

# INCREASING OPPORTUNITIES FOR AFGHAN WOMEN AND GIRLS



The Asia Foundation has engaged in a wide range of programs to help Afghan women and girls expand their opportunities and strengthen their rights. These initiatives provide women and girls with the skills, tools, awareness, and knowledge they need to improve their lives. The Foundation has ensured the active participation of women in Afghanistan's political process through education and technical support to the Afghan elections process. These initiatives began in 2002 when the Foundation re-established its office in Kabul, and built upon the Foundation's history of working with Afghan educational institutions for women since 1954. The Foundation supported programs on women until 1980 prior to the Soviet invasion, and then supported Afghan refugee programs in Pakistan until the mid-1990s. The Foundation's women's program in Afghanistan is now placing primary emphasis on institutionalizing the rights of Afghan women and girls

## WOMEN'S RIGHTS UNDER ISLAM

The new constitution of Afghanistan guarantees women full rights as citizens and participants in public life. The realization of these rights, however, is undermined by the pressures of a conservative, traditionally male-dominated culture where customary law defines the role of women as subservient to men. Contrary to customary belief, Islam, as a religion, recognizes and supports the active role of women in society. Muslim women's rights fall squarely at the inter-

section of religion, culture, and politics. Currently, no nexus is more sensitive. The Foundation's longstanding relationships with Muslim organizations in Asia, which are built upon trust and sensitivity to the culture, has given it a unique opportunity to work with women's rights in an Islamic context.

In 2004, with the support of the Foundation, the Kabul University Women's Council developed ten booklets promoting Women's Islamic Rights Awareness. These booklets deal with issues such as engagement, marriage, inheritance, divorce, and civil and political rights. The books were reviewed carefully by representative readers who are members of civil society, academic institutions, or who are religious scholars prior to their dissemination. The booklets will become the basis for a larger education program that will target not only women but also men, particularly those who are religious and political leaders. The booklets are now serving as the basis for a more ambitious program that aims to begin to explore how cultural norms and religion shape legal rights and good governance. The booklets will be used for training, education, and awareness raising. To reach a broad spectrum of citizens, this program will target three broad groups: illiterate women, high school and university students, and educated professionals. Titled the Women's Rights Under Islam (WRUI) program, the focus will be on the intersection of women's legal rights, Afghan culture, and reli-



## AFGHANISTAN

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gion which determines the rights, status, and opportunities of Afghan women.

The Foundation is planning a program that builds upon a successful, cutting-edge South Asia regional program to advance gender equity and women's rights within an Islamic framework. As part of this program, a six-member Afghan delegation comprised of leaders from civil society and academic institutions attended a regional workshop in Sri Lanka to meet with women leaders from civil society in other Muslim countries to share experiences and strategies to advance women's rights within an Islamic framework. Upon their return, the delegation organized a two-day conference in Kabul that brought together more than 50 men and women, including religious scholars, academics, practitioners, and students to discuss and solicit views and ideas on issues relating to women's rights under Islam.

#### **WOMEN'S ACCESS TO JUSTICE**

Afghan women confront a myriad of obstacles in accessing the legal system. At the very basic level, women frequently neither know their rights nor where to turn for assistance when they believe they are being treated unjustly. In rural areas, women's access to legal assistance is frequently limited to traditional *shuras* (local councils) and local *mullahs* (religious leaders) that often are not aware of women's rights, and are not inclined to protect them. Especially outside major cities, legal personnel are unavailable to provide counsel and assistance. There are very limited professional training and development opportunities for defense lawyers to bring them up to date on constitutional mandates and the rights of women guaranteed by law.

The Foundation supported the Afghan Women's Lawyers Council (AWLC), recently re-named Legal and Cultural Services Organization for Women and Children in Afghanistan, to provide a six-month course for 20 lawyers – 15 women and five men – to train them to defend the civil

rights of disadvantaged women in business, civil, and criminal cases. At the conclusion of the course, the lawyers proposed that mechanisms be created so they could provide legal services to women in rural areas; and that training be provided to strengthen the skills and capacity of defense lawyers to defend the civil rights of women. The Foundation intends to work in cooperation with the Legal and Cultural Services Organization for Women and Children in Afghanistan and other partners to follow up on these recommendations and to implement formal legal training and outreach, paralegal training, and civic education.

#### **INITIATIVE TO STRENGTHEN POLICY AND ADVOCACY**

The purpose of the Ministry of Women's Affairs Initiative to Strengthen Policy & Advocacy (MISPA) is to enable MoWA to better serve as a credible, visible, and effective agent for policy and advocacy that advances women's interests and mobilizes resources to meet the multifaceted and complex needs of Afghan women. The program will last from 2006-2008 and is being implemented by The Asia Foundation in partnership with the Afghan Institute for Learning and Sayara Media and Communications.

With the overall aim of strengthening MoWA's capacity, MISPA will work collaboratively with Ministry of Women's Affairs leaders in order to:

- Strengthen MoWA's lobbying and policy advocacy influence on central government and other ministries through strategic planning, communications, and institution building;
- Maximize the ability of the Department of Women's Affairs provincial offices to mobilize community and civil society support for advancing the status of and opportunities for women; and
- Increase management and programming capacity within the provincial Women Development Centers.

In addition, MISPA will work to:

- Build the Ministry's institutional research and analysis capacity.
- Support a media campaign and outreach as defined through the strategic plan.
- Support MoWA to advocate effectively before central government and the parliament.
- Strengthen its provincial outreach

### **BROADENING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC LIFE**

In the lead up to the National Assembly elections the Foundation provided significant support to nationwide civic education campaigns, encouraging the electorate of Afghanistan to not only take part in the elections but to do so in an informed manner. The campaigns emphasized informing women on the elections process and encouraging them to vote. Some of the messages targeted men to convince them that participation of women is vital and a necessary component for fair and free elections. The Foundation supported radio quiz shows, radio dramas, mobile theaters performances, board games, and magazines. Each had messages that emphasized the importance of citizens' participation in determining the leaders of their government.

The Foundation supported the Development and Humanitarian Services of Afghanistan (DHSA) to add regional pages focusing on election topics to their weekly women's magazine, *Mursal*, for two months. These regional pages served as a forum for women from the various regions to express their ideas, thoughts, and hopes for a government that represents their issues and needs. In addition, DHSA produced one special edition of *Mursal*, which was entirely focused on women and elections. The special edition included highlights on the struggle for women's right to vote in other countries, details concerning the polling process, and Afghanistan's history of women's participation in politics. 15,000 copies of each weekly edition, as well as the special edition, were distributed around the country.

The Asia Foundation also supported a mobile radio show targeted at civic education on women's rights. Sayara Media and Communications, a local media firm, created a mobile Afghan women's radio team that was able to produce and broadcast 13 radio shows from different environments where Afghan women live and work. The roving radio show facilitated roundtable discussions, debates, profiles, interviews, and talk shows about elections and the democratic process. The shows were hosted in strategic venues such as women's gardens, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, a jewelry shop, hospitals, a beauty parlor, and a girls' karate club. These fifteen-minute shows were broadcast weekly from eight radio stations around the country. In addition, they were sent to approximately 40 other stations that could choose to broadcast them. Potentially three million listeners of the eight stations could hear the show each week. A final one hour show, a compilation of the thirteen earlier shows, was broadcast several weeks before the elections.

### **EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING**

Afghanistan's educational system suffered greatly during 25 years of war, and girls were forbidden to attend school. Today, girls are eager to resume their education, and The Asia Foundation is providing instruction and support for students at all levels.

The Asia Foundation led and coordinated the construction, furnishing, and staffing of the Rabia e Balkhi Girls High School and a first of its kind resource center with computers, audio visual materials, a library, and trained teachers and staff.

The Foundation supported Kandahar University to create a preparatory course for girls completing twelve grade. The aim of the course was to prepare them to compete on the college entrance examination. The results of this pilot effort were better than expected: Of the 24 students who sat

for the examination last January, eight girls were admitted to the Kandahar Medical Faculty; six girls were admitted to the engineering faculty, seven into the education faculty, and one into the economics' faculty. Two girls were admitted to Kabul University Law Faculty, considered one of the most prestigious faculties in Afghanistan and requiring the highest scores on the exam. Based on the success of this pilot effort, the plan for the project is to scale up to cover Kandahar, including seven new locations across Afghanistan that have low enrollment of women. To ensure that the project has a multiplier affect, the Foundation will work to add a non-academic portion, basic English language courses, and computer training courses to the academic program. This added value will help to prepare the participants for jobs in public administration, universities, and national and international NGOs for those who do not enter university.

A handicraft center in Baghlan, guided by the Foundation, continues to become more self-reliant and sustainable. The Aria Services and Rehabilitation Organization of Afghanistan (ASROA) built its program around producing products for the local market. As a result of their targeted marketing, they are now receiving orders for products from the public, shopkeepers, and stores in the city. In mid-June 2005, a large exhi-

bition of the handicraft products was held at the center with more than 400 people attending.

The Asia Foundation also supports Khahan Improvement Organization (KHIO) to train 100 women, most of whom are widows or from female-headed households. They are being trained as tailors and receive tailoring equipment at the end of the course to start their own small self-sufficient business. KHIO will also link trainees to the local Market of Kunduz and will help them develop marketing skills and display their products in its handicraft shop for exhibition and sale. To complement the vocational training, KHIO will also provide literacy classes for one hour per day to help them acquire needed skills to run a small business.

Many Asia Foundation women's programs in Afghanistan have been conducted through the generous support of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. State Department, the National Geographic Society, Give2Asia, and other funders.

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**The Asia Foundation works with individuals, foundations, and corporations to support education programs such as "Adopt-A-School" as well as increasing opportunities for women and girls in Afghanistan. To support these efforts, please donate to:**

**The Asia Foundation's Afghan Women's Fund**

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