



Pushing the envelope: Creating successful and inclusive women's rights programming in Afghanistan – what is possible and how?

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	1
INTRODUCTION.....	2
Methodology.....	2
OVERCOMING FEARS: ENGAGING WITH LOCAL ACTORS RATHER THAN AVOIDING THEM.....	3
BUILDING CAPACITY AND SELF-CONFIDENCE AMONG WOMEN IN RURAL AREAS.....	6
RELIGIOUS LEADERS: KEEP THEM IN.....	8
CONCLUSION.....	10

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is based upon learning that has emerged from a three-year European Union-funded project called *Strengthening Women's Role in Peace*. It was implemented by the Peace Training and Research Organisation (PTRO) and International Alert between 2016 and 2019. Here, we look back at our experience of delivering this work and highlight some of the key points that shed light on the methods, approaches and conceptualisations that can promote surprisingly good results while working on sensitive topics in locations sometimes assumed to be beyond the reach of work focusing on women's rights.

Methodology

The research that this paper is informed by was conducted at the end of the abovementioned three-year project carried out in the five Afghan provinces of Takhar, Herat, Nangarhar, Laghman and Kandahar. The project worked to engage both men and women in remote villages as well as urban areas in support of women's participation in the peace process and their protection. The respondents are mainly the direct beneficiaries of the project including female members of Inclusive Women's Groups (IWGs), male members of the same groups named Male Champions, members of Regional Coordination Committees (RCCs) and PTRO provincial coordinators who were directly involved in the implementation of the project.

A total of 42 people were interviewed individually for this research: 16 female IWG members, 13 Male Champions, 8 RCC members and 5 PTRO staff members based in the provinces. Of the respondents, 18 are female and 24 are male. Almost an equal number of respondents were selected from each province and the selection criteria were based around their experience and knowledge from their local communities and active participation in the project activities. Targeted questions were designed for each group in order to elicit each respondent's views about three key approaches that were used in the project implementation: using Islamic teachings, working with men and youth, and creating safe spaces for women to operate freely. The aim was to promote involvement in local peace-related activities and local peacebuilding initiatives.

OVERCOMING FEARS: ENGAGING WITH LOCAL ACTORS RATHER THAN AVOIDING THEM

One of the key findings is how crucial it is to interact with various local actors in order to provide the maximum opportunity for the project to succeed. Traditional and conservative values overwhelmingly dominate almost all aspects of men and women's lives in rural villages. The decision to send girls to school or female participation in development projects is influenced by how the village may react. Decisions that should be made at the family level are influenced by the reaction of elders, religious figures and even the often irresponsible and uneducated youth who may blame their male family members for failing to display control over their family, thus challenging their masculinity. This kind of opposition to a woman who leaves her house to teach, for example, might make that woman and her family a target of gossip. Although these are hurdles for almost every family who wants its female members to go to school or engage in social work, the majority of respondents agreed that women's participation is possible even in remote villages providing the right conditions are created and religious figures and elders are involved meaningfully.

It was assumed at the start of the project that providing safe spaces is one of the factors that might encourage women's participation in social life. While street harassment is a major concern for girls and teachers, female members of the IWGs and RCCs did not report any preconditions to participate in meetings with their male counterparts as long as their physical security was ensured. To this end, conference rooms in hotels, government offices (particularly the departments for women's affairs), girls' schools and universities were preferred spaces in the urban settings, while girls' schools, elders' houses and the offices of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were preferred in rural areas. Regarding the latter, only those NGOs whose previous performances had not been questioned by communities were named as reliable by a number of respondents.

This bold stance of women in rural villages to participate in meetings comes from the trust they have in the male members of their groups. These male members included elders, religious leaders and youth who demonstrated their commitment to work for women's rights. Interestingly, however, for many it was difficult to publicly say they are Male Champions and work for women's rights. Inclusion of respected elders and particularly religious leaders proved to be the main factor in encouraging women's participation as, with the support of these leaders, no one else in their communities felt able to openly criticise women for going out of their houses to attend public meetings or working for their basic rights. Therefore, tackling the fears women and their families had from the negative reaction in their community was more important than the place where they were supposed to participate in meetings. As a female respondent in Herat said:

"It is not important where women attend the meeting as long as it is secured, however, it is important that your family know what are you learning and who the other participants are and which organisation you work with. It is the trust rather than the place you go to."

However, some places were named as difficult to go to. In Takhar, a female respondent said she might not be able to go to the Women's Affairs Department or Independent Human Rights Commission Office in the province as her husband might think she is unhappy with him and is looking for support to separate from him. Mosques, on the other hand, were named as the safest spaces, however, none of the respondents in the provinces apart from Herat reported a meeting there. As in many parts of Afghanistan, a mosque is a space for men and traditionally women do not attend mosques for praying.

At the start of the project, the PTRO dedicated a fair amount of time to consult with community members to select the right individuals, both male and female, and partners for this project. The PTRO held in-depth discussions with elders, religious leaders, youth and households discussing problems that hinder women's protection and participation in peace processes at the community level. These discussions helped to first map the influential actors and identify a range of issues women in the

community faced but that were simply ignored as most of the elders did not think they were serious. The skills of the community mobilisers (PTRO staff), in particular the female ones, were crucial in creating convincing arguments and challenging the actors in the community to fulfil their responsibilities in terms of contributing to solving these issues.

When elders and religious leaders express concern around or disagree with a programme regarding women's rights being initiated in the community, participation rates are always negatively affected. Another type of fear that hinders women's participation in social work or girls' attendance at school often comes from the villagers themselves. At the family level, male members are cautious to keep the family honour. Not allowing female members to take a social role or girls to attend school stems from the fear that this might lead to immorality or the abandonment of traditional and religious values. This is compounded by the fact that that young girls and women are sometimes abused on the street and can be baselessly blamed for adultery and these accusations – even without evidence – kill the reputation of the women and their families, leaving little opportunity for them to get married in a respected family. In response to this, fathers become cautious and try to keep movements of female members of the family restricted. Other male family members, such as brothers, are also sensitive to unfavourable comments made in village youth circles about their female family members.

The PTRO and Alert's approach to include elders and religious leaders in projects related to women's rights was welcomed by both these actors and female participants. The inclusion of religious leaders, whose influence is crucial to achieve social acceptance of such programmes, responded to the fears female participants had at the start of the project. According to the respondents, women in rural areas feared that village mullahs might not agree to the work the project wanted to deliver or, worst-case scenario, may even openly oppose such initiatives through their rhetoric in mosques. This kind of opposition could result in the project's failure and make it difficult for female participants to secure the consent of their male family members to participate.

Although there was significant consensus around the importance of these figures' approval, there was some difference of opinion among the project's beneficiaries around the reason religious actors' opinions were of such significance. Some respondents spoke of their fear to potentially go against Islamic principles and therefore deserve divine punishment if the religious leaders had not approved the project's work, while others think that some religious leaders use Islam for their own ends, and can cause problems for them using religion(if these religious leaders didn't agree with their work or felt left out). This idea often applies in conservative communities where few people possess much Islamic education and are therefore unable to challenge the mullahs. Explaining the conservative views of her community, one female respondent in Takhar said:

“For some women, taking her picture can stop her from community and public work. Pictures spread among your relatives and in the village, something many men in the villages cannot tolerate.”

The respondents also reported that elders and religious leaders are sometimes against these programmes when they are personally excluded from them for two specific reasons. First, if they are not part of the initiative, they may base their opinions on misperceptions of the work as representing a Western-influenced agenda implemented by NGOs. Second, they feel neglected and want to be part of it as this participation would acknowledge their status in their community and may also benefit them financially. As one of the elders in Herat claimed:

“Whoever is out of these programmes, particularly religious leaders, they start to sabotage it. Therefore, it is good to take the religious leaders in confidence.”

Therefore, it was crucial, in the initial stage of the project, to bring in and build confidence among all actors in the community and include female and male members who are both committed to work for women's rights, and, at the same time, to be conscious of the concerns that families may have around sending their female family members to participate in the trainings and advocacy meetings. A

thorough elaboration on the aims of the project took place with elders, religious leaders, youth and women in the target communities. This inclusion of elders and religious leaders was critical to eliminate the fears female participants expressed they would have in the absence of their support. However, full consideration was given to the selection process of these religious leaders to ensure people who would not dominate events in order to further entrench their control and institutionalise their power were chosen. The aim was to keep the leadership with female members, and for male participants to give support when it is needed.

BUILDING CAPACITY AND SELF-CONFIDENCE AMONG WOMEN IN RURAL AREAS

Women in rural areas are sometimes perceived as incompetent, uneducated and, therefore, unable to initiate public work in their villages. This project and associated work countered this general perception. Much of the development and peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan, and particularly in projects focused on women's participation, are confined to urban or semi-urban areas due to the prevailing insecurity. This means that participants are often restricted to those with a relatively high level of education, and there has often been very little chance for women in rural areas to be exposed or properly consulted on issues such as their protection and participation as outlined in the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325. Therefore, the increased number of NGOs present in urban areas has created a web of initiatives that have kept some women's rights activists extremely busy and in some cases overloaded with training, conferences and meetings. This pattern can result in a fatigue among the relevant government authorities as they find themselves reaching out to so many of the same voices in an uncoordinated manner, resulting in the perpetual sending of the same messages and discussion of the same issues.

Involving women in rural areas also seems difficult and time-consuming for many – especially new actors in the area – particularly when short-term interventions are involved or quick results are expected. People in rural communities can understandably doubt new actors and interventions, and it generally takes time to build trust and establish relationships. Unfamiliar NGOs, specifically those working on culturally sensitive issues such as women's equality, are normally unwelcomed in rural settings. People in rural areas could also question a NGO's long-term commitment, as most of them have experienced short-term projects or trainings that have led them nowhere. According to a respondent in Laghman: "people are looking for continuation of work and will be not very much interested if it is only a few days training, or a month- or three-month-long project".

Our experience in rural communities was different. We found women in rural areas enthusiastic and keen to be part of the community work and to involve themselves in village politics despite the hurdles and lack of consent from their male family members at the beginning. For most, it was the first time working with a NGO and being consulted on their role in their communities. They were the ones with local knowledge and the ones suffering from the status quo in their villages, whether it was their daughters who were prevented from attending school or sexual abuse they or their daughters experienced. Some of the female respondents reported that many women and girls are afraid to report this harassment and assault to their family members as it might turn into fighting and bloodshed with offenders' families.

The research and consultation in the first two months of the project was extremely helpful to select the local actors and discuss the project aims and work plan with almost everyone involved. These two months were used to not only explain the project, but also to build trust and encourage the actors identified to participate and make the change they want themselves. During the consultation, the PTRO worked with a range of communities with varying viewpoints when it came to women's participation. Some of them were extremely rigid and did not even want to discuss it and others were ready to frankly talk about their problems and propose local solutions. Besides permission from the male family members, women in rural areas needed to be sure that the respected elders and religious leaders were involved. Sadly, there were villages that completely denied any opportunity for the women there to participate. However, the PTRO still appointed a male member from these villages to the IWG group in the hope that this member might help gradually change villagers' attitudes.

The Male Champions, including elders, religious leaders and youth, provided more of a moral support that served to open the public space for women participants. A male respondent in Takhar said:

“The influential actors need to be included even if it is participation in a short meeting. Otherwise they think they are ignored and may start opposing the initiative and they can damage women initiatives easily.”

In addition, respondents frequently mentioned that the behaviour and approach of the social mobilisers needed to be culturally appropriate and warned that these mobilisers needed to be conflict sensitive and aware of traditional values. Therefore, people from local communities or those who have worked in the area previously are more suitable for those positions. According to a religious leader who was a Male Champion:

“Women workers should be accompanied by mahrams¹. That sends a message to the families who are supposed to let their female members to participate in trainings, workshops and meetings. Otherwise conservative community members can easily damage the reputation of the organisation and the objectives of the project.”

Local customs need to be seriously considered, even down to actors working in the area presenting themselves as examples to women and girls in villages, showing them that they can act as a role model in community development and problem solve while maintaining respect for traditional values and religious principles.

Therefore, persuading male family members and reaching consensus at the community level were the first steps to open public space for village women. While trainings and coaching had their role in capacity-building, the most important factor were the micro projects the IWGs implemented. For a woman in a remote village, planning with her peers about how to spend a small grant for the wellbeing of girls and women not only built her capacity, but immensely helped her confidence. Most of the women in the rural villages were interacting with men for the first time and had never planned and implemented such initiatives. They not only had the will to implement the micro projects, but were enormously keen to report back on their activities and surprisingly transparent in the expenses they made. A female respondent in Nangarhar recalls:

“Sitting in meetings with elders and religious leaders built my confidence. After a couple of meetings I was able to put forward an argument and speak while they listened to me respectfully.”

Therefore, small initiatives in rural villages not only responded to basic needs established at the outset of the project but also built confidence among women who are mostly uneducated and left out from social work. Their arguments on girls’ protection while on their way to school and the proposed solutions surprised the local elders and government officials. In other terms, these initiatives implicitly challenged men in the community who have not done their jobs well. Without naming any girl harassed on her way to school, a message was sent that it can happen to everyone if not stopped by the elders, local government officials and, more importantly, religious leaders in the communities.

¹ A mahram is unmarried male kin from whom purdah is not obligatory.

RELIGIOUS LEADERS: KEEP THEM IN

Almost none of the respondents rejected the influence of religious leaders in their communities, with this acceptance clearer in rural communities. Mosques and religious centres continue to shape the life of rural societies and play a role in almost every decision the community makes. Religious leaders are integral parts of local structures, help to resolve disputes and are expected to safeguard the religion. Jumu'ah prayers each Friday and Eid prayers twice in a year are the most attended gatherings. Religious leaders preach on any issue they think is necessary in order to ensure their constituency is able to live an Islamic life that will be divinely rewarded. Some more conservative families, despite their level of education, would probably consult religious leaders on almost every issue fearing they might cross the religious line and are thus immensely influenced by religious leaders. Others have raised concerns about the level of Islamic education of most of the religious leaders in the community, to the degree that they are exploiting religion for their personal benefits. However, it was anonymously agreed that well educated religious leaders are highly respected in every community as long as they are politically independent and can preach Islamic principles without fear.

Most of the respondents generally divided the religious leaders in their communities into two groups: those who are not well educated called mullahs and those who are well educated and exercise Islamic values in its true spirit called *aalem*. According to the respondents, those who know little of Islam are influenced by tradition and are sometimes radical in their views on issues such as girls' education and women's participation in public work. Some of the respondents expressed the opinion that most religious leaders are also influenced by traditional conservative communities. Despite this, religious leaders with radical views, particularly on women's issues, are respected and seen as the true interpreters or guards of Islamic education. Those with sufficient Islamic education also move with extreme caution on these issues because they are scared that they will be labelled as being inclined to Western ideas in their own religious circles and among the conservative community members, or, in the worst case, could be targeted by armed opposition groups. This has placed many religious leaders between a rock and a hard place.

However, the religious leaders who were part of this project and worked as Male Champions have demonstrated not only courage, but an honest endeavour to ensure women in their communities enjoy their rights as defined by Islamic laws. It might be because the religious scholars were selected through a thorough consultation with community members who committed themselves to a long-term process and were fully aware of the project's objectives. According to respondents, when religious leaders oppose such initiatives, they do so for two main reasons. First they are not aware of the objectives, hearing about them from people who might offer incorrect information, and second if they are not included, they feel ignored and naturally do not render support to initiatives they feel excluded from. According to an elder in Herat, it is always better to keep religious leaders in, otherwise they will stand in opposition and can easily damage a well planned and directly needed work in the community. It helps if they know what the objectives of the project are and, more importantly, that the initiative is not at odds with Islamic principles and traditional values. As an important actor in communities, religious leaders are concerned about their status, which needs to be acknowledged without further entrenching their role.

The respondents believe that village mullahs with less Islamic knowledge are influenced by the very traditional settings they have lived in or studied. The religious leaders who have been on exposure visits to different Islamic countries in the region have changed drastically and appear more moderate than those who did not have this chance. Moreover, those who joined politics and have started to acquire wealth have lost their respect too. Prominent Jihadi leaders who used to be religious scholars are no longer in the position they used to be as the conflict dynamics have changed.

Generally, the role of religious leaders has declined in urban areas throughout the last decade and a half. People use technology to find access to prominent religious scholars and social media has played

a significant role in this. The new generation with a modern education and access to a wider religious education are challenging mullahs in their neighbourhoods on their views and ignorance. While this has been taking place in urban areas, the rural villages are still struggling and find it difficult to pose a challenge particularly in areas that are under armed opposition control or influence. The Taliban are supporting village mullahs despite their lack of knowledge and this has been exploited by some of the mullahs to threaten villagers into obedience.

CONCLUSION

This project has resulted in a number of genuine successes and made significant progress on issues related to women's participation and protection in Afghanistan. It has achieved these results by adopting a considered, conflict-sensitive approach to engagement based on a thorough and nuanced understanding of the actors who are able to influence a project's activities and participants. By examining some of these actors and dynamics – and collating the reflections of those who have experienced these effects firsthand – this paper hopes to have highlighted the methods that might be of use for similar programming in the future.



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