

GENDER DYNAMICS IN AFGHANISTAN

By Supriya Agarwal



The status of women all over has been in question for centuries now. Scholars have conducted researches, debated and have tried to understand the dynamics related to gender in every society. Afghanistan, rugged in its topography with multiple ethnic and tribal groups, has never experienced a strong centralized state with a common legal system to ensure women's rights¹. The largest ethnic groups are Pashtuns at 40 percent and the Tajiks at 20¹ percent. The next largest groups are the Hazaras, Uzbeks and Aimaq. Both spatial and ethnic

¹ Dr. Huma Ahmed-Ghosh. May 2003. A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future Or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan. Journal of International Women's Studies Vol 4 #3

impassibility has prevented Afghanistan from ever forming a consensual and coherent sense of nationalism.

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In addition, interference by western countries and countries bordering Afghanistan have contributed to the fragmentation of the Afghan polity. Tribal politics is still determined by ethnic loyalties to bordering states. Although there have been occasional tries to bring tribes together, at no point has the state experienced a strong centralized state with a common legal system. Instead, rival ethnic groups have had political ambitions to capture Kabul and, through well-armed tribal leaders (supported by external funds), created their own sovereignties. Ethnically based rivalries, combined with open and varied interpretations of Islam, have created fractious cultures.

It is said that history is the lens through which one must learn about the future. If that is so, then the matter of women’s rights in Afghanistan has been historically confined by the patriarchal nature of gender and social relations deeply embedded in traditional communities. Tribal laws and sanctions have routinely taken precedence over Islamic and constitutional laws in deciding gender roles, especially through kinship hierarchies in the rural regions. Tribal power plays, institutions of honour, and inter-tribal shows of patriarchal control have put women's position in jeopardyⁱⁱ.

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However, today, there are numerous organizations working towards women empowerment and in building the capacity of women and youth in order for them to articulate their needs in the development, peacebuilding and democratic processes. Equality for Peace and democracy (EPD)² is one such organization. EPD was established in 2010 by Ms. Nargis Nehan, the Executive Director of EPDⁱⁱⁱ. The aim of EPD is to mobilise women to further the cause of a stable Afgha

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Another such associations the Revolutionary Association of the Women in Afghanistan (RAWA). RAWA represents a political

2 EQUALITY for Peace and Democracy (EPD) is a non-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to empowering women and youth at the community and policy levels in Afghanistan.

3 Among the main causes of FHHs are male migration, the deaths of males in civil conflicts.

4 Status of Women in Afghanistan, The Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2015.

movement that connects feminist and nationalist politics, where women are active, rather than symbolic, participants within the organization, and help to shape an ideological construction of the Afghan nation^{iv}. RAWA is a doctrinal sample for counter-patriarchal and nationalist feminist politics that enquires patriarchal definitions of the nation and its citizenry by redefining gender relations in the family as a mirror of the nation.

In reality today, 39.1% of the population of Afghanistan lives under poverty stricken conditions⁵ which fails to meet the Costs of Basic Needs (CBN). This threshold in Afghanistan represents the minimum cost of obtaining 2,100 calories based on the consumption patterns of the poor⁶. Women, as a common denominator, are particularly at risk across all demographic groups, especially if disabled, widowed, or coming from female-headed households (FHH)⁷. The

possibility of fear lies in the fact that FHHs are usually not favoured when it comes to land, livestock, education and health services⁸.

The quality of women's health has generally improved since 2001, but the country's health indicators remain poor from an international perspective and improvements are progressing slowly. Lack of

5 ALCS (2014). Kabul: CSO.

6 D'Souza and Jolliffe (2012). Conflict, Food Price Shocks, and Food Insecurity: The experience of Afghan households. Kabul.

7 Among the main causes of FHHs are male migration, the deaths of males in civil conflicts.

8 Status of Women in Afghanistan, The Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2015.

education linked with poverty, has created a chronic state of vulnerability for women and children of the state.

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When it comes to education, girls and women have been always disadvantaged and have fallen behind the male population. The primary long term aim of the government is **to strengthen human capital through education and improve one of the lowest literacy rates in the world, where only 32 % of total population is functionally literate.** Only 19% of women are functionally literate, in comparison to the 49.1% of males. The lack of sufficient support to impact women’s illiteracy is a

reflection of social attitudes and stereotyping gender roles⁹. Though, there has been considerable progress from 2001 in girls' enrolment. As of 2014, some 8 to 10 million Afghans are enrolled in school, of which a third are girls^v.

In terms of economic empowerment, Afghanistan is ranked 150th in the world, placing it at the bottom¹⁰. **The female labour force participation rate is at 29% whereas its 81% for males¹¹**. Only a small number of female enterprises and workers have achieved economic growth but even this has not transpired to all sectors, including the rural areas. **The gap between rural and urban women is increasing with different situations factoring to geography, culture and local customs which more often than not, do not support female activities in the economy. In rural areas, the trend to exclude females from the public space has hardly changed¹². Nevertheless, females are significant contributors in the agricultural sector, given that 76% of women are living in the rural areas.**

Women advancement in the social or economic field cannot be achieved without them having access to the resources which needs to be divided equally. This can only take place through political participation.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Human Development Reports, Table 4: Gender Inequality Index, hdr.undp.org/en/content/table-4-gender-inequality-index.

¹¹ ALCS (2014). Kabul: CSO.

¹² EPD (2014). Afghanistan Gender Equality Report Card. Kabul: Equality for Peace and Democracy.



Female representation in political institutions is at 35% locally. The new constitution also introduced reservations in the National Assembly. In the Meshrano Jirga, 50% of the members elected by the President should be women^{vi}. Though, this commendable reservation for women indicates a degree of gender equality and support for women in public life, social institutions that promote gender equality, or the general social attitudes do not support this. They also face tremendous amount of hardships, relating to security, which eventually hamper female representation. Given this, the central task of the government and MOWA then becomes to transform the mainstream mindset through campaigns and by raising awareness to sharpen attitudes towards equal rights

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One cannot disregard the change which, even if slowly, is taking into shape. The change has given rise to the hope that social advancement can take place and proven that women from all classes of the society can attempt change in their lives. **The solution to the problem lies in strengthening ethnic bonds by insisting on women’s economic participation.** The idea is that, along with laws, educated women in the future will be able to negotiate their roles in the family and society through their heightened economic and political participation.

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