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Women in Afghanistan: Developments over the Last 20 Years and the Return of the Taliban

EQUALITY: A LONG WAY DOWN THE ROAD

Afghanistan ranks among the lowest on a number of gender equality indicators. In the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, Afghanistan ranks last out of 156 countries (World Economic Forum 2021). In none of the countries surveyed is equality further away than in Afghanistan. This is also reflected in other equality indicators, such as the United Nations' Gender Equality Index and Gender Inequality Index, on which Afghanistan ranks 169th out of 189 countries in 2020 (UNDP 2021a and UNDP 2021b). On the 2019 "SIGI Index," which measures discrimination against women, Afghanistan ranks tenth lowest out of 120 countries (SIGI 2021). The index shows that women are discriminated against, especially within their own family systems, and their physical integrity is under severe attack.

A survey conducted by the Asia Foundation in 2019 with 17,812 Afghans shows that the many inequalities faced by women are driven by the fragile security situation as well as lacking access to public services and barriers to the labor market. 18.1 percent of interviewed Afghans believe that violence is the biggest problem faced by women. These security concerns are also one of the drivers behind restricting labor market access of women. Nearly 25 percent of those who think that women should not work outside the home name uncertain conditions and 11.3 percent security concerns as the main reason. 43.2 percent name gaps in educational opportunities as the biggest challenge to women in the country. Other factors mentioned are a lack of public services, employment opportunities as well as female rights (Akseer et al. 2019).

These factors intervene with harmful gender norms, customs, and tribal practices as well as religious interpretations. The acceptance of violence against women is one of the highest worldwide (World Bank 2021). Additionally, nearly one out of 10 Afghans find the practice of *baad*, a method through which a female member from a criminal's family is handed over to the victim's family as compensation, acceptable, and nearly one-third agree with the practice of marriage exchange (Akseer et al. 2019). Women also face a variety of societal expectations. As an example,

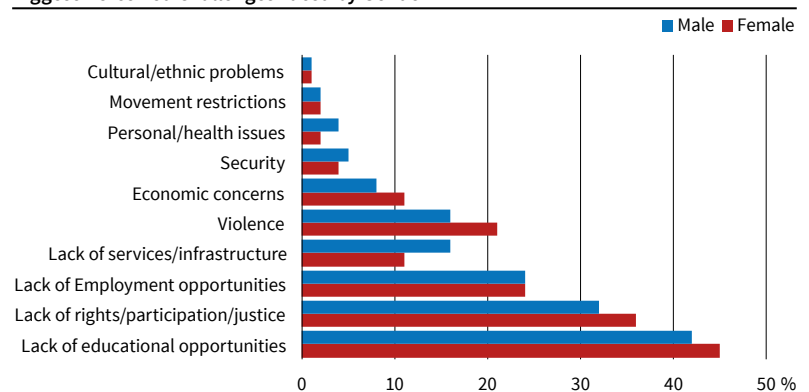
ABSTRACT

Afghanistan is one of the most dangerous places for women in the world. During the Taliban's first rule from 1996 to 2001, the country became known for its degrading treatment of women. Since 2001, Afghanistan has made progress in gender equality, but major gaps remain. Although women's labor market participation has increased in recent years, it is among the lowest in the world. Prior to the Taliban takeover, women made great strides in schooling, especially in primary education. This was similarly the case in the health sector. Women have also been represented in political decision-making processes in recent years. Since mid-August 2021, the Taliban have been back in power. What does this mean for Afghan women and girls? This article looks at the achievements in gender equality in recent years and attempts to answer this question.

36.6 percent of Afghan men prefer women to wear a burka, compared to 27.6 percent of women (ibid). Religious interpretations further increase gender inequalities in the country. 17.4 percent of those who think that women should not work outside the home base this on their belief that it would be against Islamic Law (ibid).

Development assistance has played a controversial role in gender equality in recent years. On the one hand, there is evidence that development projects

Figure 1
Biggest Perceived Challenges Faced by Gender



Source: Asia Foundation (2019).

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have been successful in improving women's participation in social, economic, and political activities (Beath et al. 2013). On the other hand, studies show that Afghan men have taken even more conservative and defensive positions on gender equality because of development assistance (Bahri 2014). Others find that development projects led by Western countries that address women's rights separately from local politics are unsuccessful (Wimpelmann 2012). Many projects did not fully consider and understand the barriers faced by girls and women in Afghanistan (SIGAR 2021).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GENDER DIMENSION IN ECONOMICS

Gender equality plays an important role in realizing economic potential. Nobel laureate Esther Duflo also emphasizes that economic development and female empowerment are closely related (Duflo 2021). Gender equality has a positive impact on economic growth, general labor market participation and also productivity (EIGE 2021a). Gender-based violence has societal costs. For example, a recent study found that it costs the EU 289 billion euros per year (EIGE 2021b).

COUNTRY PROFILE AND ECONOMIC PROGRESS OVER THE LAST 20 YEARS

Most of Afghanistan's approximately 40 million inhabitants live in the foothills and on the periphery of the rugged Hindu Kush Mountains. While the cities, such as Kabul, are vibrant and modern, life in the rural areas and in the mountains is more traditional. Although a large proportion of Afghans are Muslim, the country is characterized by many regional differences (Afghanistan Analysts Network 2011), which are reflected not least in the 14 recognized ethnic groups and the many different languages spoken, in addition to the official languages Persian/Dari (78 percent) and Pashto (50 percent) (The World Factbook 2021). Population growth is high and has doubled since 2000 and even more than tripled since 1990 (Worldometers 2021).

Each woman gives birth to an average of 4.72 children (The World Factbook 2021).

The Afghan population is comparatively young, with a median age of 18.4 years (cf. Germany: 45.7; Pakistan: 22.8; Iran: 32 years) (Worldometers 2021). Over 40 percent of the population are children between 0 and 14 years of age (World Bank 2021). Among women aged 25–49, the median age of mothers at the birth of their first child was 19.9 (The World Factbook 2021). Financial support from the government is received by only 1.7 percent of mothers (UN Women 2021).

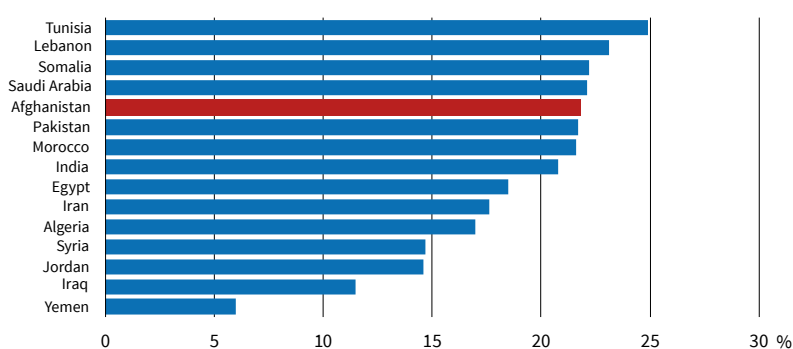
Landlocked Afghanistan is a poor country, with a real GDP (at purchasing power parity) of USD 77M in 2020. GDP per capita was USD 2,000 (The World Factbook 2021). The sectoral composition of GDP is 23 percent agriculture, 21.1 percent industry, and 55.9 percent services. The main trading partners (importers as well as exporters) are the United Emirates, Pakistan, India, and China. Exports include gold, grapes, opium, fruits and nuts, insect resins, and cotton. Imported goods include wheat flour, radio sets, refined petroleum, wrapped tobacco, aircraft parts, and synthetic fabrics (The World Factbook 2021). In general, Afghanistan is among the poorest countries in the world (Albrecht et al. 2021). How many women live below the poverty line is unknown.

Women and Work

Even before the Taliban came to power, women were largely excluded from the labor market. The labor force participation rate of the Afghan population has stagnated at around 50 percent since 2000 (World Bank 2021). Although female labor market participation has increased from 15 percent in 2000 to 22 percent in 2019, Afghanistan is among the 15 countries worldwide with the lowest female labor market participation (World Bank Data 2021). The proportion of female (male) youth not in education, employment, or training was nearly 66 percent (18 percent) in 2017 and was one of the highest in the world (World Bank 2021). Women in employment were also particularly affected by informality and precarious forms of employment. Since it is primarily men who are expected to generate income and women are often left out, gender inequality in the country is further exacerbated. This has a negative impact on the level of prosperity across Afghanistan. In 2019, less than one fifth of respondents in the Survey of the Afghan people state that female family members contribute to their family's household income, with slight decreases over the last couple of years (Akseer et al. 2019).

An analysis from 2013 shows that women's labor market participation is hampered by a variety of factors (JICA 2013). For one, it is still not accepted in many parts of society for women to interact with men outside the immediate family core. Women also often lack access to important professional networks

Figure 2
Countries with Lowest Female Labor Force Participation Rate
% of ages 15 and older; 2019



Source: World Bank Data (2021).

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or knowledge. In addition, women, especially in rural areas, are often not aware of their own rights and their property is managed by men. In Afghanistan, for example, it is estimated that only 5 percent of land titles are held by women (Reuters 2021). Harmful gender norms play an additional role. Only roughly three third of interviewees in the 2019 Survey of the Afghan people support women working outside the home (Akseer et al. 2019). While this is an increase when compared to previous years, the norms behind those who find women's work outside their home unacceptable are sticky. 18.7 percent of those believe that a woman is not needed outside the home (ibid).

Women and Health

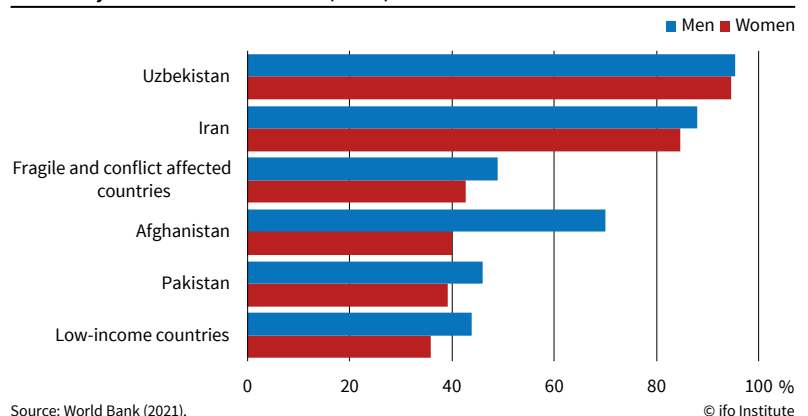
Afghanistan has made important progress in the health sector in recent years, and women have benefited. However, notable gaps remain. For example, in 2017, there were only 0.4 hospital beds per 1,000 population (The World Factbook 2021). However, life expectancy has increased and infant mortality rates and child underdevelopment have fallen (World Bank 2021). While only one in ten births were attended by skilled health personnel in 2000, this was true for nearly six in ten in 2019 (World Bank 2021). In 2019, still one in three children is underdeveloped (World Bank 2021). Cultural norms, particularly around gender equality, continue to play a role in women's access to the health system (Mirzazada 2021). A 2020 study finds that 67 percent of women surveyed cannot visit a health facility without a male escort (Care 2020).

Women and Education

Girls have made great strides in education over the past 20 years. But these gains are now in jeopardy. During the first Taliban rule until 2001, Afghan girls were almost completely excluded from the education system. In the period since, there have been significant improvements in education for girls. The gross enrollment rate for girls in primary education was zero at the end of the first Taliban rule in 2001. By 2018, the proportion of girls in primary education had increased significantly to 83 percent (World Bank 2021). The picture is similar at the secondary level. Here, too, gross enrollment rates for both genders have increased in recent years, albeit at a slower pace. However, female enrollment rates have lagged significantly behind those of males (Figure 3). Tertiary education is low for both genders: Only 5 percent of women and 15 percent of men attended a tertiary education institution (World Bank 2021). Still, nearly one in three women was alphabetic in 2018. This is a great improvement, although the country still ranked only fifth to last globally in this regard (World Bank 2021).

Social norms and the security situation have continued to have a lasting impact on girls' education.

Figure 3
Secondary School Enrollment Rate (Gross) 2018



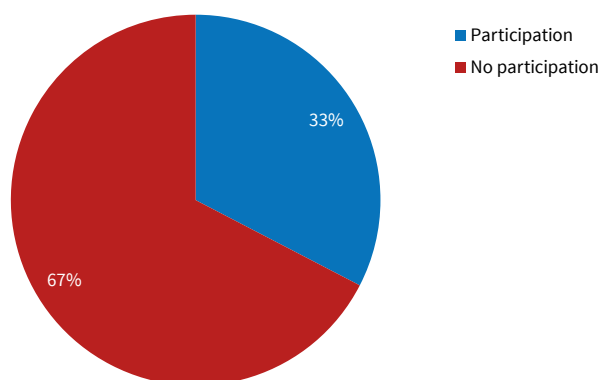
While the population's general approval for women's education is high, standing at 86.6 percent in 2019 (Akseer et al. 2019), important barriers persist. In addition to poor infrastructure, there is a lack of support and offerings in Persian (France24 2021). Moreover, child marriages could lead to more difficult access to education for girls. One in three girls in Afghanistan is forcibly married. While this is a decrease from 10 years ago, when 4 in 10 girls were married as children, the rate is still high compared to other countries. Along with this, 12 percent of girls become pregnant before the age of 18.

Women's Political, Corporate and Family Voice

While women were excluded from government during the first period of Taliban leadership, the percentage of seats held by women in the national parliament was 27 percent in 2020 (World Bank 2021). This ranked the country 81st out of 197 countries for which 2020 data are available. The percentage of women in local councils was 16.6 percent in 2020 (NSIA 2021). Recent research shows that women face numerous obstacles on their path to political participation in the country (Meera and Khatera 2021). These obstacles are mostly cultural, historical, and ideological. According to the report, there are hundreds of barriers to women's political participation that are mutually reinforcing. Harmful gender norms are one example. 4.2 percent of men interviewed in the Survey of the Afghan people wish for a female political representative, the lowest value since the start of the survey in 2004 (Akseer et al. 2019). 6 out of 10 Afghans believe that women should decide for whom to vote on their own (ibid). Still, recent years have given room for more gender-equal norms. As an example, 89.3 percent of interviewed people agree on women having the right to vote, a 5-percentage point increase when compared to 2008 (ibid).

The percentage of women in senior and middle management has been persistently low. In 2017, only 4 percent of senior and middle managers in the country were women (World Bank 2021). 5 out of 100 com-

Figure 4
Participation of Women in Intra-Household Decision-Making, 2015



Source: World Bank (2021).

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panies were headed by a woman in 2014, which was a slight improvement from 2008 (when the rate was 0.7 percent). A 2018 study concludes that female entrepreneurship is constrained by various factors, such as social norms or lack of access to financial capital, and therefore cannot realize the growth potential within the economy (Ali and Azimi 2018). Only one fourth of respondents in the Survey of the Afghan people of 2019 agree with a woman becoming the CEO of a large company (Akseer et al. 2019).

Afghan women also continue to play a subordinate role in decision-making within the family (see Figure 4). Data from 2015 show that one in three women in Afghanistan is involved in the following three decisions: health care, household purchases, and family visits (World Bank 2021). This places Afghanistan among the countries with the greatest inequality along this dimension in a list of countries for which data are available between 2012 and 2018. Just 1.7 percent of households were headed by women in 2015, the lowest among all countries for which data are available from the same year (World Bank 2021). Violence against women is also still widespread. In 2015, 46 percent of women experienced physical or sexual violence in the past 12 months (World Bank 2021). Although there have been increasing numbers of women's shelters in the country since 2001, many have been forced to close since mid-August 2021. In 2019, women in Afghanistan had very limited access to justice (Akseer et al. 2019). Only 2 out of 10 female respondents of the Survey of the Afghan People 2019 say that they know where to go in order to resolve their problems (Akseer et al. 2019).

Afghan women have also been excluded from Peace talks with the Taliban during the last decades. A study by the Asia Foundation from 2019 finds that women have only participated twice in these peace talks since 2005 (Akseer et al. 2019). This stood in contrast with recent constitutional advances in gender inequality and could be a sign of persistent problems in the voice and agency of women. While they have tried to get involved in peace talks nationally through grassroots and subnational efforts, they have been

continuously denied a role at the international negotiation stage (ibid).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TALIBAN'S RETURN FOR WOMEN

The question arises as to how the return of the Taliban might affect the situation of women and girls in the country. Early indications of this are already evident, and the situation of women and girls is expected to worsen many times over.

POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS OF THE TALIBAN'S RETURN FOR WOMEN

Contrary to the promise to uphold women's rights, the opposite became apparent in the areas of work, education and social life shortly after the takeover. Women were largely expelled from their jobs. Only medical nurses were asked to resume their work (Pakistan Today 2021). Even when women are allowed to work, they must be escorted to and from the entrance by a close male companion (Guardian 2021a). In addition, the Taliban's strict regulations require separation of the sexes. Only when there are not enough men in a particular function, such as doctors, are female doctors allowed to treat male patients (Pakistan Today 2021). The exclusion of women from the labor market could also negatively impact the household income of many families and further increase poverty among women.

In the education sector, too, the Taliban's recapture could have extreme negative consequences, especially for girls. Already, Afghan girls are once again excluded from secondary education. Although the Taliban have not formally banned them from attending school, this is similar to tactics used during the first regime. At that time, women were required to stay home until the security situation improved, but according to the Taliban, this never happened. This could also have enormous negative consequences for the country's economy. A study by USAID finds that if 10 percent more girls went to school, GDP would increase by 3 percent (USAID 2018). This suggests that education has a positive impact on women's future earnings and labor market participation (USAID 2018).

Gender segregation continues in tertiary education. Women are only allowed to attend universities under strict rules and gender segregation. They may only be taught by female professors, which the country does not have in sufficient numbers. For example, in 2018, only one in ten people employed at universities was a woman (World Bank 2021). It is only a matter of time before no women follow in the tertiary sector due to the exclusion of girls from secondary education (Guardian 2021b).

The health sector has been in a disastrous state since the return of the Taliban (Albrecht et al. 2021). In some cases, women no longer dare to seek medical

help (Albrecht et al. 2021). There is great concern that the health care system could regress to the level of the first Taliban rule. At that time, Afghanistan had one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world. In 2001, this was at an incidence of 9 per 100 children (World Bank 2021).

Again, it appears that women involved in politics in Afghanistan are targeted in part because of their gender. Even during the first rule, violence was used to discourage women from participating in politics (OHCHR 2021). The Taliban has already stated that women are barred from working in government positions, which is also reflected in the exclusively male composition of the de facto government (Deutscher Bundestag 2021). Whether women will be allowed to participate in political life beyond that is uncertain, but seems unlikely.

Return of Strict Customs, Rules and Punishments

The abolition of the Ministry of Women and the re-introduction of the Ministry of Morals and Virtue is causing concern in many quarters (Guardian 2021c). It is this ministry that implemented the strict interpretation of Islam under the first Taliban rule in the 1990s. A return of brutal punishments by the Taliban is likely (Hindustan Times 2021). This primarily involves executions for murder and kidnapping, amputations for theft, and public humiliation for minor crimes (Appnews 2021; Hindustan Times 2021). These measures, according to the Taliban, are “essential” for security (Hindustan Times 2021) and are intended to deter criminals.

IMPROVING GENDER EQUALITY THROUGH HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND EDUCATION

To improve gender equality, a two-tiered approach could be taken to best support Afghan women and girls in light of current developments in the country. The first priority level should ensure equal access for women and girls to humanitarian assistance that addresses their basic needs, such as nutrition, education, and health, but also counteracts gender-based violence. In addition, Afghan women should be part of the communication with the Taliban and given a strong voice in this dialogue. The international community should advocate for the human rights of women and girls in the country and exert united pressure in this regard.

The second priority level should consist of actions that take a long-term perspective on gender equality. These include women’s and girls’ access to media and the Internet, financial and political support for women’s civil society, strengthening institutions to be more gender responsive, and ongoing peace efforts in Afghanistan. All policy interventions should be carefully screened and monitored for gender equality. Western countries could also support by investing in

innovative approaches such as online education or “ed-tech.”

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