

## Afghan Women's Enduring Barriers

Afghanistan - a conservative Muslim society governed in a traditional way for many centuries, has attempted to change and grasp the tapping of modernity several times. Religious misconceptions, rapid reforms, in the lack of legal and institutionalised systems, have brokered enduring social injustices. Commencing with King Amanullah Khan's first attempt in the early 20th century, Mujahidin's fundamentalist approaches in the 1970s and the recent endeavours post-2001 in the aftermath of the so called war on terror, the Afghan women have suffered and played a crucial role in determining the outcome of these transformations. However, this research has endeavoured to pinpoint what are the contemporary obstacles in the way to Afghan women's development and their active participation in the socio-political affairs of the country. In this regard, Cultural practices, religious misconceptions, illiteracy and under-developments are four interwoven and prominent social factors that will be studied and analysed. The research co-opts a conceptual approach and mainly relies on a desk review of the existing researches performed by prominent scholars and major organisations such as the USAID and the UN.

Afghan Women's status (Rights and Prestige) has been playing a crucial role in determining the outcome of political transformations in in the country. King Amanullah Khan's modernization policies in the 1920s, though seen with disdain and contempt, left remarkable changes behind. Zaher Sha's reign and the years up until the collapse of Kabul under Dr Najib preserved and continued to develop on those changes. In the 70s the so-called-Mujahidin instigated their struggles by targeting women and questioned their active participation in the society, while the Taliban followed Mujahidin's fingerprints and demonstrated a flat denial to women's education. Fortunately, post-2001 and in the aftermath of the American intervention in Afghanistan, both the government and the foreign forces are chasing a moderate approach to issues pertaining to the Afghan women and Afghan polity.

### Religious misconceptions

Education is an obligation for both men and women in Islam. Islamic scriptures, particularly, define the rights of women in a very clear manner. Quran signifies equal rights to women in maintenance of property, right to consent at the time of marriage, to maintain their name after marriage, divorce rights, right to education, work and economic rights. Saira Bano contends the rights of women as given in the Qura'n and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad were a revolutionary step in

the 7th century, incomparable with any other developments in Arabia or the entire world at the time. She, however, realises that “..the context driven reforms of rights of women in Islam is subject to many challenges in the traditional Muslim societies.”<sup>1</sup> For example, the culture of Baad and Baddal, regrettably, has been one of the main obstacles in the way of development and access to legal rights for the Afghan women. Baad, happens when the families decide to settle their dispute by giving away their daughter, whereas Baddal is the exchange of daughters in marriage between two families, who agree to make a new relationship for economic or other social purposes. Such practices are purely cultural and have no legal basis in the Islamic scripture. These acts undermine women’s basic rights to marriage and put women in risk of family violence for the rest of their lives. Most of these cases include early marriage and teenage pregnancy, which, obviously, has direct negative impacts on women’s access to higher education. In the lack of legal institutions and the absence of good governance practices, the government has not been able to interfere in families’ decisions and provide justice to individual citizens, mainly the woman.

Gender inequality in education attainment – a wide historical gap between women and men with 19 % literate women compared to 49% men - is still a threatening factor for the future of Afghan women. Although, the Islamic scriptures acknowledges an equal right to education for both men and women and strongly emphasise that "Seeking of knowledge is a duty of every Muslim". Similarly, the Elimination of Violence Against Woman Law (EVAW), Article 3 (4) considers Baad unlawful and mentions “Baad: Marrying a woman to someone as blood price or to achieve peace linked to murder, sexual violence or other circumstances to observe indecent customs and traditions” is unlawful and the perpetrators will face long term imprisonment. Baadal: Exchange marriages, families exchange daughters to avoid marriage costs is also considered illegal.

### Progress and Developments

Asia Foundation’s most recent report on the status of Afghan women is promising. It states “More women than men (21.8% vs. 16.4%) reported bringing family disputes to court, the Huquq Department, or the local shura or jirga, progress that can be partly attributed to three agencies of the Afghan

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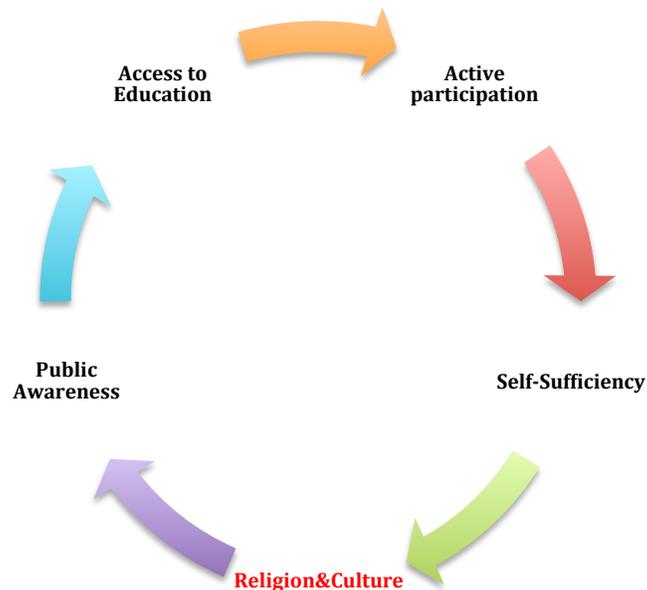
<sup>1</sup> Saira Bano Orakzai, *Institute of Commonwealth Studies*

government—the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, the Attorney General’s Office, and the police...”<sup>2</sup> Other figures are also quite promising:

- “More women than men (21.8% vs. 16.4%) brought family disputes to court, the Huquq Department, or the local shura or jirga.”
- “This year, just 9.5% of respondents agree that baad is an acceptable practice, down from 12.0% in 2017 and 18.0% in 2016
- Same downward trend for baddal, which just 25.2% of respondents find acceptable in 2018, down from 29.1% in 2017 and 31.8% in 2016
- 3 Million Registered Female Voters
- 400 Female Candidates Competed for 68 Allocated Seats in the Parliament
- Over 9 million children are enrolled in school
- Over 3.5 million girls
- Public and private universities enrol around 300,000 students, including around 100,000 women

## Recommendation

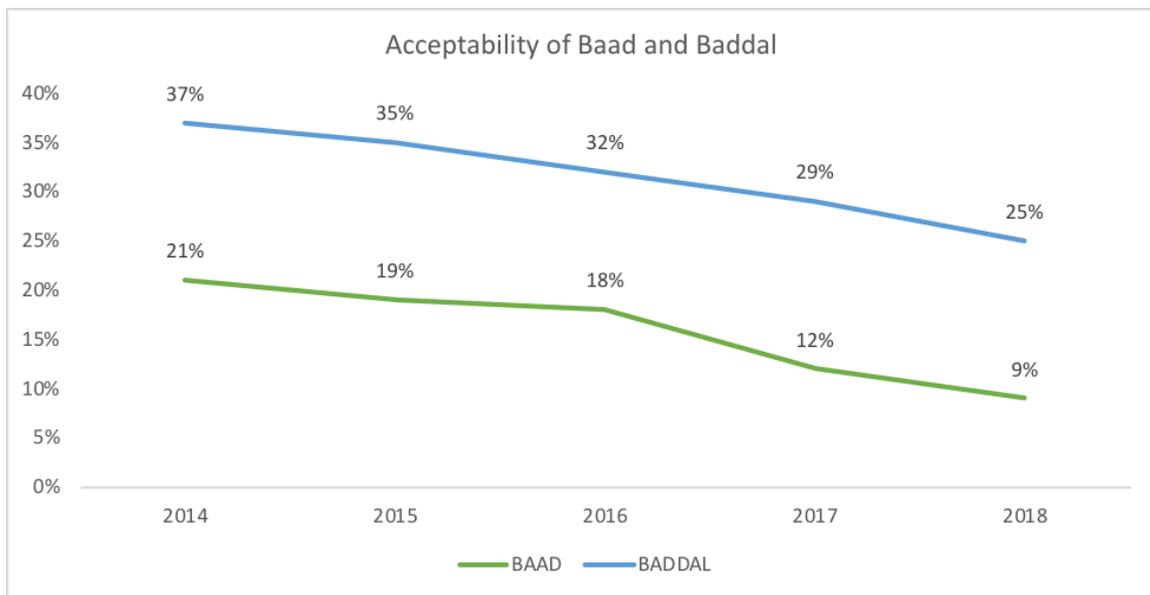
A development model



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<sup>2</sup> <https://asiafoundation.org/2018/12/05/2018-survey-of-afghan-people-shows-womens-rights-are-complicated/>

In retrospect, the Afghan Women's Prestige and Rights have played a crucial role in determining the outcomes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century socio-political transformations in the country. In order to institutionalise the entire development process, it is vital to espouse a considerate and inclusive approach where cultural norms, religious sensitivities are dealt by the grass roots of the society and from within the people themselves. Of all these two steps seem the corner stones: propagating Women's Rights through Inclusive High School Curriculums and Government Engagement (Public Awareness) through the media by brighter religious scholars.



Source: Asia Foundation

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