
How to Promote Women's Rights, in Afghanistan and Around the World

This year seems to be a year for taking stock of women's rights globally, but what does that mean for women in Afghanistan?

BY **ELIZABETH WEINGARTEN**

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It was 2011, and a 60-year-old man was attending a sermon in a mosque in Afghanistan's Khugyani District, near the border of Pakistan. The imam was preaching about women's rights — conveying to the congregants that Islam is not at odds with gender equality. The older man started crying and approached the imam.

“He said, ‘why weren't you telling me this before? I never allowed my daughters to go school. My sister-in-law died, and I didn't allow her to visit a male doctor...I forcefully married my children [to spouses I chose for them],” recounted Jamila Afghani, the founder of Noor Educational and Capacity Development Organization in Afghanistan, a group that works with imams to teach women's rights. Because her organization had been working with the imam in the Khugyani mosque, volunteers regularly came to monitor and write reports of the sermon, which was where she first heard about this story.

Today, that older man has become the most active advocate for women and girls in the tribal village, Afghani said at a recent New America event where she spoke alongside **Sally Kitch**, Founding Director of the Institute for Humanities Research and a Professor of Women and Gender Studies at Arizona State University.

His story speaks to a critical lesson learned after 14 years of engagement in Afghanistan: Supporting and advancing the rights of women and girls must involve men.

That's a salient lesson not only in Afghanistan, but around the world. And this is a year when the international policymakers and women's rights advocates are hungry for lessons: 2015 marks Beijing + 20 (the anniversary of Hillary Clinton's famed "women's rights are human rights" **speech** in China), the expiration of the U.N.'s Millennium Development Goals (intended to accomplish development benchmarks, like halving poverty and ramping up girls' education), and the U.S. troop drawdown in Afghanistan. It's been a time, too, of taking stock of the status of women in Afghanistan and globally. Women have made progress in the past few decades. And yet, in most countries — especially those besieged by extremist violence — women are still not gaining access to political, educational, and economic opportunities as freely as men.

The question, then, is: What can we all learn from more than a decade of engagement in Afghanistan? Though its historical, political and cultural context is unique, many of the lessons from our involvement there are universal and borderless.

The first lesson, which Kitch was quick to emphasize, was that the female activism of the women's movement isn't a Western invention, though it may be politically convenient for opposition groups to link women's rights to a "Western agenda." For this reason, any moves to advance women's rights must build on the existing foundations of civil society and seek to work within local cultural context. In Afghanistan, said Kitch, there is a tradition of considering women's rights from "within the context of families and communities." Marriages are created not just to satisfy individual desires, but to build alliances and to produce more opportunities for all members of a family, she explained.

And yet, "there's a tradition within Afghan families and villages of women exerting influence over activities of men and the values of sons and husbands," said Kitch, who recently published *Contested Terrain: Reflections with Afghan Women Leaders*, a book based on interviews with both Jamila Afghani and Judge Marzia Basel. "There has also been a women's movement [in Afghanistan] for decades."

In fact, Kitch said, dozens of women's organizations operated effectively (and often covertly) during Taliban rule from the 1990s up until the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001. And yet, Kitch **wrote recently**, "the U.S. government has made little effort to support or expand such organizations or to learn from their successes about developing culturally appropriate perspectives on social change."

This lack of effort could stem from challenges reconciling the differences in the way that women's rights are conceived of in Afghanistan compared to the West. Westerners tend to think about women's rights as an individual matter, Kitch explained. "It's allowing a woman to identify herself, what she's going to do, and not be enmeshed in other obligations that keep her from self-actualization."

"Western women see family as traps for women, places where they are required to meet the needs of other people and often to put aside their own needs and desires for their whole lives," Kitch told me in an interview. "But although Afghan women want some autonomy and freedom to choose their activities, they also believe that a strong family unit is for the good of themselves and for everybody else. They may have less antipathy to their roles as mothers and daughters and sisters." Men, in other words, are not the enemy, and women are often wary of interventions that offer them — and not their sons, husbands, and brothers opportunities.

Consequently, when organizations landed in Afghanistan with plans to elevate women with women-specific programming, neglecting to consider the impact of that programming on their extended kinship networks and social connections, that could (and sometimes did) cause a backlash that worked against women's advancement, Kitch suggested. For instance, Western organizations built schools for girls during the Taliban rule, when boys, too, had also been deprived of schooling during that time. Because they didn't get local buy-in to the schools, they became very unpopular; **half were burned down by 2006**.

Today, American policymakers and development officials have an opportunity to put the learnings that Kitch and Afghani articulated into practice through PROMOTE, the "**largest women's empowerment program in U.S. history**." It vows to multiply the population of female leaders in Afghanistan by increasing access to education, networks and trainings.

The stakes for success are high. “We won’t see such an opportunity again,” said Afghani, who worries that the money won’t be used properly. That’s why she says it’s imperative that women leaders like her — and not only government officials — be involved in discussions about how the funds would be best used to serve Afghanistan’s current and future leaders.

Afghani, for one, credits her organization’s success not to a Western cash influx, but to building capacity among local communities, engaging women and youth, and creating simple, inexpensive programming. In 2002, she started a literacy program with a group of 2,000 people in Kabul; today she serves 50,000 women in 22 provinces. She also began working with 25 imams in Kabul on integrating Quranic teachings with gender equality; now she’s working with 6,000 imams in 22 provinces.

Kitch agreed that the key to success in any future Western engagement in Afghanistan will come from building the capacity of local leaders, listening to their ideas, and making sure that all of our financial assistance is connected to women’s rights programming.

“We shouldn’t give money in a country like Afghanistan unless some portion of it, and not one-tenth of it, but maybe half of it, is engaged with programs that will benefit women,” and, importantly, “that the women of Afghanistan *believe* will benefit women,” Kitch said.

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