



WOMEN AND EDUCATION IN AFGHANISTAN: A LEADERSHIP DILEMMA

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Abstract

Afghanistan's strategic location has always connected the rest of the world to Afghanistan, dating back to the Silk Road. According to Ewans (2002), "Afghanistan has also over its long history been a highway of conquest between west, central and southern Asia" (p. 10). Different empires have traveled throughout Afghanistan, from China in the East to Italy in the West resulting in many distractions, quandaries, and unwanted circumstances that have impaired and faltered the society in a number of different ways. This chapter provides both direct and indirect constructs, recommendations, and mechanisms for promoting gender equality, reversing the brain-drain, and embracing capacity building endeavors to help with the development process of Afghanistan.

Introduction

Over the years, the struggle for a unified Afghanistan has been an arduous situation because of belligerent neighbors, dependency on western empires, sub-optimal leadership, and tribalocracy. One main reason for this unfortunate situation is that Afghanistan is located in a strategic location in Asia which has caused many conflicts. In fact, throughout Afghanistan's history, there has been involuntary conflict. Ewans (2002) explains, "Although never colonized, Afghanistan is part of the colonial history of Tsarist Russia and British India" (p. 9). Throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, the British attempted to colonize Afghanistan on three different occasions and were unsuccessful. Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, the Russians invaded Afghanistan hoping to spread communism, and were also defeated by the Afghan resistance. Afghans have never surrendered to an outside invader. "Uniquely among the nations of Eurasia, Afghanistan has steadfastly resisted conquest, despite being a crossroads for ambitious empires throughout ancient and medieval times and a battleground in the modern age during the Great Game and Cold War" (Tanner, 2009, p. 26). In 1996, the Pakistani backed Taliban aggressively

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invaded and controlled parts of the country. After the Taliban were defeated in 2001, a liberal democratic Afghanistan emerged and has played a pivotal role in the future of this nation. Afghanistan currently has a very young population with a median age of about 18 years. Furthermore, several generations of Afghan boys and girls have grown into adults knowing and seeing nothing but continuous war (Frank, 2002, p. 82). While universal education is a legal requirement, due to economic realities, only a small percentage of the population is literate (Mujtaba,

2007). For several decades, Afghanistan has become dependent on the international community for assistance in all matters. “As a result of this long-term foreign assistance and dependence, Afghanistan has regressed” (Kaifi, 2008, p. 17).

Afghanistan’s unique profile would lead one to assume that this largely rural, poor population embodies the characteristics of a collective culture that remains close to its tribal and village based lifestyle. According to one study, “The schools generally requested help from students’ fathers for renovations and improvements to classrooms and schools, which accorded with traditional gender roles and expertise” (Hoodfar, 2007, p. 280). Furthermore, school teachers and educational officials in rural parts of the country tend to rely more on tribal and community leaders to educate their students. While women might show more empathy toward people and lead with a care orientation, it is evident from modern research that males and females will be equally effective in leadership roles (Jones & George, 2009). Since Afghanistan has been economically depressed due to three decades of intense and destructive war and violence fewer women have had educational opportunities which would qualify them to reach higher ranks of management and leadership positions (Mujtaba, 2007). As such, Afghan managers and government officials should strategize to provide more educational and management development opportunities to this underrepresented group. In Afghanistan, there was a transformational leader (King Amanullah from 1919-1929) who embraced the importance of independence, modernization, education, and equality. With the 2014 presidential elections quickly emerging, it is imperative for the Afghan people to elect a President who will embrace and implement what King Amanullah envisioned almost 100 years ago.

Afghanistan’s King Amanullah

There was a visionary leader named King Amanullah (1919-1929), the son of King Habibullah and the grandson of King Abdur Rahman who had a dream for Afghanistan to progress. As documented in history, “On February 27, 1919, Amanullah was formally crowned” (Ewans, 2002, p. 87). King Amanullah and his soldiers defeated the British in a month long war and gained complete independence of Afghanistan during the third Anglo-Afghan war and soon after became a national hero. King Amanullah was a strategic-forward thinker and a change agent, and was able to properly evolve the country into a modernized society.

During King Amanullah’s reign, Afghanistan flourished into an independent nation that focused on enhancing human rights, education, and promoting modernization. He understood the inequalities faced by women in Afghanistan and quickly worked toward granting them equal rights. The King’s ability to enhance the quality of life in the Afghan society will always be commendable and admirable. “For the first time [in Afghan history], a written constitution was written up, implemented, and promulgated” (Ewans, 2002, p. 93). The public was both astonished and surprised by his bold endeavors to make positive changes.

King Amanullah went on a grand tour with his wife Queen Soraya where he spent time in India, Egypt, France, Germany, Britain, the former Soviet Union, Turkey, and Iran. This notorious tour allowed him to be exposed to different cultures, lifestyles, and ideologies. Being a charismatic and visionary leader allowed him to accept, adapt, and enjoy the differences that he and his wife encountered.

King Amanullah understood the importance of education and the positive impact education has on a society. He established a number of schools, including some for girls with the help of Queen Soraya, and started to “send young Afghans abroad for higher studies” (Ewans, 2002, p. 93). Suddenly, Afghans were immersed in their studies and worked hard to receive

scholarships to study abroad. Many Afghans traveled to the west during his time and received advanced degrees and returned to Afghanistan to help with the development process. King Amanullah influenced the people of Afghanistan by empowering them to be visionary, proactive, and an active part of the global community. After King Amanullah's reign in 1929, all of his successors neglected his progressive reforms and instead, were manipulated and influenced by foreign powers and became dependent on foreign resources, support, and aid.

Dependency Theory and Afghanistan

Afghanistan throughout the millennia has been a place of rich culture and a junction of civilizations from multiple continents (Mujtaba, 2007). This has led the country to become dependent on the international community for survival and the prospect of a peaceful future. Of course, "Dependency theory concludes that poverty in the developing nations is the result of their dependence on high-income nations" (Tregarthen & Rittenburg, 2000, p. 675). Influence is exerted over Afghanistan by many other nations. According to Tregarthen and Rittenburg (2000), "Dependency theory holds that the industrialized nations control the destiny of the developing nations, particularly in terms of being the ultimate markets for their exports, serving as the source of capital required for development, and controlling the relative process and exchange rates at which market transactions occur" (p. 675).

Despite much foreign aid, Afghanistan still lacks in many professional and technological fields (Mujtaba, 2005). This is perhaps normal as well since "the benefits of trade between a rich country and a poor country will go almost entirely to the rich country" (Tregarthen & Rittenburg, 2000, p. 675). Even though the majority of the benefits are going to the richest countries, poor countries do not have many options if they want to live peacefully with the international community. The good news is that "Dependency theory, like Marxian economic analysis, promises prosperity, equity, and justice once the political obstacles to economic transformation have been overcome" (Ahiakpor, 1985, p. 538). In this case, the future does look brighter if the citizens of the developing country educate themselves and become self-reliant key players in the global community. Ultimately, the people of a country must help themselves if they want to prosper and to be key players in the global community. However, it has been suggested that the people of each country must realize that "Capital and technology from the West do not lead to development but can only deepen underdevelopment" (Munck, 1999, p. 58).

Poor countries are often stuck in the cycle of oppression until they are able to put an end to this cycle through entrepreneurship, development and education. According to Perraton (2007), "dependency theory not only argued that the nature of peripheral countries' insertion into the global economy perpetuated their subordinate status but also that it reinforced domestic inequality with a 'comprador' bourgeoisie unable to play a developmental role leading to the type of capitalist transformation seen historically in Western countries" (p. 32).

Such countries must develop a comparative advantage for themselves to trade with their regional neighbors and globally. Gradually, they must strive to escape the dependency trap since dependency is said to be a theory of underdevelopment: "Poor countries exiled to the periphery of the world economy could not develop as long as they remained enslaved by the rich nations of the center" (Velasco, 2002, p. 44). Long-term dependence cannot be sustained. Dos Santos (1970) explains that, "By dependence we mean a situation in which the economy of certain countries is conditioned by the development and expansion of another economy to which the former is subjected" (p. 231). Dependency can be best converted into sustainable development through equal and speedy education of all citizens of a country. Equal and public access to a

speedy education can help avoid the disparity between the upper and lower classes. As stated by researchers, “dependency theory holds that economic development widens the gap between the rich and the poor because most new jobs are for educated middle-class and skilled blue-collar workers rather than for unskilled workers” (Tensey & Hyman, 1994, p. 31). Independency is part of the journey toward the ultimate goal of living interdependently with the global community. However, over-emphasizing nationalism, culture, and historical literature can certainly lead people of a society to desire absolute independence from the global community. This, however, is not a long-term solution in today’s interconnected global community. Today’s economic productivity and work environment are dependent on an “open system” where people can receive resources from anywhere worldwide and sell them globally, rather than functioning in a “closed system” which requires independency on all fronts. Overall, dependence is especially harmful when the nation is forced to rely upon less-developed countries. “Dependence” must be converted to “independence” and then to “interdependent relationships” globally; in this way, Afghanistan can benefit from certain comparative advantages which are afforded to it through its natural resources. The continuous conditioning of “independence” can also lead to ethnocentricity, as well as xenophobic thinking and paradigms. This “surface level” mentality can negatively impact a country who is receiving international assistance in the rebuilding process. High illiteracy rates in the country may be causing this mentality since they cannot perform proper cause and effect analysis due to the lack of knowledge on inductive and deductive reasoning. It appears that the current Afghan government is encouraging capacity building by making literacy a top priority while building the workforce’s capacity for more effective decision-making (Mujtaba, 2007). As a result of long-term dependence, the majority of Afghans have neglected education and innovation which has resulted in a society that has mainly embraced culture. While culture provides the foundation of a society, education provides the means to a civil society (Kaifi, 2010). In a quantitative research study by Mujtaba and Kaifi (2010), the authors were able to conclude that, “higher education among the Afghan respondents demonstrated a statistically significant and positive correlation toward ethical maturity” (p. 32).

Afghan Culture and Gender Roles

Within the Afghan culture, the roles for men, women, and children are clearly outlined (Crown, 2007). The men lead and represent the household. They are the “public face” when dealing with matters outside the home. It is expected that children will do as they are told, and follow the religious guidelines in the family along with traditional roles (Sekandari, 2007). Typically, Afghan girls are taught to be obedient daughters, brides, and daughter-in-laws, and they are also expected to not bring shame to the family (Sekandari, 2007). Therefore, women are mainly homemakers and do the child rearing (Crown, 2007; Sekandari, 2007). Fathers control the household and make all the important decisions (Emadi, 2005; Entezar, 2007). Gender roles are strictly defined and are not to be compromised. Individuals would rather act ungenerously because of their desire to not bring shame upon themselves and their families (U.S. Army, 2004).

The Afghan culture has many strong core beliefs and values. Some of the primary values and beliefs are: pride, honor, hospitality, respect, virtue, morality, loyalty, family, reputation, religion, culture, and education. Shame also plays an important role in the Afghan culture and tradition. It is considered very shameful when an Afghan is not in touch with his or her Afghan language and culture (Sekandari, 2007). Afghan men are prideful of their families and are also responsible for the family’s actions; therefore, the father makes all decisions and tries to ensure that the family members live up to his decisions in order to avoid any shame to the family. For

this reason, many women are watched closely and kept close to home, because the actions of one may bring shame to a whole family and, sometimes, even the tribe (Emadi, 2005; U.S. Army, 2004).

Pride is extremely important within the culture. Standing up for one's family or tribe name is considered by Afghans to be a way of expressing pride or even patriotism (Emadi, 2005). Being Afghan and more importantly Muslim, is a unique identity of which the Afghan people are proud of (Kaifi, 2009). Men are honorable to their family and to their culture or country. There are several ways that Afghans may lose their honor; for example, one may violate a social or behavioral code, such as when a man asks about another man's wife (Crown, 2007). However, the most common way Afghans lose their honor is when they are shamed by the behavior of someone else for whom they are responsible or to whom they are related (Crown, 2007). For example, if a daughter disobeys her father, a father feels shamed at the expense of his daughter. An Afghan girl can bring shame to her family by dating, being sexual and even for having male friends (Sekandari, 2007).

Afghans place a lot of value on hospitality and on their guests; for example, when a guest is over one's home, the host waits to eat until the guest has begun eating (Advameg, 2011). "Afghans will carry hospitality to embarrassing extremes, but are implacable enemies" (Ewans, 2002, p. 9). Refusal to be hospitable or to accept the hospitality of others is very offensive to the Afghan people. For example, if someone offers food, tea, or gifts, it is important to accept them and not say "no." Afghans always offer food or tea to visitors, even when the host may not have enough for himself or herself (Crown, 2007).

Respect is for parents, elders, and for the self (Emadi, 2005). For example, younger individuals are to address elders by their title and not by their name (Advameg, 2011). It is a tradition to stand up to greet an individual when he or she enters the room. It is crucial to stand up and greet an individual especially when it is an elder. It is considered disrespectful and offensive to have one's back towards another, especially an elder (Crown, 2007).

Morality, doing the right thing, is especially important to the Muslim's religion, which in turn is a big part of the culture and family dynamics (Emadi, 2005; Entezar, 2007). Loyalty is to friends, family, community, and/or tribe and is a vital part of the culture (Crown, 2007; Emadi, 2005). To not be loyal typically results in "loss of honor on the part of both parties" (Crown, 2007). In regards to religion, Muslims believe that Islam is a complete way of life (Livengood & Stodolska, 2004). Culture is valued and Afghans are to follow their traditions (Emadi, 2005). Based upon Afghanistan's history, Afghan's culture and traditions come from many different tribal and religious influences (Aryan, 2010; Kaifi, 2009).

Education is very important to Afghans. Educational systems existed even before Afghanistan became a country (Aryan, 2010). Education was formally organized in Afghanistan in 1913 (Sadat, 2004). The first primary school for girls in Afghanistan was established in 1921, eighteen years after the first school for boys (Karlsson & Mansory, n.d.). Higher education was not available for girls in Afghanistan until later; some Afghan girls who were interested in higher education had to go to university in other countries, such as Turkey (Sadat, 2004). The value of education grew over the years and Afghanistan eventually had its own universities, offering higher education in many different fields for both genders (Sadat, 2004). It was not until the mid 1990's that the Taliban took over Afghanistan and shut down many of the schools, including all of the schools for girls (Sadat, 2004).

Women in Islam

According to tradition, Islam is a complete way of life (Livengood & Stodolska, 2004) that was brought to the people to support their civility because, prior to Islam, there were many unjust acts (Younos, 2002). Entezar (2007) claimed that there is a difference between traditional Islam and what now exists in the Arab nations—cultural Islam. The difference is credited to “Islamic fundamentalists,” who have a strict and one-sided interpretation of Islam (Entezar, 2007). Many consider themselves Muslim, but follow an understanding of Islam that is based on what they have been taught and retained, rather than on what Islam actually is in its origins (Emadi, 2005). Younos (2002) agreed and added that it is unfortunate that many Muslims do not speak the language of the Qur’an (Arabic) and, therefore, must rely upon the interpretations of others.

According to Entezar (2007), the oppression of women and the forbiddance of their rights is part of cultural Islam. Furthermore, women in Afghanistan have had and continue to have limited access to proper translations of the Qur’an and hadiths and, as a result, believe that what is conveyed to them by Muslim clerics is the word of God or of the Prophet (Younos, 2002). Thus, the combination of lack of education for women and of the Muslim clerics spreading cultural Islam, Afghan women face oppression and many societal trials and obstacles.

Islam is considered to be a complete way of life (Livengood & Stodolska, 2004); therefore, the followers of Islam are accustomed to seeking guidance from Islamic clergy when counseling is needed. In fact, according to Gerner (2007), most U.S. Afghans do not know much about Western psychotherapy. Ali, Milstein, and Marzuk (2005) researched the role of religious leaders (Islamic clergy) attending to the counseling needs of individuals in their US communities. The researchers conducted a survey that they sent to imams throughout the US. Ali, Milstein, and Marzuk (2005) concluded that, when people came to the imams for counseling needs, the issues that they raised rarely included religious concerns; rather, they focused more on domestic and mental health issues than on issues related to social obligations and family dynamics. Johansen (2005) also stated that Muslims typically seek assistance from spiritual leaders who understand their religion. Muslims do not trust counselors who do not take Muslim religious beliefs and practices seriously. Therefore, the Islamic clergy play a central role in counseling in the U.S. because they understand religion and the cultural background of the Muslims seeking assistance.

Younos (2002) and Wadud (1999) explained that some Muslim clerics fail to note that the Qur’an uses the gender-neutral form to address both men and women. Wadud (1999) asserted: There is no distinction between the male and the female with regard to individual capacity. With regard to their potential relationship with Allah, they are the same. With regard to personal aspirations, they are also the same (pp. 34-35).

Islam, Women, and Education

Many individuals have a misguided judgment about Islam; in part, this is due to the influence of cultural Islam, and it is also due to the media, which generally shares only half of the story (Kaifi, 2009). There are many Muslim women who are educated and who did not have to fight for their right to an education (Sadat, 2004). There have been several female Muslim leaders throughout the Muslim countries; for example, Benazir Bhutto (1993-1996) was the Prime Minister of Pakistan and Sima Samar (2001-Present) is currently the chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). Furthermore, Megawati

Sukarnoputri (2001-2004) served as the president of Indonesia, which has the largest Muslim population in the world.

Today, however, many women in many Islamic countries are forbidden to go to school, and many Muslim women have to fight for their right to an education. In Afghanistan, parents may be reluctant to send their daughters to school. According to Emadi (2005), some Afghans condemned and strongly opposed the transformation of Afghan schools that allowed female students to attend classes, where “girls were flirts, [and] they were going everywhere, jumping like Tatar gazelles, their legs were shown above their socks [and] they had washed their hands of shame, dishonor and holy honor. And [they] shamed the Nation by their flirting” (p. 212).

Traditionally, in Afghanistan, the girls who were encouraged to go to college were allowed to obtain vocational training to become a nurse or midwife, for example, in order to better serve other women in the country (Emadi, 2005). Due to their pride and honor, Afghan men did not want their wives to be seen by a male physician without a female chaperone; therefore, female nurses were preferred, and this was an acceptable career for Afghan women (Emadi, 2005).

Therefore, it is not the religion, but cultural Islam’s interpretation of the religion that has brought on the oppression of women (Entezar, 2007). Oppressing women and depriving them of human rights are not supported by the Qur’an or by Islam; as a matter of fact, Islam was one of the first religions to give equal rights to women (Emadi, 2005; Kaifi, 2009; Younos, 2002).

Furthermore, Godlas (2003) stated that the *hadiths* are the sayings and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) or a report from others about something the Prophet did. According to the hadiths, men and women are considered equal (Younos, 2002). Younos (2002) also claimed that, “knowledge lays the foundation of learning and education in Islam for both sexes” (p. 20). Verse 20:114 of the Qur’an reads, “Exalted is God, the true ruler. Do not rush with Recital before its revelation to you is concluded; but say, “My Lord, increase me in knowledge,” (translated by Cleary, 2004, p. 20). The above quote can be interpreted to demonstrate that God asks all Muslims (men and women) to pray for knowledge. Further, Younos (2002) cited Al-Bukhari (1981) who claimed that the hadiths stated, “Seek knowledge from cradle to grave” (p. 22). This is not gender specific and is believed to speak to both men and women. Consequently, the overall message of the hadiths relating to education is that learning is an obligation for both men and women (Younos, 2002). According to Tabari (as cited in Younos, 2002), in Islam, the first object God created was the pen and the first words that were revealed to the Prophet was *iqra* (read). The Qur’an states, “Read, in the name of your Lord, who created: Read, for your Lord is most generous, the one who taught the use of the pen, taught man what he did not know” (96: 1, 3, 4, 5; translated by Cleary, 2004, p. 298). These texts imply that Islam supports learning and education for all people.

Conclusion

Education is the key to the development of a country and its capacity to develop infrastructure. As such, administrators and officials in Afghanistan must do what they can to provide an environment where people are encouraged and supported to complete their educational dreams by earning advanced degrees nationally or internationally (Mujtaba & Scharff, 2007). Educational opportunities for the local community as well as programs to encourage the return of Afghan expatriates will alleviate the brain-drain challenges facing the country. Many educated Afghan-Americans are hopeful that a stable and secure Afghanistan will emerge so they can return to Afghanistan to assist with the development process. In a qualitative

research project by Kaifi (2010), the following three Afghan-American female professionals discussed the importance of education.

The Afghan female physician stated the following:

“My grandmother was a strong woman. I'm from the mountains, she would say when questioned about her ability to remain steadfast through war in Afghanistan, refugee status in India, and poverty in America. However, I witnessed her strength falter for the first time when news arrived from Kabul announcing the death of her niece during childbirth, leaving a husband widowed and young children motherless. My grandmother quickly regained her composure, but those fleeting moments of weakness were unsettling. I would soon learn that these tragedies were not uncommon for Afghans and that, in fact, Afghanistan endured one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world. Although I was born and raised in America, my grandmother had instilled in me the desire to help the women of Afghanistan. It was as early as the fifth grade, when I was assigned to write a career report, that I learned the vehicle by which I would reach this dream” (Kaifi, 2010, p. 98).

The Afghan female civil engineer stated the following:

“Initially, I had entered college as a computer engineering major, but after 9/11 and the ensuing war on Afghanistan; I saw the ousting of the Taliban as a potential opportunity for a democratic Afghanistan. I figured a time would come where there would be more stability in Afghanistan and I could go back and help re-build. I felt I would be better able to contribute to the re-building efforts in Afghanistan as a civil engineer, and so I change my major halfway through my college career to civil engineering” (Kaifi, 2010, p. 103).

The Afghan female professor stated the following:

“While I recognized that many of my Afghan peers struggled in school, earning poor grades and unable to overcome language-learning challenges, I found school to be one of the few stable and dependable areas of my life over which I had control. I dedicated hours to my homework, studying for the SAT exam and writing and re-writing my personal statements for college applications. Because of our traditional values, my parents insisted that I stay home for college, which meant I would only apply to schools within a 20-mile radius” (Kaifi, 2010, pp. 116-117).

According to Mujtaba and Kaifi (2010), “Afghanistan, however, lacks sufficient human capital that can develop the next generation of workers in a speedy manner. The Afghan workforce needs to be educated and trained so they can create a peaceful environment for themselves and effectively compete with their neighbors in the marketplace” (p. 43). High literacy rates, continuous education, vocational training, and equipping the workforce with the right skills to become industrialized are critical elements to Afghanistan’s progressive development and growth (Mujtaba, 2007). Such workforce training efforts can accelerate economic development and reduce Afghanistan’s heavy dependence on foreign aid. Therefore, Afghan elders and war veterans should encourage the youth to seek knowledge and to become more competitive both locally and globally. However, there might be cases when Afghan elders, as effective situational leaders, may have to humbly and voluntarily step aside to let the most knowledgeable person lead. Educational qualifications and relevant experience should be the criteria for choosing who

will be best suited to make the people, the department, and the country of Afghanistan more economically competitive (Mujtaba, 2005; Mujtaba, 2007; Kaifi, 2013).

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