on government policies and calling for immediate action in certain cases such as the Presidential Executive Order on the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law (EVAW).⁴⁵ Women’s active participation, predominantly in the civil society sector, has over time helped “institutionalize a culture of protest and advocacy in the traditional Afghan context which prohibits women’s loud voice in public.”⁴⁶ This is also evident from a review of the frequency of women-led or women-initiated protests over the past fourteen years. Women-led civil society organizations have played a significant role in encouraging women’s civic and political participation through nationwide voting campaigns, resulting in a substantial number of women voters showing up at the ballot boxes. Heads of women’s organizations gave the credit of these achievements to moments of unity, saying that women leaders have had “valuable achievements and have found legitimate relevance to people’s aspirations where they have stood together.”⁴⁷

Efforts to promote women’s leadership have placed hopes on the emergence of strong civil society organizations that can mobilize women. For example, during the 2014 presidential campaign, the Afghan Women’s Network, one of the largest women-focused civil society groups in the country, drafted a six point petition and had it signed by Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani.⁴⁸ This move confirmed the tendency of women’s organizations to focus more on convincing figures of authority rather than on mobilizing from within.⁴⁹ However, this trend—believing that only individuals in positions of formal authority have the power to bring change—neglects the role of the public in shaping change. It puts the onus of responsibility on individuals in positions of power, instead, betraying the original collective identity and drive of the civil society sector. The rentier nature of civil society organizations, rooted in their financial dependence on the donor community, contributes to the trend by emphasizing top-down accountability at the cost of bottom-up engagement with society.

Women-led civil society organizations have played a significant role in encouraging women’s civic and political participation through nationwide voting campaigns, resulting in a substantial number of women voters showing up at the ballot boxes.

Despite protests by the Ulema Council, the government has continued to facilitate provision of space for female faces in the Afghan media—both as newsreaders and in the broadcast of female performances (artists, singers, and so on).⁵⁰ However, a prominent Afghan female journalist in a focus group discussion suggested that such protests by conservative elements in society continue to harm the role of women in the media, as they are usually depicted in “nonserious roles or used as pleasant objects to increase viewership.”⁵¹ She believed that it is difficult to find women as anchors of popular prime time political talk shows, a reflection of the “social mindset dominant in the media circles that considers women incapable of conducting political analysis or creating serious analytical content.”⁵² Female journalists often face threats of violence when reporting on women’s issues, and the support structure within media organizations remains limited.

Interviewees were particularly critical of what they believed to be the government’s inadequate attention to facilitating women’s role in the private sector. An Afghan businessman believed that “the government has not done much to facilitate women’s role in businesses. Whatever that is there today, is primarily due to the efforts of the private sector itself.”⁵³ This sentiment was ironic because instead of viewing markets as bottom-up or independent entities, most respondents attributed the weak role of women in business to weak government policy. Such a sentiment was surprising because, at the same time, many were critical of the government’s weak capacity and reputation for predation.

Although the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries (ACCI) 2014 annual report speaks of support for women’s engagement in businesses, the overall challenges of the sector, such as insecurity restricting women’s mobility and lack of infrastructure, are serious impediments. Furthermore, many women noted lack of access to financing and difficulties accessing cash to create small business. An Afghan entrepreneur and businesswoman noted that Afghan businesswomen themselves did not have tools to self-organize because they “lack strong professional networks of support within private sector circles” that are mostly male dominated, another major obstacle.⁵⁴ Furthermore, corruption in customs, contracts, and loans makes it difficult for women to lead in the sector.⁵⁵ Lack of self-organized networks of women in businesses, and inability to build strong linkages with institutions like the ACCI, has resulted in lack of strategic cooperation and information sharing within these networks, leading in turn to women’s weak and donor-dependent presence.⁵⁶ Businesswomen consequently face financial constraints and are not taken seriously in the business world.⁵⁷

Many interviewees felt that women remained significantly underrepresented in the production industry. This trend becomes evident in a review of the limited literature on women’s economic empowerment: Most focus on the employability of women or their entrepreneurial skills, but all take the perspective of the service industry rather than the production industry.⁵⁸ In the words of an Afghan businesswoman, “Saffron production might be the only good example” of female presence in the production industry in Afghanistan.⁵⁹ Continued emphasis on increasing the numbers of women in the service industry may continue to keep women out of the economic production cycle or at best as its “passive contributors,” as one Afghan sociologist believed. An international expert on women’s leadership working in Kabul expressed concern regarding the upcoming large-scale five-year USAID program PROMOTE.⁶⁰ Major components of the program, she said, are likely to “add to the number of women working in government, civil society, or businesses” as opposed to women in production.⁶¹ Women’s passive economic role limits their capacity to emerge as leaders in the family, which Afghan sociologists believe is the “foundational building block of Afghan society and the starting point of the practice of leadership for women and men.”⁶²

Trends were not much different among civil society organizations. Some women’s rights organizations participating in focus group discussions believed that “civil society groups

have managed to raise their voice.”⁶³ Others found the civil society collective to be “irrelevant to youth,” a sentiment also echoed by students and young journalists.⁶⁴ As a result, as an Afghan legal expert suggested, “educational institutions are becoming centers of religious extremism, a pattern of thought that does not carry favorable views of women’s agency to lead.”⁶⁵ In the absence of focused interventions aimed at engaging men, religious actors, and customary institutions, bridging this gap of irrelevance remains a challenge.

Engaging Men, Religion, and Custom

Adaptive leadership posits that enduring social change is more likely to emerge when a wide group of stakeholders are engaged on an issue. Engaging other stakeholders involves understanding their perspective as legitimate players rather than as ill-intended enemies of the cause. For this reason, efforts to promote women’s leadership without engaging men are likely to struggle.

The vast majority of resources aimed at improving the role of women have been targeted at women, not men. Most focus group discussions spoke specifically to the predominant perception of women as victims and second-class citizens in relation to men.

A perception that the international community was disproportionately supporting women led many male informants to believe that men had received inadequate attention. For example, an *imam* believed that this perceived disproportionate targeting contributed to “feelings of inequality and inadequacy among men.”⁶⁶ A 2013 USAID gender analysis illustrated similar findings, indicating that men generally did not believe their female counterparts had any struggles in their professional work.⁶⁷ Male project managers interviewed echoed similar sentiments and believed that “women had a privileged position in government and society as a result of the trainings, quotas, and other preferential treatment mechanisms.”⁶⁸ Although this notion is not particularly credible, it comes during a time of significant social, political, and economic change for Afghan men as well, which might suggest why antipathy toward women could be so virulent.

Taking stock of such sentiments among men, the Afghan Human Rights and Democracy Organization recently argued that the only way to tackle women’s problems is to engage with men. Specifically, they believe that it is family dynamics, where women have little decision-making authority, that keep them marginalized.⁶⁹ It is in the family environment where women are subject to “persistent violence and abusive behavior.”⁷⁰ This domestic culture spills over into the public world, where women are subject to persistent harassment.⁷¹

Insecurity and harassment inhibit women’s mobility and justify family restrictions. As an Afghan entrepreneur and civil society activist explained, “Women leaders have less information about Afghan society; their access is limited; they can’t travel to Afghanistan’s provinces, districts, and villages, as men can; they cannot sit down next to a shopkeeper and hear him out.”⁷² In the words of female students, “Men harass us, but we can’t tell our family for fear of more restrictions. So we keep quiet and tolerate it.”⁷³

Surprisingly, we found little direct correlation between marriage and women’s perceptions that they had a safer space for personal growth or social contribution in the public sphere. Several factors contribute to society’s alienating attitude toward women, gender segregation at educational institutions being one of them. Mainstream media’s content adds fuel to this fire by broadcasting programs that strengthen and further institutionalize alienating opinions about women’s role. Some university students believed that “popular shows on Tolo, Khurshid, or 1TV, such as *Lahza ba Lahza*, *Dam ba Dam* and *Shabkhand*, contribute to objectification of women and provide extremists with an excuse to speak against women’s role in media.”⁷⁴

Social norms informed by narrow misinterpretation of religion restrict women’s access to society. Ashraf ul Madares, a *madrasah* in Kunduz province housing more than six thousand female students, promotes religious extremism and a Taliban style set of rules restricting

radio, television, photography, celebrations of teacher's day or mother's day, new year, or women's work outside the household.⁷⁵ Women activists of the Jamiat-e Eslah, the Afghan association inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood, protested against the EAW law in 2013, "condemning the freedoms envisaged in the law as a plot by the West to strip Muslim women of their Islamic dignity."⁷⁶

Interviewees, both men and women, voiced concern that the Afghan religious establishment is somehow complicit in violence against women and poses a barrier to women's personal security outside the house. This is because many Afghan men use religious justifications for their desire to isolate women—a practice that seems to have evolved from social norms in Afghanistan rather than religious scripture. Although a predominant view among interviewees was the need to have women religious scholars with capacity to accurately interpret religious text, respondents warned of the consequences of making religious scholars the messenger in every field. Following the horrifying murder of Farkhunda, mullahs in Kabul called for a ban on civil society activities.⁷⁷ The murder also demonstrated widespread lack of compassion and tolerance fostered by religious instruction that indoctrinates youth with an interpretation of Islam that fosters narrow-mindedness.⁷⁸

Meaningful engagement with religious groups, as Palwasha Kakar argues, can be effective only with patience and constructive effort to build trust and a sense of ownership. Reflecting on past efforts, she emphasizes that quick fixes—in which traditional leaders were given documents developed by human rights organizations—were perceived as an attempt to place Islamic ideas into a foreign human rights framework rather than as real consultation.⁷⁹

Enablers of Women's Leadership

Interviews and focus group discussions not only allowed us to understand the effectiveness of efforts to promote women's leadership but also factors that help generate effective women leaders in Afghanistan. The very personal and biographical nature of the interviews—especially among the prominent women—shed enormous insights into what they believed helped explain their rise to eminence.

In Afghan society, power and authority are typically the dominion of men. In the words of a human rights advocate, "Society perceives women as citizens with secondary status, at times even as things."⁸⁰ Changing this social mindset may take a long time. An alternative frame of leadership that facilitates women's space to exercise leadership beyond the limitations of access to authority may hold more immediate promise. "We need creativity when it comes to women's leadership, otherwise, there is a lot going on that is seen as more important than promoting women's leadership."⁸¹

Supportive Family

In the words of a former Afghan MP, "Women's safe space for growth starts with a supportive family."⁸² A woman leader's family members, both male and female, are key to her capacity to step out, explore, learn, and play a useful role in her field. Becoming a woman leader does not necessarily mean women should be women's rights activists. "We need women leaders in every field, so we should encourage our children to get education in the fields that they love and become leaders in those sectors. We need women leaders in the air force, in medicine, in engineering, or in teaching."⁸³

Family support however extends beyond affairs at home to include facilitating women's safe space outside the household. It is an internationally recognized principle, as articulated by an international gender analyst, that "women's mobility depends on their capacity to safely move from point A to B, which can be facilitated through a women supportive transport system and harassment free society, workplace, and educational institutions."⁸⁴ Families

play a critical role in shaping social attitudes women face once they step out. A journalist participating in the focus group discussion explained that he will not allow his younger sister to work outside because “women get harassed in offices or on the streets.”⁸⁵ This concern emerged repeatedly, indicating the widespread nature of this problem but also highlighting society’s inability to own and collectively address it. Given that children’s early years determine most of their character, the family environment at home plays a key role in shaping how boys and girls treat themselves and each other, both at home and in public.

Women Role Models

Promoting women’s leadership through government will be most effective if capable women are appointed to senior decision-making positions through a credible process that ensures their legitimacy in the eyes of the public. The national unity government’s manner of picking women for senior posts, in particular the two candidates who did not receive a vote of confidence from the parliament, visibly “lacked credibility and thus delegitimized those women,” an Afghan media observer pointed out.⁸⁶ An international development expert believed that the only way to “normalize women’s leadership roles is for women to have legitimacy and an authorizing environment that protects that mandate—that is, through political will, provision of adequate resources, and implementation capacity.”⁸⁷ Without these, the appointment of women to senior positions is merely symbolic. Women’s having a legitimate leadership role in government, an Afghan international policy expert suggested, would help build “a strong state, the prerequisite for any and all that must be achieved in Afghanistan, including enforcing women’s right to inheritance and property ownership.”⁸⁸

Interviewees believed that a strong contributing factor to expanded women’s leadership could emerge when the population relies on women’s services and products for their daily needs. This, they emphasized, could open the doors to women’s positions in government and private-sector service delivery agencies. As several activists and prominent women pointed out, appointing women to key service delivery institutions, such as health, education, higher education, judiciary, and the security sector, has the potential to offer women a legitimate platform to exercise leadership and serve as role models, provided political will supports them and enough resources and capability (that is, the power to decide and enforce) are at their disposal. Such a measure would also give women a strong voice that neither the government nor the private sector and media can ignore.

Another important measure is active mentorship. A female entrepreneur and activist believed that taking time out to “mentor and actively seek mentors is critical for women leaders, which can also help in fostering sisterhood and making leadership accessible as opposed to the current common pattern of inaccessibility.”⁸⁹ It is critical, however, as an Afghan leadership coach pointed out, to have and promote “role model women leaders for all layers of society, because today’s women on positions of national significance belong to a certain class, and thus lack relevance to a majority of young women who search for ideals and role models as they grow.”⁹⁰

Education

Consensus was strong that access to education and higher education is the first step in building women’s agency for leadership. However, respondents warned of the danger of relying on quantity at the cost of quality of education. One activist suggested that “while having more institutions of higher education and continued increase of women’s access to higher education can be effective, mindset change will not happen without curriculum reform.”⁹¹ This view was seconded: “The challenge in training programs like PROMOTE’s Women in Leadership is that it starts in the middle and faces the, in some cases impossible, task of helping people unlearn in

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order to learn new concepts.”⁹² Participants believed that curriculum reform must also cover centers of religious education because “the religion that our children learn today is the religion of mullahs, not the religion of Prophet Muhammad.”⁹³

Recommendations

Leadership development programs need to adopt a gender-inclusive approach and engage with men and women. Leadership must be studied, understood, exercised, and promoted as an activity distinct from authority, and one beyond any formal position of power, because the current authority-driven social definition of leadership significantly excludes women. Leadership development programs must stress contextual awareness and leader’s sense of purpose, promote leadership as an act of mobilizing people to tackle a collective challenge, and stress authority as one of many tools leaders may use.

At an individual level, women aspiring to exercise leadership roles need to learn and practice self-confidence, actively seek mentors and be mentors for other women, wisely pick their fights by prioritizing, practice stepping back to see and listen to the bigger picture, and actively build alliances and networks of support.

Afghan media should project positive and encouraging images of credible women leaders, not only by developing profiles of women leaders in politics, business, and civil society but also by embodying their value in media programs, reflected in the increased role of women in serious political analysis programs.

Civil society organizations, through an informed and collaborative effort with the international community, should aim at transitioning their mutual relations from one defined by total dependence on the donor community to one characterized by interdependence and thus increased emphasis on bottom-up accountability.

Civil society organizations and the Afghan government should join hands in tapping women’s social, political, and economic potential. To expand women’s space for social and economic contributions and to engage them as part of the work force, civil society organizations and the government education curriculum should inform the younger generation that women’s work at home counts as work. This would help support equality-based social change and facilitate building a foundation for gender equality beginning in families. This effort should be complemented by a social discourse led by civil society organizations, including the media, on equal opportunity for Afghan citizens.

The Afghan government must develop a zero-tolerance policy toward harassment in the workplace and in educational institutions in order to promote and encourage harassment free public spaces. Creative reform of the national transport system would make women’s movement safer and encourage a supportive family environment.

To extend women’s empowerment to rural areas, civil society organizations need to seriously engage with religious groups and thought leaders. Relatedly, the international community needs to understand that religious thought will continue to be a more important organizing and legitimizing principle for the people of Afghanistan than UN resolutions and declarations. Such engagement must move beyond lip service and quick fixes to more sustained engagement and dialogue with men generally as well as with religious and traditional leaders.

Donors need to continue to support Afghanistan’s potential for women’s meaningful role in social, economic, and political spheres. This would entail backing efforts that lead to the wider presence of women in the civil service, diversifying its support from civil society organizations, and helping the Afghan government tap into women’s potential for economic agency and make them foundational to generating revenue in the country.

To extend women’s empowerment to rural areas, civil society organizations need to seriously engage with religious groups and thought leaders.

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