

Review

U.S. Aid falls short in the social, political and economic advancement of Afghan women

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In this article, the author addresses the effect of USAID investments in educational programs offered to Afghan women and how this investment is falling short in its goal to assist females in securing leadership opportunities that allow them to participate in decision making activity. Annual gross domestic product (GDP) data is reviewed along with the results of newly implemented quota systems in Afghanistan to confirm if educational programs are revealing evidence that their efforts are affecting economic growth and development through the hiring of Afghan women into jobs that coincide with their education. This information is compared to GDP data from western cultures where women play a significant role in economic growth and development through workforce participation.

Key words: Afghan women, social, women's rights, gross domestic product, USAID, Afghan culture.

INTRODUCTION

Despite billions of dollars that have been spent on the war in Afghanistan for more than a decade, the U.S. government, as part of the re-building efforts, has financed projects to educate and promote the advancement of Afghan women within a culture that has denied them social progress, economic independence and political participation. In an era where the American public is concerned about foreign expenditures, the question of whether these programs have been successful needs to be addressed. Have these programs met their objectives in promoting women into positions of leadership whereby foreign aid is helping to shape policies to include gender equality and employment opportunities? Is there evidence that Afghan women, and their country, are benefiting from educational opportunities offered to them through foreign aid?

US AID AND BUILDING THE ECONOMY IN AFGHANISTAN

The use of programs that are intended to promote women and build an economy is based on documented success from western cultures as women have historically provided significant contributions to economic development. Evidence of the increase in growth of economies may be found in Figure 1 whereby the

increase in gross domestic product (GDP) from women's contribution to GDP 1970 and 1990 as well as women's contribution to growth 1970 to 1990 is documented as improving economic growth and stability (University of Michigan, 2012). As Afghanistan seeks independence from foreign support, women are a valuable resource in which this goal may be achieved. According to findings in Figure 2 which represents data from the Asia Foundation's *2009 Survey of the Afghan People*, the issues that prohibit women from succeeding within their culture are that of lack of education, limited job opportunities and laws that promote and enforce equal rights (Ayubi, 2010).

At a capstone conference for the Ambassador's Small Grants Program to Support Gender Equality in Afghanistan, held on November 20, 2011 in Kabul, it was reported that USAID funded programs that awarded more than 1,000 grants totaling more than \$16 million to support women-focused civil society groups in all 34-provinces of Afghanistan, provided ongoing technical support to 120 women-focused organizations, and formally registered an additional 350 civil society groups with the Government of Afghanistan (Sauers, 2011). These programs were established to improve the status of girls and women in Afghanistan through progressive western-style educational training forums that would prepare them to enter into political and leadership

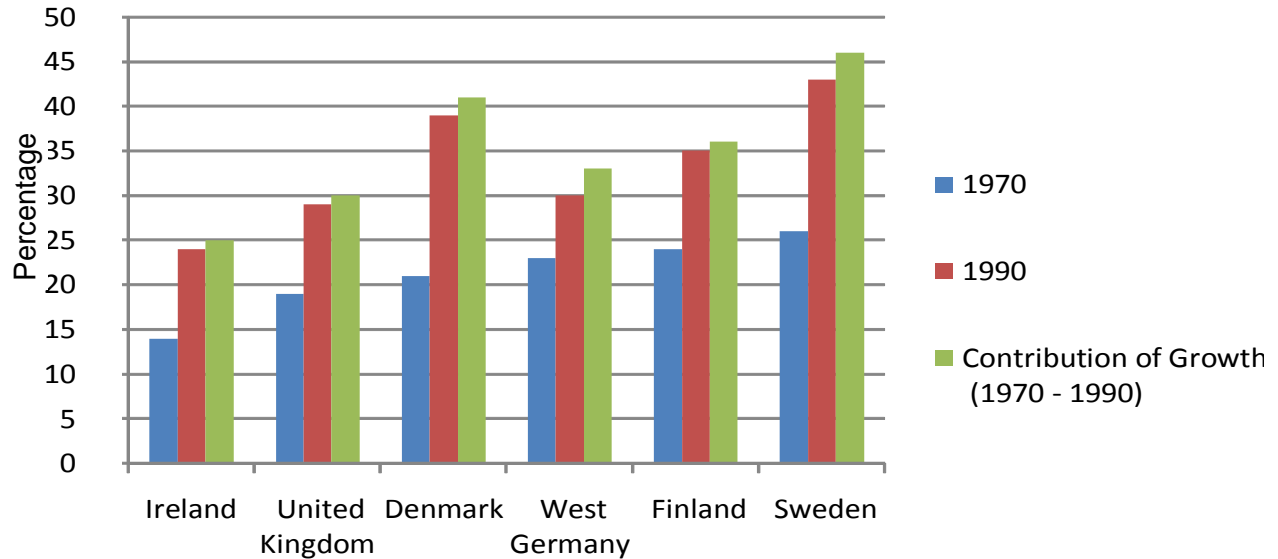


Figure 1. Women's contribution to GDP and Growth (%). Source: University of Michigan: Gender Equality and Economic Growth.

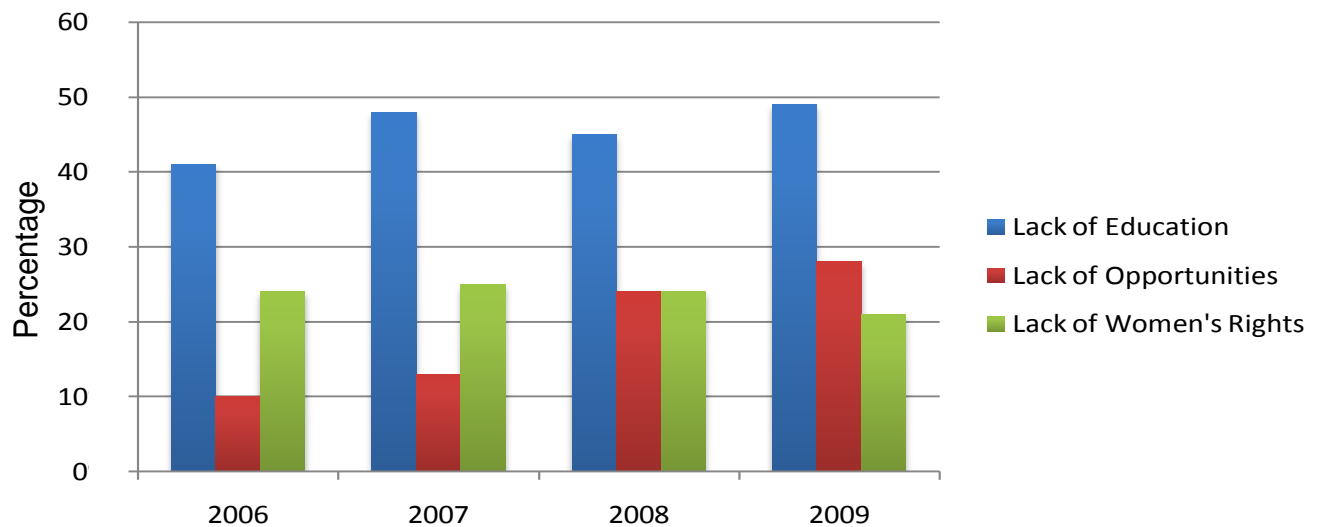


Figure 2. What are the biggest problems facing women in Afghanistan. Source: Asia Foundation.

positions. Justification for funding was that if given the opportunity, Afghan women could assist in the social advancement of the country that would carry economic growth and stability forward to future generations.

In light of the high profile status of these projects, confirmation of the ongoing commitment to Afghan women was noted by former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Ryan C. Crocker, stated at the conference, "As women leaders in Afghanistan, your role in helping to build the capacity of Afghanistan's government and civil society, participating in the decision-making, and in holding your government accountable to its people, is

essential." Crocker added, "The U.S. Government will maintain a strong focus on women's rights and issues in Afghanistan and will look to you to continue a productive partnership as your country continues to advance towards peace and stability (Sauers, 2011).

QUOTA SYSTEMS RESULTS ON EMPLOYMENT OF AFGHAN WOMEN

Contrary to claims made by Ambassador Crocker, Afghan women struggle to make notable progress toward

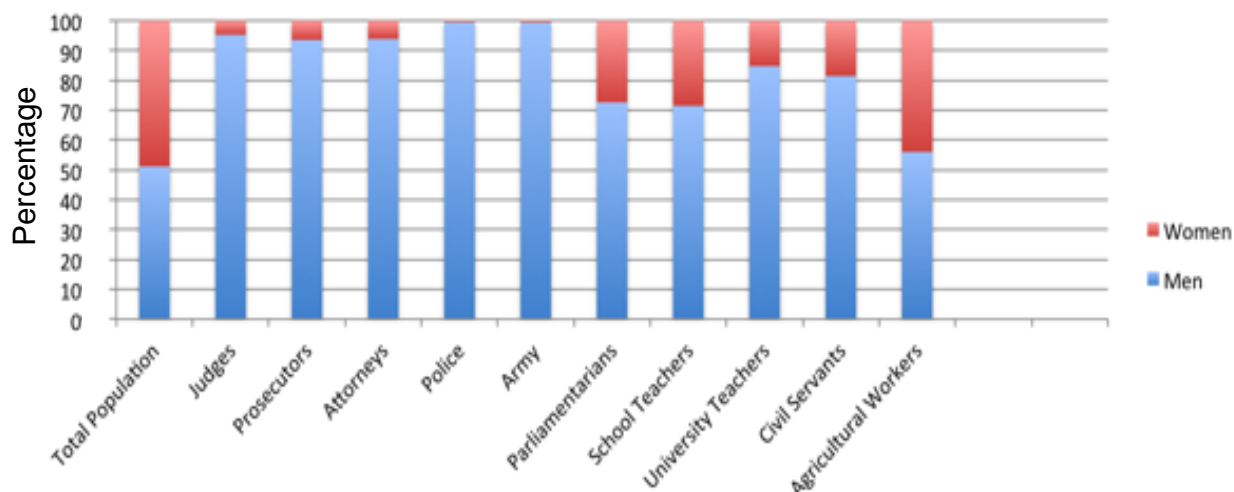


Figure 3. Female versus Male participation in the public sector, Afghanistan, 2010. Source: UNIFEM Factsheet, 2010.

improving their economic, social and political status as advancements made has been limited, only benefiting a few, and some opportunities have decreased compared to a decade ago. According to Figure 3, jobs as an agricultural worker or that of a school teacher are the most common option for women as they account for more than 50% of the positions filled by them. Careers holding Parliament seats is the third best option for women by offering 27% of the positions as a newly enacted quota systems commits to improving their involvement in governing the country. Specifically, this accounts for 18 positions out of the total of 69 seats to be held by Afghan women (Khan, 2012). In comparison to the United States, this is a significant number when analyzing data from percentage basis as the 2011 to 2013 U.S. Congress reported 17% of the seats in the U.S. Senate and 16.6% in the House of Representatives are held by women (womenincongress.gov, 2012).

However, as quota systems and investments in educational programs are touted as successful for participants, a report from Oxfam International, a UK based organization committed to working to solve social and economic challenges of struggling countries, reported that as women have gained access to a number of position of power in Afghanistan, they are not allowed to participate in the actual decision-making process of the government. In addition, the Afghan cabinet included three female ministers in 2004, but only one in 2011. Due to threats and attacks against women, the number of women in the civil service has dropped from 31% in 2006 to 18.5% in 2011 (Kahn, 2012). The lack of action-based policies will only continue the cycle of prohibiting women from advancing into higher economic levels regardless of foreign investments that are intended to help them.

To evaluate the progress of women in Afghanistan, it is important to review the historic changes in other

economies where women have transitioned through cultural, legal and political barriers to join the workforce in positions of leadership and higher level/paying jobs.

MODEL FOR SUCCESS FROM WESTERN CULTURES

The United States, for example, first started to see notable gains from working women as the influx of baby boomers, coupled with the rapid growth of working women during the 1970's and 1980's contributed to the considerable economic growth of that period (Toossi, 2011). During these two decades approximately 24% of this growth in the United States can be directly tied to the participation of women (Toossi, 2002). However, while the country reaped the benefits of women in the workforce in 1970's and 1980's, the first sign of progression of women came in the 1960's during an era of turmoil over equal rights and gender equality.

Even though the economy was in a mild recession between 1960 and early 1961, female workforce participation rates reflected a steady rise from 33.9% in 1950 to 37.7% in 1960 (bls.gov. 2012). The issue of women's equal rights was fought in multiple venues in the 1960's, yet it was not until a full decade later when their contributions made a difference in the growth of the economy. This may be attributed not only to more women entering the workforce, but also from a combination of educational opportunities, equality laws and quota programs that advanced women (and minorities) into higher paying positions.

In Afghanistan, as noted in Figure 4, the data shows that while levels of participation from women in the work force has been marginally consistent between 14 to 16% of the total population between 2007 to 2010, the changes of gross domestic product (GDP) has been

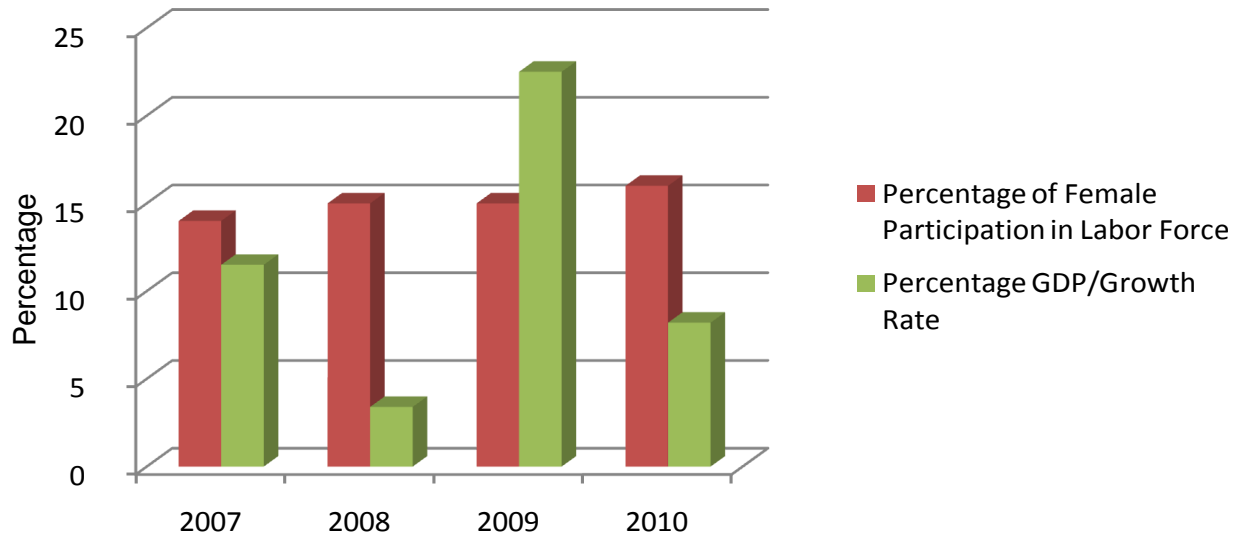


Figure 4. Female Labor Force versus Annual GDP – Afghanistan. Source: Data evaluated from World Bank Organization Data: World Development Indicators & CIA World Fact Book, January 1, 2011.

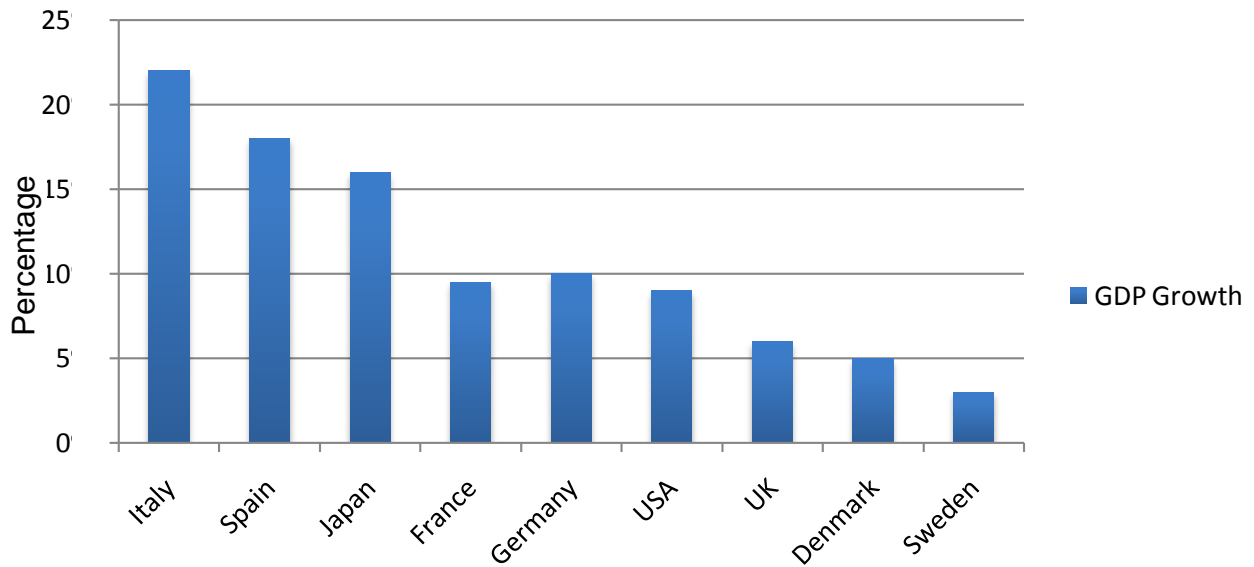


Figure 5. Potential Boost to GDP from Closing the Gap in Female and Male Employment Rates Source: National Sources: Goldman Sachs Estimates.

between ranges of annual rates of 3.4% (2007) to a high of 22.5% (2009) within the same time period. Therefore, in terms of GDP as an indicator of economic growth, it cannot be substantiated that links between the percentages of women in the labor force has affected fluctuations in GDP.

There is compelling evidence that women can be powerful drivers of economic development as has been proven in western cultures. Research from the World Bank, United Nations, and Goldman Sachs demonstrated

that gender equality helps reduce poverty and ensures sustainable growth. The Figure 5 notes that closing the gap between male and female employment rates would have substantial impact on the global economy increasing American GDP by approximately 9%, Eurozone GDP by 13% and the Japanese GDP by 16% (worldbank.org., 2010). Even moderate growth in the number of women joining the workforce in Afghanistan could prove to be most beneficial in advancing the country toward economic stability.

CONCLUSION

According to a report on Gender Equality and Economic Growth from the University of Michigan, the United Nations Population Fund believe that economic growth and social equality should go hand in hand, arguing that 'gender inequality' holds back growth of individuals, development of countries, and the evolution of societies to the disadvantage of women and men (umich.edu., 2012). When current leadership becomes pro-active in creating a comprehensive plan to assist women, economic success shall assist in paving the path toward national peace and stability.

In conclusion, impressive efforts have been made to assist Afghan women since 2001, and significant strides in educational opportunities have been taken with foreign aid assisting the advancement. However, due to the regression of women's rights in the past decade, Afghanistan under the current circumstances will not reap the benefits from these well-trained women as social barriers will hold back economic progress.

Additionally, without political participation from women in shaping laws and policies, the country will struggle to promote equality that will allow movement toward a peaceful democratic society. Without this meaningful policy-making effort from women, the necessary social progress will never be made. The success of foreign aid funding is based on the outcome of training initiatives to help not only women progress, but also crucially to eliminate the dependency of Afghanistan on foreign aid. Given the current situation, much more work and funding from foreign sources over a long duration will be needed to change the current barriers confronting women in Afghanistan.

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