

Breaking Barriers: The Evolution and Impact of Women's Political Leadership in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT: Afghanistan's political landscape has historically been dominated by patriarchal norms, leading to significant socio-cultural and political barriers for women's participation and leadership. Due to prevailing traditions, women in Afghan society have often played a marginalized role. However, the past twenty years have presented a unique opportunity for women to engage more actively in society and politics, particularly following the signing of international agreements. The participation of women in Afghan social and political life has experienced fluctuations since the restoration of independence. This study examines the detailed history of women's political participation in Afghanistan, tracing its evolution from 2003 to 2020. It provides a comprehensive analysis of both progress and setbacks in women's political leadership by highlighting key milestones, influential figures, and critical policies. Using a multifaceted approach that includes historical analysis, qualitative interviews, and policy analysis, this study not only emphasizes the resilience and contributions of Afghan women leaders but also offers insights into the broader implications for gender equality in post-civil war societies. These findings illustrate the interplay between local traditions, the impact of international support on political regimes, and the valuable insights they offer for global discussions about women's leadership and empowerment.

KEYWORDS: Afghanistan, women, political, leadership, empowerment, barriers

Introduction

The history of political participation in Afghanistan is the history of the true symbol of resistance, struggle, and gradual progress against challenges and big problems. Throughout history, Afghan women have made significant and good progress in the political arena despite facing the rigid patriarchal structures and internal civil wars and conflicts that existed in the Afghan society. In this article, the explanation and analysis of Afghan women's journey in the field of politics, providing detailed information about participation, challenges, and the transformational effect of women's leadership on society, will be discussed.

After 2003, with the establishment of the interim government and the establishment of the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the elements and values of democracy were revealed in the constitution and political and social system of Afghanistan. They provided for the active participation of all sections of society without creating biased restrictions in all political, social, and cultural fields. As mentioned above, in Afghanistan, due to historical deprivations, in addition to not enjoying their basic rights, women could not realize their potential capabilities and enjoy great capacities to participate in political and development affairs. As previously mentioned, historical deprivations in Afghanistan have

prevented women from enjoying their basic rights and realizing their potential. This has significantly limited their ability to participate in political and developmental affairs. The lack of women's presence in political and leadership roles has primarily been influenced by religious, traditional, and cultural factors. A striking example of this is the ongoing deprivation of Afghan women throughout history, which has led to a diminished and, at times, nearly nonexistent role for them in various social and political fields. In Afghan society, women are often regarded as only half of the population in terms of numbers; however, in terms of access to rights and privileges, they have been counted even less than their demographic presence suggests. Until the last twenty years, little attention was paid to the role of women in leadership positions. However, after 2004, significant changes occurred in the status of Afghan women.

This research addresses the following concepts: In the past two decades, with the relative growth of democracy in Afghanistan and the support of human rights institutions and powerful nations, women and girls have gained positions in government, parliament, civil society, and scientific institutions. Although these roles have often been superficial and lacking genuine authority, women have managed to assert their presence. This study defines the concepts of leadership and political leadership, examines women's political leadership, and explores the opportunities and challenges women face in the political arena. Research findings are analyzed in a separate section, and suggestions will be provided. Following September 11, 2001, and the establishment of a new political system in Afghanistan, a relatively open and conducive environment emerged for women's participation in various fields, leading to the approval of laws aimed at protecting women's rights (Maqsoodi and Gholadar 2012). This research aims to highlight the trend of women's presence and participation in Afghanistan, particularly in the political arena within the Islamic Republic after 2001.

Significance of study

This research analyzes the political empowerment of Afghan women by providing a comprehensive review that connects the context of Afghanistan to the global discourse. It emphasizes the resilience and determination of Afghan women leaders while offering valuable lessons for promoting gender equality in challenging environments like Afghan society. The significance of this research lies in demonstrating the abilities and sacrifices of women, revisiting the historical narrative of women's roles, and highlighting the impact of women's political leadership in Afghanistan. Ultimately, the goal of this research is to contribute to the understanding of fair and universal systems at a global level.

Objective of study

1. Determining the historical path of women's political participation in Afghanistan from 2003 to 2020.
2. Identifying and analyzing key figures, movements, and policies that led women's political leadership.
3. Investigating the social, cultural, political, and economic factors that have influenced women's political participation.
4. Assessing the effects of women's political leadership on broader social change, especially in terms of gender equality and democratic development.

Methodology

This research uses a mixed-methods approach, integrating historical analysis, qualitative interviews, and policy review. Primary and secondary sources, including archival materials, government documents, and scholarly articles will be used to construct comprehensive historical narratives. Individual interviews with women and political elites, activists, and politicians who were in the previous government will provide qualitative insight into their experiences and perspectives on the labor government and related organizations. Review and critique of related policies and international interventions to evaluate their effectiveness and impact on women's political participation.

Literature review

In the literature review, this research will include a set of sources, including historical sources, the viewpoints of women's advocates, political science research, and studies on the status of women after the civil wars. Also, important and key issues in the current research literature, such as the status of women throughout history, the role of international organizations in women's empowerment and equality, and comparative analyses of women's political participation that have commonalities with the target society, will be examined. Amir Amanullah Khan was the first ruler to take fundamental steps toward revitalizing women's rights. Among the key changes during this period was the formulation and approval of the first constitution, which recognized the citizenship rights of all classes in Afghan society, including women. Thus, one of the pillars of Amanullah Khan's reforms and modernization was serious attention to women's rights, which included legalizing the right to education for Afghan women and allowing women to freely walk in public spaces. Following that, they established a girls' school (Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan, [cw4wafghan-afghanwomenhistory-factsheet.pdf](#)).

Likewise, after the era of Amanullah Khan, the situation for women was limited, and once again, they had to wear the Islamic hijab. According to Kashani, the women of Afghanistan have experienced an inappropriate and undesirable situation in different periods, including the Taliban period and before their dominance, as the reality of non-democratic countries. Despite this, women's lives in rural areas were limited, but some of them had jobs outside the home, such as during Zahir Shah's period. Three women were ministers, forty percent were doctors, and a large number of women were also teachers. It can be clearly said that the situation of women, especially their personal lives, was open (Kashani 1998, 33). In the same way, after the 1950s, women were accepted as workers in service departments, such as secretaries, nurses, receptionists, and flight attendants. Also, the field was prepared for those who had higher education, such as doctors, engineers, and newspaper writers. However despite these changes, the religious leaders were against them (Marzan 2000).

With the approval of the third constitution in 1964, women were allowed to participate in political arenas and granted the right to vote. During this period, the first woman was appointed as a minister in the Ministry of Health, and three women also entered parliament. In 1965, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was formed, along with a group dedicated to defending the rights of Afghan women. This marked the first time such an organization existed. The group's main goals included eliminating illiteracy among women, banning forced marriage, and addressing other limitations that had previously existed for women (Ghosh 2003). However, during this period, efforts were made to raise women's awareness about their rights and the services available to them. The party successfully recruited women of all ages, particularly high school and university students, who were motivated to support the party's goals (Ahmadi and Lakhani 2015).

After the defeat of the leftist regimes, the Mujahideen took power. During the Mujahideen period, women's social activities were severely limited. Women active during

this time reported that internal conflicts and divisions among Mujahideen groups hindered their ability to play an active role in society. According to reports from the United Nations, the situation for women during this period was dire, as they were significantly affected by the ongoing conflicts.

Under Taliban rule in Afghanistan, beginning in 1996, Afghan women faced numerous challenges and an uncertain, dangerous future. Poverty, economic hardships, and low income made women particularly vulnerable. During the first period of Taliban rule, Afghan women experienced one of the most difficult times in history. The Taliban imposed the harshest laws against women, denying them access to political, social, educational, employment, artistic, and many other opportunities. Both physically and mentally, women were in an extremely vulnerable condition (Mahmoodi 2023).

After the fall of the Taliban regime, the new government started many projects with the cooperation of international and non-governmental organizations, as well as government agencies and the United Nations, for the empowerment of women. Most of these organizations were helping vulnerable women. Programs such as development, health, and food distribution target women and their families. Various international organizations and non-governmental organizations worked with different programs to improve and create a platform for the implementation of women's rights in order to turn women's rights into an important and valuable light in the Afghan society. In order for Afghan society to accept women's rights and to teach the society what women's rights are and what the role of women in society is, Afghan women have suffered a lot in these 20 years to defend their rights in society, but after many efforts with the cooperation of international organizations, they achieved their rights to some extent. Afghan women faced a lot of struggles and sacrifices to achieve their rights, but they were able to find their place and carry out their activities in different political and social sectors.

Although they were deprived of all their rights during the time of the Taliban (Mallyar 2023), the situation changed significantly after the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent fall of the Taliban from power. The formation of the new government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is considered a turning point in the history of Afghanistan, particularly in terms of changing the status of women.

With the formation of the new government and the Bonn meeting in Germany, a significant opportunity emerged for women to participate in the country's affairs. Women were able to engage to some extent in various cities across the country, including the northern and central regions, as well as in Pashtun-inhabited provinces and cities in the south and east. They gained access to education, employment, freedom of speech, and participation in political structures and official institutions, including universities, the military, and police security centers. In this way, they achieved some of their rights within the traditional and rigid society of Afghanistan. I will continue this discussion in the analysis section (Maqsoodi and Gholadar 2012).

Discussion and analysis

The agreement was based on the state-building efforts supported by the United States of America and NATO in Afghanistan. One of the important and necessary points of this agreement was the emphasis on the social freedoms of Afghans, including freedom of speech, as well as women's rights and human rights (Cheganizadeh and Sahrai 2015).

According to Muhammad Tariq, in the Loya Jirga of 2002, which was convened to appoint an interim government, 180 out of 1,500 representatives were women. In the Constitutional Loya Jirga of 2003, 114 out of 504 representatives were women. In the 2004 elections, following the implementation of the constitution, women were able to secure a

majority of seats, with 68 out of 249 in the lower house and 17 out of 102 in the upper house reserved for them. Due to the active presence of women in the political arena, after the 2018 parliamentary elections, women occupied 67 out of a total of 316 seats in the lower house, while 19 seats were held by women in the upper house. In total, there were 86 women in both houses of parliament.

It should be noted that the proportion of women's seats in the House of Representatives is 27%, which is higher than the proportion of women's seats in the United States (around 23%), as well as in Pakistan (20%), Tajikistan (24%), Iran (6%), and India (14%). This achievement has been very significant for the empowerment of women in Afghanistan during the 20th century (Tariq et al. 2021).

Table 1. The percentage of women's political participation at the global level

Countries	Percent
Iran	6%
Tajikistan	24%
United States	23%
India	14%
Pakistan	20%
Afghanistan	27%

Source: Tariq et al. (2021)

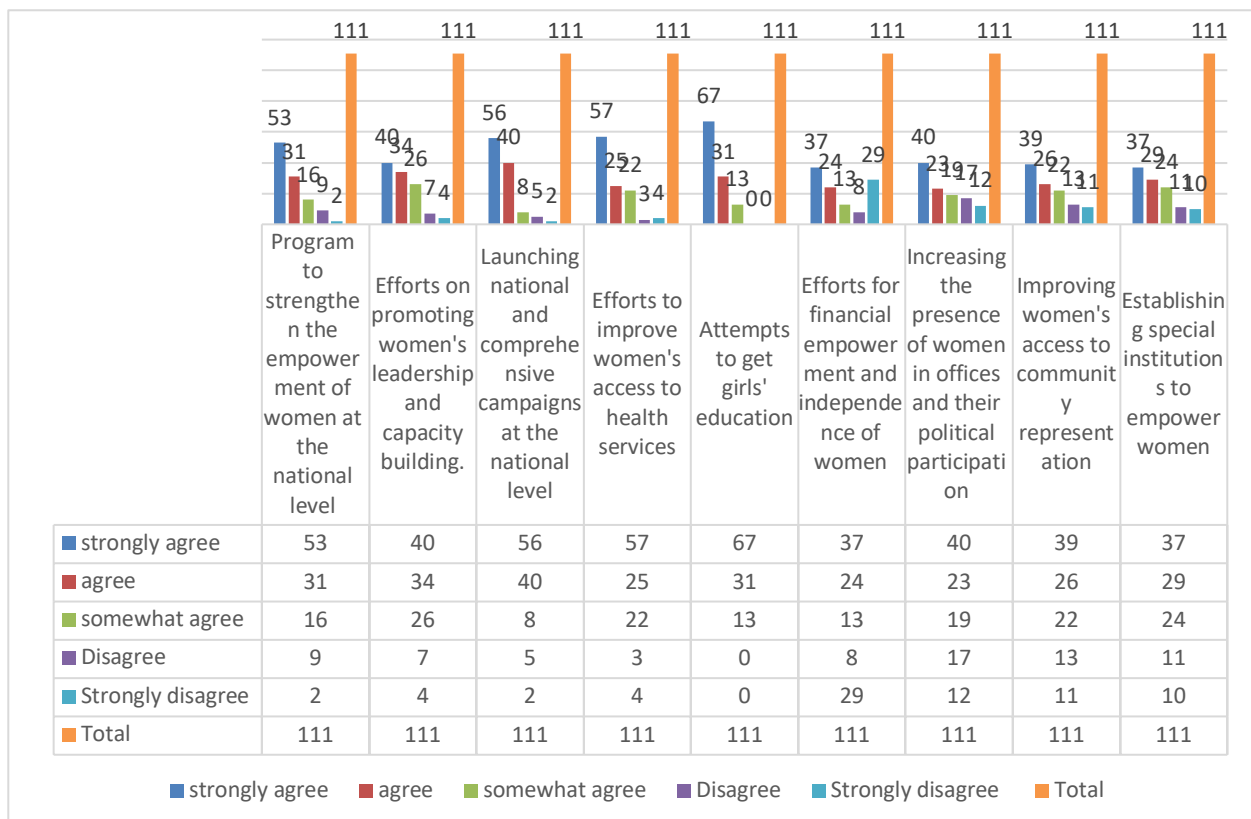


Figure 1. Support for Afghan Women: Global and National Perspectives

Source: Field interview 2023

After the formation of the new government in 2004, national and international organizations, as well as non-governmental organizations, implemented women's empowerment projects aimed at bringing about change. One such initiative was the Afghan Women's Empowerment

Program, which focused on promoting gender equality by increasing the social and economic participation of women in various areas of Afghanistan. Educational programs were established to strengthen women in many provinces, covering market-based professional skills, business management, entrepreneurship, and literacy classes, even in villages. Additionally, training was conducted at the district and provincial levels with financial support from international organizations. Departments of Women's Affairs implemented numerous projects aimed at empowering women, with the overarching goal of enhancing women's empowerment at the national level.

Following the September 11 attacks in 2001, the issue of women's political participation in the country was reexamined. Efforts to establish a democratic system and the attention given to creating conditions for increasing women's political and social activities led to greater participation of women in these arenas. In this context, 53 respondents completely agreed that efforts have been made to promote women's leadership and capacity building. After 2004, with the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, it was promised that national campaigns would be launched in support of women's rights under the leadership of elite women. Data shows that 40 respondents completely agreed with this statement, while 30 respondents agreed that national campaigns have been initiated. Similarly, 9 respondents disagreed, and 1 respondent completely disagreed.

After the fall of the Taliban and the formation of the new government, hospitals were established in provinces and cities. The new government worked to set up clinics in various provinces and villages, as accessing hospitals in the districts and many provinces had been very difficult, particularly for women who faced numerous challenges. Data shows that 57 respondents completely agreed that women's access to health services has improved compared to previous periods. Additionally, 25 respondents agreed that women's access to health services has improved, while 22 respondents somewhat agreed. A small number of respondents—3 disagreed, and 4 completely disagreed.

In terms of women's education, the 2004 Constitution of Afghanistan guarantees the right to education for all Afghan citizens, including women. According to this law, the government is required to provide free education up to the bachelor's degree. Our survey also shows that 67 respondents completely agree that efforts have been made to give girls access to education at the national level. Additionally, 31 respondents agreed, and 13 respondents somewhat agreed.

In 2006, the Afghan government developed the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) to increase overall school enrollment rates, with a particular emphasis on girls. This plan aimed to raise the enrollment of girls in primary schools from 35% in 2006 to 60% by 2010. The NESP also included measures to improve the quality of education, such as teacher training programs and the development of educational resources. The objectives of NESP II (2010-2014) were to create a supportive educational environment for girls and to achieve a gross enrollment rate of 72%, specifically for girls, by 2014.

NESP III (2017-2021) takes a comprehensive approach to bridging the gap in access to education between urban and rural areas. It focuses on enrolling students from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds, reducing gender inequalities, improving infrastructure, and enhancing the quality and accessibility of education (Omari 2023). After 2007, Afghan women's empowerment plans were also implemented. However, regarding women's financial independence, polls conducted show that the situation remains unsatisfactory.

The survey conducted by the authors of this research in 2020 shows that only 37 respondents completely agree, while 24 respondents agree. Conversely, 29 respondents completely disagreed, indicating that patriarchal restrictions continue to impact women's financial independence. Although efforts have been made to provide financial support, a 2020 survey by the Afghanistan Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry (AWCCI) identified 2,471 official businesses owned by women in 32 provinces, excluding Nuristan

and Paktika. Official businesses are those that hold a license from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. In addition, there were 56,000 informal women-owned businesses. The survey found that these businesses collectively created more than 130,000 jobs (Ahmadi and Rahimi 2024).

After the establishment of the new government in Afghanistan, significant efforts were made to improve women's participation in political decisions. The achievements of these efforts and advocacy for women's rights are noticeable to some extent, including the election of 2 female governors (from Daikundi and Bamyán provinces) and 4 female ministers (Minister of Higher Education, Minister of Combating Narcotics, Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, and Minister of Education). Since the establishment of the new system, women have held a considerable proportion of positions in government. When respondents were asked about the increase in women's presence in offices, their political participation, and their access to community representation, the majority (40 respondents) completely agreed that Afghan women's participation in political and social fields has increased over the past twenty years. Between 23 and 26 respondents agreed on the improvement of women's presence in offices and their political participation. Only about 11 to 12 respondents strongly disagreed on this matter. The details are shown in Figure 1.

A strategy to promote women's leadership and political participation includes the following components: 1. Adopting and implementing comprehensive leadership and capacity-building programs for women. 2. Eliminating violence against women in public and private spaces. 3. Creating partnerships between women and men. 4. Increasing opportunities and mechanisms for women's leadership and participation in various fields also includes a strategy for protecting women's human rights and their rights as outlined in the constitution. 5. Elimination of discrimination against women in law. 6. Improving women's access to justice. 7. Law enforcement reforms. 8. Promotion of legal and religious awareness about women (UNDP 2024).

The percentage of seats occupied by Afghan women in the parliament in 2020 is 27 percent. World Bank, 2021. It can be noted that after the Bonn Conference in 2001, organized under the leadership of the United Nations, a new chapter in the history of Afghanistan began. Significant achievements were made regarding women's rights in the country. Regarding this issue, respondents were asked which specific institutions had been created to empower women. The data shows that 37 respondents strongly agreed that special institutions were established to ensure women's rights. Additionally, 29 respondents agreed with the establishment of these institutions and programs for women's empowerment. Furthermore, 24 respondents somewhat agreed that some institutions had been established. Only 10 disagreed, while 11 respondents completely disagreed and did not support the establishment of special institutions for women. An examination of the available data and secondary information reveals that special institutions and organizations were established to support women. Additionally, the survey we conducted indicated that several institutions, along with a ministry, were created specifically for women's affairs.

The establishment of the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Afghanistan marked a significant milestone, along with the declaration of fundamental rights for Afghan women. Other important developments included the National Regional Development Program, the establishment of the Independent Human Rights Commission of Afghanistan, and the 20 percent representation of women in the Loya Jirga. The constitution clearly stipulates a quota of 27 percent for women in the Wolosi Jirga (parliament) and a 17 percent quota for women in the Meshrano Jirga. Additionally, it is legally mandated that 25 percent of provincial council seats be allocated to women. The National Work Program for Afghan Women (2007-2017) and the Law to Eliminate Violence against Women were also crucial initiatives. These institutions were established to empower women in Afghanistan with the support of the international community (Ganeish 2013).

Conclusions

Throughout history, Afghan women have demonstrated their ability to influence their circumstances and advocate for their rights. The most significant issue is that women make up half of society. Ignoring them equates to disregarding the rights and future of half the population. For the development of society and the country, it is essential to harness the talents of women, particularly in social and political structures. Otherwise, society will struggle to progress and prosper. In Afghan society, women have often been kept away from social and political relations. However, due to international pressures, improvements in security, increased literacy levels, and the expansion of higher education, they have been able to enhance their capabilities. According to studies, achieving these important changes has been a difficult task, yet Afghan women have managed to overcome these obstacles through their struggles and hard work. A society with a deeply traditional history, along with entrenched gender beliefs and attitudes, has slowed the process of political development for Afghan women. From 2002 to 2021, women's rights were recognized in the country's constitution, paving the way for women's education and their participation in social activities. To ensure women's representation in society, specific quotas were established for women in the Wolesi Jirga (Parliament) and the Meshrano Jirga (Senate). The findings of this research indicate that significant efforts have been made to enhance women's political leadership, including: a national program to empower women, initiatives to promote women's leadership and capacity building, efforts to improve women's access to health services, initiatives to promote girls' education, increasing the presence of women's offices in the political arena, improving women's access to community representation, and establishing specialized institutions to empower women. Finally, this research concludes with a summary of the main findings and their implications for policy and practice. The findings indicate that continuous support from international and national organizations for the political, social, and economic empowerment of women in Afghanistan and other post-conflict societies is crucial. Therefore, it is recommended that policymakers, international organizations, and civil society work together to enhance women's political participation and leadership, providing comprehensive support at both levels.

Recommendations

Integrating Afghan women's policy viewpoints in a meaningful way: Encourage and assist Afghan women's representatives in engaging in substantive and direct negotiations with the Taliban and other relevant parties. This entails cooperating with the Taliban in a way that supports Afghan women's goals and the prompt restoration of their basic liberties and rights, such as through targeted pressure and conditional engagements.

Removing barriers for women to achieve equality: Afghan women should be accepted as equal partners in political and social affairs with the cooperation of the international community. Participation in political affairs should be prioritized. It is essential to ensure confidence, remove various obstacles, and create strategic partnerships by providing significant, long-term, and flexible budgets to local and national organizations working in the field of women's rights and equality.

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