**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.”

The Asia Foundation is a private, non-profit, non-governmental organization. Through its programs, the Foundation builds leadership, improves policies, and strengthens institutions in order 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.
for the 4,500 girls enrolled at the school. A broad range of teaching materials, books, and school supplies addresses the needs of girls and young women who were enrolled at Shaheed Girls' School now has refurbished classrooms, a new structure in intact and virtually no teaching materials or educational materials, and created a new resource 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 work 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. Additionally, in 2009, 60,000 Dari and 40,000 Pashto examination guidebooks were distributed to students and 6,000 teachers' guides to teachers. The Ministry of Higher Education has now assumed complete responsibility for the preparatory courses.

**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 exclusively 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), Bacha Khan 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, and other provinces.