

Where Do Afghan Women Stand on Education and Economic Empowerment?



Background Brief for the Symposium

Women's Rights and Empowerment in Afghanistan

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- How important are *cultural barriers* to the promotion of women's rights in Afghanistan, and how and by whom are they most effectively addressed?
- What is the experience with *gender-segregated education* at various levels and in various types of institutions?
- What are *the major career bottlenecks* in women's professional lives – from one level of education to the next, from education to employment or business – and how are they best overcome?
- How can *female entrepreneurship* most effectively be promoted in Afghanistan, and what is the division of labor between the government and other actors?
- Which *monitoring mechanisms* will both safeguard the need for solid progress reporting and contribute to transparency and public debate?

These are key questions on education and empowerment, to be discussed at the Oslo Symposium. In the following, we will present a short summary of progress since 2013. Before turning to the individual elements – basic education, vocational education, higher education, work life, business engagement – we offer a brief snapshot of progress since 2001. We will round off by pointing to some main challenges, before detailing the questions for further debate.

Taking Stock

Over the long decade following the 2001 regime change, Afghanistan has seen enormous improvements when it comes to advancing women's rights, as well as female access to education, to jobs, and in business. Empowering Afghan women, after years of Taliban rule, was an important justification for the US-led intervention in 2001, and the issue has been high on the agenda since day one. Yet, there

are many challenges ahead. Since 2001, the government and the international community have made great strides to enable women to engage at the center of Afghan political, economic and cultural life, and thereby become agents in the country's rebuilding. During the years of Taliban rule, from 1996 to 2001, women and girls were barred from school. Female engagement in work life was limited to a handful of jobs related directly to women's health, and work on family farms in the rural

areas. Women's involvement in business was virtually unthinkable. In the urban areas, women were largely deprived of any form of public life and in effect were confined to the walls of their homes.

Post-2001, women's status has drastically changed. Girl's enrolment in school has grown from close to zero (with a very limited number in clandestine home schools) during the Taliban, to 3.4 million at present, as reported by the Afghan Ministry of Education (and backed up by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) Yearbook 2013-14). Simultaneously, the share of girls amongst those pursuing higher education is close to 19%, while the figure is 9.5% in vocational education. The newly gained access to education is a sea-change, laying the foundations for a level of female participation in public life that, while meeting resistance, seems resilient. The engagement of women in work life has improved considerably. However, there are large variations between various parts of the country, and between the urban and the rural areas. In business, there is a major shift, from a situation where female businesses were exclusively in the form of small home-based production, largely as subcontractors, to a growing number of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that have women at the lead.

Importantly, Afghanistan has adopted a National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA), a ten year strategic framework (2008-2018). NAPWA is a comprehensive and ambitious document, which concentrates in particular on the following six areas:

- Security
- Legal Protection and Human Rights
- Leadership and Political Participation
- Economy, Work and Poverty
- Health
- Education

The objectives of NAPWA were integrated into the five year Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS), for which the implementation period ended in 2013. The assessment of a draft report by the Ministry of Economy, the entity with the mandate of monitoring the implementation of ANDS, claims that there have been only limited gains



Photo: US Agency for International Development (USAID)

in the cross cutting theme of gender. The report notes progress in both basic education and higher education as significant achievements. Similarly, the report applauds the presence of women in the parliament. The report also discusses possible reasons why the plans have not been fully realized, including insecurity (which constrains mobility for all and places women in leading roles at particular risk), as well as cultural barriers (which brings about both self-restraint and negative pressure within the family and community at large).

NAPWA implementation was also assessed in a study by the Afghanistan Public Policy Research Organization (APPRO). Here also, particular attention was drawn to the gains in the education sector. On the negative side, the report pointed to the failure of the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) to monitor or actively advocate for implementation of plans in other sectors. The report attributes the failures in part to a variety of internal issues at

MoWA, including political rivalries, capacity problems, poorly developed routines and regulations, and underdeveloped strategies on how to effectively advocate women's issues in general. All of this has prevented MoWA from living up to its mandate. Looking ahead, one possibility for MoWA is to team up with women's organizations and civil society groups in a joint effort to strengthen monitoring and capture change, and to engage the broader public with the findings. The newly launched PROMOTE program, an initiative of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) which is closely linked to the government's structure of national priority programs, explicitly aims to enhance the implementation of main pillars within the NAPWA.

Basic Education

There is little doubt that access to basic education for girls is one of the major successes of the past thirteen years of Afghan rebuilding. During Taliban's reign, no woman or girl was

allowed to study outside their homes. There were a number of home schools – secret underground classes hosted at people's private houses, at times frequented even by the daughters of Taliban officials – but it is hard to find any data on the number. Today, as a result of three and a half decades of war, more than 90% of women aged 25 and over are left with no education at all. Only 2.7% have managed to complete primary education. The 2013 National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA), issued by the CSO, reports that the number of women in the 25 and above age bracket who hold a university degree is 18 000, which corresponds to 0.5% of the relevant population.

A common channel to basic education, including limited exposure to reading and writing, is religious, and is most often hosted at the local community mosque. This has been one of the main means of educating children in the country for centuries. The purpose of

such Islamic education is to build a basic familiarity with the religious foundations, mobilizing the local mullah, who himself would often have a fairly rudimentary training in Islam. There is only a minor gender difference in the numbers who have completed Islamic Education, with 70 000 women and 80 000 men in the group aged 25 years and above, also as reported by the NRVA. We have been unable to find figures that depict trends in Islamic education. Nonetheless, conversations we have had with religious scholars indicate that for continuing religious education, at madrasas, there has been a considerable expansion in private institutions that cater to female students in recent years. This is clearly an area that merits further research, as little is documented when it comes to the strength of the trend, the ideological orientation of the madrasas in question, their recruitment base, and the job prospects for the students.

As the Taliban lost power, schools were quickly reopened and the number of girls going to school grew from naught to over 600 000 in 2002, with now more than 3.4 million female students currently studying in schools around the country. In most parts of the country, there is still a relatively low number of female teachers, which is a cause for concern for families who want to send their daughters to schools. Nationally around 31% of teachers are female, with the majority being in Kabul (74% of all teachers), Balkh (53%) and Herat (47%). However, there are provinces where the share of female teachers is less than 2 percent. In provinces where the number of female teachers is low, the percentage of girls attending secondary and higher secondary education is also lower in comparison to provinces with a larger percentage of female teachers. Paktika province, for instance, in the east, has 60 female teachers out of a total of 3 656 teachers, which is the lowest in the country. Similarly, Paktika has the lowest percentage of female students, at 20%, and the lowest share in higher secondary, with 138 female students out of a total of 4 253, a mere 3.2% of the total (again according to the CSO yearbook 2013-2014).

The indicator for the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) in table 1 depicts the ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary level education. In effect, there are three girls for every four boys in primary education, while there are two girls for every five boys at

the tertiary level. The declining share of girls in attendance as they grow older and as the relevant level of education gets higher is fairly dramatic. Access to basic education differs greatly between urban and rural areas. For example, in basic education the ratio of girls to boys is as high as 90% in urban areas, with correspondingly low levels in the countryside. The national net attendance for girls is 48.3% compared to 64% for boys in primary education (grades 1 to 6). At the tertiary level, attendance is as low as 2.7% for girls. The data shows that only 0.5% of rural girls are able to attend tertiary education, compared to 4.4% of boys at the same level, again as reported by the 2011-12 National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA).

Primary	0.74
Secondary	0.53
Tertiary	0.42

Table 1: Ratio of girls to boys under education

The assessment also reports interesting figures as to what people see as the main reasons that girls are not obtaining education. A high share (34%) reports that girls are unable to attend primary school because of cultural reasons. Other major reasons given as preventing the girls from completing their education is geographical distance (29%), insecurity (5%) and economic scarcity (4%). Interestingly, respondents report that boys (11%) are not able to attend school because of economic problems much more frequently than girls (4%). The disparity, when it comes to the economy as an obstacle to attending school, is even higher at the secondary and tertiary level with 42% and 46%, respectively, for boys, compared to 5% and 3% for girls. What appears to be a major obstacle for girls more than economic scarcity, insecurity or even distance are cultural reasons, listed by 34% for the primary, 52% for the secondary and 53% for the tertiary level. It is puzzling that cultural reasons are more frequently seen as an obstacle to girls' secondary school attendance in the urban areas (60%) than in the rural areas (53%). This seems to run contrary to the assumption that rural settings are the most conservative.

While school attendance, particularly for girls, is one of the main successes in the post-2001 period, serious concerns about quality remain.

Many teachers still have only rudimentary education, have been offered little or no refresher training, and have had minimal exposure to pedagogy. The curriculum, despite considerable investments, has large room for improvement across most subject areas. Not surprisingly, given the prevalence of corruption, there are also problems with fair evaluation and transparency in the school system, problems that will take a long-term sustained effort to fix, but which can hardly unfold in the absence of a similar campaign in other sectors. Many of the quality challenges are gender-blind, but certainly also affect girls. Gender sensitivity can inform the education system more thoroughly than it does at present. It is important, for example, to highlight female role models, and to bring attention to power relations within the family, which is a particularly important area in the years ahead, both in teacher education and in curriculum reform.

Vocational education

Institutions for vocational training are set up to train their students as skilled professionals, with command of a craft for which there is a demand. Examples are masonry, carpentry, mechanics, or, to take a more recent specialized case, cell phone repair. Students enroll in vocational training after grade 10 of school and finish it in between two and four years, depending on the type of course. According to CSO data, in 2013-2014, a little over 25 000 students were enrolled in a total of 153 technical and vocational schools. Of these students, only 9.4% are girls. Out of the 153 schools, 4 are exclusively for female students, while the remaining 149 are either mixed, or they cater to boys only (the data doesn't tell). Over the past two years, since 2011-2012, the number of technical and vocational schools has grown from 97 to 153. Somewhat disappointingly, only one for girls was added to the three that existed two years ago. The completion rate for girls, however, stands at an astounding 100%, compared to 82% for boys. Most of these women and girls are studying in formal technical-vocational institutes in the fields of accounting, agriculture, public management and information technology, all of which are areas where the job opportunities are promising.

In addition to the formal institutions run by

the Afghan state, there are a number of national and international non-governmental organizations, mostly funded by international agencies, which provide various types of skills training, including tailoring, carpentry and metalwork. It is hard to find exact data on the number of projects, their location, the number of trainees as well as the degree of success that these courses have in leading to gainful employment. There are certainly large variations, but the overarching impression based on various evaluations and reviews is that, by and large, short term skills courses of this kind have limited success in leading to a job or a business for its students. A number of reasons for this emerge, in no particular order: quality and length of the training provided, demand for the relevant services (and absence of a solid market analysis), and the absence of any follow-on support that could enable attendees to set up a workable business (credit; equipment; advice and mentoring).

The implications for future investment seem self-evident. Vocational training for women is a success, but also in extremely scarce supply, and an expansion in this area can have a solid impact within a relatively short time span. The record for short-term training courses is mixed. Yet, when such courses are an integral part of a larger whole, so that the skills acquired are in demand, and students are followed up with advice after the course, the results are promising.

Higher education

Despite a massive expansion in higher education after 2001, Afghanistan still has one of the lowest gross enrollment rates (GER) in the world, at 5%. In the World Bank's global listing of enrollment rates, this is fourth from the bottom, above Burundi, Chad and Eritrea. The low enrollment rates can be traced back to the decades of war and insecurity, with institutions of higher education increasingly in decay and much of its academic staff leaving for abroad. Also, the patterns that we see as a result are consistent with the fact that the higher the education level, the lower the enrollment rates. The last decade, though, has seen a considerable change in the nature of higher education overall in Afghanistan, as the number of private universities and higher education institutions have grown almost exponentially. Over the past two years alone, the number of private institutions has almost



More than 3.4 million female students are currently studying in schools around the country.

doubled, from 43 in 2011-2012 to 79 in 2013-14. The public and private universities together provide services to 204 875 students (18.7% girls) in 431 different areas of specialization. Of this total, 124 741 study in public universities and the remaining 80 134 are enrolled in the private sector. The percentage of girls in private institutions (18%) is marginally smaller than at public universities (19.2%). Private universities offer more choices (244 faculties) compared to public universities (187 faculties).

From the outset, the public higher education system - and the curriculum in particular - is in large measure outdated. Long serving university teachers use their decades' old handwritten notes as textbooks, with little attention paid to updating them let alone acquiring new textbooks to replace them. The level of qualifications, not surprisingly, given what we know about the quality of teachers in basic education, is generally inadequate. With a handful of PhD holders and a small number of lecturers with graduate degrees, the majority of lecturers at the public universities hold only an undergraduate degree. According to a 2013 report by the World Bank, 'Higher Education in Afghanistan: An Emerging Mountainscape', only 5% of the academic staff in public universities, on average, are PhD holders. The ma-

majority of those with PhDs are at Kabul University, Kabul Polytechnic University, and Nangarhar University. Another 38% of the total hold degrees at the master level, while the remaining 57% of university staff only have bachelor level education.

In pursuing a further increase in female attendance in universities, there are a number of obstacles that ought to be addressed, apart from the very basic question of the quality and the relevance of the education offered. Insecurity and cultural constraints, including the fact that most girls marry at a young age, are obstacles, both for the individual student, and for the family whose encouragement (or permission) she will need. One issue is harassment of girls, reportedly fairly widespread, which can only be addressed through a sustained campaign. Safe student hostels for women could also be an effective measure. President Ashraf Ghani, in his electoral manifesto for the 2014 elections, suggested the establishment of at least one women only university. Several attempts to establish gender studies have so far stranded, but could be one interesting measure in a larger bundle of efforts aimed at gradually bringing about cultural organizational change at Afghan universities. Perhaps most important, though, is the sheer force of numbers. As more Afghan

1. Women's Leadership Development

Promote will provide 25,000 women with leadership training to give them the skills necessary not only to perform in their jobs, but also to rise to meaningful leadership positions in their careers. As the foundation to Promote, this group will also participate directly in future project activities in order to expand the effects of Promote.

2. Women in Government

In close coordination with the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Promote aims to ensure women are always represented at the highest levels of policy and decision-making in Afghan society and government. This component facilitates women's entry into decision-making roles in government service, encourages policy reform within the Government of Afghanistan at both the national and regional levels; increases support for women in government; and establishes an internship and fellowship program for high school and college female students interested in working within government ministries.

3. Women in the Economy

To empower women as leaders in business, Promote aims to reduce barriers for women entering the workplace, particularly in non-traditional sectors such as technology, finance, and administration, leading to a more competitive and inclusive society. This component will work in the urban hubs of Kabul, Nangarhar, Kandahar, Balkh, Herat, and Mazar to improve business, vocational, and technical placement services for women; increase assistance and support to women-owned businesses to increase competitiveness; and reduce regulatory barriers to participation and advancement by women.

4. Women's Rights Groups and Coalitions

Promote works to strengthen the capacity and influence of women's activists and groups so they may better advocate for gender-sensitive policies and cultural practices at the local, provincial, and national level. USAID will provide targeted assistance and small grants to provide the resources needed to elevate the impact of women's rights groups across the country. Empowered groups and coalitions will help sustain the project's goals and become leaders of the long-term effort to ensure gender equity.

Box 1: PROMOTE components (adopted from USAID fact sheet, issued November 2014)

women qualify to become university professors, they will not only serve as role models for students but also demonstrate to all that higher education for women serves the interests of both the family and the community at large.

Work Life

The participation of Afghan women in the private sector economy as entrepreneurs, business owners, and employees is noticeable, although still at a limited scale. Women are active in business in a variety of sectors such as public transportation and logistics, construction, food processing, architectural design, jewelry making, and technology. The participation of Afghan women in the business sector is still incomparable to that of men, but the past five years have brought about an improvement in the opportunities for women to engage in business. Still, challenges remain for women in the business sector, such as accessing credit for expansion of their businesses or connecting to the market.

Constraints on women's mobility, reflective of norms of segregation, are very significant. This limits the ability to understand how markets work, to access relevant contacts and build networks, and to access the information that is needed. This again might explain why many women limit themselves to home production, with male relatives or traders taking care of marketing and sales. When traders run networks of home producers, they are also the sources of credit, which is otherwise difficult to access for small scale female producers. However, donor funded programs by USAID and other large European countries, specifically targeting women, might contribute to easing the loan process, building skills for women in this sector, and helping them connect to the markets. Still, it is the Afghan government that ultimately carries the responsibility for taking initiatives that enable women's entrepreneurship and business engagement.

Launched on 8 November 2014, the new PROMOTE program – Promoting Gender Equity in National Priority Programs – has been set up by USAID, with the endorsement of a number of European countries. USAID has committed 216 million USD to the program, and aims to raise another 200 million USD from partners. USAID refers to PROMOTE as

the largest women's empowerment program in its history, and it is slated to become the US flagship development program in Afghanistan over the next five years. The program will first and foremost provide support and training to women between 18 and 30 years of age, in order to prepare them for playing a more prominent role in Afghan political, social, and economic life. The Women's Leadership Development (WLD) component, which is the only part of the program yet to be started, is a critical element in PROMOTE. WLD aims to recruit 18 000 urban, educated women, in order to train them in management and facilitate their advancement into positions of greater professional responsibility. Moreover, through WLD up to 7 000 girls will receive business management training that will better enable them to enter the workforce and contribute to Afghanistan's economic development and political stability.

Business and Entrepreneurship

We see a positive trend for female involvement in business life. Over the past decade close to 1 400 businesses either run by women or with women as partners have been registered with Afghanistan's Investment Support Agency (AISA). The main sectors with significant female engagement in small and medium-sized enterprises are, according to the Afghan Women's Economic Participation Report for 2013, construction, transportation and logistics, handicrafts, consulting, education, office furniture, media and communication. Most of the businesses in question have their main market inside the country, though some have been successful in connecting to outside markets and exporting their products. One example of a successful export enterprise is Zarif Design, a handicraft company run by Zolaykha Sherzad which aims, according to its website, 'to preserve and merge Afghan traditions and culture with the elegant designs of today'. Zarif is one partner of Zardozi, an inconspicuous but effective organization that both employs female crafts-women directly, and acts as an umbrella organization in support of the establishment of new women businesses. Zardozi concentrates on quality design products that mostly attract international customers or are exported, and it has been able to establish good market access both inside and outside the country.

Another example of a women-led business is Kaweyan Business Development Services, run by Kamliya Siddiqi, which offers multiple types of services such as transportation, consultancy and export of Afghan products. Yet another company that made good progress is the high-tech Afghan Citadel Software run by Roya Mahboob, an Afghan entrepreneur and businesswoman. This is a full-service software development company based in Herat province. Roya Mahboob is the first female IT CEO in Afghanistan, and was named one of the 100 Most Influential People in The World for 2013 in Time Magazine for her work. Undoubtedly, people such as Kamaie Siddiqi, Roya Mahboob, and the female entrepreneurs working in conjunction with Zardozi, serve as important role models for prospective Afghan business women.

There are a number of strong barriers to women's entrepreneurship, and while some of those are of a legal or institutional nature, there are also important cultural and normative constraints. Again, hard facts and figures are scarce, but the supply of anecdotes and personal narratives is rich. One business woman, contributing to a conference at the Economic Women's Center at the American University of Afghanistan, had a story that is fairly typical. A successful entrepreneur in the handicrafts area, frequently travelling abroad to cultivate her markets, she found that her business success was not valued at home. After each trip, she would experience that her husband, who was unemployed, refused to talk to her for a week, if not two. As the only breadwinner of the house, and a successful business woman, she felt that was unfair. Cultural conceptions of the division of labor within the household, coupled with fear of losing dignity, are still hard to surpass.

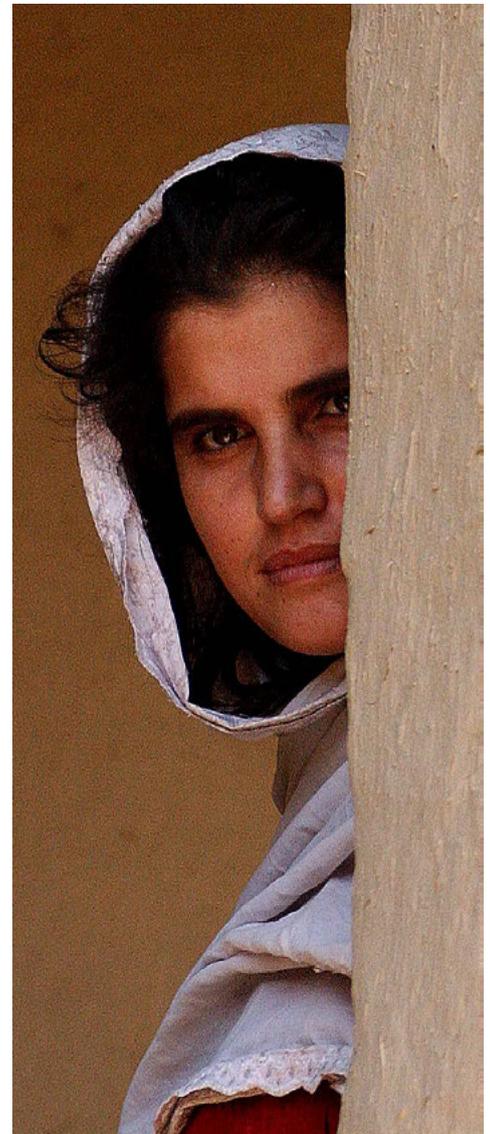
To foster women's entrepreneurship in Afghanistan, there will clearly be a need for long term mentorship and coaching, with a particular focus on marketing and market analysis, sales promotion, and financial management, including wealth saving and investment. Manizha Wafiq, coordinator of the Peace Through Business program, summed up years of experience when she stated, in an interview with the first author, "A one day training or just a one shot training is not useful at all and it is waste of time for the participants and for the donor agencies". The keys to de-

veloping best practices from successful support programs for female business are basic skills, market analysis, and mentoring, all with a long-term perspective.

It is also important that women's rights as property owners are secured and fully respected. Traditionally, women have not been considered relevant actors in the land market. Yet, control over land plays an important role in Afghan economy and society. Land is a precious source of household income as well as an important basis for both self-sufficiency and social status. Indeed, land is a marker of status in the community; owning more land is equal to obtaining both credit and respect. Control and possession of land also creates a sense of self-worth for the owners. Local conflicts over land are most often settled through informal mechanisms at the community level, where women tend to have limited influence. Ultimately, credit, which is essential in order to start and expand a business, is difficult to obtain in the absence of full property rights for women.

Looking ahead

While upholding the hard-gained advances for women will require firm commitment in itself, ensuring continued progress will be even more demanding. Insecurity, limits to employment opportunities for women, difficulties with access to schools, limited mobility - ultimately also cultural and normative traits - remain core challenges for Afghan women's empowerment. Yet, in spite of these challenges and considering the current status for women in Afghanistan, it is of paramount importance to provide training and education on women's rights to both men and women in the country. This is not only about women leading the way, it is equally important that men step forward and act as change agents in supporting women who claim a larger role in development. The benefits will accrue to every man, woman and child. At the same time, it is important that women be conscious of their rights as assigned to them under the country's laws and in the Afghan Civil Code. Women's rights remain a sensitive topic. Much of the training would probably need to be for women only, as many women feel more comfortable discussing and sharing their experiences without the presence of men.



A woman in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Training and education that target women specifically are needed to bring about and sustain change. For female entrepreneurs, for example, training should be provided on how to successfully link into market chains, as well as on financial management and property rights. In the education sector, more female teachers must be recruited and trained, across all levels. At the level of higher education, the quality of the teaching is particularly important. It is also critical for the female student, and for her family, to feel that she can be safe both during studies and in her free time. Various types of training, including mentoring, are

also important for those women that have already completed their education and skills training, including those who are in good positions in the government or elsewhere. Ensuring that female talents overcome various organizational, social and political obstacles does require extraordinary effort, and building female role models is critical. In certain areas of the administration, such as the Economic Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, securing the influence of qualified women is key to continued progress.

Continued progress is not a given. With Afghanistan's transition in 2014, the international presence will be significantly reduced, raising concerns about a further deterioration of security, as well as a weakening of the ability to upkeep reforms. At the same time, the new Afghan leadership has expressed a crystal clear commitment – manifested in concrete plans – to further empower Afghanistan's women. New mechanisms for coordination and collaboration will be needed. The progress has been tangible. Maintaining the momentum is going to require an extraordinary effort by all major actors, most notably by the Afghan government, but also by the Afghan civil society and various international actors. ■

Issues for Discussion

- **Cultural change:** What are the most effective ways of addressing cultural and normative obstacles to increased women's participation in education, work life, and business? Who are the most effective change agents, what skill set do they require, and who are the main strategic allies?
- **Dedicated programs:** How are programs (and budgets) aimed to secure female access to education best designed in order to be sustainable under changing political circumstances? What are the pros and cons with building female-only institutions?
- **Continuity:** What are the major bottlenecks in securing that access to basic education is linked to opportunities for higher education, and that education in general leads to gainful employment or to engagement in business?
- **Entrepreneurship:** How can female entrepreneurship be fostered in Afghanistan? What are the types of programming and external assistance that work? In this, what is the responsibility of different actors – the government, business actors, international donors – and how can they most constructively work together?
- **Monitoring:** What are the most efficient ways of ensuring adequate and efficient monitoring of commitments and activities that aim to improve the access of women to education, work life, and business engagement? Which actors – or combination of actors – are best placed to contribute?

Recommended Readings

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THE PROJECT

This paper provides background for the Symposium "Women's Rights and Empowerment in Afghanistan", Oslo 23 November 2014. The Symposium is hosted by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in partnership with the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the US State Department, the Afghan Women's Network (AWN), Georgetown Institute of Women, Peace and Security (GIWPS) and PRIO.

PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.