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Economic Empowerment: An Avenue to Gender Equality in Afghanistan

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Following the entry of the United States armed forces into Afghanistan in 2001, Afghan women's rights rose to the forefront of the international community's attention. As media outlets highlighted the Taliban's egregious treatment of women, government agencies and international NGOs poured into the country with the aim of liberating women from their oppressive circumstances. While the Taliban's presence lingers in Afghanistan today, significant strides have been made toward gender equality since their fall from power in 2001. Yet, in many ways, women remain subordinate, with lower levels of education, poorer health, and less participation in politics. Many of the legal advances made for women remain little more than words on paper. Extensive changes are needed to realize these gains in practice. This paper presents the argument that, while education, legal rights, political participation, and physical security are important pieces of the gender equality puzzle in Afghanistan, economic empowerment of women should be the top priority as it is the most effective and culturally sensitive way to improve women's rights in the long-term. Women who gain economic skills that are valuable to their household and community will eventually wield greater political influence and ability to advocate for their own rights. Furthermore, economic empowerment is the most effective means to equality in the context of Afghanistan's patriarchal, Muslim-majority society. Approaching gender relations from an economic angle will be less threatening than approaching it using human rights discourse, which many Muslims consider at odds with Islam or an imposition of Western values.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN AFGHANISTAN

While gender in Afghanistan received heightened attention from the global community over the past few decades, it has been a point of contention in Afghanistan for much of the twentieth century. Even before the Taliban's rise to power, Afghanistan ranked last in the world on the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) gender index due to high female illiteracy and maternal mortality rates and low school enrollment for girls.¹ Various regimes have sought to improve women's status through modernization policies. For example, in the 1920s child marriage was outlawed, and in the 1960s women were forced to unveil themselves. During the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan in the late 1970s and 1980s, a "literacy jihad" was aimed at improving literacy rates amongst rural women. In all of these cases, "women's lives and bodies became symbols of contrasting traditional and modern ways of life," creating so much turmoil that each regime was either overthrown or collapsed internally.²

¹ Gillian Wylie, "Women's Rights and 'Righteous War': An Argument for Women's Autonomy in Afghanistan," *Feminist Theory* 4, no. 2 (2003): 219.

² Wylie, "Women's Rights and 'Righteous War,'" 218.

Overall, the early and mid-twentieth century witnessed improvements in women's status in Afghanistan. Afghan women gained the right to vote in 1919, a year before their counterparts in the United States, and in the 1960s a new constitution ushered in equality in many areas. However, women's status began to decline following the Soviet invasion in 1978. While women in cities like Kabul enjoyed more freedom than ever before from 1978 to 1992, the majority of Afghan women—those in rural areas and those living as refugees in neighboring nations—saw their rights deteriorate. The refugee camps in Pakistan became a breeding ground for *mujahideen* and a new, more radical Islamist ideology. The *mujahideen* were groups of guerilla fighters recognized as “the main political and military forces” that caused the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.³ Larry Goodson, professor of Middle East Studies at the U.S. Army War College and an expert on Afghanistan and Iraq, argues that control over women's behavior became a symbol of the difference between the Communist government and the *mujahideen*.⁴ The Soviet occupation deflected women's movements from focusing on the fight for gender equality, instead focusing their efforts on national liberation. Following the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan, completed in 1989, the Moscow-backed Kabul regime took over. To gain women's support, they created new legislation that supported women's rights to work. A 1987 labor law stipulated equal pay for men and women and forbade prohibiting women from working. With time, the Kabul regime began withdrawing some of its forces from peripheral regions, allowing opposition groups to administer the “daily affairs of regions that it occupied during the war or those that the government forces abandoned for political and strategic reasons.” In regions where Islamic groups began reestablishing their rule, they replaced many of the recently implemented socioeconomic reforms with strict Sharia law.⁵

In April of 1992, the Kabul regime transferred power to a coalition of Islamic parties. Soon thereafter civil war ensued as the parties vied for power. The Islamic regime implemented policies that negatively impacted the lives of women. For example, in 1993 government agencies and state functionaries dismissed all female employees. Furthermore, women were no longer allowed to leave their homes unless absolutely necessary. If they did so, they had to be covered and needed their husband's permission. In the ongoing fight between the Islamic parties, rape became a weapon used to dishonor and intimidate rival

³ Neamatollah Nojumi, *Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War, and the Future of the Regime* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 83.

⁴ Larry P. Goodson, “Perverting Islam: Taliban Social Policy Toward Women,” *Central Asian Survey* 20, no. 4 (2001): 417.

⁵ Hafizullah Emadi, *Repression, Resistance, and Women in Afghanistan* (Westport, CN: Praeger, 2002), 122-23.

communities into submission. Rape and murder of women continued as common tactics of war from 1992 to 1996.⁶ With these practices in mind, it becomes clear that the policies later established under the Taliban were not entirely new, but were “in effect the enforcement of some previously existing trends in the Afghan gender order over others.”⁷

Weary from years of war, many Afghans welcomed the rise of the Taliban, a group that claimed to bring peace and stability. Yet the situation for women worsened. In September of 1996, Radio Sharia announced that women were banned from going to school and from working outside of the home.⁸ Other Taliban policies curbing the rights of women included, but were not limited to: forcing women to be veiled from head to toe when in public; banning women from dealing with male shopkeepers or doctors, or speaking to men outside of their family; restricting women’s access to medical care; restricting women from voting and holding political leadership positions; and publicly stoning women accused of adultery.⁹

Overall, women’s rights have been low on the list of priorities for many regimes throughout Afghanistan’s history, both Islamic and secular alike. Hafizullah Emadi, Afghani author of numerous publications on Islamic and Middle Eastern politics and culture, argues that women’s equality “did not occupy an important position in the political platform of the Islamic parties in Afghanistan since their emergence in the 1960s.” The platforms of most secular political movements in regards to women’s oppression also experienced little change from the time of the Soviet occupation to the Taliban’s rule.¹⁰

STATUS OF AFGHAN WOMEN TODAY

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States led an invasion that toppled the Taliban by December of that same year. While the Taliban has not been extinguished from Afghanistan, significant improvements have been made in the lives of women since they were ousted from power. To begin, women’s legal protections and political participation have increased. As of 2012, women constituted 27 percent of the seats in the lower house of Parliament, and in 2010 parliamentary elections, 40 percent of voters were women. Greater freedom for women is reflected in education enrollment as well. Under the Taliban, the number of girls attending school was close to zero, while in 2010, 37

⁶ Ibid., 124-25.

⁷ Wylie, “Women’s Rights and ‘Righteous War,’” 222.

⁸ Emadi, *Repression, Resistance, and Women in Afghanistan*, 126.

⁹ Tim Luccaro and E. L. Gaston, *Women’s Access to Justice in Afghanistan: Individual Versus Community Barriers to Justice* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2014), 5.

¹⁰ Emadi, *Repression, Resistance, and Women in Afghanistan*, 129.

percent of the seven million schoolchildren were girls. Improvements in healthcare have also positively affected women's lives, seen in the 22 percent decline in infant mortality rates from 2002 to 2012.¹¹ Yet, while these improvements should be celebrated, Afghanistan remains one of the most inequalitarian places in the world in terms of gender. Out of 155 countries rated by the UNDP's 2014 gender inequality index, Afghanistan ranked 152.¹² Lina Abirafeh, an expert on gender issues in Afghanistan, argues that "Afghan women continue to be among the worst off in the world in virtually all aspects of life—health, education, poverty, literacy, civil and political rights, protection against violence, and political participation."¹³ This begs the question of *how* best to address these inequalities. Both local and international organizations and government agencies have made efforts to improve the lives of women. Furthering women's legal protections, political and economic participation, education, and physical security are all important aspects to consider in efforts to achieve greater equality. The following sections address each of these factors, and are followed by an explanation of why *economic empowerment* should be the top priority of them all. In short, increasing women's economic participation is the most effective way to ensure women's rights in other areas, as it will give them the influence necessary to advocate for themselves. Furthermore, economic inclusion of women can be promoted in a way that coincides with Islamic principles, making it a culturally sensitive and feasible strategy in this Muslim-majority country.

LEGAL PROTECTIONS

Legal recognition of women's rights and protections against unfair or inhumane treatment are key steps toward equality. Historically many laws have sought to enshrine women's legal equality. The 1964 constitution officially enfranchised women, and the 1977 constitution afforded them equal rights.¹⁴ The Afghan Civil Code of 1977 provides women the right to inherit or own property, sets the minimum age for marriage, and gives women the right to choose their partner and initiate divorce. More recently, international donors have prioritized the promotion of stronger legal protections for women.¹⁵ The 2004 constitution

¹¹ Kathleen R. Kuehnast, *Lessons from Women's Programs in Afghanistan and Iraq*, (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2012), 2.

¹² United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2015: Statistical Annex*, 2015: 224-27.

¹³ Lina Abirafeh, *Gender and International Aid in Afghanistan: The Politics and Effects of Intervention* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2009), 20.

¹⁴ Abirafeh, *Gender and International Aid in Afghanistan*, 21.

¹⁵ Anastasiya Hozyainoya, *Sharia and Women's Rights in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2014), 1.

reintroduced women's right to vote, and national policies like the Afghanistan National Development Strategy and the National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan emphasize gender equality.¹⁶ Yet despite formal protections, many of these laws are not universally accepted and in practice significant barriers remain. For example, despite the ban on child marriage, 21 percent of Afghan women are married by age fifteen. Women are also consistently excluded from the civil service, despite the goal of filling at least 30 percent of civil servant positions with women. In short, Anastasiya Hozyainoya of the United States Institute of Peace finds that, "despite formal guarantees, the courts and society at large still act within the framework of conservative social norms that restrict women's rights."¹⁷ While further articulating women's legal rights is important, it is not the most crucial area to focus on. These laws play a significant symbolic role as they reflect an attitude that values women's rights in Afghanistan, but at the present time implementation mechanisms are lacking. Until the judicial branch is capable of enforcing adherence to laws that guarantee women's rights, focusing on this aspect will draw time and resources away from more effective strategies at securing women's rights in practice.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Women's participation in politics is another important factor in advancing women's rights. Greater representation of women in political leadership and increased participation of female constituents will allow for women's voices to be expressed more openly and for their concerns to be addressed via legislation. Legislation in place today protects women's right to vote and sets quotas for their participation in elected bodies. In 2009 elections, two women ran for president and seven for vice president, and nine percent of all provincial council candidates were women. In 2010, 16 percent of all parliamentary candidates were women. While these numbers reflect progress, especially in comparison with the ban on women's political involvement under the Taliban, huge disparities remain between men and women's participation. Abirafeh explains that women "are still a minority in public life and are often marginalized in policy-making and decision-making."¹⁸ While women's participation in politics is important, without more universal education for girls the female population holding political leadership positions will remain an elite few. Furthermore, so long as poverty is widespread and the majority of women's time is spent meeting daily family needs, participation in politics will remain a low priority. Huma Ahmed-Ghosh, a Women's Studies professor at San Diego State University and expert on women in Afghanistan and Islam and feminism, argues that while women's rights can

¹⁶ Ibid., 2.

¹⁷ Ibid., 2.

¹⁸ Abirafeh, *Gender and International Aid in Afghanistan*, 21.

only be guaranteed through democracy that includes the full participation of women, this participation depends on security and economic empowerment.¹⁹

SECURITY

Physical security is an important condition affecting the development of women's rights. While security in its most conventional sense of the word was not high on the list of "Key Problems Affecting Afghan Women" according to a 2004 public opinion poll conducted by the Asia Foundation, with just 6 percent of people listing it as the biggest problem women face, it remains an underlying issue. In fact, security concerns seem to have increased over the last several years.²⁰ A 2013 survey about Afghans' perceptions of safety reflects this, with 59 percent responding that they often feared for their own personal safety or the safety of their family, compared to 40 percent in 2006.²¹ Security concerns in Afghanistan include criminal acts, gender-specific violence, threats to women from fundamentalists (such as targeting girls' schools), terrorism, landmines and unexploded weapons, and the targeting of ethnic Pashtuns. Alvi-Aziz argues that crime and overall security levels are major concerns for the future of women's education and are prerequisite conditions to successful reconstruction of Afghanistan.²² Therefore, ensuring the safety of Afghanistan's citizens must be an ongoing effort. Yet focusing solely on this aspect at the expense of furthering women's economic empowerment could result in a society in which, even if stability was achieved and security threats became merely minor issues, the current situation of women's rights would remain unchanged.

EDUCATION

Efforts to increase girls' education, and subsequent backlash toward these efforts, are a highly publicized aspect of the struggle for women's equality in Afghanistan. During the revolution of 1978, an "aggressive program for social change" was implemented which included mandatory literacy programs for women. Some viewed such policies as a "direct attack on Afghan culture and honor."²³ Later, under the Taliban, only a few thousand girls had access to school. These schools were held in secret, as girls' education was officially forbidden.²⁴ Hayat Alvi-Aziz, Associate Professor of National Security Affairs at the U.S. Naval War College, argues that improvements since the fall of the Taliban have

¹⁹ Huma Ahmed-Ghosh, "Voices of Afghan Women: Human Rights and Economic Development," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 8, no. 1 (2006): 110.

²⁰ Cheryl Benard, *Women and Nation Building* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008), 20.

²¹ The Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2013: A Survey of the Afghan People*, 2013, 14.

²² Alvi-Aziz, "A Progress Report on Women's Education," 174-177.

²³ Abirafeh, *Gender and International Aid in Afghanistan*, 14.

²⁴ Hozyainoya, *Sharia and Women's Rights in Afghanistan*, 2.

been minimal due to corrupt Afghan government and NGO policies, and security threats.²⁵ While achievement of equal educational opportunities for male and female students is still far from being realized in Afghanistan, the progress made thus far should not be discounted. As of 2012, nearly three million girls were enrolled in school, comprising 39 percent of all students enrolled. Another 270,000 girls were enrolled in literacy and vocational schools.²⁶

Like economic empowerment, education is especially important because of how it affects rights in other arenas. Better-educated women receive better jobs. Higher levels of education correlate with higher average income levels amongst Afghans, with the most substantial increase in income seen in the population group with at least some amount of university level education.²⁷ Education affects women's health as well. For example, the Taliban's five-year ban on education for women caused a huge decline in medical education and a subsequent drain of doctors from the country. As a result of a lack of trained health professionals present at the time of birth, Afghanistan's infant mortality rate is among the highest in the world.²⁸ The need for greater access to education for women is highlighted in The Asia Foundation's findings in its "Survey of the Afghan People" from 2006 to 2009, in which lack of education was consistently ranked as the biggest problem facing women.²⁹

While female education is indeed essential, it remains unattainable for a majority of girls so long as women lack access to jobs and widespread poverty persists. Faced with economic troubles, girls are often kept out of school to help their families financially. Child marriages are an additional obstacle to women's education. These marriages, which result in girls ending their education at a young age in order to take on new roles as wives and mothers, are often arranged to lessen their families' financial burdens. A general lack of funds also inhibits the rebuilding of Afghan schools, again demonstrating the need for economic development in order to further educational opportunities.³⁰ Economic advancement of women is of great importance in achieving increased rates of female education. Overall, programs to increase economic opportunities must be considered in conjunction with efforts to improve women's access to education.

²⁵ Hayat Alvi-Aziz, "A Progress Report on Women's Education in Post-Taliban Afghanistan," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 27, no. 2 (2008): 169.

²⁶ Hozyainoya, *Sharia and Women's Rights in Afghanistan*, 2.

²⁷ The Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2014: A Survey of the Afghan People*, 2014, 63.

²⁸ Carol J. Riphenburg, "Post-Taliban Afghanistan: Changed Outlook for Women?" *Asian Survey* 44, no. 3 (2004): 413-414.

²⁹ Najila Ayubi, "Women's Biggest Problems in Afghanistan," *The Asia Foundation*, 2010.

³⁰ Alvi-Aziz, "A Progress Report on Women's Education," 176.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

While greater legal protections, political participation and educational opportunities, as well as an improved security situation are all necessary components in the fight for women's equal rights in Afghanistan, economic empowerment should be the first priority for several reasons. First, economic development is crucial for the well being of the country as a whole. In 2009, Afghanistan had the fifth lowest standard of living in the world, as seen in its Human Development Index score of 0.346. Only 13.5 percent of families had access to a sustainable income source.³¹ In 2013, Afghanistan's real GDP growth slowed to less than four percent after experiencing 14.4 percent growth in 2012. In 2014 about 36 percent of Afghans lived below the poverty line of \$30 U.S. dollars per month. Surveys about the biggest problem facing Afghanistan today show that 25.7 percent of Afghans are most concerned about unemployment, 10.8 percent are most concerned about a poor economy, and about 7 percent are most concerned about poverty.³² For those who have left Afghanistan since 1992, the second most commonly cited reason, behind war and insecurity, was lack of jobs and economic issues.³³ Gillian Wylie, Assistant Professor of International Peace Studies at Trinity College Dublin and expert on gender, conflict and peace, argued in 2003 that the realization of women's rights could not be assured in the socioeconomic context of that time, given the "perilous state of the Afghan economy."³⁴ That argument is still valid today, as Afghanistan remains mired in poverty and continues to lack much of the economic institutional framework that it did in 2003.

Despite these shortcomings, development programs that emphasize opportunities for economic growth should be acknowledged. Such programs have supported 2,300 new enterprises owned by women, helped establish 400 new businesses, and trained over 5,000 women in local handicrafts and fine arts businesses.³⁵ However, even as some women are engaged in agricultural work and microenterprise, they continue to "lack access to capital, information, technology and markets."³⁶ They also lack economic mobility and the ability to engage in trade.³⁷ A 2011 Thomson Reuters Foundation poll ranked Afghanistan as the number one most dangerous country for women, ranking worst in three of six risk categories, one of which was lack of access to economic resources. Respondents cited a "near total lack of economic rights."³⁸ This lack of economic

³¹ Abirafeh, *Gender and International Aid in Afghanistan*, 21.

³² The Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2014*, 51.

³³ *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁴ Wylie, "Women's Rights and 'Righteous War,'" 220.

³⁵ Kuehnast, *Lessons from Women's Programs*, 2.

³⁶ Abirafeh, *Gender and International Aid in Afghanistan*, 21.

³⁷ Benard, *Women and Nation Building*, 93-94.

³⁸ Lisa Anderson, "Trustlaw Poll – Afghanistan is Most Dangerous Country for Women,"

rights is seen primarily in women's employment rates, which are among the lowest in the world. Overall, only 16 percent of women participate in the workforce, compared to 80 percent of men.³⁹ Certain age groups reflect an even more pronounced disparity in employment. In 2014, 88 percent of men age 25 to 34 self-identified as "working," compared to just 6 percent of women. Amongst women in this age group, 83 percent self-identified as housewives, with similar figures seen in other age brackets.⁴⁰ In addition to low labor force participation rates, women also tend to work in the lowest paying sectors.

Increased involvement of women in the labor force and greater access to capital, technology and markets would expand Afghanistan's output and bring greater prosperity to the nation as a whole. Economic growth would positively affect *both* men and women, making women's economic empowerment more palatable to those men who seek to limit the spheres in which women participate. While Afghans cited lack of education as the biggest problem facing women in a 2014 survey (followed by lack of jobs), they cited unemployment (26 percent of respondents) and a poor economy (11 percent of respondents) as the biggest problems facing the nation as a whole. Comparatively, only 8 percent of respondents cited lack of education as the biggest problem facing the nation as a whole.⁴¹ This seems to reflect that, while lack of education is more closely associated with women's issues, overall Afghans are more concerned with economic problems. By building upon this common concern and addressing it through economic activation of half of the population, economic empowerment can be an effective tool in enhancing women's rights in other areas.

Some scholars, however, argue that programs to economically empower women have done more damage than good. Honor is a highly valued concept in Islamic cultures. A primary factor affecting men's honor and understanding of their own masculinity is economic autonomy. In a deeply patriarchal country, and one in which approximately 99.7 percent of the population is Muslim,⁴² Abirafeh argues that many Afghan men and women "view women's employment as a reflection and reminder of their absolute poverty and destitution, an insult to men's dignity, and a questioning of men's ability to provide."⁴³ A study by Nancy Hatch Dupree, Director of the Afghanistan Center at Kabul University, found that aid programs that focused on women's employment left men feeling diminished,

Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2011.

³⁹ Luccaro and Gaston, *Women's Access to Justice in Afghanistan*, 7.

⁴⁰ The Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2014*, 59.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 24-26.

⁴² "The World Factbook: Afghanistan," last modified February 25, 2016, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>.

⁴³ Abirafeh, *Gender and International Aid in Afghanistan*, 107.

fearing that their “patriarchal status had eroded.”⁴⁴ Similar sentiments toward women’s employment were found amongst women. In Abirafeh’s discussions with Pashtun women from different parts of Afghanistan, they expressed strong desires to “remain largely within traditional roles,” citing Islam and its view of gender roles as their reasoning.⁴⁵ Evidence shows that, while women’s contribution to family household income has increased over time, those increases may be caused more by economic necessity than changing social attitudes.⁴⁶ Historically speaking, fundamentalists have reacted negatively to the changing role of women that has accompanied modernization and urbanization trends. As woman began working in more nontraditional areas, fundamentalists felt threatened by what they perceived as women’s social and economic liberation.⁴⁷

While a significant portion of Afghans cite Islam as their reason for limiting women’s employment and economic inclusion, others argue that these beliefs are a misinterpretation of Islamic law. It is important to recognize that there is “far more ideological heterogeneity [in Islam] than many people in the West believe.”⁴⁸ Some Muslims argue that Islam is in fact very cohesive with women’s economic incorporation, and that there is nothing in the Qur’an justifying the attitudes toward women held by the Taliban. Scholars argue that Sharia law actually upholds women’s rights, such as the protection of inheritance, the necessity of consent for marriage, and land rights.⁴⁹

The advent of Islam brought about advancement for women in comparison to conditions during pre-Islamic times. Women earned the ability to administer the wealth they brought to their families or had earned through work. The Prophet Muhammad instituted women’s rights to property ownership, inheritance, education, and divorce. In Muhammad’s time Muslim women held public roles and exercised property rights. In fact, his own wives held property and had the economic freedom to act.⁵⁰ Azhar Aslam and Shaista Kazmi of Vision 21, a Pakistan-based non-profit focused on rights awareness and women’s empowerment, note that while the Qur’an and Sunnah support women’s rights to buy, sell, mortgage, and lease property without gender-based discrimination, over time these rights have eroded as those in power “manipulated the Qur’anic

⁴⁴ Ibid., 109.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 109.

⁴⁶ The Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2014*, 60.

⁴⁷ Lisa Blaydes and Drew A. Linzer, “The Political Economy of Women’s Support for Fundamentalist Islam,” *World Politics* 60, no. 4 (2008): 579.

⁴⁸ Nadia Kaftan and Lexy Smith-Doughty, “Islam, Western Education and the Riddle of Human Rights,” *College Quarterly* 12, no. 4, n.p.

⁴⁹ Hozyainoya, *Sharia and Women’s Rights in Afghanistan*, 4.

⁵⁰ Azhar Aslam and Shaista Kazmi, “Islam and the Free-Market Economy: Muslim Women and Property Rights,” *Economic Affairs* 29, no. 2 (2009): 10-11.

legislation and altered its interpretation.”⁵¹ Thus, women’s economic empowerment can and should be approached in a culturally sensitive manner that intentionally incorporates Islamic law. Rather than viewing women’s interests as at odds with Afghanistan’s Muslim-majority population’s beliefs, women can draw upon the Qur’an to validate their right to economic incorporation. The idea, as Hozyainoya puts it, is to “engage with an acceptable existing paradigm and thus incrementally normalize women’s rights.”⁵²

It is especially important to use this approach because much of the behavior of Islamists has been reactionary, viewed as a defense of Islam itself in light of the perception that gender equality is yet another imposition of Western values. Any type of intervention or advocacy to change women’s position that rejects Islam will cause “accusations of cultural imperialism or neo-imperialism.”⁵³ Following the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan in 2014, resistance to Western-influenced rights programs has risen.⁵⁴ Most Afghans view human rights as a Western construct. Many NGOs in Afghanistan cater to Western demands, choosing to include “human rights” and “human rights education” in their grant applications in order to receive funding. Human rights are controversial both in Afghanistan and in other developing countries, often seen as a tool of the West to impose its values on other cultures. Broad support for universal human rights is further challenged by the notion that this discourse is centered on a North-South hierarchy that justifies Western nations assuming a position of moral superiority over other nations.⁵⁵ Ahmed-Ghosh found in her interviews with Afghan women that they wanted guaranteed rights, but that they wanted those rights within Islam, rather than feeling forced on them as Western ideals.⁵⁶ In response, finding ways to use Islamic law and draw upon its credibility amongst Muslims to promote women’s rights will hold more sway in Muslim communities than using a rights-based approach that is perceived as Western. Hozyainoya found that Afghan law “perceived as reflecting Islamic law tended to be embraced by communities and legal actors.”⁵⁷

Furthermore, economic empowerment is key to securing women’s rights in other societal realms because women who earn their own income lessen their dependency on their husband for survival. This, in turn, affords them greater influence and ability to raise their voice within their family. In Afghanistan’s patriarchal family structure, women’s economic dependency on men limits their

⁵¹ Aslam and Kazmi, “Islam and the Free-Market Economy,” 14.

⁵² Hozyainoya, *Sharia and Women’s Rights in Afghanistan*, 4.

⁵³ Iman Hashim, “Reconciling Islam and Feminism,” *Gender and Development* 7, no. 1 (1999): 8.

⁵⁴ Hozyainoya, *Sharia and Women’s Rights in Afghanistan*, 1.

⁵⁵ Ahmed-Ghosh, “Voices of Afghan Women,” 121.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁵⁷ Hozyainoya, *Sharia and Women’s Rights in Afghanistan*, 3-4.

ability to negotiate their rights.⁵⁸ Therefore, Ahmed-Ghosh argues that economic empowerment should be a higher priority for Afghan women than demanding human rights. When women have the ability to own property and other assets, they can participate more fully in the economy, thereby lessening “the burden of an economically dependent population.”⁵⁹ Blaydes and Linzer found that economic circumstances affect a woman’s beliefs about religion, politics, and her role in society. Women with limited economic opportunities due to poverty, unemployment, or lack of education, are “more likely to take on fundamentalist and traditionalist belief systems” because in so doing they enhance their value as potential marriage partners.⁶⁰ Ascribing to fundamentalist views that further engrain patriarchal customs is a valued trait in the “marriage market.” Therefore, women who are financially insecure may at times choose to support the very ideologies that limit their rights because in so doing they achieve greater material security.⁶¹

Another reason that improving women’s economic opportunities and participation is so crucial is because a woman’s basic needs must be met before she can devote time and resources to expanding her rights in other areas. Cheryl Benard, adjunct researcher at the RAND Corporation and President of ARCH International, explains that so long as a woman’s focus is on meeting her family’s needs for food, water, and shelter, she is “effectively blocked from seeking real power via education, activism, and legislation.” Poverty, while not as obvious as explicitly restrictive policies, “disempowers Afghan women much more insidiously than official discrimination does.”⁶² Historically, modernization and economic growth have not affected all women equally. While upper- and middle-class women have had the opportunity to attain higher education and expand their employment opportunities, in turn resulting in greater social and political awareness, low-income women forced to focus on fulfilling their daily needs could not reflect on “women’s strategic needs.”⁶³ Historical experience also shows that economic empowerment is an avenue to respect for women’s rights in a broader sense. Following World War II and the modernization that swept across Afghanistan, women’s work outside of the home “contributed to the development of women’s social and political consciousness,” making them more aware of the denial of their rights.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Ahmed-Ghosh, “Voices of Afghan Women,” 124.

⁵⁹ Aslam and Kazmi, “Islam and the Free-Market Economy,” 14.

⁶⁰ Blaydes and Linzer, “The Political Economy of Women’s Support for Fundamentalist Islam,” 577.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 580.

⁶² Benard, *Women and Nation Building*, 87.

⁶³ Emadi, *Repression, Resistance, and Women in Afghanistan*, 152.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

Some scholars have linked poverty to fundamentalist groups known for limiting women's rights. They assert that, "poor economic circumstances may create attitudes and grievances among particular groups...inclining them favorably to fundamentalist arguments, themes, and practices."⁶⁵ Extreme poverty may create a "breeding ground" for extremist groups that play on the grievances of marginalized people groups. It is in these environments that groups espousing inequality for women thrive.⁶⁶ However, significant counter-evidence to this argument exists. Research on individuals who self-identify as fundamentalists has shown that fundamentalist beliefs are not limited to the poor, but rather, span across socioeconomic classes. In fact, Egyptian sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim's research finds that "Islamic extremists tend to be well-educated, upwardly mobile young men."⁶⁷

It should be noted that, while certain groups' interpretations of Islam have indeed played a role in determining women's position in Afghanistan, Islam is not the only contributing factor. As local and international leaders look for practical ways to improve women's rights, they must also consider factors such as Afghanistan's highly conservative, tribal society, its history of poverty, weak infrastructure and war, and the backlash against the former Communist regime's efforts to redistribute land and emancipate women.⁶⁸

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The research presented above clearly supports the thesis of this paper: that while education, legal rights, political participation, and physical security are all important factors, women's economic empowerment should be the top priority in the struggle for gender equality in Afghanistan. A focus on economic advancement is simultaneously the most effective and culturally sensitive approach to this issue. The international aid community has tended to focus on education and health, failing to explore in much depth strategies such as small-income-generating projects and small business, which could "effectively induce voluntary participation of women."⁶⁹ Investment in programs that promote women's employment and vocational skills alone will not be enough to empower women economically. As reflected in public opinion polls, women's rising contribution to household income has outpaced societal attitudes toward women's place in the work world. Therefore, in order to bring about long-lasting change for

⁶⁵ Blaydes and Linzer, "The Political Economy of Women's Support for Fundamentalist Islam," 582.

⁶⁶ Abirafeh, *Gender and International Aid in Afghanistan*, 15.

⁶⁷ Blaydes and Linzer, "The Political Economy of Women's Support for Fundamentalist Islam," 582-83.

⁶⁸ Rokhsana Bahramitash, "Islamic Fundamentalism and Women's Economic Role: The Case of Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 16, no. 4 (2003): 554.

⁶⁹ Emadi, *Repression, Resistance, and Women in Afghanistan*, 156.

women's rights, such programs will need to be accompanied by major shifts in deeply entrenched beliefs about women's role in the economy.

However, several stipulations must be included in the findings of this paper. First, while economic empowerment should be prioritized above efforts to advance women's political, legal and educational participation, as well as physical security, these other factors must not be ignored. They are all inextricably tied to one another. For example, one of the key ways to increase a woman's economic independence is to ensure her rights to inheritance and land. Yet this depends on strong legal protections of those rights and a judicial system that enforces them consistently. Education and economic advancement are also intimately linked. Education level is a key predictor of income. Without sufficient education and skills training, women, even if allowed to participate fully in the job market, will not be qualified for the types of jobs that earn an income high enough to become financially independent from their husbands. Gaining entry to fields like engineering or business requires high levels of education and specialized skills. Finally, economic empowerment is closely linked to physical security. Opinions on whether or not women should be allowed to work outside the home depend greatly on security concerns. A 2014 survey by The Asia Foundation found that the more Afghans fear for their own safety or that of their family, "the less likely they are to say that women should be allowed to work outside the home."⁷⁰ Therefore, while economic empowerment is indeed the most crucial factor to ensuring Afghan women's rights in other areas in the long-term, political participation, legal protections, education and physical security should be incorporated to varying degrees as well.

Another stipulation is that economic empowerment, while focusing on women, must also work to incorporate men. Gender equality programs to date have concentrated on women's empowerment but have failed to involve men or address their point of view. In a context of high unemployment, frustration with practices like affirmative hiring by aid organizations has provoked men rather than incorporating them into gender equality efforts.⁷¹ If men are left out of the economic development process completely, it will cause backlash that ultimately hinders the advancement of women's rights. Interviews with Afghan men and women in 2009 revealed that frustration with aid institutions stemmed from the sense that greater women's employment opportunities and a lack of similar opportunities for men had negatively affected the social order. Women found men to be increasingly "angry and impatient" as they were denied their traditional familial role of provider, and men felt that their honor had been insulted when

⁷⁰ The Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2014*, 60.

⁷¹ Javed Bahri, "Western Gender Policies in Afghanistan: Failing Women and Provoking Men," *Gender, Technology and Development* 18, no. 2 (2014): 175-76.

their wives found work and they could not.⁷² Men today are the most powerful actors in Afghan society and have access to the most resources, therefore their support and involvement is necessary if gender equality is to ever become a reality in Afghanistan.⁷³ Organizations like the U.S. Institute of Peace recommend that, while empowerment programs should focus first on women, ultimately women can “make quicker strides forwards when their male counterparts support them.”⁷⁴

Finally, for women’s economic empowerment to be successful, it must be approached using Islam, rather than an international human rights discourse, as its justification. Afghans tend to negatively connect gender concerns with the West, feeling that Western ideals about gender roles are imposed on their society. Economic inclusion of women must be presented as compatible, rather than combative, with Islamic principles. This approach will be more appealing to Muslim women and will prevent claims of cultural imperialism. Furthermore, Afghan women themselves must be centrally involved in the conversation about the advancements of their rights. Women are not passive actors who need to be “saved” by international or local actors. Women’s agency and desires, even if different from those of the international community, must be respected. As Wylie put it, if the United States and the West, as well as Afghan domestic actors, are serious about improving Afghan women’s rights, “rather than adopting the rhetoric as a flag of ethical convenience...facilitating women’s autonomous decision-making is an approach they will need to consider.”⁷⁵ Taking all of these considerations into account, this paper maintains that economic empowerment should be at the forefront of the agenda for the advancement of women’s rights in Afghanistan.

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⁷² Abirafeh, *Gender and International Aid in Afghanistan*, 127-28.

⁷³ Bahri, “Western Gender Policies in Afghanistan,” 170-73.

⁷⁴ Kuehnast, *Lessons from Women’s Programs*, 4.

⁷⁵ Wylie, “Women’s Rights and ‘Righteous War,’” 222.

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