



Women in the Eyes of Men:

Tackling the Structural Roots of Women's Problems in Afghanistan

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Executive Summary and Recommendations

Despite the progress made on women's rights in the last decade, the situation of women in Afghanistan remains dire. There is a need for significant change in the attitudes and behaviors of Afghan men towards women. Characterized by parochialism, suspicion, violence and control, Afghan men largely view women as subordinates and often treat them either with denigration or negligence. The entrenched attitudes and behaviors of Afghan men are central to understanding the slow pace of Afghan women's development.

In order for women to continue their progress in social, economic, political and private spheres, attitudinal changes in Afghan men are essential to creating a favorable institutional and social environment for this to occur.

Afghan men dominate key institutions and social structures that not only influence, but also shape and configure, women's life in public and private realms. Patriarchal family structures, a masculine religious establishment, unsafe public space, the male dominated market place and conservative culture and traditions considerably restrain women both privately and publicly. Women face complex structural forces that tacitly and expressly affect their lives and negatively impact their ability to change their situation.

Religious forces have a long historical record of suppressing women with strict and inflexible religious interpretation. Religious establishments in various forms - madrasas, mosques and other localized centers of learning and counseling - have structured and sustained a deeply conservative discourse on women that constrains them. What social functions women have, how they should live their life, and how they should appear in public and in private, are predominantly defined by the interpretations of these religious institutions, actors and practices.

Engagement and interactions with mullahs throughout our research revealed that they could be loosely divided into two broad camps with certain variations according to their views on women: the extremist and the moderate.

The extremist mullahs that wield significant sway are immersed in the communities and operate independently of any form of governmental and civil society oversight, rejecting women's role outside the family environment by considering it against Islamic Sharia codes. They promote a puritanical view of women advocating strict gender segregation and the veiling of women. They promote their extremist reading of women's social role

with inflammatory and religiously charged orations and speeches using their extended network of mosques, families, friends and communities. In their view, Afghan women's ethical integrity has been harmed in the wake of the Taliban's fall and this trend must be reversed.

The moderate mullahs allow women a role in the public realm but urge their strict compliance with the Islamic code of dress and behavior. They express concerns about the problems women face from lack of security to abuses and harassment but put the blame largely on the provocative dressing and behavior of women. There is a minority amongst these moderate mullahs that have liberal views and consider women equal to men but still consider that respecting religious and cultural norms would boost women's standing in society.

Mainstream religious forces do not promote a long-term view to help transform women into constructive social, economic and political players. Nor do they expressly blame Afghan men for the street harassment, abuses and violence that men perpetrate against women. Instead, they remain intent on 'correcting' the attitude and behavior of the victims, not those of the perpetrators.

Despite recognition that mullahs exercise preponderant power over local communities, neither the Afghan government nor civil society or their international partners have constructively engaged with mullahs in order to harness their support to improve women's roles in various areas including education and employment. The religious establishment is the force that has most influenced women's lives across the various layers of society yet it has been disregarded over the past decade, despite largely opting to work against women. Furthermore, as they have done so, they have either been co-opted by the insurgents on ideological grounds or mobilized by opportunist elements - both detrimental to women.

The institution of the family, the most important social structure, is both patriarchal and male dominated. This affects women tremendously. In a typical Afghan family, an elderly male or any other male member of the family exercises control and power. As such, power and decision-making are highly hierarchical with women occupying the bottom rung of the power constellation. Within such an arrangement, the opportunity structure is highly discriminatory, keeping women severely marginalized.

In their families, women are often treated as secondary to men and are subject to persistent violence and abusive behavior. Physical control of women and the alleged protection of their moral integrity have greater primacy than their education and

development as agents of change. Certain cultural norms and twisted religious and traditional practices all disadvantage women and girls but discussions during our research revealed that chronic poverty plays a significant part in women's predicaments. Male family members are preferred because they are either part of the current productive labor force or have the potential to become economically productive. Women, largely lacking this feature, suffer exclusion and marginalization as a result.

Many of the different forms of violence sustained by women can be traced to poverty. Indeed, the criticized practices of child marriage, forced marriage, exchange marriages, the giving away of girls to settle disputes and other forms of family violence have their roots in chronic poverty rather than cultural and traditional mores. Changing women's status in the family requires restructuring power relations, especially economic-financial relations inside Afghan families and the market place.

Afghan women's role in the market place is extremely limited, although women's role has improved in government and non-government institutions. Political quotas, gender mainstreaming, media and civil society have provided opportunities for an improved absorption of women into the public and private sectors. These institutions have empowered women, marking a slight change in unequal productive-economic relations, however, men's domination over these structures means that women in the workforce continue to be subject to potential abuse and ill-treatment, including sexual harassment.

To a certain extent, some Afghans view women who work outside family environment with suspicion. Even some women themselves can hold equally cynical views about their peers working in public sphere. AHRDO's field research shows that such deep-seated suspicions and misperceptions often result in significant social costs for women in their families, neighborhoods and communities. It limits women's role in public and their access to resources.

An area characterized by persistent harassment is the public space. Street harassment has turned into a big challenge in the daily life of the Afghan woman. Afghan men of varied age and from different religious, social and economic backgrounds engage in abusive practices in public. These practices are most common in Kabul but are spreading to other major cities. Strict social segregation in schools, little communication between the two genders, and ambiguity and poor rule of law have allowed this social problem to fester. Having become so normalized, such abusive practices no longer receive serious public rebuke and reprimand, and are becoming accepted as just another challenge in the daily lives of Afghan women.

A persistent public presence of women will reduce the problem of public harassment. The creation of appropriate public space and a redefining of gender relations would also counter harassment. Afghan men must revise their view that interaction between boys and girls and men and women will lead to physical, and thus illegal, relationships. More importantly, redefinition of gender relations is required in the family and at secondary education levels. To tackle a highly gendered environment, Afghans must gradually move towards adopting a co-educational secondary school system, at least, in urban centers. This should take place in a culturally sensitive way to mitigate potential harms on girls' attendance to educational institutions. There are variations across the regions in this respect with Nangarhar featuring as more conservative while Kabul and Bamyan are more open.

Women's role in the initiation and administration of small business initiatives must improve. Restaurants, grocery shops, shopping malls, vegetable stalls, clothing shops and the like have the potential to constitute the bulk of women's economic engagement. Women have slowly penetrated this area but they need to increase their roles in this sector. This can help normalize women's presence outside the family environment as well as empower and liberate them socially. Right now, women feel quite vulnerable in a mixed environment. In the short term, the creation of gender specific business districts can serve as a good trigger. This is because women's presence in local market place insignificant. It will help restructure the social power relations in the long run in favor of women in the country.

Key Recommendations:

Religions Institutions

1. The Ministry of Haj and Awqaf in concert with the Ulema Council of Afghanistan and civil society must formulate a clear set of educational and social criteria for the operation of mullahs as preachers and tutors in the local mosques and madrasas. Transgression of the set benchmarks and regulatory framework must be met with disciplinary measures.
2. Mullahs without express sanction from the ministry of Haj and Ulema Council must not be allowed to administer mosques and madrasas on their own. The appointment and removal of mullahs in local mosques and madrasas must be centralized. The Ministry of Haj must exercise appointment and removal authority over mullahs both in mosques and madrasas.

3. The Afghan Parliament/ Provincial Councils in coordination with civil society and the media must oversee the operation of mullahs in mosques and madrasas in local communities. These institutions must provide regular reports on exploitation and abuse of local religious institutions against women and national interests to the government for practical measures.
4. The curriculum of madrasas must be reformed, uniformed and standardized in accord with the latest developments in Islamic studies. At present, local religious actors twist and distort religious teachings and preaching to promote an extremist religious tradition. In the long run reforms must replace extremist religious traditions with moderate and progressive strands of religious thinking while protecting the religious minorities and promoting religious pluralism.
5. Civil society must engage with the mosques and madrasas in order to maintain a dialogue and to help influence their messages in relation to women. Civil society can assist in the mobilization of the resources of religious institutions to promote women's rights and freedom of education and work.
6. Civil society, especially women's rights activists, must work together with the government to encourage that religious institutions substitute their narrow obsession with gender segregation and the physical control of women with the intellectual, social and economic development of Afghan women.
7. The government in consultation with women's rights activists must devise strategies to break the monopoly of men over religious education and religious institutions by promoting the role of women in religious sectors especially in the madrasas. At the moment, religious institutions, in particular the madrasas, are under the exclusive control of men and this has disproportionately affected women. Women's representation must improve in these institutions to employ religious resources for women's development as well as to counter religious abuses.

The Public Sphere

8. There is a legislative vacuum about street harassment in Afghanistan. Many Afghans do not view street harassment as a criminal practice. The Afghan Parliament must criminalize street harassment through appropriate legislation.

9. Street harassment of women is fast spreading and is fast becoming culturally acceptable. Such practices must be countered through extensive media and civic campaigns.
10. The government must adopt a zero tolerance policy towards abusive practices against women. Abusive practices in public institutions including sexual molestation often do not meet robust legal and disciplinary measures. The new policy must cut across all public and private institutions.
11. Afghan women must adhere to the principles of a gradual process of change in Afghanistan's conservative social context. Certain excessive practices in public like televised commercial advertisements may trigger intense public reaction by the conservative forces. This has the potential to harm the prospects for women's enduring development.
12. Afghan women must continue to resort to courageous, defiant and expressive initiatives such as cycling, driving private cars, administering public transport, managing economic initiatives, etc. Such empowering and expressive measures will normalize and institutionalize women's presence in public space.
13. The overwhelming majority of women still remain economically unproductive. The gradual absorption of elite women in high profile jobs in public and private sectors will not bring about significant change in women's current living condition. Afghans have yet to fully accept women's economic engagement in the market place in large numbers. Therefore, the establishment of women-only business streets is most needed and will permanently change the status of the majority of women from an economically sterile and dormant force to an economically productive and dynamic force. Such initiatives will increase women's self-confidence, improve their independence and will trigger broader socio-economic changes in the country.
14. The Afghan media, cultural centers and women's human rights activists must initiate campaigns to counter certain injurious and disrespectful communicational terms and metaphors. Many Afghans feel uncomfortable addressing their wives and daughter by their name. This affects the personality of women as an independent agent of change. As such, it must be corrected through cultural reforms.

15. The government in accord with women's rights activists must regulate marriage practices. Certain marriage practices in rural areas have earned an exclusive commercial character. Poor families engage in such practices as a means to alleviate their poverty and wealthy individuals and families abuse the desperation of the poor families. And;

16. The Afghan government must establish and enforce an effective, country-wide and compulsory civil identity registration program, which among others, should include birth, marriage, divorce, death etc certification. A proper civil identity registration program will help address many of the problems women face in civil disputes.

The Family, Culture and Traditions

17. The criminalization of family violence must be prioritized. The writ of Afghan laws rarely extends to the realm of Afghan families where violence, mistreatment and discrimination against women are rampant. Women and girls constitute major victims of family violence and mistreatment. Family violence has yet to be criminalized in practice. Male members commit violence without fear of prosecution. This must change by extending the writ of the law into the family environment. The Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law is an important legislative development but it has yet to be effectively enforced in Afghanistan's court system.

18. Women's lack of economic productivity combined with chronic poverty in Afghan families have in most cases allowed women and girls to degenerate into second-grade, tradable and exchangeable individuals. Even the informal sale of girls and other harmful forms of marriage such as child and forced marriage, which are being frequently blamed on wrong cultural practices and traditions, largely stem from the severe financial problems that families face. Families engage in such practices to alleviate their poverty. For women to overcome these problems, they must engage in economically productive activities primarily through women-only economic and business initiatives.

19. Family education and counseling is nearly non-existent in Afghanistan. Male members often avoid engaging female members in critical family issues. Women are not treated as actors and agents of change. This institutionalizes the marginalization of women. This must be changed through the establishment of family counseling associations and reforms in the educational curriculum.

1. Introduction

Over the course of the past 13 years, significant efforts have been undertaken to tackle women's problems in Afghanistan. Afghan women have taken important steps forward in all sectors ranging from education to politics, civil society, government and democratic institutions. Yet, women face insurmountable problems. Fragility and uncertainty in the position of women in society is increasing as the international withdrawal gets closer to its conclusion.

Most of the problems women face today stem from areas and institutions that have faced negligence in the past decade or so. The family environment and religious institutions such as mosques and madrasas continue to constrain women. No conscious efforts have been made to help women penetrate the market place. Afghan public space haunts women and street harassment has turned into a serious issue across the major urban areas. These areas predominantly remain masculine. Women's development will largely depend on structural reforms in these institutions.

The efforts made in post-Taliban Afghanistan to address women's problems have been radically different from those in 1920s, the decade of democracy, and under communist rule throughout the 1980s. Historically, structural factors and unequal social relations constituted the focus of reform movements. Change in conservative institutions such as marriage, and individual freedom including legal modifications attracted the greatest salience and controversy. Most interestingly, Afghan state agents and the urban elites were the principle drivers of these earlier reformist struggles.¹

Over the course of the past 13 years, the Afghan government has not been a major champion of women's rights. Neither have the state elite had the courage and ethical commitment to do so. Rather Afghan civil society with international support has led the efforts, albeit incoherently. The efforts at best have been scattered with not much focus on structural factors.

The most important change with long-term implication has been women's participation in the democratic institutions such as parliament and provincial councils, mainly through a quota system under the Constitution. Lacking solid vision and common agendas, the women in democratic institutions have clearly failed to promote their group agenda and interests. The promulgation through presidential decree of the Law on Elimination of Violence Against Women was another important legislative development. Yet parliament

1. AHRDO, *Afghan Women after the Taliban: Will History Repeat Itself*, February 2012.

challenged its approval and the judicial institutions have largely ignored its implementation. As a result, violence against women remains rampant in its various forms with devastating consequences.

In 2012, The Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization (AHRDO) published its report *Afghan Women after the Taliban: Will History Repeat Itself?*, providing an historical perspective on women's struggle for reforms in Afghanistan and offering an analysis of the politics of women's empowerment after the Taliban's fall.

The current report reflects Afghan men's thoughts and views on women's rights. It assumes that women's development requires changes in Afghan men's behaviors, views and perceptions of women. To place the problems in their institutional and structural contexts, the project has engaged men that represent certain structures and institutions with immediate influence on women. Throughout the project cycle, the function and role of institutions including the family, religious establishments, the public sphere, the market place and culture and tradition were explored. The key objective of the research was to find ways to make these masculine structures more conducive to women's liberation and development.

Research Methodology

The methodology for this project has been multi-prong, drawing upon different research elements such as theatrical performances and debates, workshops, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. To gauge a nuanced view a highly diverse male audience was targeted. The targeted groups such as local mullahs, family elders (patriarchs), media, civil society and the common people represented distinct institutions and structures such as the religious establishment, the family, public sphere and Afghan customs and traditions. The following offers a snapshot of the key methodologies applied for this report:

- a) Legislative Theater Workshops were applied to introduce the topic to the participants, create an atmosphere of trust and link people who stemmed from different locations and backgrounds together.
- b) In the Legislative Theater Performances, Men played women's roles reflecting women's problems inside the family, religious institutions and the public sphere, as well as with economic activities and norms and values. After the performances, the actors and spectators shared their experiences on how they

felt while playing the roles of women in different settings and an in-depth discussion ensued among the attendants.

- c) Focus group discussions aimed to further explore masculine perspectives on women. Individuals associated with religious establishments, media and civil society, the family and the market place participated in each focus group discussion.
- d) Semi-structured interviews were conducted with male interviewees representing categories such as family and religious institutions, the market place, public sphere and culture and traditions. The interviews were to complement information collected through focus group discussions and theatre performances and theatre workshops.
- e) Throughout the different stages of the program, certain cases stood out more prominently and required further scrutiny and investigation. Follow up research was carried out to expand these cases in order to consolidate and verify the available information.
- f) Lastly, the findings of the project combined with analytical policy recommendations were taken to a roundtable in each of the four regional centers, providing opportunities for all the relevant actors to debate the findings and recommendations, add their view points and confirm these as policy platforms for future action.

Limitations:

- a) The Afghan men who participated in large part avoided speaking open heartedly about women in groups. They often attempted to portray themselves as individuals with open approaches to women's rights and roles, offering twisted images of women in their areas. In private, the same individuals often confided otherwise, contradicting their statements made in the public forum. Certain cultural traits and the fact that association with a liberal view is being touted as a credit at present in Afghanistan, account to this deceptive masculine approach which is being open in word and restrictive in practice, vis-a-vis women's rights and civil freedom.
- b) The participants were reluctant to share their day-to-day observations on local circumstances under which women live. Instead, they made frequent references to general statements and clichés they had heard from mullahs and other elders

like comparing the status of women in Islam to the status of women in the West. Such comparisons were out of context, imaginative and highly self-fulfilling.

- c) Cultural limitations were interfering with the discussions. Talking about women was visibly uncomfortable as it was felt, indirectly, to be an intrusion into issues deemed largely private. As the discussions progressed, the participants settled down and seemed to open more freely to the discussions.
2. Security was a constraining factor. Some of the project staff received threats. Religious actors interfered in the program, and voiced their disapproval of the program such as by arguing against them from a Sharia standpoint or even, in certain instances, walking away from the shows in protest.

Field Activities

The Women in the Eyes of Men project was implemented in the capital, Kabul, and the country's four regional centers: Bamyan, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif and Nangarhar. The project locations aimed to reflect regional, ethnic and cultural diversity and thereby offer a nuanced image of how Afghan men perceive women, view their roles, and the problems they think women encounter in each specific geo-cultural setting. As the project progressed, regional variations required a corresponding degree of alteration and modification in the way the project was implemented.

As was foreseen, engagement with men at the grassroots level on the issue of women's problems proved problematic from the very outset. The male participants appeared uncomfortable and reluctant to discuss objectively the situation of women in their neighbourhoods and communities. The participants relied more on general statements on the status of women, often transmitted to them through mosques and madrasas, than on sharing their observation of what they see in their day-to-day life. Instead of breaking new ground, such discussion was consolidating the established clichés.

The theatrical performances in which the actors focused on a specific set of women's problems within the context of male-dominated institutions and structures was instrumental in creating a frank environment for discussion. The participants were not willing to talk about the problems women face inside a family but they were quite open to discuss the problem a fictitious theatrical performer – playing the role of a father or brother who refused to allow his wife/sister to go to work or school – highlighted in live shows.

Legislative Theatre Workshop (LTW) was the first stage in the implementation of this project. It consisted of the introduction of the fundamental concept of the project (women in the eyes of Afghan men), the theatrical methodologies, networking and team building and performance

practices. Workshops, each lasting six days, were held in each of the five regional centers to achieve the set of objectives.

Cumulatively, ten TWs were held, two in each region: Bamyan, Herat, Kabul, Mazar, Nangarhar. Overall, 125 people participated in the TWs: 30 people in Bamyan, 24 in Mazar-e Sharif, 26 in Herat, 23 in Kabul and 22 in Nangarhar.²

Building on the LTWs, Legislative Theaters Performances (LTPs) were held. The issues that had earned greater salience during the LTWs were reflected in the LTPs. The LTPs inaugurated the program to the wider public. 60 to 100 individuals attended each LTP. The LTPs had four scenes; each scene reflecting a set of specific problems. In the first scene, the principle role player was typically a father/brother/husband dealing with his daughters, sisters or wife. In the second scene, a mullah would address women's rights issues in the setting of a sermon, or settling a family dispute. The third scene typically featured a young boy or a man in an official posting harassing a girl either on the streets, in an office or during a business transaction. The fourth scene often depicted a scenario where an under-age or forced marriage case was unfolding or controversies over excessive dowries were taking place. The order, scale and scope of the scenes were changing, according to each community's issues during each LTW.³

Firstly, AHRDO-trained theatrical actors enacted the performance on stage. Following the conclusion of the play, a trained moderator led and directed the discussions by the participants on each specific play scene and the problems it proffered. Secondly, after what were often intensive and sometimes controversial discussions on the controversial topics of the performance, the participants were asked to volunteer for an on stage performance. After experiencing the performance in various roles, they were asked to share how they felt in the position of a husband disapproving of his wife going to work, a brother preventing his sister from going to school, a mullah declaring a woman's role outside the family as anti-Sharia law and a girl being harassed on the streets. This created a perfect environment for quite intimate discussions on what men were doing to women in different structural settings. The performances were often quite quickly changing, and in many cases quite radically changing, men's positions on women's standing in each societal setting.

The number of performances and the extent of turnout in these performances were significant. The application of theatrical methodologies, unprecedented as they were in

2. AHRDO, Theatre Workshop, Field Reports: Bamyan, Herat, Kabul, Mazar and Nangarhar, 2013.

3. AHRDO, Theatre of Performance, Field Report: Bamyan, Herat, Kabul, Mazar and Nangarhar, 2013-14.

local communities, attracted more participants. Overall, more than 3900 individuals benefited from the performances across the five regions: 606 in Mazar, 756 in Herat, 1076 in Kabul and 782 in Nangarhar and 682 in Bamyan.⁴

To collect more context-specific details about how men with a designated association with distinct socio-cultural structures influence women's life at the grassroots level, 21 focus group discussions were conducted.⁵ Each focus group had five participants, one person from each of the following categories; family, religious establishment, public sphere and culture and traditions. These categories exercise determinative influence on women's public role. The individuals included family elders, (the patriarchs), mullahs, civil society, government officials and people with knowledge of Afghan customs and traditions connected to women's daily life.

To further reinforce the findings of the project, 24 in-depth interviews were carried out with individuals possessing a greater degree of expertise on, and affiliation with, the targeted social groupings. The findings of the project, including recommendations for each five categories (family, religious establishment, public sphere, market place and culture and tradition) in each region were shared with local actors through a provincially held referendum. Referendum participants, which included senior government officials, in large part endorsed the project findings and committed to incorporating the recommendations in their policies and programs.⁶

The cumulative findings of the report from the five regions are presented briefly in the following sections.

Key Findings

Women and the Religious Institutions

The Mullahs play the most important role in structuring and influencing the direction of the current life of Afghan citizens. They have deep roots in the local communities and control the most important local institutions - the madrasas and the mosques. There are no other institutions at the grassroots level in Afghanistan as powerful and as far reaching in the daily life of the people as the religious institutions. A local mullah, critical of his peers' role eloquently sums it up: 'Whoever wears a turban and puts on a religious cloak, wields more influence and attracts greater followership'.⁷ This quote illustrates the

4. Ibid.

5. AHRDO, Activities Report: Bamyan, Herat, Kabul, Mazar and Nangarhar, July 2013 – May 2014.

6. AHRDO, Referendum Report: Mazar, Bamyan, Herat, Nangarhar and Kabul, March – August 2014

7. AHRDO, Interview with a Local Mullah, Mazar-e Sharif, February 2014.

power and influence of the mullahs, who penetrate all social categories and groupings to varying degrees, and whose influence has most affected Afghan women.

It must be noted that there are significant variations in the religious institutions and among the religious actors. They do not constitute a homogeneous group with a uniform approach to women. There are moderate religious institutions that uphold the ideals of women's education and empowerment while taking into account the established religious mores and parameters. They uphold more liberal approaches to women's roles in socio-economic, cultural and political life. They not only tolerate women's public role but also encourage it by allowing their own family members to play a part in their communities.⁸ Local mullahs played exemplary roles in Herat and Bamyan provinces in this respect. However, the number of moderate religious institutions and socially open religious actors are far fewer than the conservative institutions and actors. This is more so in the conservative provinces like Nangarhar, especially in its districts and villages.⁹

The radical mullahs distort religious codes and structures in an unfettered and uncontrolled way. What further empowers them in the often distant and inaccessible rural communities are the more pronounced and assertive roles the mosques and madrasas have acquired in those communities. With no civil society or other social oversight and control structure available, religious institutions operate unrivaled and unchecked in rural communities. As there is an absence of well codified and structured religious discourse on women from the top of the institution, disparate religious actors approach women in radical, self-fulfilling and distorting ways by relying on select interpretations from the Qur'an, hadiths and other religious dictums, without much contextualization or rationalization. They publically oppose women's education and employment and only agree with it if women wear the *burqa* and the educational and employment organizations segregate the working space by gender¹⁰. Public stoning and execution of women in several provinces of the country attest to the growing power and influence of the radical strand of the Mullahs.

Although mullahs vociferously propagate and campaign for the moral integrity of women, they have sexually abused and molested the women themselves in different areas in the country. There are many cases of abuse including many audio records in circulation associated with senior Mullahs, soliciting sexual favors from women and girls. Audio records of a highly senior mullah in Kabul and another in Bamyan soliciting sexual favor from women and girls Ba¹¹ have gone viral on Internet. These types of practices

8. AHRDO, Theatre Performance: Bamyan and Herat, July – October 2014.

9. AHRDO, Theatre Performance: Nangharhar, January 2014.

10. AHRDO, Focus Group Discussion, Mazar-e Sharif, February 2014.

11. AHRDO, Focus Group Discussion, Bamiyan, March 2014.

demonstrate some fundamental contradictions as well as abuses in the Afghan religious establishments.

3.1.1. Further, the religious institutions, structures and forces are the most gendered of all institutions in the country. Although no express statements have been made which could formally bar women from playing their due roles, at least in religious educational institutions, Afghan men almost exclusively dominate religious networks. Barred from playing any role in mosques, women are largely excluded from madrasas and religious schools especially from the management and administration of these institutions. The gendered religious education system combined with radical religious mosques has led to the suppression of women by religious forces and institutions. This has affected all aspects of women's life ubiquitously, ranging from family to education, clothing, choice of marriage and economic and educational activities.¹²

From the 1980s, we have witnessed a radicalization of Islam in Afghanistan. The Taliban and a number of other groups have dramatically shifted the balance of power from moderate Mullahs to those in favor of a more radical form of Islam, including those who maintain an association with rogue and terrorist religious actors. The presence of international troops has further fueled radical religious propaganda, especially in rural districts. A significant part of this propaganda revolves around women. Mullahs with public and covert links to the insurgent groups designate women who have an association with NGOs and other public institutions as corrupt and foreign prostitutes. They attempt to portray women's latest development as their moral decadence.¹³

Mawlawi Rashid, a moderate mullah from Bamyan, bitterly criticizes his fellow mullahs: "Some mullahs have got their education outside the country. They are sent to preach religion but instead, they preach against women".¹⁴ The anti-government activities of some mullahs have become increasingly worrying. As one participant in theatre performance said: "They have turned the mosques into a battle front".¹⁵ To advance their battle against the government, the theme of women's freedom in post-Taliban-areas is used as a rallying point for recruitment to their ranks.

The Afghan government has tried to target these Mullahs but as long as local communities are not mobilized and a sustained form of oversight over mosques is not exercised, extremist mullah propaganda will not only continue unabated but will also gain great ferocity.

12. AHRDO, Interview, Female Religious Instructor, Herat, July 2014.

13. AHRDO interviews/focus groups in Mazar-e Sharif, Nangarhar, Herat and Bamian, Feb-July, 2014.

14. AHRDO, Focus Group, Bamian, 9 March 2013.

15. Ibid

There are also local mullahs who do not espouse links to subversive groups but oppose the current process of women's development in Afghanistan on ideological grounds. Although they do not engage in express subversive activities they can easily turn to forces with which they share ideological commonality. They view it as their religious obligation to campaign against the current process of women's liberal development. They will only agree with a public role for women under strict conditions, including gender segregation and strict observation of a dress code involving either burqa or niqab - head to toe covering. For instance, a local Mullah from Nangarhar says:

*Women must not work in offices where the men work because the presence of men and women in one place causes rancor and moral corruption. And moral corruption in a society destroys the foundation of the family.*¹⁶

Such a strict reading of women's rights enjoys prevalence among the mullahs of many conservative communities, especially in Nangarhar. This interpretation had echoes in Mazar-e Sharif and Herat, too, but there was also a strong counter-narrative in those provinces which favored women's public role in the same social environments.

The Moderate Mullahs

The moderate mullahs agree with women having a role outside the family. To support their moderate statement, they invoke historical narratives of Islam, for example, championing Khadija, Prophet Mohammad's wife, as a trader. Building on Khadija's role in the early days of Islam, they portray Islam as a religion favorable to women's public role. Mawlana Abdul Razaq in Nangarhar says:

*In Islam, Bibi Khadija, prophet's wife, was the first woman who was doing business. Islam places no restriction whatsoever on women to do or not to do business or other works. Everything is allowed provided they observe their Islamic dress code.*¹⁷

The moderate mullahs struggle to strike a balance between their community supporters and followers, the government and their safety. They are, however, unwilling to put at risk themselves or their interests. They are pragmatic in handling their businesses. They do, however, complain about abuses, harassment and the problems women face in the country.

Some mullahs uphold highly liberal views, considering men and women as equal actors. In their view, women have just as many rights in society as men. They believe there is no

16. AHRDO, Interview, Local Mullah, Nangarhar, July 2014.

17. AHRDO, Focus group, Mawlana Abdul Razaq, Nangarhar, July 2014.

strict division of labor as such between men and women. Their emphasis on women observing the Islamic dress code, at least to a certain degree, stems more from a pragmatic perspective in light of Afghan cultural and social realities than from ideological adherence to any problematic religious reading. Mawlawi, a liberal Mullah in Mazar, says:

*I run a madrasa that has 400 students, both male and female. The majority of the students are girls. I teach both Islamic education and contemporary science. Our society is modernizing and we can't ignore technology. In my madrasa, we teach 70% religious subjects and 30% computers and English language. Let me be very clear that I have two daughters, aged 5 and 10. They learn the Holy book. Once they finish it, I would very much like them to continue their education, develop a sense of their society and to find out how to live a good life.*¹⁸

Certain mullahs even struggle to promote quite revolutionary ideas about women's leadership position. In certain Islamic sects, women are traditionally barred from taking up senior judicial and religious positions. Surpassing such traditional frontiers means confronting orthodox religious thinking. Senior religious scholars hardly dare to make such statements as it might result in their isolation. Ismail Zaki, a local mullah from Bamiyan promotes a revolutionary interpretation of the Shia reading of Islam in relation to women. Invoking Ayatullah Fayaz, one of the most senior Afghan scholars in Shia Islam, Zaki says:

*There is no reference at least in Jafari jurisprudence that women are not allowed to be in public. As you might know, one of jurisprudents, Ayatullah Fayaz from Jaghori, has allowed women to function as a Chief Justice as well as a jurisprudent. In the past, women were not allowed to do the above-mentioned works, no matter how high their education levels were. Now Ayattullah Fayaz says women can do both... Women are also allowed to work with the international NGOs, while observing their Islamic dress code. But the sparrow sacks [burqa] that some women wear have no place in Islam.*¹⁹

Despite all these variations, the religious establishment lacks a coherent view to promote women's development. At best they do not actively create obstacles, but at worst they order women's social exclusion and imprisonment. Given the ubiquitous nature of the religious establishments in Afghan society and the deep influence of the

18. AHRDO, Focus Group, Mawlawi Abdul Ahad Mowahhid, Mazar, February 2014.

19. AHRDO, Focus Group, Bamiyan, March 2014.

religious actors and institutions, women's social development appears difficult, if not impossible, without the support and express approval of religious forces. Government and civil society alike must tap into this potential, in order to both insulate women against religious propaganda as well as to seek the contribution of moderate religious groups towards an enduring women's development movement.

Women in the Public Sphere

The structure of the public sphere, whether in public or private institutes, the market place or public space, is highly gendered. Women still occupy a tiny niche in the broader Afghan public sphere. Even this slow progress toward women's participation in the public sphere is in large part due to the international presence and its accompanying gender mainstreaming policies. The overall public sphere is still being perceived as highly unsafe for women. Women face a broad range of problems from harassment to intimidation, threats, molestation and even murder. Yet, against all these odds, Afghan women continue to improve their public presence in all key sectors. However, women's role in the market place remains minimal. Furthermore, it must be noted that this is where women have the most minimal institutional safety net, if they have one at all. They feel exposed to all sorts of risks and dangers and feel very insecure about engaging in meaningful economic enterprises.

Women and the Market

Afghan women have traditionally played an important role in rural communities and they continue to do so. They enjoy a degree of freedom of movement in the tightly knit small-scale rural communities. This is largely because of the structure of rural communities. Rural communities are organized into small clusters such as a village or a conglomeration of villages. There is a degree of safety inherent in the structure of the rural communities as family, tribal and other ties cut across the boundaries of each single community, thereby creating larger space for social and communal interactions. People and families largely know each other within the boundaries of these cluster communities. These loose connections and ties in part create safety and security nets for women, which are non-existent in urban environments in Afghanistan. Within these village communities, women perform multiple traditional tasks such as working in small-scale farmsteads, tending to livestock and managing households, among other works. The execution of many of these jobs involves women's movement outside of their close family sphere. Insecurity is a problem everywhere in Afghanistan but women do not face the same amount of harassment in those communities as they do in urban areas.²⁰

20. AHRDO, Interviews: Bamyan, Herat, Kabul, Mazar and Nangarhar, February-July, 2014.

Nonetheless, women are confined to performing only traditional tasks in rural communities. They do not engage in non-traditional economic initiatives and enterprises such as managing shops in small village markets. The non-traditional markets, an important part of rural economic transaction, remain under the exclusive control of men.

Women have been working locally in the public sector in places such as schools and clinics but they have been reluctant to take up more active roles in district administrations. District administrations offer more diversity. There is a lesser degree of interconnection and solidarity in comparison to that found within the schools and clinics of village communities. Women feel less safe and secure in the public environment. Of course, women's lack of professional capacity restrains them but it is more these social structures and dynamics defining the operation of the local marketplace and district administrations that discourage women from playing active public roles.

In urban environments, the traditional village networks fall short of providing protection to women. In the cities, neither traditional sources of employment exist nor the high degree of social trust and connectedness characteristic of village communities. Unlike rural villages, the social, cultural and linguistic structures of the urban environment are heterogeneous and the social capital and connectedness that existed in the rural villages and communities are lacking in urban environments.²¹ Despite this, female movement within urban settings in more densely populated cities such as Kabul is significant. However, in more conservative urban centers such as Jalalabad, freedom of women is still restricted. Kabul is unique in many ways as it is a city with a large and diverse population. This diversity adds to the dynamics of women's presence in the public realm.

Nonetheless, there is no correspondence between women's mere public presence and their participation in public and private institutions. Women's participation in the urban market place is lower than in the traditional works – farming and husbandry - in rural communities. The number of women that own and run small-scale business initiatives such as restaurants, guesthouses, shops, etc, has been increasing but overall their numbers are still insignificant. Despite their increasing presence in the market place, it is not very encouraging and does not mark any paradigmatic change in the pattern of a highly gendered market structure.²²

Women that own and administer businesses are still being viewed with suspicion in the male dominated business environment. It is not only the men that expressly disapprove of women's involvement in the administration of private economic initiatives, some

21. AHRDO, Theatre Performance, Kabul, August 2013.

22. AHRDO, Interview, Kabul, June 2014.

women themselves do not view it positively either. One of AHRDO's researchers witnessed a woman disallowing her husband from shopping in a female-administered shop in the Kart-e Sey neighborhood of Kabul. The researcher intervened, enquiring the reasons for her disapproval. The lady said, "If this female shopkeeper had been a good person, she would not have worked in a shop". Her husband abruptly disapproved of her saying that, stating, "The female shopkeeper is doing nothing wrong".²³

Another urban area where the change in gender relations has created problems is Herat city. A comparatively higher level of education and self-confidence among women, resulting in a greater level of gender consciousness in Herat city, requires more equitable gender relations and participation in the market environment. Yet despite this social change, the urban and social environment remains highly conservative and restraining in Herat. Disapproving of these inequitable relations, some women have taken to challenging the orthodox pattern of male control and behavior. In such cases, men often respond with violence, thereby giving rise to a number of self-immolation and other suicidal acts among women and girls. Against all these odds, the Herati women still participate more in economic activities than women do elsewhere including Kabul. They run grocery stores, vegetable stalls, and handcarts in order to make a living. In Herat city, there is even a specific street on which women have traditionally been running small business schemes.²⁴ This is a positive development lacking in other major urban areas. This model needs to be encouraged further in Herat initially before being emulated elsewhere.

Women and Harassment

Women's public harassment is an established problem in Afghanistan. Harassment occurs in a range of settings from street harassment of women and girls to abuse of power in state and private institutions. Reports allege that men often mistreat women, subject them to pressure and attempt to marginalize them in decision-making politics. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some male managers procrastinate in giving leave to female employees, obstruct their working program and make up pretenses in order to force them to give in to their demands. In many other cases, men verbally harass their female colleagues and co-workers to exhaust and frustrate them. Jalal Noorani²⁵, Deputy Minister of Culture and Information says:

In my Ministry, I would not name that person or even the department, a very young and humble girl who works down there in the department had gone to

23 AHRDO, Interview, Kabul, June 2014.

24 AHRDO, Interview, Herat, July 2014.

25. AHRDO, Interview, Jalal Noorani, Deputy Minister of Culture and Information, June 2014.

a female director with tears in her eyes claiming that a boy had harassed her. Right at that very moment that boy had opened the door as he was sneaking in, and had repeatedly said: "Oh, you prostitute, prostitute, prostitute"! The director immediately intervened, warning the boy to stop and get out. She took the case to the Minister and the Minister dispatched the boy to a distant area as punishment.

Harassment has become a serious problem for women. Youngsters including married men harass women and solicit sexual favors. Women feel unsafe walking in public, often under the scrutiny of insistent male gazing and staring. People frequently touch women's bodies and direct inappropriate and unacceptable jokes at them. To harass the women, they sound their car horns, or flash their lights. Deputy Minister Jalal Noorani²⁶ shares his observation:

One day I was on holiday, I saw a man who threw a piece of watermelon from behind a vehicle right into the face of a girl. Shaken by the abrupt strike, the girl shouted loudly and was badly shocked. You must know that certain men get pleasure by harassing women. They not only harass by hurling pieces of watermelon and rocks at them but they will also pinch and touch women in crowded areas... Trust me if they find women in isolated places they will slap and pull women by their hair for their own enjoyment. They may even sexually molest women in quieter places.

The media, in particular the visual media, have played transformative roles in Afghan society over the course of the past decade. Its impact has been significant on women by creating employment opportunities, providing avenues for expression, publicizing female images in a male-dominated society, spreading information, introducing new lifestyles and fashion patterns. These features of the media have been empowering for women. Yet, the media has also had a negative impact on women. Indeed, the more liberal image often portrayed of women through the television channels has galvanized conservative families and forces against women. As such, it has backfired by creating propaganda tools largely for the conservative to exploit the televised female imageries to curtail women's public roles. These campaigns have fuelled popular perceptions against women. As Mawlawi Abdul Azim²⁷, from the Guzara district of Herat says:

Women's status in Islam is very high but women are being abused in working environments. Even in the media and commercial advertising they are subject to abuses. Our Ulemas are responsible to fight the media on Islamic

26. Ibid.

27. AHRDO, Interview, Herat, July, 2014.

grounds and such disrespect [to women]. The defenders of women's rights in particular must stand firm against the media. Our women and society must not contravene Islamic tenets. The behavior of the media is extremely bad. I am so much dissatisfied with the situation that I prefer to die rather than to live.

Across the four regions, the participants of the theatrical performances and focus group discussions frequently invoked televised scenes of young boys and girls with the latest fashion engaging in funny and promiscuous chats or televised commercial advertisements as too open and hence unacceptable. They stated that televised scenes were negatively affecting women's presence in public.

Afghan women have been struggling to defy the social pressures in public by increasing their engagement in both public and private sectors. A series of bold and defiant initiatives such as riding bicycles, driving cars and administering taxi services, have contributed significantly to the gradual normalization of women's presence outside the family environment. The continuation of such defiance will improve the pace of social change favorable to women.²⁸

The criminalization of street harassment and a strict prosecution of such practices would contribute to improving the role and status of women in public. At present, men often engage in street harassment without having any fear of prosecution. They largely view it as entertaining. It is a tricky issue too. The campaign by law enforcement agencies to tackle street harassment must not lead to further harassment on un-warranted grounds.

Women and Family Institutions

Understanding the traditional family structure in Afghanistan is important to understanding women's position in Afghan society. Many women's problems stem from their conservative, patriarchal and male dominated Afghan families. The structure of Afghan families is strictly hierarchical. A patriarch or the eldest male member of the family is the source of power and the center for decision-making. Decision-making and resource distribution is highly gendered, and as such are in large part disadvantageous to women and girls.

Discrimination against women and girls inside Afghan families is an enduring problem. Women and girls are less valued than their male peers. As such they are being accorded subordinate and inferior status and the male members of the families are being preferentially treated in every possible way.

28. AHRDO, Interview, Kabul, June 2014.

Like discrimination, violence is deep-rooted and in many cases rampant against women inside Afghan families. Most worryingly, use of rampant violence inside the family has yet to view as a criminal offence in practice. The suppression of female members within the family remains culturally acceptable. The masculine family codes of behavior sanction the application of violence against women. The family environment remains highly lawless and Afghan family law has yet to extend its writ into this very private area.

Women's problems in the Afghan family are largely cultural. Improvement in women's status in this realm requires corresponding cultural change. Change in women's economic functions will play an equally important role in redressing these unequal social relations. Many Afghan families suffer from chronic poverty. The role of women is still minimal in the economic struggle for the material survival of the family. Male members carry out the bulk of the responsibilities in the battle for survival. A change in economic relations inside the family is key to bringing about a corresponding degree of change in power relations. The best way to improve women's role in the family is to improve their material and financially productive roles.

The dynamics of violence against women inside the family differ across the regions. The increasing consciousness of women's rights has challenged conservative family and cultural structures in Herat, giving rise to suicidal acts such as self-immolation among women. The rise in violence against women in the north appears to be due to a different factor, that is the unaccountable behavior of predatory actors. Religious conservatism, violence, certain cultural practices and tribal codes limit women's public role in Nangarhar. In Kabul and Bamyan, women's increasingly liberal and defiant acts have given rise to targeted violence and attacks.²⁹

Women, Culture and Traditions

The Afghan masculine culture treats women with several contradictions. Culturally, Afghans pay respect to women. Afghan culture often does not allow women, for instance, to wait alongside men in a long queue to do official business such as handing over a petition or collecting a passport. On public transport, Afghan men leave their seats, allowing a female newcomer to take the seat. Both practices are out of respect to women. These are all positive cultural values and traits that favor women in the Afghan society. Conversely, the same culture approves of using violence against women to a significant degree or it does not disapprove of many malpractices against women such as street harassment against women. As Deputy Minister Jalal Noorani says:

29. AHRDO, Theatres Performance: Bamyan, Kabul, Mazar, Nangarhar and Herat, August 2013- July 2014.

*Unfortunately, men's immoral deeds have become an honor in itself. With due respect to you, they [men] boast about being very heroic women cheaters. By contrast, the same men view a woman's laughing and chatting with men as an unforgiving sin, let alone allowing the women sit alongside men to talk about their life and their future.*³⁰

In Afghan conversational culture and language, there are a broad array of words, terms and proverbs that, by virtue of their routine application, downgrade and devalue women. This genre of literature conveys that women are not worth reckoning with seriously. Deputy Minister Jalal Noorani says:

*To insult women further in the family, we say, we must consult the walls but not the women...you might have noticed, the men often avoid calling their wives by their names in the family. Instead, they call them as mother of Ahmad or Mahmoud or mother of the kids. Or even they brand their wives as household properties (mall-e khana) or a flying wagon (kuch).*³¹

Gender segregation is an established practice in Afghan families. Even among the urban families, this is a rather standard practice. As a cultural practice, it bears serious implications for women outside the families including in schools and public offices.

The practice of *bad* or marrying a girl to a man as a form of conflict resolution instrument is still found across the four regional centers. In certain cases the form of practicing of *bad* was moderated through the application of a traditional form of marriage practice. In Kahmard, a girl was married to a family member of a victim to settle a dispute. To make the practice of *bad* appear as a consensual marriage, the family of the victim had made a ceremonial marriage proposal. And a wedding was organized in line with the local marriage customs.³²

There are many perverse marriage practices that make women subject to an economic transaction. Rich people often compete over beautiful girls by paying higher dowries. To earn more money, some families encourage this competition by offering a girl to the highest bidder. This is being practiced in many regions of the country but it is reportedly more common in Nangarhar. Interestingly, this form of marriage practice often leads to family disputes, ultimately ending up in controversial divorces.³³

30. AHRDO, Interview, Jalal Noorani, Deputy Minister of Culture and Information, Kabul, June 2014.

31. Ibid.

32. AHRDO, Theatre of Performance, Bamiyan, July 2014.

33. AHRDO, Focus Group Discussion, Nangarhar, July 2014.

Afghan civil society and human rights organizations have constantly campaigned against certain cultural practices such as underage marriage, and *bad* or exchange marriage including a perverse commercialized form of marriage which equates in many ways an economic transaction. These marriage practices remain resilient. To correct unacceptable marriage practices, there is a need for new legislation or legislative amendment that should ban certain perverse forms of marriage practices as stated. Furthermore, there is a need for a cultural campaign against many pejorative terms men use during their routine communication. The media has the potential to play a significant role in this regard.

Conclusion

The focus on women's development in Afghanistan has fallen short of addressing the key structural and institutional issues that have historically hampered their progress. Several interconnected factors affect women, from lack of capacity to insecurity and violence. These are real issues but there are highly gendered social structures and institutions that underlie them. Reforming these structures is essential for women to develop.

Religious actors and institutions affect women the most. They have a ubiquitous presence in Afghan society and are nearly exclusively under men's control. They predominantly promote ideas and instructions that restrict women's public role. Without moderating the view of the religious actors and reforming religious establishment, the prospects for women's development will remain bleak.

Afghan women play the least important role in local economies. Local market structures are intensely gendered and women have not made any headway in this respect. Investments have been made to empower women by gender mainstreaming and political quota systems. These measures have produced positive outcomes but women will remain marginalized and dependent unless they carve out a space for themselves in local markets.

Family is another powerful social structure. Like all other important institutions, family is equally gendered and hierarchical. Women and girls still remain largely excluded from decision-making. A male member of the family always makes the final decision. Resource distribution favors the men and the boys. Most importantly, violence against women is quite deep-rooted and is rampant. This impacts the development of girls and women dramatically. Changes in the power relations within the family trigger changes in other areas for women too.

Finally, certain cultural and traditional practices disadvantage women. Unacceptable marriage practices are still a problem, despite significant efforts being made to address them. Afghan culture does accord respect to women, rather it sanctions the suppression of women in significant ways. At present, street harassment in urban centers is fast becoming culturally acceptable. Afghan men occasionally subject women to physical and psychological abuses in public as well as private institutions but these abuses are rarely being prosecuted.

Women's development in Afghanistan is not possible without reforms in certain underlying social structures and institutions. Family, religious establishments, the public sphere and culture and traditions, among others, are highly gendered and impede women's progress. These structural institutions must be subjected to reform if Afghan women are to sustain their upward march.

About AHRDO:

The Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization is an independent, impartial and not-for-profit organization established in early 2009. It is registered with the Ministry of Economy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Promoting fundamental human rights values and consolidating democratic principles and frameworks constitute the core values and objectives of the organization. AHRDO has adopted un-orthodox methodologies to contribute to the internalization and expansion of the key human rights and democratic concepts. These methodologies are centered on arts-based, participatory, and bottom up approaches at the grassroots levels.

AHRDO activities provide opportunities for local social groupings and communities to engage in localized democratic experiences. Furthermore, AHRDO focuses on policy research projects in relation to broader theoretical and empirical aspects of transitional justice, democratization and the promotion of human rights by tapping into the comparative experiences of other conflict zones and placing these issues into deeper historical perspectives in Afghanistan. This is meant to expose Afghans to the broader theoretical horizons of these issues universally and the historical experiences of Afghanistan specifically. This helps Afghans address the theoretical and empirical 'knowledge gaps' they face on these critical issues.

More pragmatically, AHRDO has undertaken several innovative initiatives towards the realization of the ideals it has been cherishing since its foundation. Over the past several years, AHRDO established the Network of Afghan Women Young leaders, founded the Social Councils of the War Victims, compiled short stories reflecting Afghan experiences of a protracted conflict, and initiated the promotion of human rights culture through encouraging Afghan writers to produce literary works with human rights content and orientation. AHRDO has also engaged in promoting policy changes nationally and internationally by writing in-depth research-based policy reports on Afghan women and transitional justice in Afghanistan.

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