The Challenges to Political Participation of Women in Afghanistan: Historical and Cultural Perspectives

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Abstract

Issues of women's rights, including political and social rights, are important topics and relevant to the political development of countries. Unfortunately, many Afghan women have been deprived of their rights and privileges for numerous reasons. The purpose of this study is to investigate and identify the challenges facing women's political participation in Afghanistan and to present strategies that can pave the way for women's political participation. The results show that there are challenges in the context of women's political participation, most notably cultural, historical and ideological problems. Afghanistan's current socio-economic environmental conditions contribute to tribal culture and clan-centric life patterns, characterized by patriarchy and centred on manhood. The patriarchal structure of society defines and interprets religious teachings as masculine and in favour of men. Cumulatively, issues such as educational barriers, economic dependence, gender gaps, and hundreds of other such obstacles, are at the root of the challenges to women's political participation. The relationship between these causes is such that the strengthening of one leads to the strengthening of the others, and vice versa.

Keywords: political participation, women's rights, tribal culture, patriarchy, gender equality

Izzivi političnega udejstvovanja žensk v Afganistanu: zgodovinske in kulturne perspektive

Izveček

Ženske pravice, ki obsegajo tudi politične in družbene pravice, so pomembne in ključne teme za politični razvoj držav. Na žalost so bile zaradi različnih dejavnikov številne ženske v Afganistanu prikrajšane za svoje pravice in privilegije. Namen te študije je raziskati

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in identificirati izzive, s katerimi se Afganistanke srečujejo pri političnem udejstvovanju, ter predstaviti strategije, ki bi utrle pot političnemu udejstvovanju žensk. Rezultati so pokazali, da izzivi izvirajo iz kulturnih, zgodovinskih in ideoloških premis. Trenutne družbeno-ekonomske razmere v Afganistanu spodbujajo plemensko kulturo in osredotočenost na osrednjo vlogo klanov, za katere sta značilna patriarhat in poudarjanje vloge moških. Patriarhalna struktura družbe verske nauke določa in interpretira kot moške in v prid moškim. Kumulativno so teme, kot so ovire pri izobraževanju, ekonomska odvisnost in razlike med spoloma, temeljni izzivi za politično udejstvovanje žensk. Odnos med temi vzroki pa je tak, da krepitev enega vodi do krepitev drugih in obratno.

Ključne besede: politično udejstvovanje, ženske pravice, plemenska kultura, patriarhat, enakost med spoloma

Introduction

Women's rights, particularly political and social rights, are among the most critical concerns in numerous countries around the world. In the international arena, the political participation of women has proven to be one of the necessary conditions for development. Women, as part of society, have the inalienable liberty to chart the course of their destiny through recognition and enforcement of their rights and the exercise of sovereignty, including political participation. Thus, women in all spheres of political power and at all levels of decision-making can excel by recognizing and exercising their rights. Unfortunately, in Afghanistan various barriers exist—such as traditional, cultural, linguistic, gender, and customary beliefs—that hold back women from being an active political force to reckon with. Studies show that the construction of gender roles and asymmetrical relations of women and men in social, economic, political arenas are an outcome of historical practices emanating from patriarchal ideology (Ali 2018, 33). This study attempts to analyse and identify the historical and cultural aspects of women's political role, identify the challenges to women's political participation in Afghanistan, and present strategies to overcome them. Identifying the challenges to women's political participation and enhancing opportunities for women's political engagement can in turn augment people's political participation, deepen democracy, strengthen political vision, and lead to political development and a sustainable, inclusive society.

Participation and Challenges: Conceptual Framework

A better understanding of the key concepts and fundamental premise of the discussion would be useful. To this end, in the first section the concepts and

generalities of this research are examined, such as what is meant by a challenge, and what is participation?

Challenge as a Word: Challenge as a word means inviting someone to fight, calling on them to prove something, or to fight for superiority in terms of ability, power, and so on (Aghabakhshi 1995).

Challenge as an Idiom: Challenge as an idiom means calling a person, rival, or opponent into a fight and provoking them to prove their competence and ability. It is also referred to as a situation in which the focal problems and crises have historical roots (ibid.).

Participation: The word participation means the act of taking part in an activity or event (Hornblower, Spawforth, and Eidinow 2012).

Political Participation: Political participation is one of the key concepts in this research, although there are various interpretations and there is no clear and comprehensive definition. However, what follows are some explanations of this concept:

- a) *Participation in Politics:* Many of the definitions that fall under the concept of political participation refer to this concept as meaning the free participation of citizens in politics, which is also defined in the *Culture of Political Science* (Aghabakhshi 1995) as “participation in politics and involvement in politics; citizens’ organized efforts to choose their leaders, effectively participate in social and political activities and influence Government formation and governance”.
- b) *Influencing the Government or Supporting the Political System:* Sajjadi (2007) states that political participation encompasses both competition and support, which is predominantly in the form of games and influence. So, the objective is to have more active participation. He described political participation as “a set of activities and actions of citizens to influence the government or support the political system” (ibid., 99). He notes that just as the roots and foundations of political participation in different individuals and societies have different types and scope, they also have different levels, such as intense, moderate and weak, and the contribution of each of the factors to citizen’s political participation is also different (Sajjadi ibid. 2008, 100). Hence, the obstacles and challenges of political participation are also linked to various causes.

Hekmatnia defines political participation as an essential sociological terminology (Hekmatnia 2011, 160). He defines political participation as involvement in political processes that lead to the selection of political leaders and determine or influence public policy (ibid.). Anthony Giddens in *The Third Way and Its Critics* refers to the nature of political participation and clarifies its voluntary aspect,

separating political activities from political participation, seeing political participation as a political right (in Hekmatnia 2011, 160). Political participation here refers to all the legal activities of non-state citizens that are more or less intended to directly influence the selection of government agents (ibid., 162).

In general, political participation is behaviour that influences or intends to influence government outcomes. Some experts believe that the first analysis of the cultural and political conditions of any society requires special attention to its primary source, the human element. Every form of cultural or social behaviour derives from human interaction in society. Hence, political participation, which is human involvement in decision-making, often emanating from citizenship, is one of the primary practices of a community.

Today, the concept of political participation has undergone a profound conceptual evolution. If in the past, participation was only meant to interfere with or be involved in something, today it defines participation as that part of the voluntary behaviour of individuals to intervene in any matter. Political participation, which is the most prominent form of participation, is the entry into the field of being elected or to elect someone, to intervene in the macro- and micro-levels of political decision-making that are relevant to the fate of the society. Political participation has several levels, the primary being voting, and the penultimate being people's representatives holding executive, legislative, administrative, and leadership positions. In other words, political participation encompasses basic involvement in civil society, public domain discourses, and voting, as well as interest in the political system, participation in informal governmental sectors, membership of quasi-political organizations, demonstrations, and seeking political or administrative office (Eskandari 2013).

Women's Political Participation: According to the concept of political participation, women's political participation can be defined as the voluntary activity of women to legitimately and legally, directly or indirectly, influence the choice of rulers and the governance process (Eskandari ibid. 2013). It includes the participation of women at all levels of political systems and processes.

Women's Political Participation: Theoretical Framework

Public participation as one of the essentials of political development is now rigorously studied, and the multi-dimensional nature of women's political participation in particular has drawn the interest of innumerable thinkers. Today's society is witnessing manifestations of patriarchy in the political arena in various forms. Hence, identifying obstacles to women's political participation and seeking to

reduce them to lay the groundwork for political development is critical. Afghanistan, as an underdeveloped country, must strengthen political participation in general, and women's political participation in particular, to achieve political development. Numerous factors have an effect on the forms and degrees of women's political participation in Afghanistan, including the level of schooling, the place of residence, and attitudes towards girls, as well as the other factors that affect the political participation of men and women in general, as a population. These include factors like the type of political structure, economic conditions, educational levels, dominant ideologies and so on. Among such factors, it is the traditional political culture of Afghanistan that has wielded decisive power and influence on the political participation of the people, and even more so with regard to women's political participation. Moreover, this is found to be true not only during any one particular historical era or particular political configuration of Afghanistan, but throughout the country's history. The traditional political culture of Afghanistan has had a powerful historical bearing on its present political nature.

Sociologists and political science theorists have brought forward numerous theories about political participation and the factors that affect it. Among them, Inglehart believes that there is a deep link between political culture and political participation. He believes that the inter-relation between deep-rooted attitudes, values, and democracy is very strong, and that democracy requires encouraging, supportive attitudes and social tendencies among the general public for progressive development and stability, and these attitudes and values should be encouraged in the popular political culture (Inglehart 1988, 1204). Therefore, he focuses his thesis on culture, stating that it is a system of beliefs, values, and experiences that are commonly shared among the people, and handed down from generation to generation (ibid. 1990).

Inglehart's theory as a theoretical framework lends itself powerfully to the arguments of this paper. He advocates that political participation is the quintessential component of democracy, and a key requisite for the evolution of political culture that is needed to craft sustainable democracy. This theoretical framework is employed to investigate the interaction and effects of political culture on women's political participation in Afghanistan. The political culture of Afghanistan being predominantly traditional and tribal is found to be the main obstacle to the political participation of women in Afghanistan.

In his book *Political Sociology of Afghanistan*, Abdul Qayyum Sajjadi states, "The social structure of Afghan society is a tribal structure with traditional ethnic political culture, which is firmly based on ethnic and tribal criteria and beliefs. It carries components of anti-development and anti-modernization in it" (Sajjadi 2012, 238). Therefore, in his view, the features of traditional and tribal political

culture are undemocratic and anti-development. He lists the features of traditional culture as follows:

- Traditional culture is an oral culture and is unquestionable. It is an individual-centric culture, rather than being focused on personality or capability, which are essential requirements for any role, be it political.
- The community is anarchistic and the rule of law has no room in society.
- The social unity between people in this society is focused on blood and ethnicity, not by intellectual unity, and the boundary between self and alien is focused on the tribal and ethnic boundaries (ibid., 239).

The prevalence of traditional culture is considered by Sajjadi as not only the root cause of several problems in governance, political management, and development, but also as making it difficult for governments to embrace democracy (ibid.). Traditional historical residues not only have retrograde effects on the extant political culture, but the traditional tribal culture of Afghanistan, in addition to being anti-development, is also anti-woman.

Sima Samar states that role of Afghan women in politics has been limited by the traditional culture of a patriarchal society (Afghan Voice Agency, 2015). Sajjadi, a Member of Parliament, also believes that traditional society's characteristics hinder women's participation in politics (ibid.). Traditional political culture has directly affected the political participation of women in Afghanistan throughout its history. Traditional tribal culture, as has been prevalent in Afghanistan, does not believe in equal rights and opportunities for women. In such a culture, gender biases, gender discrimination, and an inferior view of women are all clearly evident (WCLRF, 2017).

In Afghanistan's traditional patriarchal tribal culture, women's duties are confined to the home, with the education of girls being seen as worthless, while women's life-long suffering and the lack of healthcare are chronic issues of concern (Dejban 2000). Historical studies show that such discrimination was not limited to the dark period under the Taliban regime alone; instead, the history of Afghanistan is riddled with patriarchal ideologies and practices that became salient features of traditional tribal culture. Jude Benjamin, a researcher at the International Committee on Afghanistan in New York, cautions the folly of considering the Taliban as the root cause of women's low status, and says any such conclusion only shows inadequacy in the study of Afghanistan's history (ibid.).

In summary, the theoretical propositions of Inglehart, as contextualized by the works of thinkers like Sajjadi, become useful in analysing the challenges of political participation of women in Afghanistan, and will be applied below.

Research Methodology and Data Collection

The challenges of political participation vary from country to country at any given time. This paper gained insights by examining the studies, processes, and views of people from multiple disciplines, across social strata, class, and ideologies, as made available in the public domain. The descriptive-analytical method has been chosen for this research, with the use of secondary data. The data was collected from various books, journals, international publications, government archives, and other sources.

Challenges of Women's Political Participation in Afghanistan

Challenges: Culture, Tradition and Religion

Nearly four decades of war and violence in Afghanistan have been ample provocation for violent behaviour in Afghan society, and individuals surviving within this model of a martial culture have practiced the most brutal behaviour while dealing with each other. Moreover, one of the most vulnerable sections of Afghan society that has been brutally affected by violence is women. Unfortunately, violence against women is not limited to any one social institution, like the family and home. Many Afghan men are unable to accept women's participation anywhere at all, including social-political spheres. In Afghanistan, barring women from entering the labour market and not letting them work as equals to men remains a severe challenge to the greater participation of women in society. Reports have even documented instances where many men in the Afghan community cannot bear to see a picture or image of a woman in the public domain. As such, several instances have been reported where the posters of female candidates contesting elections have been torn down, showing clear resistance to women's participation even at lower levels of governance and administration. In addition to tearing down or taking away of pictures of female candidates, such women often also receive threatening phone calls demanding that they leave politics. Such cases indicate the entrenched patriarchal belief system and practices among Afghan men, who are unprepared for an equitable and free electoral contest between men and women as equal citizens with equal rights, following democratic values and practices. The fact that women have a legal right to stand for election seems irrelevant to the dominant ideology, rooted in traditional tribal patriarchal culture.

Patriarchal Traditional Culture

Patriarchy is a male authority system that oppresses women through its social and economic institutions (Abbott and Claire 1997, 324), with such power stemming from the fact that men have greater access to resources and the privileges of power structures inside and outside the home, and mediate their division and distribution in society. The existence of a patriarchal culture in Afghanistan's historical past forces women to conform to men's wishes. It considers women's existential value to rely only on religious practices, reproduction and their use for men in society. This patriarchal culture also governs the formulation of political rules, allowing only men to hold high political and social positions. Moreover, the historical and cultural context of Afghanistan has always pushed women to stay away from politics and other such social milieus, and limiting women's roles, responsibilities, and duties to survival, sustenance, taking care of the home and the next generation (Mohseni 2011, 308).

Patriarchy is a socio-cultural construct favouring male dominance erected in the name of culture, tradition, norms, and customs through various social institutions, beginning with the family, and simultaneously perpetuating gender gaps and inequalities through social processes and institutions. This is certainly one of the critical factors that stamp out women's aspirations in Afghanistan, including political ones. It systemically erects obstacles specifically for women. In the name of patriotism the superiority, valour, and righteousness of men in Afghan society get glorified and remain almost an unchanging practice and principle. This glorification of male valour and dominating spirit demands that men establish supremacy over women, which involves the constant breaking down of women's personality, invalidation of their emotions, feelings, aspirations, participation, and self-esteem. In patriarchal and traditional beliefs, the traits of a man are those of a courageous hard-worker and provider, while women are seen as weak, ignorant, a burden, and so on. Even in literature, public perceptions and linguistics women are depicted as the personification of ignorance, weakness, laziness, and so on. In traditional Afghan culture, good and successful women are compared to men, and bad men are always treated like women. So much so that the worst traits for men to possess are those considered to be feminine, while the best attribute for women to cultivate is to be "like a man". Clearly, in traditional thinking and popular belief, a woman is considered to be created by God only to serve the husband and/or the male relatives in the family, and for housekeeping. It is thus clear how and why women are pushed out of their rightful status in society and are instead stereotypically regarded as secondary "creatures".

Studies in India show that barriers to active participation of women are an in-built feature of patriarchal society; constructed and maintained by social institutions like

the family, religion, education, political system, and media using an assortment of gender biases, prejudices and practices against women (Meera and Gowda 2013, 74).

Patriarchal societies use conservative traditions that undermine women's overall participation in society, including political participation. Because of this culture, structure, and system, women's activity outside the privacy of the family is deemed to be unacceptable. The sexist prejudices that sometimes take the form of "science" in the epistemic network of this patriarchal system can have catastrophic effects, in that they misuse and misinterpret the natural features of femininity and womanhood to mislead and deter women from entering politics or other public or community spaces in society. However, in the emerging global world of open communication and information exchange, and with the increase in women's awareness and development, it is clear that women's demands and expectations are moving to a higher level where women's rights, roles, and equality demand acknowledgment, albeit slowly. Today, Afghan women want to be actively involved in becoming the architects of their own lives as well as participate in various stages of strategic development planning and national decision-making, because women's presence in society, along with their socio-economic-political participation, is a matter of fact. Seeing all people as equal whatever their gender is a value that needs nurturing and strengthening, as it will lead to greater gender equality, set out as goal number five in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (UNO 2018). Freedom of thought and the presence of women in public spaces like politics are thus markers of developing inclusive communities and collective rational intentions.

The study of cultural perceptions and practices clearly shows that the traditional cultural context in Afghanistan and the way women are viewed is a significant challenge to their political participation and for a more equal society. The culture that relegates women's roles and contributions only to the home creates a vicious circle of dependency and deprivation for women, not only socially, economically, and politically, but also psychologically. Such a culture poses a challenge to women who wish to make their mark in the community and aspire to contribute and realize their potential. Instead of encouraging equal opportunities, such traditional patriarchal societies challenge women by seeing them as inferior, weak, and "out of their proper place" if not at home. This has been established by studies that show the negative perception of women working outside of the home. Often, such employed or gainfully occupied women are seen as worthless and disgraced in Afghanistan. This kind of culture in itself hinders women's participation and development. Custodians of patriarchal tribal culture place the blame for more calls for women's right upon the influence and diffusion of "The other", newer cultures through global communication and information dissemination. At the

same time, some studies claim that these traditions from outside—calling for more women's right—are not original to Islamic culture and have led to the disorientation of women along with a negative impact on their total integration into Afghan society (Rahin n.d.).

Religion

Religion poses major challenges to women's political participation in Afghanistan. Religious customs, interpretations by clerics, religious teachings, and conservative custodians within mosques prevent women from participating in politics. The patriarchal structure of Afghan society, which is predominantly Islamic in its religious profile, shows that religious teachings favour men. The masculine commentary on religious texts prohibits women's participation in the public domain. Interpretations of religious tenets by several clerics are proof of this. In one of the provinces in Afghanistan a cleric issued a fatwa during a parliamentary election stating that "it is forbidden for voters to vote for a female electoral candidate when there are male candidates". This is an example that shows how social institutions like religion can prevent women from participating in elections. Religious authorities in Afghan society can also issue a fatwa to prohibit women from voting, as the Taliban have repeatedly done. Therefore, one of the barriers and challenges to the participation of women is the institution of religion (Mohseni 2011, 300).

Islam has often been a means of consolidating the political power of rulers and kings in Afghanistan, notes Sajjadi. Three main sources of legitimacy can be traced in the country: firstly, ethnicity; secondly, the source of legitimacy embodied through the principle of nationality in the Loya Jirga—the traditional grand assembly of the Afghan people; and thirdly, the divine origin of legitimacy from Islam and the teachings of the religion. These three sources of legitimacy are the more subtle formulations used in establishing the political legitimacy of the rulers. At the same time, those who possess power operate on the principles of ethnicity-based policies and discriminative practices based on ethnic and religious divisions (Sajjadi 2012, 135). Accordingly, the political participation of citizens who have no place in any of the sources of legitimacy is not considered as necessary or significant (*ibid.*, 145). The examination of political participation in Afghanistan reveals a strong juxtaposition of religion, ethnicity, and discriminative policies. In a religious society where religious discrimination is rampant, it is clear that other religious parties do not have equal chances to participate in or win elections; it is equally true that the equal participation and representation of women as a political force has a long way to go. Interestingly, even in the context of political leadership

women's role is relegated to fulfilling household duties and becoming the mother of many intelligent sons who will go on to lead the nation as men in power. The society, political system, or even the family does not care about women, who they are or what they become. Therefore, being a woman is in itself seen as a challenge in a religious society. Moreover, the fact that Afghanistan has an almost entirely Muslim population is a barrier to the participation of citizens of other religions.

Religion in Afghanistan has a defining power in politics, and religious institutions are monopolized by clerics who are influenced by the traditional conservative culture. Therefore, political and religious institutions work in tandem to protect and perpetuate patriarchal traditional culture and vested interests rather than to promote progressive culture, equal opportunities, and making women's political participation a reality.

Challenges: Position of Afghan Women in Family and Society

Population dispersion, harsh climatic and geographic features, an agricultural-based livestock economy, lack of urban infrastructure, lack of communication, limited economic resources, arid and mountainous climate, and other environmental factors have caused rural and tribal life to be the dominant living-cultural paradigm in Afghanistan for hundreds of years. The social structure in the tribal society is relatively constant, based on ethnic and tribal standards and beliefs (ibid., 44). A characteristic feature of this type of social life is the dominance of tribal traditions and norms, habits, symbols, rituals, myths, and primitive moral values. The most enduring manifestation of this kind of tribal culture is embodied in the patriarchal paradigm. The dominance of the ethnic system in the process of communal life and the dominance of rural culture, even among many urbanized populations, along with social perceptions and cultural knowledge oriented towards value and identity, have greatly influenced the personality of women under the patriarchal paradigm (Heywood 2008, 475). Male-centeredness is a set of patriarchal cultural values based on masculine standards, and any theory that defines women's lives as deviating from that of a masculine standard is male-centred (Abbott and Claire 1997, 325).

Dominating tribal traditions and norms, habits, symbols, and rituals is another challenge facing Afghan women. Men maintain control over women's bodies, feminine sensibilities and free choice in the feudal and rural culture, and the historical passivity and the psychological onslaught of expectations and gender role stereotyping of women have continued incessantly over generations. This has resulted in another great challenge faced by women, which is the widespread

prevalence of mental, psychological, and emotional ill-health and stress, which is often deftly concealed from society, and especially from male scrutiny, due to social stigmatization.

Women in Afghanistan often suffer from mental stress, emotional emptiness, social disconnect, excessive self-censorship, low (or no) self-esteem, fear and anxiety of “encountering” or interacting with men, the tendency for seclusion and isolation, lack of courage and confidence, especially in expressing desires; a sense of inferiority, negative self-image, viewing oneself as belonging to men, overly dependent on men’s abilities; a sense of anxiety, insecurity, and even fear to claim or exercise personal autonomy; fear of social activities; social conditioning that makes women need to be sheltered by male guardians and decision-makers; undermining of women’s agency and concealment of their talents and capabilities. These are all “home-grown” challenges that cause women to remain in the background, depriving themselves of socio-economic and political opportunities as well as their rights. Thus, much of the social disadvantages and individual challenges faced by women are rooted in the same psycho-educational spaces and patterns of socialization that emerge from the context of socio-cultural-economic-environmental systems, processes, and settings. In this context, the aspirations and possibilities for women’s political participation can seem bleak or insignificant. The barriers blocking women from political participation become manifold in such a traditional tribal culture, where even men from non-ruling tribes are denied active political participation. In such settings gaining equal opportunities for women to participate is not easy to achieve, and even more so in politics which is considered a male bastion.

The primary role of a man, as ordained by tribal culture, is that of a provider and protector of his family, which translates into earning the money needed to support the family. On the other hand, society expects a woman to be a nurturer and comforter for the family. A woman is expected to be in the house and do all the routine household chores every day of her life, for the sake of her family. Besides, the reproductive role of bearing and rearing children is exclusively placed on her. Her role here includes the responsibility of raising children into fine adults, with the duty of imparting education and the transfer of culture also placed on mothers. A woman also has to be the caregiver to all in the family, including the old, sick and young. Working within the family for no-pay or in others fields for additional income, doing all tasks related to family livestock management, extending support to her husband in his work as and when he needs or demands, maintaining harmonious familial relations, and following traditional rituals and festivals, are just a few of the expectations for a woman. Interestingly, none of these tasks or the woman’s role in them are generally

acknowledged or considered as valuable, hence her labour and contributions remain unaccounted, undervalued, and invisible.

Like the famous proverb goes, “one who gives bread gives orders”, and thus the role of men as providers is given more importance. Therefore, in the Afghani tribal family system, more attention is paid to men and boys than girls and women, which continues into the present with the preference for sons. In such a culture, secondary status is given to women and girls at home and outside. Gender role stereotyping ensures that women themselves subscribe to such patterns of thinking, choosing, doing, and so on. Through the process of patriarchal socialization girls and women are made to believe that they are weak, need male protection, are less important, less capable and their primary role is to be married, have children, and serve one’s husband and his family.

Even society employs different standards of measure for men and women, viewing girls and women either with pity or sympathy, measuring them up based on their external appearance, degree of servitude, and so on. Workplace stereotypes also encourage the secondary status and lower position bestowed upon women in both the family and society. This percolates into public sphere, including politics, as manifested in the many challenges to women’s political participation and development.

Women in Afghanistan: The Past and Present

The Historical Position, Political Participation and Challenges of Afghan Women

The record of Afghanistan’s history shows that Afghan women have been courageous and talented, but rendered victims under the pressures of traditional society. They have not been in the right place at any given time, and their spirit, talent, and personality have been suppressed in various ways. Historically, Afghan women’s pathways to acquire knowledge, education, a scientific outlook, and rational thinking have been blocked by the strict oppression that forces them to lead lives of despondency and discrimination, almost like the living dead in the cemetery of time. Despite this, there has been no lack of talented women, and Afghan women have never been quiet, but instead have written their names in the pages of history through their presence, perseverance, resistance, and socio-political movements for equality.

Princess Rabia Balkhi (856 AD–926 AD), from the Balkh region located in present-day northern Afghanistan, is historically credited as the first poetess in the language of Dari, and became famous for her expressive poetry about her love for

a man who was a slave, for which she was imprisoned and then her veins were cut, leading to her death. Historical narratives record that despite this she defiantly continued to write poetry on the walls of her prison cell in her own blood till her last breath, and thus became a symbol of resistance. Rabia exercised her freedom to choose her love, and valiantly resisted all efforts to suppress her freedom of expression through poetry.

The history of Afghanistan is witness to several such records of courage and sacrifice from women. They have always been just as active as men in making history and independence in Afghanistan, but have always faced violence and been seen as inferior. The abilities, talent, and grit of Afghan women in the fields of art, culture, literature, and the political arena are evident. Although the political visibility of women is relatively low, some have indirectly influenced political change through the selection of the crown prince, in the position of the king's wife and queen mother, and at other times had more direct effects.

Afghan history is marked with narratives on the situation of women, their activities, and their deprivations through the chronology of events, years, and periods of rule. Historical accounts directly mention women like Queen Gouhar Shad (1447–1457), who as the Queen of Herat ruled for about ten years after the death of her husband King Amir Timor. History records that she led a cultural renaissance through patronage of art, architecture, and trade, transforming the town of Herat into a seat of power, oasis of learning, religion, and business. Architectural splendours like a mausoleum, mosque and minarets still stand as mute testimony of her governance. During the Timuri era (1370–1507), encouraged by religious tolerance and lack of ethnic, linguistic, and regional prejudices, the urban women were able to participate in social affairs and develop their talents and education more than ever before (Mohseni 2011, 29).

The Ghaznavi period (977–1186), despite its reputation for progress in literature and science, still lacked the presence, participation, and progress of women due to the nature of despotism and discrimination at that time.

As Afghan society became engulfed in domestic tyranny through superstitious beliefs and practices, the flow of ideas, pace of development, and political participation of not only women but all other segments of society stagnated. Afghani women experienced even more severe forms of oppression and deprivation within the authoritarian tribal system.

The Ahmad Shah era (1747–1772) witnessed a humiliating attitude towards women. Men of the tribal family were so dominated by traditions that they even used women to leverage their trade. Society then condoned the disgraceful

attitude and custom of considering women as the ‘property’ of men. The era of Timur Shah (1772–1793) was no different. In the despotic tribal system, women were always victims under the onslaught of demands dictated by the power play of tribes. Women were used as sexual slaves of the influential houses and made victims of tribal violence, which continued even during the so-called peaceful era until Abdul Rahman Khan (1880–1901). Poor women were taken hostage after bloodshed to strengthen the relations between the two tribes. The times of Abdul Rahman Khan (1880–1901) witnessed the height of oppression against women (Mohseni 2011, 45). During this dark period, history witnessed the enduring power of women through their protests, writings, and poems, and even encouraging and equipping female freedom fighters. For example, during the Maiwand war (1880) and the second British invasion (1880), women were directly involved in the conflict along with men, such as the young Miss Malalai who carried the national flag on the battlefield after the death of previous flag guard, and started singing epic poems to encourage the fighters to fight and resist (Ghobar 1993). Other brave women also fought against injustice and cruelty with all their heart and strength, and so became symbols of zeal, integrity, and courage.

King Habibullah Khan (1901–1919), as Ghobar writes, claimed to be a reformer and proponent of women’s rights and wanted to stop the multiple marriage system (*ibid.*). History says Amanullah Khan (1919–1929) ushered in some changes to increase the equality and rights for men and women under different laws, whereby women finally received the right to education. This was the historical period when women’s efforts founded many schools, and girls and women were sent abroad to study. However, the radical, westernizing policies of Amanullah Khan stirred up fanaticism, and with the advent of Habibullah Kalkani (1929) women’s political participation and their right to education were disrupted. When King Nader Khan (1929) came to rule with his tribal despotism, schools for girls were closed, students pursuing education abroad were compelled to return, and the path that was gradually opening up for social and political participation not just narrowed down, but was simply closed. However, it was then during the Zahir Shah era (1933–1973) that the constitution was ratified by the Upper House (1965), and the right of all citizens to vote was recognized. This provided the basis for greater political, legal, legislative participation of women. For the first time in the history of Afghanistan, the election of 1965 recorded voting by women, and also saw women getting elected to Parliament. The political arrival of female delegates such as Aziza Gardizi and Homira Seljuki was recognized by Zahir Shah, who made them Senate Representatives (Farhang 1992, 720). This period, which is known as the era of democracy, may have been the first in the history of Afghanistan when women could legally engage in their organizational activities. The

ruling period of the People's Democratic Party (1978–1992) was short-lived for several political-cultural reasons, including their increased promotion of modern western notions of culture and freedom, which were not tolerated by Afghanistan's traditional and religious community.

However, the period of Daud Khan (1973–1978) marked even greater encouragement for the education of Afghan women than what was witnessed during the term of Zahir Shah. The Revolutionary Society of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) also started its activities in 1977, aiming to fight for women's rights and secular democracy. However, the activities of this movement faced innumerable challenges due to its goals of greater secularism, gender equality, social justice, and human rights, and members were often forced to carry out its mission covertly. (Ekhlasi 2010, 453)

After the Saur Revolution in 1978, the seizure of power by the communist People's Democratic Party, the equality of men and women in all social, economic, and cultural spheres, and especially in the political and civil areas, were expressed in Article 12 of the rules governing the regime. Many writers believe that the most important advance in this period was the fight against women's illiteracy. Although it provided the basis for women's political, social, and educational activities, even then extremism and irrationality continued and created conflicts with the religious community in Afghanistan, and eventually provided the ground for the return of the oppression of women's rights and equality in society. With the rise of the Mujahideen (1992–1996), fighters against the Soviet occupation, communist extremism faced fierce opposition. This political tide against the communist regime unfortunately also meant strong opposition to the communist agenda of encouraging the social and political participation of women. So, in this period, women's political and social participation, and even their cultural activities, were forbidden, and this was one of the most challenging periods for Afghan women in recent their history, ranging from deprivation of education and political participation to cutting off their heads and removing organs as punishments. And the worst of all periods was the Taliban regime (1996–2001), when all forms of oppression were inflicted on the already suffering women, and all in the name of Religion. The precepts of religion and religious interpretations were used during this period to fiercely deny women their rights to education, employment, or work outside their house, to assemble in public places, even to see a doctor, and so on.

The oppression of women during the Taliban regime was so blatant and severe that it woke up the international community, assemblies, and organizations. Amnesty International reported that all the rights of women in Afghanistan had been violated, and severely condemned the Taliban's actions. Moreover, at the

UN Commission on the Status of Women, which is held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York every year, a resolution on the status of women in Afghanistan was adopted. This addressed human rights violations against women and girls, which included all forms of discrimination, calling on the Taliban to end their discriminatory policies and practices in Afghanistan and recognize the dignity and equal rights of women and girls (Mohseni 2011, 78).

After the overthrow of the Taliban regime, the Bonn Conference was held from November 21 to December 6, 2001, under the auspices of the UN. Among the six main issues discussed were those of the security and rights of women, which included an emphasis on the presence of women in governance, and the establishment of processes to empower women and development of institutions focusing on women in Afghanistan. In the fourth section of the Independent Commission of Loya Jirga, Article 2 (c), the appointment of representatives and the significant presence of Afghan women in the Emergency Loya Jirga (2002) is emphasized, and women's participation in the formation of the Emergency Loya Jirga was highlighted. It was under the Interim Government (2001–2002) that the obligation was spelled out to set up the emergency Loya Jirga and elect 21 members of the commission from among the qualified persons consulted by the United Nations, including three women, namely, Mahboba Hoqoqmal, Soraya Parlika, and Homeira Nemati. One thousand five hundred and one members were appointed by the commission to attend the Emergency Loya Jirga, of which 160 were women, and Sima Samar was elected the First Deputy Chairperson of the body. In the first election for the transitional government, Massouda Jalal was nominated for the presidential election, the first time a woman had stood for high office, and she received a considerable number of votes. Women like Asifa Kakar and Mukarrama Akrami were present in the constitutional Loya Jirga and in the nine-member commission set up to draft the constitution by the interim government. In the year 2003, when the transitional government created the 35 members commission to draft the constitution, seven women were present, and a special committee consisting of 20 women was set up under Mahboba Hoqoqmal, to further formulate policies and uphold women's rights. The committee which was mandated to evaluate the drafting of the constitution added another article, "Ensuring equal rights for men and women and eliminating all forms of discrimination against women". It also called for a minimum of two women instead of one to be present in Parliament and provincial councils. In the new constitution, unlike the famous Sunni and Shia's religious fatwas, under the rule of the President, Parliament, and Senate, the law did not prohibit women from engaging in any sphere and set the foundations for equal treatment, while also approving steps for affirmative action and positive discrimination for women to be represented in the Parliament,

Senate, Provincial Council, and District Council. This marks the beginning of the historic and monumental march of Afghan women towards equal opportunities and outcomes in all spheres, including political participation. The act of adopting international conventions has since come into law, where equality between men and women is an important pillar (Mohseni 2011, 89–90).

According to Sarabi (2004, 45), the constitution of Afghanistan is in the interests of women. This statement is true to the extent that, when equality in law is implemented in practice, then discrimination in policy or practice should not prevail. The new Afghan constitution (2004) has a humanist Islamic approach that envisages “an Islam in harmony with the fundamental values of modern humanism; such as the human being’s self-determination and innate dignity, democratic activity, human rights, socio-political justice and an optimistic view of rationality and reason” (Shah 2016, 33). This lays a foundation that can underpin democracy, as stated in Article 22: “All discrimination and privilege between Afghan nationals are prohibited. Men and women have equal rights and responsibilities against the law.” This article in the country’s constitution rejects all forms of discrimination and formally recognizes equal rights for men and women, although it was already mentioned in the earlier constitution by Daud Khan (1973) and the communist regime (1978–1989). But these earlier attempts were not explicit and clear to the same extent, and could not be applied in the community. However, due to the favourable socio-political situation that ensued following the Bonn Agreement (December 5, 2001), the Afghan people started a new social, economic, political, and cultural life under the broad umbrella of democracy.

The Present Position, Political Participation and Challenges of Afghan Women

The adherence and incorporation of international human rights treaties in the new constitution have made a towering difference to the lives of Afghan women. Article 7 of the constitution clearly states that “The government, the United Nations Charter, the international treaties, that Afghanistan has joined and shall follow the Declaration of Human Rights”. In addition to these commitments, the transitional government of Afghanistan, with international backing, established the Independent Human Rights Commission in Afghanistan (2002) to prevent and combat any form of ethnic, religious, sexual, and all other forms of discrimination in the country.

The new constitution, in Article 58, formally endorses the Human Rights Commission: “The government shall establish an independent Human Rights

Commission to monitor and improve the protection of human rights in Afghanistan.” Anyone can submit their grievances to the Commission, and the Commission will examine the human rights violations through legal authorities and assist in defending everyone’s rights. Afghanistan’s accession to the “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women” also reflected the harsh realities that have been enslaving Afghan women historically, culturally and politically, and showed promise that the country will be able to embark on journey that eventual ends all forms of discrimination, upholds human rights, and achieves gender equality and social justice. The dark years of the Taliban regime were the most devastating times for Afghan women in recent history. Acceptance of various international treaties by Afghanistan and its new constitution have strengthened the pathways for women’s participation and leadership in Afghan society. For example, the eligibility criteria to be met by presidential candidates are spelled out in Article 62 of the new constitution, in which there are no formal restrictions on a woman becoming the President of Afghanistan.

Examination of the extant situation shows that though the constitution has paved the way for women to enter the political arena, the actual size of women’s representation is still very small and needs encouragement. Effective inclusion of a good number of women representatives in important political talks and peace processes, as well as the importance assigned to their views, proposals, and ideas, leaves much to be desired. The challenges of converting words and aspirations into reality are real in Afghanistan. Making the representation and participation of Afghani women more effective is the challenge of today, and one that is among the major development concerns in the country.

Several challenges remain to be faced. For example, many of the representatives in the High Peace Council (former Taliban members) do not believe in the equality and rights of women (WCLRF 2017, 4). The Women’s Political Statement on Peace, Security and Political Participation states that the majority of decisions in the High Peace Council’s Executive Committee are made by men and imposed on women, and that women members of the High Peace Council, of which there are very few, have not been informed or even invited for discussions held on the peace process (*ibid.*, 6). The Women and Child Legal Research Foundation reports several threats to active political participation and leadership. The findings include women’s effective political participation continuing to be poor; women’s active participation in national and international discussions being inadequate; that women’s concerns need to be better addressed and included in national agenda; that participation needs to move beyond women’s mere presence to active participation and leadership (*ibid.*, 9–10).

The Afghan Women's Network campaign entitled "Afghan Women Will Not Go Back" represents the current position of women in the face of recent concerns about ignoring their role, presence, and voice in national debates (Afghan Women's Network n.d.).

The attack of 9/11, US military interference in Afghanistan, followed by the Bonn Conference and the formation of a new Afghan government, were all turning points for Afghanistan, particularly for Afghan women.

In its journey towards development and sustainable growth, Afghanistan as a society strives to overcome several deep-rooted challenges that remain from its historical cultural composition, characteristics and experiences. Elements of tradition, culture, ethnicity, and religious interpretations have formulated the belief systems of the people. The traditions, values, culture and religious beliefs that characterized traditional tribal Afghan society have had negative impacts on the lives of Afghan women in all spheres, including their identity, self-esteem, well-being, education, employment, and political participation. The male-dominated tribal society of Afghanistan, with its patriarchal belief system, has made women and their work remain within the four walls of their homes, so much so that generally women are not allowed to step out without male members accompanying them, even to visit a doctor during serious illness.

Progressive religious thinkers and researchers in Afghanistan consider that Islam in its original form does not profess or condone discriminatory attitudes towards women. Such thinkers believe that woman must be treated as equal members of the human community with equal rights to those given to men in Islam. Hence confining women only to the family and within the house, denying them opportunities for education, employment, financial independence, and political participation all derive from the masculine patriarchal narratives and interpretations of Islam, tribal culture, and traditional conservatism. It is stated that Islam in its true essence values women's dignity of life and financial independence. However, due to patriarchal interpretations these basic tenets have been ignored, make women second-class citizens.

Various religious authorities have a strong influence in Afghan society, and are considered to be important sources of power and legitimacy, and they are by far the most significant factors in making anti-feminine statements that impact the individual, social, political, economic, and legal destiny of women (Vaezi 2013). Religious institutions, the clergy, Loya Jirga, tribal chiefs, and tribal elders continue to be influential and play a powerful role in social, political and cultural spheres in Afghanistan. Their perceived role in regulating social order, defining social relationships, monitoring social contracts, controlling individual

and inter-personal behaviours continues, and thereby allows the continuation of historical patriarchal perceptions and discriminatory practices against women, from the past into the present.

The prevailing attitude and practice of treating women as second-class, subordinate citizens and like ‘property’ owned and controlled by men presents many challenges for women in all walks of life, including political participation, which in turn not only oppresses one half of society but fundamentally weakens it as a whole and retards the development of the nation. To break these vicious cycles there is an urgent need for a strong political will, social mobilization, and sustainable empowering processes, structures, and perspectives that all aim to uphold women’s rights as human rights. Gender-sensitive policies, enabling institutional structures, systems and processes are important in this context, and the sustained political participation of women is a key component in this.

Strategies and Suggestions

“Women hold up half the sky” is a popular quote that states the truth that: women constitute half of human society. It is beyond doubt that women and men are meant to be natural equal partners in life and society, and when this fact is accepted it dismantles the very tenets of patriarchy as well as the historical and cultural roots of gender inequality.

Society sees development when its members as stakeholders, its processes, institutions and agencies all subscribe to a shared vision of higher ideals and are pro-actively committed to achieving them. Therefore, barriers to women’s participation in family, culture, value, economic, and social contexts need to be first identified and dismantled, including the complete elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women. Gender-sensitive female empowerment processes are essential here.

Strategies to overcome the challenges to the greater political participation of women and to encourage their equitable partnership in the development process broadly require paradigm shifts in the policies, processes, institutions, attitudes, values and culture of society, with an unequivocal commitment and emphasis on freedom, equality, equity and justice for women, men and the others in Afghanistan. Gender mainstreaming is a pre-requisite for this, and the socio-cultural and political incorporation and institutionalization of equal opportunity principles, gender sensitivity, and capability building are vital, as is an empowering eco-system.

Some of the definitive steps that need to be taken up as a high priority include the following:

1. Elimination of illiteracy and promotion of universal progressive education for all is fundamental. One of the historical, deep-rooted causes of many ills in Afghanistan is widespread illiteracy, lack of progressive education, and a lack of awareness about issues such as human rights. Therefore, the expansion and strengthening of prevailing initiatives and new, innovative mass education and literacy campaigns involving adult education, evening study centres, universal school education and an emphasis on the education of girls should be put in place. Violence and deprivation thrive where society breeds ignorance, nepotism, and discriminatory Literacy can make a positive difference.
2. Education needs to be viewed from a broader premise to include capacity building, skill development, leadership development, self-development, life skills, vision-building, social entrepreneurial development and attitudinal changes using BCC (Behavioural Change Communication).
3. Effective awareness and IEC (Information Education Communication) campaigns using multiple mass media, including traditional folk media, theatre, music in Dari and Pashto and other local languages, portraying women as equal partners in society and development will be useful points of influence. Encouragement and support for civil society organizations, NGOs, and people's collectives, along with research, learning and development institutions, are other effective ways to build partners for sustainable development.
4. Gender sensitization and gender mainstreaming in all social institutions, including religious ones, along with collaborative partnerships for advocacy of human rights, gender justice, zero tolerance for violence and discrimination against women and girls need to be adopted as flagship policies and programs of the government. The role of international agencies like the UNO and other aid agencies is critical in ensuring global commitment and pressure against any "going back" to the old days, as now feared by women in Afghanistan. The support and commitment of religious leaders and their institutions is invaluable and must be enlisted and guaranteed for the success and sustainability of the changes envisaged.
5. The laws protecting women's freedoms have an active and beneficial role in eliminating violence, including domestic violence. The equal rights of women and men need to be upheld in all walks of life, including the right to education, to work and employment, the right to property, to health care (including reproductive health care), to vote, to contest in elections, to be elected and

win elections to become political leaders and policymakers. In short, women should have the same rights as men.

6. Also critical for women are the alleviation of poverty, greater employment opportunities, along with public and workplace safety. Economic rights and empowerment can increase the confidence and capabilities of Afghan women, and thus enhance their political participation. Cooperatives can make a positive difference and bring powerful possibilities.

Equal rights for women are now guaranteed for the first time in the Afghan constitution, although political will, belief in female empowerment and gender equality are still needed for the greater appointment of women at all levels of decision making.

Conclusion

Historically and culturally, Afghanistan's conservative traditional tribal society has blocked women's progress. Patriarchal beliefs, biases, and processes, including socialization combined with traditional tribal culture and social institutions under despotic rule throughout the country's history, have caused a deep-rooted schism in society perpetuating oppression, discrimination and tyranny. Afghanistan's current socio-economic, political, environmental conditions reinforce its tribal culture and clan-centric life pattern, characterized by patriarchy. It is clear that the patriarchal structures of society are defining and dictating all walks of life, and that masculine narratives of history, religion, and cultural practices present women with educational barriers, economic insecurity, the burden of domestic drudgery, restrictions on physical mobility and autonomy, widening gender gaps and other obstacles to women's political participation. The relationship among the causes of these barriers is such that the strengthening of one leads to the strengthening of the others, and vice versa. It is thus essential to work in a comprehensive manner to overcome these barriers.

In the first transitional period of the Afghan government it established a Ministry of Women Affairs under the leadership of a woman for the first time ever. This emerging period created a relatively open socio-political space for Afghan women's activities, resulting in a new wave of progressive, well-informed students, educated and working women, even a female candidate for president. These developments are a ray of hope even amidst the complexities of the post-conflict situation originating from previous era, deep-rooted patriarchy, gender gaps, massive illiteracy, governance issues and more. Enhancing women's participation in all spheres, including political engagement, can augment people's representation,

strengthen political vision, deepen democracy, and lead to gender equality and a sustainable, inclusive society.

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