



Women's Economic Empowerment in Afghanistan: Creating Spaces and Enabling the Environment

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Introduction: Examining women's labour and labour participation

Women's economic participation in Afghanistan is being increasingly acknowledged as an integral part of both women's rights and as vital to development. This research, *Women's Economic Empowerment in Afghanistan 2002 - 2012: Information Mapping and Situational Analysis*, identifies and reviews efforts pursued to improve the economic status and human rights of women. This Policy Note draws upon evidence from research funded by UN Women as part of its broader strategy focused on Women, Economic Security, and Right; the research was conducted between 2012 and 2013 by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. The research findings place Afghan women's inadequate economic participation within the wider frame of the policy environment and deep-rooted socio-cultural barriers.

The first sphere of the research, Information Mapping, examines interventions for enhancing women's economic and development status in Afghanistan since 2002, including international resolutions and governmental strategies, legal amendments, and procedures and mechanisms. Reviewing gendered developmental and economic indicators, it examines the ways and extent to which women's access to human rights and to economic engagement have - or have not - been addressed in this past decade.

The second sphere of the research, Situational Analysis, explores the views of women participants and their communities on development projects that were implemented in rural and urban Kabul to enhance women's economic opportunities and activities. It takes a closer look at the socio-cultural processes that help or hinder women's participation in the income-generation interventions that the policies and strategies of the Afghan government and international agencies seek to engender. In doing so, it looks at the space between policy and implementation, and between strategy and praxis.

Unequal fields

Research findings indicate that although the achievements of this past decade are many, they pale in comparison to the cumulative deprivations faced during the preceding three decades, and are, further, challenged by extant severe poverty. Gender gaps are wide across sectors and strategies in Afghanistan. At the governmental level, they are apparent in the following: in legal instruments; in the implementation of policy into strategy; and, in the outreach of ministerial policies and national strategies for gendered development. Further, even as many policies are well-positioned and cover much ground, some tend to lack context and gender-sensitivity while others offer broad-based vision with little material direction.

The chief casualties for women's human rights in Afghanistan continue to be education, health, public and political participation, and safety; these are four important indicators of women's well-being that connect directly to the economic empowerment of women. The effect of the gender gap is sharpest in: access to basic health services, particularly in reproductive health; addressing gender-based violence; female absolute enrolment at primary levels and in retention at secondary and tertiary levels; women's highly inadequate access to justice and rule of the law; and, women's minimal public and political participation

and absence in most decision-making bodies at the local and national levels. Each of these issues has a cascading effect on women's economic well-being, particularly with the high levels of gender-based violence and deteriorating security in Afghanistan.

Women's representation in labour is disorganised and fractured. Available data indicate that there has been no substantive surge in their economic participation since 2002. Economically, the picture that emerges is of women's work being unaccounted for as women are mostly engaged in unpaid or low-paying labour in insecure and vulnerable jobs, and in an informal and unregulated economy. The nature and outcomes of women's labour participation are further exacerbated by their perceived position in society and their vulnerability for being women. While the micro-finance investment sector, a potential channel of small opportunity for women, is currently quite restricted, there is also a dearth of support for women in small and medium-scale entrepreneurship. Women's economic participation remains at the lower end of value chains and the lack of access to many resources prevent an enhancement of their skills and income. Women's income-generation needs processes and national level strategies that can structure, streamline, and harness the potential of women. This includes financial, credit, and trade related services for an extensive and deeper outreach tailored to suit gender and sector needs so that women are incorporated into all levels of value chains in all sectors and occupational categories.

This research also shows that women's economic participation is hugely dependent upon two main factors: localised, community-based perspectives being incorporated into a project's programming; and, strong links to markets being developed for the project's efficacy and sustainability. While an Islamic framework validates a project's legitimacy, enhancement of income for the woman propels significant changes in self-perception and ability at levels enough to bring about altered gender roles within the family and the community. Such women are able to contest accepted gendered frames of reference and can cause some alteration in the perception of a woman as a "dependent." Although all women in this research are unequivocal about the rights that income generation can or has conferred upon them, the changes in attitude are clearer in projects that enhanced or produced visible income generation.

Enabling the environment

The efforts of some of the strategies, programmes, and projects implemented in the past years that built capacity and skills among women are beginning to bear fruit, with urban Afghanistan and select pockets of rural Afghanistan being the drivers of change. There is immense potential and opportunity for women in the small and medium enterprise industry, particularly in horticulture, poultry, agri-business, and manufacturing. In these sectors, protectionist measures are required to nurture and sustain their initial gestation and growth vis-a-vis their potential in engaging the maximum number of women. The need now is to harness the positive results of the many micro-level projects for women implemented in the past decade, and to harness their energy and knowledge into coherent meso and macro level policies that can shape the national economy. Women-only occupational groups and producer associations need to be nurtured and strengthened in an enabling environment through regulatory reform, investment, and trade links. Women's labour participation should be acknowledged and formally encouraged through policy, incentive, and remuneration.

For women's economic potential to be realised in full, ministries and their strategies, as well as international aid, have to be fully-oriented towards the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) and to all principles of the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA). Currently, how "gender mainstreaming" is understood, and if and whether it is acted upon varies within programmes and strategies - the mechanisms for these need to be streamlined and strengthened. It is crucial to review all policies and strategies of ministries to ensure NAPWA and ANDS are being implemented fully in letter and spirit. Further, there is also a large gap between broadly stated principles in some policies and the specifics that are then provided within the policies themselves. Coordination and monitoring mechanisms need buttressing as do accountability mechanisms.

In the current economic climate, the international and national private sector could be mobilised to invest in the productive sectors, in a gender-informed manner, by transferring appropriate technology to women and by providing credit and capital at concessional terms to women producers and entrepreneur groups. Although this could jumpstart the process of investing in women's economic potential, the government must ensure the regulatory mechanisms needed for public-private partnership. Similar attention is needed in current and future policies that have economic stake, for example, in the extractive industries and in the environment sector. The establishment of women's networks by stakeholders offer great potentials in enhancing women's active and sustainable participation in the generation of income and knowledge. The creation and institutionalisation of economic knowledge for women in Afghanistan is crucial as is the transmission of such expertise and experience to and among women. Effective mainstreaming of women's perspectives and participation in development and governance needs to be pursued, and allocating adequate resources to develop gender-based economic networks is critical.

Women's self-help groups and women's cooperatives at the village, district, and provincial levels can offer platforms to channel resources that individual women are otherwise less or unable to access; localised groups help incorporate women's familial and social roles into economic activities and help shape the contours of each woman's economic engagement. Such gendered collective approaches raise income levels and decrease deprivation, and also address inadequacies in capabilities and the paucity of opportunities that restricts individual ability. Collective processes at the local levels need to be linked with collective women-oriented initiatives at the national and international levels; these links can be strengthened by a far greater focus on women's equitable access to resources.

One of the chief requirements in policy and programming is the material acknowledgement of the segregated nature of women's lives. Much of the primary and secondary evidence in this research suggest that women's participation in the economy can be examined through the lens of gendered solidarity, as well as through contextualised project and policy programming that are well-monitored.

Engendering women's spaces

Increasing women's access to economic opportunities will require strengthening existing strategies, especially in: education, health, economic empowerment, and religious affairs. All four converge in the field of what could be termed "creating women's spaces" by:

1. Strengthening the policy environment

At the central level of the government, across line ministries and within the Central Statistics Organisation, there has to be a revised understanding of women's contribution to the economy and to the economic development of Afghanistan. The specific review and implementation of NAPWA and ANDS alone, in collaboration with the line ministries, can address many of the gaps that the country is facing today in human development and poverty reduction. In parallel, the greater involvement of women in economic activities can be engendered through women-friendly Shari'ah-informed legislative review that can safeguard women's well-being.

2. Addressing human development gaps

Addressing the gaps that girls and women face in accessing education facilities, health care, safety, physical mobility, and political participation, is of utmost importance. One of the routes to take in addressing these gaps is to adhere to customary and traditional norms and values in gendering facilities. The bottlenecks here are lack of access to separate but equal resources for women, particularly for girls and younger women.

3. *Focusing on deliverables*

A strong and active cross-sectoral network of women entrepreneurs is imperative. A network which operates at a pan-Afghanistan level, across cities and provincial headquarters to build a robust women-to-women service delivery model (from producer to wholesaler to processor to exporter) and to strengthen entrepreneurship among women is needed for the domestic and international markets.

4. *Engendering financial services*

Access to credit, capital, and collateral remains a challenge and women lack insurance and risk guarantee. The current microfinance climate offers women limited opportunities, especially in the rural informal sector and in small-scale and micro entrepreneurship. Larger-scale investments in medium, small-scale, and micro industry that make better use of women's entrepreneurship and business skills and labour participation is needed. In parallel, labour and finance reforms need to be initiated.

Conclusion

Given Afghanistan's socio-cultural background as well as the gender dynamics prevalent prior to 2001, the situation at present could be called encouraging. Even though socio-cultural traditions that shape gross gendered imbalance cannot be addressed in a decade, the economic empowerment of women in terms of policy in Afghanistan is greatly complicated by the interlinked absence or limited presence of human rights.

In order to create free, fair, and favourable opportunities for women's equitable access to the monetised market, a "level playing field" in the world economy is necessary. Much depends upon the nature of the transition and the terms of agreement negotiated as well as the turn the economy may take, but a focussed national policy on women's economic empowerment, with protectionist measures, is needed. While short-term initiatives and medium-term investments by politicians, academics, civil society activists, political parties, religious scholars, tribal elders, provincial councils, members of commerce and trade, and other groups are critical to maintain the momentum of the past decade, longer term human and resource investment in women's economic empowerment is vital for the rejuvenation of society.

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AREU was established in 2002 by the assistance community working in Afghanistan and has a board of directors with representation from the donor community, the United Nations and other multilateral agencies, and non-governmental organisations. AREU currently receives core funds from the Embassy of Finland, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

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