

***Restoring Women's Status in Rural Afghanistan by Building a Sustainable Livelihood through Education and Capacity Building to Overcome Poverty  
(Case of Afghanistan)***

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**Abstract**

Since 2002, billions of dollars in foreign aid has been invested to bring about sustainable social change for women in Afghanistan's large cities through education, literacy projects, and capacity building. However, very little is known about the impact on women in the rural areas of Afghanistan. This paper examines the importance of education and building strong capacity in rural Afghanistan to ultimately lead to a sustainable livelihood and overcome poverty. Once a woman is educated and skilled in many ways, she can change her social status from a housewife to a decision-maker in her household and the community. A woman with a secure financial status has purchasing power; hence, she is able to build a positive dialogue and earn the trust and respect of the community elders. She will be an affluent woman and will support other women in promoting women's empowerment through education and capacity building. The paper reviews the importance of women working together at the grass roots to bring changes to their community and find ways to avoid the poverty trap. The paper reviews the importance of women's involvement in community affairs which contributes to creating confidence and the self-esteem needed to overcome daily challenges in a Muslim, male-driven society. The paper showcases best practices and success stories from Afghanistan and neighboring countries.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Capacity Building, Education, Rural Women, Poverty Alleviation

## **Introduction**

Four decades of civil war have ruined the infrastructure of Afghanistan, especially in the education sector and for girls and women in rural areas. Although women enjoyed freedom of movement during the reigns of many Afghan kings, their situation worsened during the Taliban regime. Afghan women experienced the harshest treatment under this regime and were forbidden to attend schools and universities. After the fall of the Taliban, schools were reopened, and teacher's training colleges were constructed in almost all of the country's 34 provinces to build the capacity of the teachers. The aid funds pouring into the country, mainly channeled through the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education, caused a major flux and corruption, leaving nearly one-third of 398 districts with no access to education or decent teachers (Naryan, Rao, & Khan, 2010). In some parts of the country, mainly in large cities, female students were able to attend school; however, in many rural areas women were deprived of education due to lack of proper infrastructure, absence of teachers, corruption, and other factors.

This paper provides a succinct overview of the effect of building a strong capacity for women in rural Afghanistan, where women are deprived of basic human rights and anyone attempting to create social change is perceived as a liability rather than an asset. It is a success story of one Afghan woman in the rural western province of Ghor who, against all odds, persisted to build a strong workforce of 20 vulnerable women, taught them new skills, and created the first women-owned bakery in a province where women are outcasts from society.

## **Overview of Afghanistan**

Afghanistan has gone through many wars and interventions during the past 40 years, which have disabled its physical infrastructure as well as hindered human development in many areas. Afghanistan is a rugged, mountainous country with a population of 36 million people and 14 ethnicities spread throughout 34 provinces, which causes ongoing religious and cultural conflicts (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2014). The country borders China, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Iran.

The religion is 99% Muslim, divided into 84% Sunni and 10 % Shia, with 6% following other religions (CIA, n.d.). The official language of the country is Dari, which is widely spoken in the western, northern, and central provinces (CIA, n.d.). Pashtun is the second official language, which is spoken in the East, Southeast, and South (CIA, n.d.).

The unequal treatment of women in the Pashtun region (situated in the South, East and Southeast provinces) captured the attention of the world after the international invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Pashtuns are defined as the backbone of Afghanistan; they are the most extremist and restrictive tribe in the country. All Pashtuns follow a strict code of conduct called *Pashtunwali*, which has prevented women from living with self-determination (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007). The

*Any kind of discrimination and privilege between the citizens of Afghanistan are prohibited. Life is a gift of God and a natural right of human beings. No one shall be deprived of this right except by the provision of law.*

*Article 23, Chapter 2*

Pashtuns are known for their strict rules, regulations, and limitations imposed on women (Wahab & Youngerman, 2007), which limits movement outside of the home and keeps them in isolation within their living quarters. In contrast, among the Hazara tribes, neighboring with Tajikistan and Iran, women have more freedom of movement; they work outside of the home, mainly in the agriculture sector. These tribes live in the central, north, and western regions of Afghanistan. The overall assumption of the men in rural areas is that women in many rural provinces are not treated in accordance with the protections article outlined in the first and second Constitutions of Afghanistan (1923, 1963).

### **Afghan Women's Status (1880-1994)**

The myth that Afghan women and girls form an uneducated, ignorant subclass of society has captured the minds of millions of people around the world. However, few know that throughout the centuries, Afghan women have gone through suffering; yet they have still managed to rise to top positions and obtain higher education, starting with the reign of King Abdul Ahmad Rahman Khan (1880-1901; Nemat, 2011). The first gender equality reform took place during his reign, when he challenged the tradition and the cultural status quo by giving equal rights to women in all aspects of life (Nemat, 2011). The king and his wife promoted western attire and putting aside the veil. Women learned new skills and soared in business and industry. These were landmark events, the first steps toward modernization and improving the status of women in Afghanistan. The state reformation process continued under the king's son, Habibullah Khan, who was assassinated in 1919; his son Amanullah Khan promoted women's advancement and valued women as active members of the society. During his reign (1926–1929), Afghans from all over the world returned home to contribute in rebuilding the country. The educated women were ambitious to rebuild the country and create a strong female work force. Afghan women gained access to higher education, learned new skills, started businesses and became active key players in the government and public sectors (Nemat, 2011). This revolutionary move caused a major backlash among Pashtunwali conservatives and tribal elders, who had viewed women as a commodity and not as valuable members of the society.

Muhammad Nadir Shah became The King in 1929. His priority was to maintain a positive rapport with the conservative tribes of Pashtunwali and to keep the peace; hence, he contributed very little to women's empowerment in order to please the tribal leaders. His rule was short-lived, as he was assassinated in 1933 (Nemat, 2011).

The golden era of peace and prosperity for Afghan women began with the reign of Zahir Shah, the last king of Afghanistan. He reigned for 40 years (1933-1973) and is known as the king who worked diligently to promote women by giving them access to higher education and skill development and encouraging them to become active in key official positions. He was the pioneer in banning the traditional Afghan attire for women, known as the *burka*.

By 1959, women could appear unveiled, and they strengthened their social status through advancement in education and health. They pursued careers in the business world and established small businesses. In 1964 an amendment to the Constitution of Afghanistan gave a boost to women's equal rights and allowed them to enter the

political arena. However, this freedom was limited to major cities like Kabul and Herat, while the rural areas remained socially conservative.

The first president of Afghanistan, Mohammad Daoud Khan (1973–1978), continued his support of women's empowerment by establishing the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan in 1977. The presidency of Daoud Khan and his legacy came to an end with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1978. A decade-long Soviet regime empowered women to seek higher education and be an active member of the society. Over 40% of medical doctors were women; over 60% of women worked as teachers or were employed in public sectors (Schulz & Schulz, 1999). During the Soviet era, women enjoyed their freedom and held higher ranking positions in private corporations and universities and were employed as doctors and nurses; however, this freedom came to a halt when the Soviet troops departed in 1989 followed by a decade of civil unrest which stripped women from their freedom. Women were removed from positions in the public sector and remained confined to their home, resumed wearing the traditional burka, and were seldom allowed to be seen in public (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003).

### **Afghan Women Under the Taliban (1994–2001)**

The darkest years for Afghan women were under the Taliban Regime. The Taliban ("students of Islam") emerged in Afghanistan in 1996, bringing with them strict rules of conduct and discrimination that were in violation of the first Afghan Constitution and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Afghanistan ratified in 1948. Taliban leaders followed Wahhabism, an extremist branch of Sunni Islam. The codes of Wahhabism justify their crimes and violations of human rights; they do not acknowledge or recognize women as human beings and do not extend human rights to them. After taking control of Kabul on September 26, 1996, the Taliban issued strict rules forbidding women to work outside of the home, attend school, or even leave their homes unless accompanied by a male chaperone (Schulz & Schulz, 1999).

Once an active part of Afghan society, women were torn from their basic human rights, such as health, education, and freedom of movement. To make matters worse, in September 1996 the Taliban leaders issued an announcement in the Kabul and Herat provinces forbidding women from employment in all sectors; even worse, a ruling denied women the back salaries owed to them for work performed during the Soviet period. All this caused extreme financial hardship, especially for 40,000 affected war widows whose livelihood and support of family depended on employment outside their living compounds (Schulz & Schulz, 1999). Women fell from grace and became invisible, begging in the streets.

### **Afghan Women Postintervention (2001)**

The events of September 11, 2001, which claimed over 3,000 civilian lives in the United States, marked the beginning of the ensuing international intervention in Afghanistan. To oust the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, the United States and United Kingdom, followed by Canada, Australia, Germany, and France, launched Operation Enduring Freedom and invaded Afghanistan in October 2001. In early December 2001, the Taliban rolled out of most of the provinces in Afghanistan. In November

2001, at the fall of the Taliban, international donors urgently worked together to implement a series of new initiatives to develop concrete institutions to help rebuild Afghanistan. In addition to providing humanitarian assistance, international organizations and international financial institutions administered donor conferences, trust funds, and reconstruction programs, all with one objective in mind: to rebuild a self-reliant Afghanistan.

Finding a balance between building a stable development framework to ensure sustainable livelihoods for women and restoring peace was a difficult task for the international donors. While the ongoing efforts intended by 30 international donor agencies to bring humanitarian relief to Afghans with priorities in health and education, very little focus was given to building the capacity of women and providing them with skills to earn a sustainable income.

The Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) was established to ensure that all women throughout 34 provinces have equal access to aid funds. With the support of many donor agencies, especially the UNDP, MOWA launched the first National Action Plan for the Woman of Afghanistan. This is a 10-year plan with the main objective of ensuring that women in both urban and rural areas have equal access to health, education, and skill development. The plan heavily emphasizes skill development and capacity building as an effective tool to avoid poverty in rural areas.

Despite all the efforts made by the MOWA, the international donor community, the government officials raised their dire concern of women' condition in the rural areas. With limited to no access to resources, these women were left to fall into a poverty trap. The International Rescue Committee's (2014) research in several provinces of Afghanistan indicated that women in rural areas were willing and capable of creating a sustainable income to contribute to their family and the community, given the proper resources and tools to build their capacity.

### **Current Situation of Afghan Women in Education and Employment in the Rural Areas**

The three decades civil wars have ruined every sector of Afghanistan especially the education sector which damaged the most. The schools were ruined and burnt in every part of the land. People migrated to different countries and especially those who were literate left the land early and left the county with the black clouds of ignorance. The three decades civil wars have ruined every sector of Afghanistan especially the education sector which damaged the most. The schools were ruined and burnt in every part of the land. People migrated to different countries and especially those who were literate left the land early and left the county with the black clouds of ignorance. The three decades civil wars have ruined every sector of Afghanistan especially the education sector which damaged the most. The schools were ruined and burnt in every part of the land. People migrated to different countries and especially those who were literate left the land early and left the county with the black clouds of ignorance.

The four decades of civil war have ruined every infrastructure in the country, especially in the education sector for girls and women in rural areas. After the fall of the Taliban, schools were reopened, and teacher's training colleges were constructed

in almost all provinces to build the capacity of the teachers. Despite pouring billions of dollars of aid funds through the Ministry of Education and the Higher Education, the latest report by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), says 90 percent of Afghan women in rural areas are illiterate. (<https://en.unesco.org>)

Afghan women have the right to study and there should be no implications and challenges for them to seek higher education. To reinforce this matter, Afghanistan's Islamic Laws indicate that "all persons may study, and men and women have the same right to have access to education" (Constitution of Afghanistan 1923). In many cases, women are granted certain privileges stipulated under Article 21 of Afghanistan's new constitution, which dictates that "any type of discrimination towards men or women is forbidden; the right to education is the same for all citizens of Afghanistan" (Constitution of Afghanistan 1963). In addition, All these articles show that the government has a responsibility and obligation to provide free access to education for women throughout Afghanistan.

*The state shall devise and implement effective programs to create and foster balanced education for women, improve education of nomads as well as eliminate illiteracy in the country.*

*Article 44*

The World Bank (2018) has reported some progress in women's empowerment in the rural areas in education and governance sectors; however, there is very minimal improvement in women's skill development and vocational training, which leads to a sustainable livelihood. Women in rural areas are largely confined to agriculture and farming, which does not require specific skills; in fact, their labor does not count as employment. Despite the ongoing aid funds from the international donor communities and the most recent grant by the World Bank (2018) of \$325 million for women's education and empowerment in the rural areas, there is very little evidence that funds have been allocated to skill development to secure a sustainable income.

Given the ongoing war for the past four decades and the country's current social, political, cultural, and economic situation, there are a variety of factors that exacerbate these problems. The Asia Foundation's survey of Afghan people in 2018 revealed that the major challenge for women in rural areas is the lack of access to education; while 84% of Afghans agreed that women should be given equal rights to pursue education, there are very limited opportunities for women to seek education in the rural areas. Unemployment is another major challenge facing women in rural areas. The survey indicated that there seems to be a paradigm shift in many rural areas: 70% of Afghan male populace agreed that women should be given proper tools and resources to learn new skills and work outside the home. This percentage does not include the conservative provinces in the Pashtunwali (Asia Foundation, 2018).

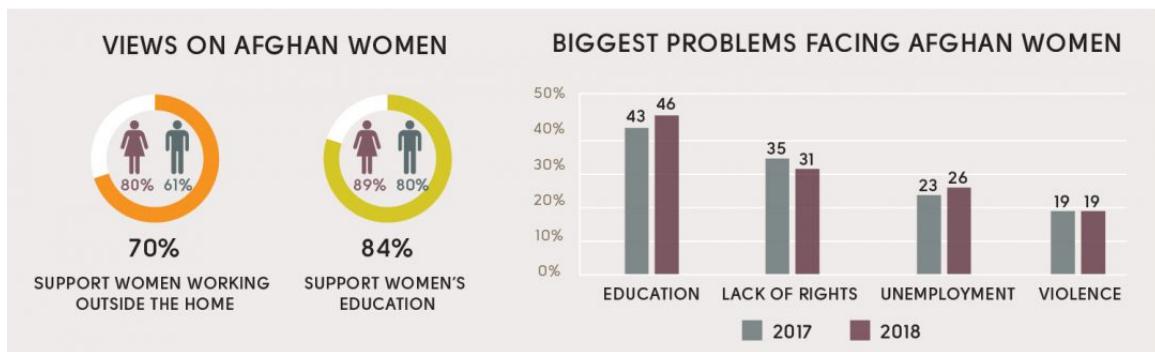


Figure 1: Survey of opinions on Afghan women. From *Afghanistan in 2018*

### Correlation of Capacity Building to Reducing Poverty

Poverty is a growing phenomenon and an issue of concern within underdeveloped, conflict, and post conflict countries. Although the definition of poverty may vary from one donor to another and one country to another, the United Nations has defined poverty as “a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information.” The simple definition of poverty is “the inability of people to meet their basic human and daily needs such as: decent living condition, access to health and education, food and sustainable employment” (1995, para. 19)

In Afghanistan, 70% of the current population of 340,940,837 lives in the rural areas, with 54.5% living below the poverty line (CIA, n.d.). As part of the annual United Nation Human Development Report (HDR), that measures human development progress in all areas, a Human Development Index (HDI) report of 2018 has ranked Afghanistan 168th out of 189 countries.

(<http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/AFG>)

The UNHDR report was developed based on the theoretical foundation of the development theory as designed by two economists, Mahbub ul Haq and Indian Nobel laureate Amartya Sen. Both Haq (1999) and Sen (2000), both economists suggested that their theory of sustainable development through capacity building is the only way to get out of poverty. Sen (2000, p. 42) mentioned that the “true purpose of development is to enhance people’s quality of life which is best achieved by giving them tools and resources to expand beyond boundaries.”. Within the Afghan context, once a woman has explored her ability to overcome the cultural protocols and receives the full support of her husband or a male figure in the household, she is capable of learning new skills and pursue working outside of the home. Once she established a stable income, she will have purchasing power, gain the trust and respect of the community leaders, contribute to family finances, and ultimately become a decision maker in her family and the community, she no longer is being perceived as a liability but an asset.

There are many definitions for capacity development which varies from one donor to another. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Capacity Development and the Measurement of Poverty report defines capacity building as “a tool for people to understand their full potential and starts from the principle that people are best empowered when the means of development are sustainable”

(<http://www.undp.org>). Simply put, capacity development is about transformations that empower individuals, leaders, organizations, and societies.

The World Bank (2012) defined capacity development as “the availability of resources and the efficiency and effectiveness with which societies deploy those resources to identify and pursue their development goals on a sustainable basis.” Internationally known economist Jeffrey Sachs (2005) examined many underdeveloped countries such as India, Bangladesh, and sub-Saharan Africa and determined that only through capacity development can an individual secure a sustainable livelihood, prosper financially, and avoid poverty traps. In the end, if properly strategized, capacity development can be a great tool to reduce poverty in underdeveloped countries.

### **Women in the Grassroots Unite to Build a Sustainable Livelihood: A Success Story in Ghor Province**

The province of Ghor is a remote rural province in the Northwest of Afghanistan in a Hazarajat region. Agriculture and animal husbandry are the main sources of income for people. Due to high unemployment and lack of access to stable jobs, the province has experienced a major depopulation of young men, who migrate to neighboring provinces to seek employment. Ghor has the highest overall poverty rate in Afghanistan (over 65%), and more than 75% of the women there are illiterate.

In a province where a woman is confined to her household with no knowledge of how to generate an income, a woman’s quest to build a strong female-driven work force came to fruition (Grigorian, 2016). Mrs. S. was the head of a women’s empowerment NGO in the province. With the support of a small grant from a donor agency, she managed to implement a baking project to build the capacity of 20 vulnerable women in learning how to operate baking machineries and provide the community with variety of sweets in the city of Chagcharan. Although the project faced much resistance and many challenges from the participants’ husbands or male figures and the community elders, Mrs. S. with the support of her husband convinced the affluent members of the community that this project would contribute to local economic development and be an asset for the city. The project was implemented in 2009 and is still in operation, with only a small handful of women. This is a success story and a testimonial that once women work together, they can overcome challenges and obstacles and be able to build a strong female work force in a highly conservative, male-driven society.

The findings of the research revealed that the status of the remaining women changed significantly (Grigorian, 2016). The participants were able to contribute to the household finances, which led them into the decision-making process. They had purchasing power, contributed to the local economy, and in turn gained the trust and respect of the community leaders. The research findings emphasized heavily the importance of the support of a male figure and the affluent members of the community to be able to venture beyond the veil (Grigorian, 2016).

## **Rural Microfinance as a Pathway Out of Poverty (Cases of Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, and Nepal)**

Jeffrey Sachs's (2005) research from rural Bangladesh revealed that women working in garment factories were happy with a small surplus from their meager income and still managed to save, go to school, and enhance their literacy and job market skills. His findings from several countries in South and Southeast Asia revealed that to avoid poverty, people should explore beyond their boundaries to learn innovative skills to earn a sustainable living. The importance of capacity building to avoid poverty has also been underlined by Purushothaman (1997), who revealed that women in rural India, Nepal, and Pakistan learned new skills and with the help of local NGOs had access to market to sell their products. In underdeveloped countries, the NGO community plays a key role in women's empowerment. For example, the Nepalese NGO Women's Skills Development Organization (n.d.) helps thousands of vulnerable women in rural areas by providing small loans and free training in carpet weaving, handicrafts, and tailoring to earn a sustainable income and sell their products online.

The noble concept of rural microfinance, which became popular in the 1970s, was initiated by social entrepreneur Muhammad Yunus from Bangladesh. Yunus recognized that access to finance is a gateway for the poor to generate an income and alleviate poverty. He created the Grameen Bank, a microcredit institution, to give collateral-free loans to rural Bangladesh. As of today, the Grameen Bank has given loans to 7.5 million clients in 82,072 villages in Bangladesh, 97% of whom are women. Yunus received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006. He has proven rural microfinance has helped millions of women in rural India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal to start a microbusiness and build a sustainable livelihood. With the help of microfinance millions of women are building a stable income which enables them to stay out of poverty trap. (Grameen Foundation, n.d.).

In Afghanistan, microfinance has become popular during the past decade. The World Bank (2018) revealed that the Afghan microfinance sector has grown during the past decade, with the total number of clients standing at 0.22 million. However, only 12% are in rural areas; microfinance does not follow Sharia law, which prohibits interest paid on all loans. In addition, borrowing money through microfinance requires collateral (e.g., land), which automatically disqualifies women; the cultural expectation is that a woman's husband or any other male figure in the family is the breadwinner, hence entitled to the land. A woman has no right to any property.

## **Conclusion**

The past four decades have been nothing but social and economic turmoil for Afghan women, who have somehow managed to overcome these horrendous challenges and move ahead in society. Once active members of the society, holding high-ranking positions, Afghan women fell from grace to grave under the dark terror of the Taliban regime. Their liberation from oppression by the Taliban was reinforced by the international invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001.

In Afghanistan, the international donor community, the government, public sectors, and policymakers did not pay a close attention to develop and implement a long-term strategy for women to learn new skills and create a stable income in rural

Afghanistan. Many donor-funded projects with an emphasis on rural women's empowerment consisted of a multitude of short-term trainings and capacity building initiatives that had no long-term result. Although billions of dollars of aid funds were channeled to the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, there is no evidence that women in the rural Afghanistan gained access to literacy programs or learned new skills to earn a stable income. Too often trainings did not address the needs of the target groups and did not provide them with tools and resources to overcome cultural barriers and able to work outside of their home.

Breaking the poverty shackles in the rural areas of any country will be achieved only through equal access to education and skill development programs. Education plays a key role in building the capacity of the people. Unfortunately, the women in rural Afghanistan suffer from a high illiteracy percentage rate; UNESCO has estimated that nearly 90% of women are illiterate in rural Afghanistan (citation needed here). In a society with such a high illiteracy rate, a capacity development approach will be fruitful through a customized process. The first phase must concentrate on adult education and literacy programs, which should be implemented in the community level to provide women with a basic outlook of the importance of learning new skills to build a sustainable livelihood. The next phase must concentrate on addressing the needs of the participants and develop a capacity-building strategy considering the local and cultural protocols. It is important to note that capacity building does not begin and end with trainings; history has proven that ad hoc training does not serve any purpose. To lead a successful capacity development program, a value chain approach must be implemented that begins with adult training, skill development, understanding the basics of business, and access to finance, and ends with access to market. Only through this approach can rural women prosper and be able to build a stable and sustainable livelihood.

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