

# Women's Empowerment Programs in Afghanistan



**The Asia Foundation**

Improving Lives, Expanding Opportunities

The Asia Foundation has been a leading advocate for women's empowerment in Afghanistan and works on the premise that improving social, economic, and political opportunities for women will improve society as a whole. We have pioneered projects to promote opportunities for Afghan women by forging strategic relationships with government institutions, local NGOs, and influential non state-actors, particularly traditional community leaders and religious leaders. By strengthening the formal and informal justice sectors, encouraging institutional reform, and raising awareness of women's rights within an Islamic framework, these projects contribute to a sustained reduction in violence against women and expand women's personal and social security.



Since the fall of the Taliban regime, Afghan women have made great strides in reclaiming active roles in their society's social, economic, and political life. The Law for Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW), 2009, was a landmark effort to provide women with legal protection from violence, and in all its current programs The Asia Foundation promotes greater awareness of the EVAW law. The National Unity Government of 2015 was another step forward for women in Afghan politics, as the new cabinet included four female ministers, the government appointed two new female provincial governors, and according to the Foundation's 2015 *A Survey of the Afghan People*, almost half of Afghans surveyed identified the Directorate of Women's Affairs (DoWA) as a place of assistance for women at the provincial level. Within education, 30 percent of all teachers are women, and women make up 54 percent of students in teacher training. The government has introduced affirmative action measures to increase the enrollment of girls in tertiary education, and as part of its "Transformation Decade," 2015–2024, the government and its international partners have

launched programs to support women's leadership, rights, and participation in the workforce.

Despite these advances, Afghan women continue to face significant barriers to full and free public participation. Barriers include lack of quality tertiary education services, limited access to both formal and informal justice sectors, and insufficient political representation. The Foundation's Women's Empowerment Program supports initiatives to empower women and men to become effective advocates for women's rights and enhance their opportunities for full public participation.

## STRENGTHENING ACCESS TO JUSTICE

Drawing on The Asia Foundation's extensive experience in Afghanistan, the Women's Empowerment Program is adopting a more "male inclusive" and "collective community" approach, broadening its engagement to include men and households in expanding the political, social, and economic space for Afghan women. The Women's Empowerment Program supports initiatives that focus on the following priorities:



### AFGHANISTAN

Since 2011, over 15,000 men and women have been trained in women's rights across 19 provinces.

The Foundation is leading the way in transforming high school curricula, and will support science and math preparation for the Kankor university entrance exam for 72,000 female students, and train 3,000 teachers to better support Kankor preparation for young women.

- Educating and empowering women and men to promote violence-free environments for women and girls;
- Increasing women's access to justice by promoting their constitutional rights, within an Islamic framework, among state and non-state justice actors and institutions;
- Increasing women's access to higher education to improve their economic opportunities and allow them to become agents of change in public and private spheres; and
- Strengthening government institutions to become effective advocates for policy reforms and initiatives that address the most pressing needs of women and girls.

By design, these strategic priorities are mutually reinforcing, and Foundation staff and partners will strive for synergies across these areas, and in collaboration with the Governance and Law and Education Programs.

### ACCESS TO JUSTICE

Over the past decade, The Asia Foundation has pioneered projects to protect women's rights and increase their access to justice within an Islamic framework. The 2015 *A Survey of the Afghan People* found that over 60 percent of Afghans agreed there should be women-only *jirgas* and *shuras* for conflict resolution, an area in which the Foundation already has extensive experience and which it continues to support.

In addition to conducting training activities, the Foundation has developed innovative outreach tools to promote discussion of women's empowerment. Public service announcements (PSAs), recital pens (pens programmed to read text out loud to those who are illiterate), and media productions have been used to engage a variety of audiences across the country. A unique dimension of public outreach included a call center, promoted through radio PSAs, offering counseling and referrals to more than 1,000 callers a month in 2015.

### BOOKLETS ON PROTECTION OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The Asia Foundation has developed a series of 18 booklets in both Dari and Pashto addressing specific issues related to the protection of women's rights within an Islamic context for communities in Afghanistan. The booklets cover a variety of Islamic rights afforded to women, including marriage rights, inheritance rights, political rights, and social and economic rights, and they provide information on accessing justice, resolving familial violence, and the importance of dialogue. Since 2011, over 15,000 men and women across 19 provinces have received training with the booklets, including Afghan parliamentarians who have used the booklets to raise awareness of women's rights in Islam. On average, 35 percent of all beneficiaries showed an increase in knowledge.

### CURRENT PROJECTS

With joint funding support from the Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), The Asia





Foundation works in 12 provinces to strengthen access to justice for women affected by violence, by increasing the understanding of women's rights among women and influential provincial actors. A key achievement includes over 4,000 Friday *khutbahs* (religious sermons) on women's rights, delivered by religious leaders to male audiences to build local support for women's rights in their communities. The Foundation works in partnership with local NGOs, and has reached out to communities in some of the hardest-to-reach and most insecure provinces, including Uruzgan, Kunduz, and Farah.

The Strengthening Access to Justice and Advocates for Peace project, supported by the Kingdom of the Netherlands, works in four provinces (Balkh, Bamyán, Kunduz, and Parwan). This community-level project focuses on informing communities about basic legal concepts and restorative justice. Advocates for Peace groups are trained to resolve conflicts and promote participatory strategies to mitigate conflict and promote peace. There is a strong emphasis on the role of women-only *jirgas* and *madrassa* students as peace advocates.

Beyond the Women's Empowerment Program, the Governance and Law Program helped train 700 female election observers for the 2014 presidential elections, and has provided civic education for over 70,000 homebound women and their spouses. The Legal Aid through Legal Education (LALE) project, supported by USAID, supports access to justice for vulnerable populations by increasing the availability of legal aid, particularly in the area of family law affecting women. The Foundation placed 100 legal aid fellows, 40 of them women, in 29 provinces in Afghanistan to assist in the delivery of legal aid.

## ACCESS TO EDUCATION

The Asia Foundation has established strong links with formal education systems at all levels, and provides small grants to local NGOs to create and expand educational opportunities for girls and women. Based on our strategic priorities, the Foundation has helped create opportunities for women and girls by improving the quality of science and mathematics teacher training, improving access to higher education for working women, and responding to critical needs for safe and affordable housing for female students at Kabul University

With the support of USAID, the Foundation is conducting a five-year project called Strengthening Education in Afghanistan. The overall objective is to improve the institutional capacity, operations, and programming of education institutions and civil society organizations. The project supported the education of women and girls across six provinces by conducting literacy classes at the community and household level, producing 1,012 female literacy graduates in 2015-16. The Foundation is leading the way in transforming high school curricula, and will support science and math preparation for the Kankor university entrance exam for 72,000 female students, and train 3,000 teachers to better support Kankor preparation for young women. With the support of USAID's Promote fund, the project will provide 720 private scholarships to young women over five years.

## POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Since 2002, The Asia Foundation has assisted the government in strengthening its institutions to become effective agents of policy reform. With the support of USAID, the Foundation has continued to strengthen the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) and its

provincial line ministries as effective advocates for policy reforms and initiatives that address the most pressing needs of women and girls.

MoWA's Organization Restructuring and Empowerment (MORE) project supports both MoWA and provincial women's affairs directorates by promoting institutional reform, strengthening capacity, providing English classes and scholarships, and building public awareness through education, outreach and media relations. The Foundation has provided over 18,000 books to DoWA libraries, and placed 70 billboards in Kabul and 42 in 12 provinces.

The Foundation has supported several high-level discussions on women entrepreneurs. In 2015, the foundation supported a Ministry of Commerce



and Industries conference to discuss women's achievements in business and identify ways to support economic opportunities for women in Afghanistan.

*The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia. Headquartered in San Francisco, The Asia Foundation works through a network of offices in 18 countries and in Washington, DC. Working with public and private partners, the Foundation receives funding from a diverse group of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, foundations, corporations, and individuals.*



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