

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Trapped in the Past or Empowered for the Future? Afghan Women's Prospects in the Decade to Come

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The recent presidential election in Afghanistan saw larger numbers of women defying the Taliban by questioning candidates and turning out to vote. This paper argues that Afghan women now need to further revolutionize skewed gender relations within the private sphere of the family. Already a growing number of men are lobbying on behalf of female relatives who have experienced sexual abuse; the result is that notions of women's rights are being inserted into public consciousness. A genuine women's movement could extend well beyond the past decade's cosmetic 'modernization' that has benefited only a few elite women. To gain independent bargaining power for such a groundswell, different female constituencies should unite, rallying behind a vision that appropriates and deploys liberating and peace-advocating versions of Islam. At home – where they customarily have been bartered into marriages – girls should be expected to gain skills in literacy and numeracy that can lead to a salary and professional status. Then, instead of adhering to traditional gender roles and identities based on the number of sons they have borne, women could start to be recognized for their formal labor. As one symbolic step to reverse women's precarious status in the decade ahead, the government and international donors should set the example of employing members of both sexes to work on projects of economic development.

Introduction

Over a decade since the momentous year when the Taliban were ousted and women once again saw opportunities for change, we are poised at the beginning of a new decade of transition as Afghanistan leaves centre stage for the international community. A situation of stark contrasts has emerged, not only in the creation of new elites who play by their own rules, but also in terms of the

'progress' achieved by women living in different contexts in Afghanistan. There was both stagnation and change. It is difficult to predict how things will change for Afghan women based on an analysis of the previous decades. Each saw dramatic changes, often likened to a pendulum effect, swinging from modernization to conservatism and back again. This article presents a brief overview of some of the salient issues for Afghan women in the coming decade. These include changes in perceptions surrounding women in family life, politics, economics, culture and Islam.

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Far too often in the last decade superficial phenomena and gestures involving women have been heralded and lauded as achievements. This is because substantive change has been difficult to achieve in the short term by those more interested in feel-good factors than sustainable transformation. At times the commitment, support and investment in the 'revolution' required to change the lives of millions of Afghan women has been traded in for cosmetic change in the lives of a few elite women. The international community has often been more comfortable dealing with English speakers reflecting their own values. At other times efforts made to help women do not go far enough, leaving them afloat in treacherous waters. An example is the precarious existence of a few women's shelters which accept abused women who manage to make it there (Bezhan 2012). The societal changes necessary to allow women to live as viable socioeconomic units away from abusive families, however, are a long way off. Adequate social protection is non-existent leaving most women needing protection with very few palatable options beyond life in the shelter.

The recent elections have shown a phenomenon which inspires optimism – the widespread politicization of women in some regions of Afghanistan. Women turned out in large numbers (Hume 2014), in defiance of the Taliban and other armed opposition groups to vote. It is clear that for many of these women a change in presidential candidates and the political elite is perceived as a shift that will impact their quality of life. The interesting part of this phenomenon is that there was no need for female candidates to draw the female voters.¹ Constituents and candidates demonstrated the gendered state of Afghan politics by reaching out to each other across the divide which commentators on Afghanistan see as an immutable part of Afghan life and culture. The women who voted demonstrate clearly that they understand the political process and that, more importantly, they are learning to navigate the political landscape.

Those groups of women who were asking candidates seemingly innocent questions about why their wives were not part of the campaign were emphatically demonstrating embryonic political bargaining power. This is something that should be developed and strengthened in order to give women a firm and strategic foothold as they try to create a permanent presence in public and particularly political life. So far, such solidarity and mass mobilization of women has only been seen during elections when male candidates have learnt that women mean votes. Thus, male candidates have been increasingly keen to facilitate women's large-scale presence in the public sphere during elections. But, so far women are only recognized by the male Afghan establishment as a valid political constituency during elections and women largely restrict exercising their political rights to the election period (Ford 2014). This energy can be harnessed and applied elsewhere. With the eventual emergence of viable civil society leaders, women may well begin lobbying en masse during other periods and on issues which affect them as women. This in turn may finally bring about the creation of a cohesive national women's rights movement – the absence of which is felt by those who fear the rise of conservatism in society and government, and the fall out of the return of the Taliban.

Leadership is critical in the coming period of transition as Afghans take firm hold of the reins of politics and governance. An effective female leadership is needed to unite various female constituencies and factions into a coherent whole with more political negotiating power. Emerging young leaders of both sexes must forego leadership models focused on personality cults and charisma or the construction of mythical personas. Strategically thinking female leaders are needed to help to articulate a vision which will unite the archipelago of women's groups, all with conflicting agendas. Current female leaderships are still largely entering the political sphere on the coat tails of male sponsors and mentors.

Without an independent power base and access to *independent* financial resources, untainted by the agendas of others, it will be impossible for them to develop and pursue a domestically viable platform. The emergence of interest in more democratic and representative models of leadership is already moulding the next generation of female leaders. They are being pushed to attract a following based on the issues they champion rather than charisma or largesse, the more traditional and popular form of leadership.

Overall, Afghans are wrestling with the dilemma of finding a unifying national Muslim identity which will be acceptable for the majority. Unfortunately, the ongoing campaigns of violence by a variety of armed opposition groups indicate that a satisfactory conclusion is a long way off. Women need to empower themselves in this debate if they are to become actors with substantive agency rather than pawns. The discourses of political Islam in Afghanistan have dominated and will likely negatively impact women's political and social agency as well as access to basic rights in the foreseeable future. Yet, women's empowerment could also gain strength through the strategic appropriation and deployment of empowering, liberating and peace-advocating versions of Islam. Violent forms of political Islam have been appropriated, albeit not exclusively, by groups such as the Taliban who use the position of women, or more precisely the control of women, as a symbol of their political integrity and the health of the Islamic polity they would like to construct.

Women have struggled to make inroads into this discourse where they are consistently disempowered – their rights being used as bargaining chips by leading political figures. Aside from an ongoing commentary on women's concerns about the return of the Taliban, Afghan women's rights activists and their supporters have had varying levels of success in gaining access to the arenas where such discourses take place. In terms of protecting women's rights, a small but growing

group of determined women are active in the justice sector, negotiating passage through the uncertain waters of sharia law for a mounting number of female clients. Provided with ongoing support and protection, these women may well expand possibilities for women to access their legal rights.

One interesting phenomenon, and a tiny glimmer of hope, is the increasing number of families demonstrating willingness to lobby on behalf of female relatives who have suffered sexual assault (Rubin 2012). This was previously considered taboo and families faced stigma and shame if addressing such issues. Credit must be given to those promoting the discourse on human rights, creating a space for such grievances to be aired and for families to become more courageous, fighting for the rights of female relatives. The growing discussions on domestic violence also demonstrate an opening of the private family sphere to public scrutiny in previously unimaginable ways. These phenomena also highlight the gradual and slow penetration of notions of women's rights into public consciousness, bringing about a minute but notable shift in attitudes which previously held the honour of men above the welfare of women. Such shifts in Afghan society are often difficult to reverse and will continue gnawing at societal and political restraints.

The missing bedrock for erecting a more robust edifice of presence, voice and rights for Afghan women has been the absence of a women's movement. Also lacking is a unifying vision which mobilizes individuals to put the needs of women as a group above family prerogatives, a habit borne out of a need to survive in a deeply paternalistic and hierarchical society. Without these, the situation of women will not be dramatically different in one decade or ten. A myriad of small groups and individuals represent women's rights, presenting a fragmented front and a cacophony of voices. There is no articulated vision which speaks to women beyond a small group familiar with international development jargon and jockeying for survival in

the development business. Women's groups still do not have the political power and resources to proactively create and articulate a vision. Instead, they simply react to incremental threats posed by policies designed to curb women's rights. These groups still need the support of the international community, which opens them up to accusations of pursuing foreign agendas. The formation of a women's movement not only needs resources but also a visionary leadership, the development of a vision which appeals to a large national constituency and the ability to see differences in opinion and outlook as strengths.

The participation of women in economic development is critical if Afghanistan is going to move away from donor dependence and drag its population away from the poverty line. Attitudes need to change. If women are to take their rightful place in economic decision-making from the family level up, then their contribution in terms of labour and involvement in productive activities controlled by men must be valued and not just in monetary terms. In the current situation women are seen as freeloaders who stay at home because of lack of education and skills. The general attitude from men is to ask programme implementers to give women something 'useful' to do (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2010). The truth is that many women are already active contributors to agriculture, animal husbandry and a number of other sectors – in addition to the labour intensive process of running the household. However, their contribution is invisible because it is often unpaid, paid in kind or is simply not considered official work culturally.

There is often an expectation from families and communities that women should provide their labour and skills for free, even where such work would have to be compensated monetarily were it performed beyond the confines of the family. Women's contributions are assigned little value in Afghan society and without concerted efforts such attitudes will not shift any time soon. Women's labour in the informal sector and in traditional labour-intensive agriculture and food processing is not organized, certainly

not unionized and almost always controlled by men – in other words women have no bargaining power. Currently, men also moderate women's access to the marketplace. Women entering the bazaar do so with little or no social sanction or protection. Women's large-scale participation in the formal economy has never occurred in Afghan history and, without focused and inclusive policies it will continue to be a retarding factor to gender equality in coming decades.

Lifting families out of poverty in the coming decades will require sensible and gendered approaches. The majority of Afghan women reside in rural areas. A significant proportion suffers from or is at risk of poverty. Available data points to stark differences between the lives of urban and rural women from different socioeconomic categories. The life of the average rural woman in Afghanistan is one of drudgery and low life expectancy. Poverty reduction policies have barely made a dent thus far and require rethinking (Kantor and Pain 2011). Feminization of poverty and measures to address it require special attention. Economic development programmes for women have been expensive, piecemeal and focused on unsustainable income generation models. Very little has been done in terms of giving women sustainable and direct access to viable markets.²

One of the failures of development in Afghanistan has been the inability to significantly increase literacy rates in both men and women over the past decade (ACCU 2010). This partially reflects the inability to retain girls in school beyond the age of ten and to change family attitudes and societal norms about the value in educating girls into adolescence and beyond (Oxfam 2011). It also reflects donor and government habits of substituting repetitive policy making exercises, expensive publicity events and remote reporting on 'positive change' for achieving actual change.³ Illiteracy continues to leave poorer, rural women at a distinct disadvantage. Schooling not only provides women with literacy and numeracy but also provides a range of other necessary skills such as the ability to follow instructions, get access to

public information and effectively access their legal rights. Without a focused and realistic effort to plan and effect long-term change in this sector, women will only have access to low-paying jobs and will be disadvantaged when they compete with male unskilled labour.

The Afghan family has been subjected to a great deal of pressure through several decades of war. The position of women in some circles is changing but is still largely restricted to elites and the embryonic middle classes. A small but growing number of women are able to moderate their relations within the family and to negotiate their status using new factors such as salary and professional status as opposed to number of sons borne and adherence to gender roles and identities based on cultural and religious strictures. However, these factors still dominate.

The family has been a locus of protection and sustenance throughout the dark decades of war and civil unrest. The evolution of the Afghan state and political sphere is dependent on the transformation of ideas about the 'traditional family' that is still seen as the cornerstone of a morally viable society. Self-appointed guardians of morality are deeply threatened by individuals who challenge family mores and, by extension, jeopardize the survival of conservative regimes. For women to renegotiate gender relations with their peers, they must begin within the private sphere of family. This is the only way to loosen the grip of patriarchy. The remarkable proliferation of reporting on teenage attempts to run away from forced marriage and to marry for love (Nordland and Rubin 2010; Bron 2011), for example, may demonstrate just one aspect of a societal shift. Without attempts to address this, upcoming generations of Afghans will mostly enter their adult life deeply frustrated by tradition, underserved by government, and feeling distinctly disempowered to influence fossilizing societal forces resistant to change.

Rural, and to some extent urban, adolescents face a bleak life with little in the way of targeted government services, opportunities

and prospects in Afghanistan. Despite of the fact that they are the future generation, there has been little or no attempt to garner their energy and potential to generate societal change.⁴ More than any other group many adolescents have seen little difference in their lives despite dramatic changes in Afghanistan in the last decade. Boys and girls appear in government statistics on primary education and infant mortality. Beyond that, they are not seen again until they are adults. Adolescent girls may be seen blended into statistics on maternal and child health. Adolescent girls in particular are bartered in a range of marriage negotiations, forced into marriage, become underage brides and underage mothers. However, for both sexes there is little to describe their plight: they are exposed to the possibilities of change through the dramatic expansion of the media sector, and yet lack the possibility to realize change in their personal lives.

Despite some positive gains, the situation for women in Afghanistan is precarious and the future remains uncertain. The decision to insert women into many facets of public and political life echoed the policies of regimes long gone. It represented a pendulum swing, countering the suffering and exclusion women had endured under the Taliban. Women have been inserted at convenient junctures so that gender equality boxes can be ticked. Some sectors, such as security forces, have proved more resilient to such tampering but have nevertheless paid lip service. Women have not created the strategic foothold they need to continue to progress in different areas. They have not been able to form strategic and strong alliances which will withstand efforts to push women out of the public sphere. The re-emergence of women in the public sphere has been based on practical considerations for families and accelerated in pockets by positive discrimination from government. It remains to be seen which gains are durable and resilient. A gradual progression based on activism and the growth of a movement with a strategic vision will create more sustainable gains. The challenges mentioned

above herald a coming period of struggles to retain ground gained and to push forward into new territories.

Author Information

Sepi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam is an independent consultant and researcher who has spent 18 years in Afghanistan travelling extensively, interviewing Afghans in Dari and analysing realities on the ground. Based on this in-depth understanding of Afghan communities and society she has advised groups and individuals from Afghan civil society organizations to government and military leaders on a range of issues.

Notes

- ¹ This is based on the author's observations and interviews throughout every election process since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001.
- ² Based on the author's work for almost two decades analysing the role of income-generating programmes in economically empowering Afghan women.
- ³ Based on the author's personal experiences of such processes in Afghanistan since 1995.
- ⁴ Based on the author's interaction with civil society groups and firsthand observations of rural life since 1995.

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