

# ANALYZING FEMALE LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION IN AFGHANISTAN

## Identifying the Key Barriers that Prevent Women from Entering the Labor Force

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The current female labor force participation (FLFP) rate in Afghanistan is around 16 percent—one of the lowest in the world.<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan ranked 171<sup>st</sup> among 188 countries in the UN's Gender Inequality Index and, in 2011, it was the most dangerous country in the world for women.<sup>2</sup> In 2015, UN Women estimated that only 5 percent of Afghan businesses are female owned. These dismal statistics have serious implications for the country—in terms of socioeconomic inclusivity, poverty reduction, and for overall growth and productivity, as female engagement in economic activity does not only benefit economic development, but also promotes sustainable long-term growth.<sup>3</sup>

A low FLFP in Afghanistan implies that there are other underlying factors that prevent women from working. These include limited mobility, gender inequality through legal frameworks, lack of economic opportunities, and low household bargaining power. Evidence suggests that Afghan women are willing to work. For example, in the 2015 Survey of Afghan People, 74.5 percent of Afghan women state that women should be allowed to work

outside the home.<sup>4</sup> Since 2012, Afghan women have been stating “lack of job opportunities” as one of the top three largest problems facing women. In the broader South Asian context, traditional norms have played a large role in dictating gender roles; nevertheless, indicators for women in neighboring countries have improved.

We believe there is a role for well-designed policy to improve the status of women in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> To date, there has not been a comprehensive analysis to study the issues Afghan women face to join the labor force. The World Bank reports that policymakers should “support agricultural value chains, where women's contribution is strongest and most valued, strengthen quotas and incentives for women to participate in the public sector, and target key barriers to women's employment,”<sup>6</sup> but there is limited clarity on what these barriers may be.<sup>7</sup> In order to bring sustainable long-term improvement to FLFP, it is critical to determine the key barriers women face and use policy to effectively target these barriers.

In our research, we aimed to, first, determine the underlying barrier(s) that prevent

women in Afghanistan from entering the labor force, and second, find effective actions that the Government of Afghanistan (GoA) can take to affect reform and monitor progress in the Afghan context. The presented analysis is a short excerpt of a full research paper completed in March 2016 and can be found in the Harvard Kennedy School library reserve.<sup>8</sup>

## II. CONTEXTUALIZING THE PROBLEM

Despite dramatic changes across the world in women's access to employment, education, and political participation, progress has been uneven.<sup>9</sup> We started by analyzing why this gap exists.

### Is Government Policy a Part of the Solution?

FLFP in developing countries is quite complex to study since there are many interrelated factors to consider. Researchers have highlighted a few dimensions that affect women's ability to engage in the labor market: level of economic development, educational attainment, social dimensions (e.g., norms influencing marriage, fertility, and women's role outside the household), institutional setting (e.g., laws, protection, and benefits), access to credit and other inputs, and household/spousal characteristics.<sup>10</sup>

There is strong evidence suggesting a need for policy action. Policy instruments such as top-down options like quotas, institutional reform, and conditional transfer programs have been common, and have had some positive outcomes. Even if these top-down policy measures do not bring about radical changes in the way women are perceived in society, evidence presented suggests that properly designed policies targeted towards women can have immediate consequences. Duflo takes an extreme position when she states that "equity between men and women is only likely to be achieved by continuing policy

actions that favor women at the expense of men, possibly for a long time."<sup>11</sup>

### The Afghan Context

While there is a clear need for policy to enforce equality, promoting equality has been challenging in countries with long-standing traditions that sustain discrimination in all facets of life.<sup>12</sup> Even with political will, these policies are often insufficient to change deeply embedded gender stereotypes—such is the reality for Afghanistan.

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For over a decade, the international community has spent millions of dollars on top-down programs in Afghanistan, yet Afghan women engagement indicators remain among the worst in the world. Some may even argue that these programs have provoked Afghan men into taking more conservative positions.<sup>13</sup> This is clearer as Bahri suggests that efforts to promote gender equality could be bolstered by including men in programs, and addressing the issue through an Islamic perspective as opposed to an ethnocentric approach. In addition, he suggests that programs to encourage women's participation in society should focus on the benefits to the family instead of economic reasons.<sup>14</sup>

There is some hope: evidence suggests that certain policies can work to some degree, even in environments where women are subjected to very high levels of discrimination. A randomized experiment finds that gender quotas in Afghan village councils improves outcomes specific to female participation in some areas, such as increased mobility and income generation; however, quotas produce no change in

the short term to deeply entrenched attitudes towards the role of women in society.<sup>15</sup> Along with the deeply entrenched cultural practices, the heightened insecurity imposes further constraints on female mobility in the Afghan context.<sup>16</sup>

### III. METHODOLOGY

Participation of women in the labor force is an outcome of various micro and macro-economic factors. To design effective policy, we need to understand how these factors interact with FLFP. As part of our research, we developed a robust predictive model to understand the characteristics of the women in the labor force and identify the major determinants of women's decision to enter the labor force in Afghanistan. Using the 2015 Survey of Afghan People, the model allowed us to study how FLFP correlates with female characteristics, instances of security and violence, and information sources, as well as men and women's perceptions of gender roles. Even though it does not directly provide causal linkages, the model provides strong evidence of the relationships between our factors of interest and FLFP. Building on the predictive model, we deployed a diagnostic framework to determine the key barrier(s) that prevent women from entering the labor force and prioritize policy reforms.<sup>17</sup>

### IV. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

We start by acknowledging that the low FLFP in Afghanistan is due to supply-side barriers, or factors that affect the supply of female labor, as well as demand-side barriers, factors affecting the demand for female labor. Due to data limitations, we focused solely on supply-side factors.

First, the model shows that security is a common concern, negatively associated with FLFP, across different ethnicities and districts in Afghanistan. Second, men and women's education in Afghanistan significantly

influences FLFP. For women, the higher the level of education is, the more likely a woman participates in the labor force. On the other hand, men's education has a reverse effect on FLFP. As average years of education for men at the district level increase, women within that district are less likely to enter the labor force, holding other factors constant. This suggests that the quality and content of education matters: the fact that men in an area are educated does not imply greater mobility for women.

Third, exposure to the outside world is an important indicator for FLFP. Watching television and obtaining information from community shuras—councils held to discuss particular issues including governance, security, and development—is positively correlated with FLFP. This may imply that television and community shura, as channels for receiving information, may provide space for policy interventions. In addition, evidence suggests a causal link between the perception of women's mobility potential and women joining the labor force. This not only includes the idea of women being empowered and expected to be mobile, but also men's perception toward women's work. The model suggests that women are more likely to be in the labor force when men in the region are more supportive of equal education opportunities and are less strict on where women can work.

Using the results of the model, we examined key critical barriers: security, education, caregiving, religion, norms, and the legal framework. A detailed diagnosis (see the full research paper) of these barriers led us to conclude the following:

- Security is an underlying barrier limiting women's participation in the economy. High violence not only diminishes women's willingness to leave their home, but it also raises concern in men, which further restricts women's mobility.
- Norms produce another key barrier

that limits FLFP. Prevailing norms, including men's biased attitude towards the role of women in the family and in society, have resulted in a weak legal framework, low autonomy, and low mobility for women.

- A supporting environment for women's education is instrumental, especially men's support for equal education opportunities. Women self-report that limited or complete lack of education and professional trainings are among the largest challenges they face.

- Information matters, and the channel in which women receive information matters. Obtaining information from the outside world provides exposure and can update women's prior beliefs.

- Given the state's capabilities, programs that seek to be effective have to take both top-down and bottom-up approaches. Afghanistan is a weak state, but has a long history of strong informal ruling through community shuras and jirgas—ad-hoc meetings held to resolve disputes, which have power to exercise local control.

## V. RECOMMENDATIONS

### Security

In the Afghan context, security is a challenging issue and requires bold leadership from several actors in the international arena. Our analysis led us to believe that security tensions arising from acts of violence are the main underlying barrier preventing women from entering the public space. Our main recommendations did not delve into security as the topic is beyond the scope of this analysis; however, we felt this is a first-order concern that will need to be addressed at a regional level to ensure the empowerment not only of Afghan women, but the Afghan people in general.

We recommended the GoA dedicate resources to meet with relevant internal and external actors and stakeholders, and design a new regional strategy to alleviate the escalating security tensions. This is by no means a simple task, but the approach to ensuring security needs to be revisited. However, given the tense security situation, the GoA can work to encourage and promote home-based women's work, such as handicrafts and textiles. While this does not solve the mobility issue, it allows women to work and sheds light on an important industry in Afghanistan.

### Increasing Access to Information Through Television

Second, we recommended policymakers develop a television program, leveraging channels like television media programming and the increase in viewership to improve access to information and exposure to the outside world. This directly addresses norms, another main barrier affecting gender roles in Afghan society.

FLFP is highly correlated with various modes of information-sharing, and watching television is one of the most positively correlated indicators: 72 percent of women in the labor force obtain information via television, whereas about 60 percent of those not in the labor force use television. Cable television is thought to be an effective form of persuasion because people emulate what they perceive to be desirable behaviors and attitudes; therefore, increased access to information through television allows us to effectively target the perceptions that prevent women from entering the labor force.

From an administrative feasibility dimension, a television program would be simple and cost-effective. With roughly half of the population with access to a television, the long-term benefits of initiating this centralized program would potentially be profound as it can reach women in urban and

rural areas at a low variable cost, despite the high up-front infrastructure cost. In addition, with evidence suggesting the international community has relatively high interest in supporting a targeted women's program, international stakeholders can be engaged to provide financial assistance to a sound program design.

From a political perspective, this program would be disseminated like any other television program, without the explicit knowledge of it being a women's empowerment program. While religious scholars or opposition groups may try to prevent women from watching television, over time, as televisions become widespread, it will be difficult for opposition groups to ban television viewership. Also, the goal of the program would be to start a discourse, and watching the show is not required for this to occur. Furthermore, the program will be centrally managed and disseminated through local partner networks. This would also minimize the political resistance from religious scholars, who have the strength to exercise local control. The centralized structure of the policy also limits the negative influence from provincial governments and threats from the Taliban.

### **Timely and Comprehensive Data**

Finally, we recommended the GoA revisit its national surveys to enable the precise measurement of the magnitude of challenges facing women. There are commendable data collection efforts in Afghanistan, but currently, datasets are missing a few critical elements with respect to FLFP. GoA could aim for the national survey to:

- Include questions capturing the activity of all the women in the household and not only married women;
- Probe women who self-identify as housewives to see if they participate in the informal labor market through agriculture, domestic labor,

handicraft work, etc.;

- Capture the sector of employment;
- Directly ask labor force involvement questions instead of indirectly attempting to identify a source of income for female participants by asking, "In the last week, did you do any work for pay, for profit, or for family gain?"

## **VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

We know from literature that gender equality matters for development, and we believe that greater female participation in the economy is a major opportunity for the Afghanistan's reconstruction. We acknowledge this will require addressing obstacles at all levels, including shifts in social customs, greater accommodation of women in the market, and inclusive policy that addresses the key barriers that women face to join the labor force. Security is a critical barrier that disproportionately affects women—this issue needs to be addressed by the GoA in tandem with a program that aims to affect FLFP. Prevailing norms are another underlying barrier that prevents women from entering the labor force, but we believe that a targeted intervention, such as increasing access to information, can help to lessen this barrier.

In sum, while progress has been made, there is a long way to go for women in Afghanistan. We hope the GoA can start a long-term dialogue to empower not only women, but all of Afghanistan.

## NOTES

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