

Women's Empowerment Programs in Afghanistan

The status of women in Afghanistan has been of deep concern since they were stripped of their fundamental rights under Taliban rule. Today, The Asia Foundation works to promote opportunities for Afghan girls and women through collaboration with a broad range of local partners, including government agencies and influential non-state actors, including civil society, and tribal and religious leaders. The Foundation provides growing support for girls to access education and programs that increase women's economic participation and access to justice. The Foundation is helping build the capacity of the Ministry of Women's Affairs to be an effective advocate for policy reform and provision of services to women.



GAINS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS TO DATE

Although Afghan women still face significant challenges, there have been some notable achievements, including a national constitution that guarantees women's equal rights, the adoption of the National Plan of Advancement of Women of Afghanistan 2008-2018, and the growth of civil society organizations working to advance women's rights and deliver much-needed services for women. There has also been significant progress in getting girls, who were banned from attending school under the Taliban, enrolled in public schools. Today, more than two million girls attend school, representing 35 percent of the total K-12 student population, and women's university enrollment is also increasing. Four hundred women contested the 2010 parliamentary elections and for the first time, women served as election observers in all 34 provinces in Afghanistan.

MINISTRY OF WOMEN'S AFFAIRS

In 2002, The Asia Foundation provided early assistance to the newly established Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA). Since then, the

Foundation has worked to strengthen the MoWA as an effective advocate for policy reform and initiatives to address the most pressing needs of women and girls.

Among the key recent accomplishments:

- An organizational assessment of MoWA identified strategic, structural, and operational gaps, and helped develop appropriate capacity-building strategies.
- Assisted MoWA to develop a comprehensive communications strategy, which included contributions to the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan, and MoWA's own Gender Advocacy and Public Information Campaign.
- Advocacy campaigns aimed at women and their families, including a campaign on marriage registration and elimination of family violence, two critical issues for women.
- Preparation of the Development of Policy guide, on "Increasing Girls' Enrollment in Primary Education."



AFGHANISTAN

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- Assessment and recommendations on MoWA budget process to make it more transparent and effective.
- Establishment of women's resource and referral centers at the provincial level.

EDUCATION FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

Nearly 80 percent of all Afghan women and girls are illiterate — 90 percent in rural areas. Although the government has made significant strides getting girls into school, more than 60 percent of school age girls are still not in school. This is due in part to a shortage of schools and teachers, and in part to the reluctance of parents in insecure areas to send their daughters to school for fear of reprisals such as school burnings and acid attacks on girls.

The Asia Foundation works to maintain and increase girls' enrollment in school and provide access to quality education. The Foundation has established strong links with the formal education system at all levels, and provides small grants to local NGO partners to create and expand educational opportunities for girls and women.

IMPROVING GIRLS' SCHOOLS

The Foundation has helped to improve two large public girls' schools in Kabul: the historic and prestigious Rabia-e-Balkhi Girls' School, and the Lama-e-Shaheed Girls' School. Both schools were severely damaged during the years of fighting. In 2003, when the Foundation began its work with Rabia-e-Balkhi Girls' School that serves 3,000 students in K-12, classes were being held in tents on rubble-strewn grounds with almost no infrastructure in tact and virtually no teaching materials or books. In partnership with the National Geographic Society's Afghan Children's Fund and other private donors, the Foundation rebuilt 14 classrooms, established five science labs, provided classroom furnishings and educational materials, and created a new resource center with a library, conference hall, and computer lab. With support from the Janet Ketcham Family Foundation, the National Geographic Society, and the Sheridan Urbanski Family Foundation, the Lama-e-Shaheed Girls' School now has refurbished classrooms, a renovated roof, working sanitation facilities, and a wide range of teaching materials, books, and school supplies for the 4,500 girls enrolled at the school.

REMEDIAL EDUCATION FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

The Asia Foundation works with Aid Afghanistan for Education (AAE) to provide remedial and accelerated education classes to more than 2,000 students, primarily girls, in eight provinces of Afghanistan. This program addresses the needs of girls and young women who were

unable to attend school during Taliban rule. To close the gap in their secondary education, students advance at an accelerated pace, completing one grade level every eight months until they complete their education, preparing students to enter university or the job market.

KABUL UNIVERSITY'S WOMEN'S DORMITORY

Responding to a critical need for affordable, safe housing for women who want to attend Kabul University, in partnership with the Ministry of Higher Education, the Foundation oversaw the building of a women's dormitory, which houses 1,000 female students and subsequently assumed operational support. This included providing significant upgrades for the living space, library, and health clinic, as well as programs for residents in leadership development and civic participation.

TEACHER TRAINING

Afghanistan's national university entrance examination focuses heavily on science and mathematics, but the country has a severe shortage of qualified science and mathematics teachers, especially female teachers for Grades 10 - 12. Between 2007 and 2008, the Foundation funded refresher courses for math and science teachers in four provinces, and supported the establishment or improvement of science laboratories in more than 40 girls' schools.

UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE EXAM COURSES

Although university education is free in Afghanistan, in many universities there was not a single woman enrolled because most women lacked confidence and adequate preparation to take the entrance exam. In 2005, the Foundation piloted a university exam preparation course for women, in conjunction with Kandahar University, which then had no female students enrolled. Eighty percent of the women who participated in the first course passed the entrance exam and enrolled in the university. Subsequently, the Foundation expanded the program nationwide. Over a two-year period, 13,000 teachers were engaged across all 34 provinces of Afghanistan. These teachers reached approximately 200,000 students who were eligible for the national college entrance examination. In 2009, 60,000 Dari and 40,000 Pashto examination guidebooks were distributed to students, and 6,000 teachers' guides went to teachers. The Ministry of Higher Education has now assumed complete responsibility for the preparatory courses.

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PHYSIOTHERAPY AND REHABILITATION SUPPORT FOR AFGHANISTAN (PARSA)

Building on PARSA's years of experience in Afghanistan, the Foundation helped PARSA develop psychosocial training for Afghan schoolgirls in Kabul, and incorporate the resulting curriculum into the Kabul University Psychology Department's training program for professionals.

SOCIAL JUSTICE FOR WOMEN WITHIN AN ISLAMIC FRAMEWORK

Since 2003, the Foundation has worked with influential Muslim leaders and institutions to promote the constitutional rights of Afghan women in the context of Islamic tenets and principles, and to increase justice for women through non-formal conflict resolution mechanisms. Partners include the powerful Ministry of Haj and Awqaf, the Ministry of Justice, Kabul University, and leading religious scholars, tribal and community leaders, Imams and other religious leaders.

BOOKLETS ON PROTECTION OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The Foundation has developed a series of 16 booklets in both Dari and Pashto addressing specific issues related to the protection of women's rights within an Islamic context for both Shia and Sunni communities in Afghanistan. The booklets serve as a catalyst for discussions among scholars, community leaders, and tribal and religious leaders regarding women's rights in an Islamic framework. Using the 16 booklets, the Foundation also works with Afghan parliamentarians, key staff in the Office of the State Minister for Parliamentary Affairs, and the Ministry of Women's Affairs, to raise awareness of women's rights in Islam.

TRAINING CURRICULUM FOR IMAMS

The Foundation has supported the development of a South Asia regional training curriculum for Imams in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan on social justice for women within an Islamic framework. The curriculum, which addresses women's rights and roles in education, the family, political participation, and economic activity, has been redrafted and adapted for each country context in consultation with religious scholars and civil society representatives. With the endorsement of a broad range of influential religious and community leaders and women's rights activists, the curriculum was pilot tested, and it will soon be used to train over one thousand Imams in the three countries in how religious leaders can raise awareness and cultivate support for social justice for women.

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS WITHIN AN ISLAMIC FRAMEWORK

Delegations from the Ministry of Women's Affairs visited India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Turkey to gain a comparative perspective on efforts to advance women's rights in an Islamic framework. The delegations visited ministries that focus on women's rights, and other influential institutions that support those efforts.

WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Afghanistan's constitution and election law reserve a number of seats in parliament for women. But thirty years of war, limited literacy, and the huge gap between the last elections of the mid-1970s and the new election cycles since 2002, have produced several generations of Afghans with no direct experience of democracy. The Asia Foundation works extensively to educate women on their voting rights. In preparation for the 2010 Parliamentary Elections, the Foundation provided civic and voter education to women across the country. The Foundation's work encourages women's participation at all levels of public decision-making and political life—focusing on women as voters, as candidates, and as observers.

CIVIC EDUCATION FOR HOMEBOUND WOMEN

Reaching women in rural villages, who may have limited access to outside information, is a particular challenge. The Afghan Civil Society Forum (ACSF) along with other partner organizations, such as Afghan Women Council (AWC), Afghanistan Community Rehabilitation Unit (ACRU), Bachakhan Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution, and Welfare Association for Development of Afghanistan (WADAN), conduct door-to-door education campaigns. They take place in Baghlan, Farah, Kandahar, Laghman, Paktia,

Takhar, and Uruzgan provinces, where the level of civic education is lower than in other provinces. ACSF has recruited a core group of community-based female trainers in the two provinces, who carry out their civic education activities by visiting women in their homes.



VOTER BEHAVIOR

The Foundation supports the Afghan Women's Network (AWN), which conducts research and data collection on voter behavior, levels of political knowledge, people's perceptions of their role as citizens, and their responses to parliamentary elections. AWN plans to use this data as a resource for the proposed 2014 and 2015 presidential, parliamentary, provincial, and district council elections.

In Afghanistan, The Asia Foundation's programs receive funding from the Australian Agency for International Development, U.S. Agency for International Development, U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Embassy - Afghanistan, the United Kingdom's Department for International Development, and UK Embassy, Canadian CIDA, the Royal Netherlands Embassy, Belgian Government, the European Union, the National Geographic Society, the United Nations Development Program, International Trade and Labour Program - Canada, U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, private donors, and the U.S. Congress.

LABOR RIGHTS OF WOMEN

Women in the workforce face serious challenges in Afghanistan. The Asia Foundation cooperates with the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs, and the Disabled (MoLSAMD) to increase awareness and understanding of the rights of women workers under the new labor law. The Ministry works with other ministries and civil society organizations to promote international labor standards, including elimination of gender discrimination in employment, and equal pay for women. In addition to public awareness programs, the Foundation organizes workshops for women workers in the target provinces of Balkh, Herat, Kabul, and Kandahar, and for MoLSAMD officials, helping to strengthen MoLSAMD's gender unit and to bring gender issues into the policy mainstream, and to build more effective linkages with gender units in other ministries.

WOMEN'S ROLE IN AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION

The Asia Foundation recognizes that the role of women in agricultural production needs to grow beyond subsistence farming into higher-value and market-oriented agricultural production. The Foundation supported the establishment of a Gender Resource Center within the Ministry of Agriculture to institutionalize promotion of the role of women in agricultural production.

The Asia Foundation is a private, non-profit, non-governmental organization. Through its programs, the Foundation builds leadership, improves policies, and strengthens institutions to foster greater openness and shared prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region. It is funded by contributions from corporations, foundations, individuals, and governmental organizations in the U.S., Europe, Canada, Australia, and Asia, and an annual appropriation from the U.S. Congress.



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