



Chapter-4

Work and Employment



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With respect to the economic sphere of life, there is much potential for more equitable opportunities to be realized between our women and men; because our women are often invisible that does not mean they are always excluded. There is little in Afghan everyday life that does not, in some way, involve both its female and male members. There is certainly room for more work to be done here, but we are realistic, it will involve new approaches, new tools, new technologies as well as some new attitudes.⁹¹

The economy of Afghanistan has always been agriculture-based, and it is estimated that up to 80% of the population live in the rural areas. Contributing an estimated 53% to GDP and 67% to the labor force in 2003, agriculture (including crops, livestock, forestry and fishery) is central to the Afghan economy.⁹² Agricultural and related activities are a major vehicle for women's participation in the economy. Production is dominated mainly by subsistence-oriented family holdings, with a well-defined division of labor based on age and gender. Locations, cropping patterns, ethnic affiliation and economic and educational background also have implications for the specific division of labor within a given household, since communities differ regarding women's participation in agriculture. Horticulture generally involves women more than grain production, and poor households require greater involvement of women in income earning activities than do more wealthy households.

⁹¹ *National Development Framework*, p. 13

⁹² World Bank, 2004

This chapter discusses women's contribution to agriculture and livestock production and regional variation, as well as women's other income generating activities, along with the various social factors affecting them. It is demonstrated that women play an important role in all dimensions of agricultural production - in certain regions women's time input equals men's, while in other regions traditions restrict their work to the household where they are involved in crop processing and are in charge of household maintenance and reproductive activities. In most cases women's labor is non-monetized, but they make large labor contributions to a range of marketed products such as dried fruits, opium, fuel wood, dairy products and handicrafts. Women's involvement in the formal sector has grown since the 1960s, mainly as civil servants in the health and education sectors. Currently, close to one-third of all teachers are female, but many more are required to ensure increased enrollment of girls. In the health sector, an estimated 40% of health facilities lack female staff, which along with the shortage of rural health facilities constitutes a major constraint to delivering much needed health services to the female half of the population.⁹³

Unlike in the case of education and health, the gender and employment picture in Afghanistan is similar to that in other parts of the South Asia region - particularly Pakistan and northern India. Women's labor force participation rates in Afghanistan are comparable to the rest of the region at 35.8 % - lower than in Bangladesh (42.5%), Nepal (40.5%) and Sri Lanka (36.9%), but higher than in India (32.5%) and Pakistan (29.5%)⁹⁴. While gender-disaggregated data are not available by sector of employment, the likelihood is that this relatively high level of female labor force participation is due to the needs of an agrarian and pastoral economy. Second, poverty drives women's employment in Afghanistan, as it does in other South Asian countries, and high poverty rates are no doubt responsible for high female labor force participation.

⁹³ **Sources:** *The Nationwide Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA)* from 2003 provides data from 1850 villages in almost all the districts in the country, excluding few areas in the South, which could not be covered for security reasons. This data is the source for Maletta's *Women at Work: Gender, Wealth, Wages and Employment in Rural Afghanistan, 2002-2003*. This national level information is supplemented with numerous surveys and in-depth case studies of limited geographical coverage, such as *AREU's Case Studies Series*, *DACAAR Baseline Studies* (Laghman, Ghazni and Jaji), Afghanaid's studies in Badakhshan, studies of the poppy economy (Kandahar and Badakhshan) and Wily's case studies of land relations in Bamiyan. Urban vulnerability studies of more limited coverage plus small scale marketing surveys complement the picture

⁹⁴ World Bank SIMA

Agriculture and Women's Work.

In rural Afghanistan, as elsewhere in the region, there are distinct male and female roles in the rural economy. Evidence from surveys in Laghman, Ghazni, Badakhshan, Bamiyan, Paktia, Helmand, Faryab and Saripul confirms⁹⁵ that women and girls engage in a number of farm-based activities ranging from seed bed preparation, weeding, horticulture, and fruit cultivation to a series of post-harvest crop processing activities such as cleaning and drying vegetables, fruits and nuts for domestic use and for marketing. In a survey in Badakhshan,⁹⁶ it was observed that women carry out 37% of the household work, while men do only 15 %. Girls carry out 27% of domestic activities and boys do only 21%. Turning to the agricultural activities, women and men's contribution in terms of time allocation was found to be almost equal - but whereas women were found to be dominant within the domestic tasks, men were dominant as regards agriculture and livestock. There were considerable variations among the various districts, but in general women tend to play a greater role in agricultural and livestock production in Badakhshan than is the case in the southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan. Badakhshan is also known for comparatively more equitable gender relations than most other areas.

The study of Badakhshan also point towards the different nature of men's and women's agricultural activities, which presumably would apply to other regions as well. Male activities such as land preparation, planting/sowing, and fertilizer application are one-time jobs and usually accomplished within a specific, limited time. In comparison, female activities such as weeding are recurrent daily activities, lasting from the time that the seed is planted until it is harvested. In spite of spending the same amount of time on agricultural activities, women's work in general tends to be less visible and of lower value compared to men's. Often women's products are bartered rather than sold, and this is both a cause and a consequence of their perceived lower contribution to the rural economy. This attitude even extends to a number of products produced by women, which can only be exchanged in kind but not sold, since selling them would be considered shameful. Non-monetary exchange relations between households also contribute to social networking and cohesion, and are thus an important aspect of building social capital.

⁹⁵ *AREU Case Studies Series*: Alice Kerr-Wilson and Adam Pain, 2003; UNDCP Strategic Studies # 4 & #6; David Mansfield, 2001; Wilding, John and Azerbaijani-Moghadam, S., 2002; Strategic Monitoring Unit, 2001; Christoph Klinnert (ed.), 1997a; Christoph Klinnert (ed), 1997b; Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, S. (ed), n.d. (probably 1998); Jo Grace, 2004

⁹⁶ Afghanaid, 2001. The survey was conducted in Ishkashim, Warduj and Argu districts

A comparative study of three villages in Laghman illustrates women's work in another regional context, and although the overall picture is similar there are local variations in the degree of women's participation.⁹⁷ A combination of factors was found to affect women's participation in agricultural production, not only in these specific communities. Women in poor households, or households with a low worker/dependent ratio, tend to participate in more agricultural tasks outside the home. If the need is great enough, women may, in spite of the prevalent social norms, even engage in wage work on other peoples' land. This is not a new phenomenon but has been an option for poor households for many years.

Many smaller surveys and case studies have indicated that women contribute in a significant manner to the family income - but that variations between regions and income groups are so large that simple generalizations should be avoided. The *NRVA* survey now provides a far broader quantitative basis for analysis. According to Maletta (2003), 55.5% of the wealth groups⁹⁸ reported women having worked during the past year in some gainful activity (excluding housekeeping, and other 'non-economic' activities, including food for work or other relief activity), with the highest frequency in the North, Northeast and West. A closer look at the figures reveals that averages are not very informative in view of the huge variations - from about 80% or more of women in the North, Northeast and West down to less than 14% in the South.

Opportunity Structures and Cultural Norms: Implications for Women's Work

The role of women in agricultural production is largely determined by the life cycle of the household, the location of household fields and other reproductive and productive tasks that women undertake during the agricultural year. The availability of sufficient labor within the household can often mean that women are not required to participate in cultivation outside the family compound. However, widows, women with young children, or married daughters will often be required to assist with the cultivation of particular labor-intensive crops.⁹⁹ These observations are largely confirmed in the study *Gender Roles in Agriculture in five villages in Faryab and Saripul*, where Grace furthermore sums up, "It appears that the richer the

⁹⁷ Kerr-Wilson & Pain, 2003

⁹⁸ The *NRVA* covered 1850 villages in almost all the districts of the country. At every village *NRVA* collected data at three levels: the village, three main wealth groups and households. The total database comprises information on 1850 villages, about 5600 wealth groups and about 13,000 households (Maletta, 2003, p.3)

⁹⁹ Strategic Studies No. 6

household, the less the women work on land. Also, there appears to be a stigma attached to women working on land, as it denotes that the family is poor."¹⁰⁰ This observation can safely be assumed to have general validity all over Afghanistan.

With the *NRVA*, there are now large-scale comprehensive data available, which confirm the general picture emerging from the case studies of various regions. Across all regions and social groups, it is a cherished ideal that the men of the household should be the breadwinners, while women take care of domestic chores. However, most households cannot live up to this ideal, and women contribute in a variety of ways to the family's upkeep. But the ideal is reflected in the relative frequency of female gainful work among different wealth groups, with poor and very poor groups of women showing higher frequencies, 60% as compared to 46% among the better-off groups. The percentages are much higher in the North, Northeast and West than in other regions. Some specific occupations like domestic service are highly concentrated in the "very poor" group. Other activities, however, are more or less equally present in all the wealth groups.¹⁰¹

There is an inverse relationship between wealth and work, i.e. the frequency of work increases as wealth decreases. But some activities have a reverse pattern - they are practiced more frequently by those with a medium or higher level of wealth, such as embroidery and tailoring of clothes. There is thus a kind of stratification of various activities between the upper wealth group and the very poor. Embroidery is practiced three times more frequently among the richer than among the very poor, while domestic service is at the other extreme: for every 100 very poor groups reporting it, it is reported by only six better-off groups, i.e. 1 in 16.

The definition of 'economic activity'¹⁰² excludes the exchange of labor and products between households, which women in particular are engaged in. It also seems to exclude the post-harvest processing of crops (drying/cleaning/preserving), which is a predominately female domain - and it excludes the vital role women in the South play regarding a household's contracting of poppy harvesters, for whom three solid daily meals are part of their wage packet. Table 12 amply reflects different regional practices regarding female

¹⁰⁰ Jo Grace, 2004

¹⁰¹ Maletta, 2003, p.10-12, Tables 10.2-10.9

¹⁰² 'Economic activity' follows the usage in employment statistics by referring to activities seeking or performing any work conducive to monetary income, or (as a special case) subsistence agriculture even if the product is not for sale (Maletta (2003), footnote 1, p. 9)

Table 12: Women's Participation in Various Gainful Activities in 2002-03 (in percent)

	Any work	Harvest	Other farm work	Embroidery	Handicraft	Weaving	Tailoring	Domestic service	Gather wood
TOTAL	55.5	6.2	11.9	9.3	13.0	17.8	20.8	11.7	9.1
North	90.2	2.3	20.3	19.3	24.4	42.1	27.9	30.1	21.8
North- East	80.9	13.0	21.1	20.4	13.8	19.2	28.5	18.8	6.8
West	79.9	4.1	8.1	6.8	5.8	46.5	21.6	12.0	4.5
West Central	45.0	6.1	6.9	3.0	1.3	17.7	13.9	8.7	2.6
Central	33.8	7.1	8.3	6.5	4.3	9.2	16.9	3.2	3.4
South	13.7	0.1	1.6	2.2	2.7	2.5	8.1	1.4	2.1
East	39.0	15.8	21.3	0.7	0.1	0.0	3.3	11.8	23.8
South-West	52.7	0.0	0.2	8.9	50.5	0.2	46.9	0.2	0.0

Only activities with a significant number of cases are mentioned. Planting and irrigating crops, shepherding, and gathering wild items other than wood were mentioned in only a handful of groups each

Source: Maletta, 2003

'economic' activities, with particularly the South representing a tradition where women's activities mainly take place within the four walls of the household. While the relative proportions between regions are probably realistic, the absolute figures thus underestimate women's 'gainful activities'.

Fruit Cultivation: The cropping pattern in a given locality has a considerable impact on women's participation in agricultural production, with grain production having the least female involvement and horticulture (vegetables, melons etc.), fruits and nuts in general including large labor input from girls and women. These are major cash crops, which counted for around half of all export earnings in the 1970s, when Afghanistan was the world's largest exporter of dried fruit.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ *Afghanistan: Survey of the Horticulture Sector*, FAO, 2003, p. 22

Box 6: Plum Cultivation in Ghazni

In Deh Hamza in Ghazni Province, certain kind of plum (*aloo bukhari*) is the main cash crop, and 94% of the farmers grow it. A total of 30% of the cultivated irrigated land is covered with plum orchards due to its high relative profitability. For those families with no land, all of the women and older girls work during the season to peel plums. It is the only activity reported for which women receive payment. Processing of plums is a painstaking task. All the women and girls are involved, working throughout the day from sunrise to sunset to carefully peel the plums, in addition to their other work in the household. Women complained of problems with their hands as a result of being covered in the acidic plum juice all day.¹⁰⁴

Opium: Currently opium is the biggest cash crop in Afghanistan, and women play an important role in the cultivation of opium poppy in both the northern and eastern regions of Afghanistan. They are involved at various stages of opium poppy cultivation including planting and weeding, thinning, lancing the capsules, collecting the opium, clearing the fields, breaking the capsules and removing the seeds, cleaning the seeds, and processing by-products such as oil and soap.¹⁰⁵ Women's role in cultivation is more visible and more valued in opium production than for example in wheat production - and both women and children get paid for their work in collection of opium resin in Badakhshan.¹⁰⁶ However, in the southern region which tends to be more conservative and where land ownership is more concentrated, women's participation in opium poppy cultivation is restricted to the task of preparing food and drink for itinerant opium poppy harvesters.¹⁰⁷ But in both the east and the south, poppy harvest is a labor-intensive time for women as well as men. Given the size of the hired workforce, the preparation of this food and drink is reported to increase women's workload significantly.¹⁰⁸

The low opportunity cost associated with women's labor tends to make labor-intensive crops, such as opium poppy, a more attractive option for the household¹⁰⁹ and poppy cultivation also involves widespread use of reciprocal labor. While it is often assumed that the burden of

¹⁰⁴ Klinnert, 1997a

¹⁰⁵ Strategic Studies #4 & 6

¹⁰⁶ Badakhshan Gender Survey and Programme Assessment in Terms of Gender Sensitivity. August 2001, Afghanistan

¹⁰⁷ Mansfield, 2002

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*

¹⁰⁹ Strategic Studies No, 6

reciprocal labor falls directly on the men, women and children are also actively involved in *ashar*.¹¹⁰ Many women find their workloads increased, by working on their own land, the land of their relatives, and preparing food for the *ashar* labor. Indeed, in the eastern region, women expressed a preference for the use of hired labor over that of *ashar* due to the fact that hired labor did not require food.¹¹¹ The public role of women in reciprocal labor arrangements for opium poppy cultivation highlights the importance of unpaid labor in the production of poppy.¹¹²

Supplementary incomes: The livelihood of most rural households consists of a mosaic of jobs, such as crop production, livestock, cutting of wood, labor and a number of other small-scale activities, and women frequently contribute with economic activities beyond agriculture. In mountainous villages,¹¹³ for example in Laghman, cutting and selling wood is an important seasonal activity for men and women alike, providing income for the household during the winter.

Similarly, pistachio trees growing on government land on the Northern plains were considered a public good which contributed much needed cash to rural households through the joint efforts of all household members. The district government administration controlled access to this good and at harvest time announced publicly when the various villages of the

Box 7: Wood Collection

In Village C, it is predominantly young and middle-aged women who walk the three hours to reach the dry wood, collect it and carry the 8-9 *seer* (56-63 kg) baskets of wood back to the village. Collecting wood is a strenuous and difficult task, which many men said they would rather avoid, preferring to find easier work in Pakistan. Older women tend not to go as they can send their daughters/daughters-in-law instead to collect wood. While women collect wood for firewood and chop it up in the forest, male collectors are likely to collect larger pieces of timber used to make windows and doors.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ *Ashar* refers to communal unpaid labor. It is an exchange system, where if one person works for another, the other is expected to reciprocate and work for the first person at a later stage. (Kerr-Wilson and Paine, 2003, p.21)

¹¹¹ Strategic Studies No. 5

¹¹² Mansfield 2002, p. 11

¹¹³ See for example Kerr-Wilson and Pain, 2003 and Klinnert 1997a, 1997b

¹¹⁴ Kerr-Wilson and Pain, 2003, p. 22-23

district were allowed to go and collect pistachios in a specified locality. All men and young boys would go for days to collect the pistachios, and on their return to the village, all of the women and children would work for days and nights de-shelling the pistachios, after which men would sell them to middlemen in the nearby bazaar.¹¹⁵ As a result of the conflict and the drought the pistachio forests are said to be depleted.

Livestock: Most rural households also keep livestock, mainly for domestic consumption of meat, milk, wool, eggs, etc., and occasionally for sale. The pastoral economy contributes significantly to the national economy. Women and children are the main tenders of animals. Boys are usually in charge of taking the animals for grazing while women and girls collect fodder. Hence, while women have a significant responsibility for animals, their livestock management in most areas is centered around the home, taking care of newborn and sick animals, milking, collecting fodder and stable feeding. In some of the northeastern mountainous areas in Panjshir and Badakhshan, the women play a far wider role in livestock management and may go to summer pastures without their families to tend animals and produce dairy products, even on contract for neighbors.¹¹⁶ Most rural households have some animals.¹¹⁷ The main production of livestock prior to the conflict and drought was by the pastoral nomads, with a gender and age division of labor broadly similar to the settled rural communities.¹¹⁸ Before the drought the pastoral economy contributed significantly to the

Box 8: Women and Livestock

The FAO/PIHAM project recognized the different roles and knowledge of women and men in livestock production and in particular the critical role which women play in diagnosing and tending to sick animals. The PIHAM project identified rural women as a key beneficiary group and recognized their capacities as animal production and health 'specialists', providing a basic veterinary worker training course for women. The reason was that women can often best provide the diagnosis for a sick animal through their intimate knowledge and observation on a daily basis.¹ The lesson learned from the PIHAM project was that women have an important role to play in participatory livestock management and monitoring and can influence their husbands (or other male household members) to change livestock practices.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Own observation from fieldwork in Samangan Province, 1977-79

¹¹⁶ Kandiyoti (2004, p. 12) describes this situation for Panjshir while Afghanid report similarly from Badakhshan

¹¹⁷ Klinnert, 1997a, 1997b and Azerbaijani-Moghaddam, 1998

¹¹⁸ Ferdinand, 1969

national economy, with carpets/rugs, skins and wool being major export products. The carpets and rugs are primarily produced by women, who also play a major role in the preparation of the wool, as well as participating in the processing of the hides and skins and sheep casings.¹¹⁹

Social and Occupational Stratification

The socioeconomic status of the household determines the types of work that women do. At one end of the spectrum, the poorest women engage in manual agricultural labor or wage work outside the home (if available), while at the other end women from better-off families engage in sedentary, home-based activity.¹²¹ Overall, a recent survey reports that over 55% of women work in at least one economic activity, and the difference by wealth group for

Table 13: Women's Work by Wealth Group

Women working at least in one of the activities*				
	Total	Wealth group		
		Med/Better	Poor	Very poor
Total	55.5	46.3	59.8	60.6
North	90.2	79.6	96.1	95.0
Northeast	80.9	67.1	86.6	89.3
West	79.9	77.3	83.2	79.1
West Central	45.0	42.1	42.3	50.6
Central	33.8	22.7	38.5	39.9
South	13.7	9.8	15.6	15.6
East	39.0	16.5	49.1	51.4
Southwest	52.7	52.8	52.5	52.8

Source: Maletta, 2003

¹¹⁹ Exported for sausage making in Europe, Barfield, 2004, p.2

¹²⁰ Hill, 1997

¹²¹ Grace, 2004

women engaging in any activity is relatively small (46% for the richest and 61% for the poorest women).¹²²

Thus there is an inverse relationship between wealth and work, i.e. the frequency of the work increases as wealth decreases. But some activities have a reverse pattern - they are practiced more frequently by those with a medium or higher level of wealth, There is thus stratification among various activities, and the richest are three times more likely to practice embroidery

Table 14: Social Ranking of Female Gainful Activities in Rural Areas

Ratio of participation rates (better-off / very poor)								
	Embroidery	Tailoring	Weaving	Handicraft	Harvest	Other farm work	Gathering wood	Domestic service
Total	3.16	2.34	1.19	1.04	0.30	0.28	0.21	0.06
North	7.77	3.74	1.43	1.75		0.25	0.06	0.04
Northeast	4.35	6.13	0.73	0.54	0.46	0.29	0.50	0.02
West	1.68	6.47	1.15	0.99	0.12	0.58	0.06	0.03
West Central		5.07	2.79			0.13		
Central	0.95	0.85	0.70	0.92	0.32	0.24	0.46	0.25
South	0.83	0.94	0.85	0.57		0.14	0.28	0.25
East		2.97			0.32	0.27	0.35	0.24
Southwest	1.13	1.09		0.97				

Figures indicate the ratio between the medium/better-off group and the very poor group, regarding the percentage of groups reporting women working in each activity. A figure higher than 1 indicates that the activity is more frequent in the richer group; below 1 indicates the activity is more frequent among the very poor. The intermediate group ("poor") is ignored in this indicator. Figures are shown only when both extreme groups report the activity

Source: Maletta, 2003

¹²² Maletta, 2003

than the poorest, while the poorest are 16 times more likely than the richest to work in domestic service. Weaving and handicrafts are almost equally practiced across the socioeconomic divide and are among the 'desirable' activities for women (since a girl in any case is expected to do needlework for her trousseau), and which are socially acceptable to monetize, i.e. to produce for sale. Farm work, gathering wood and especially domestic service are practiced overwhelmingly by the very poor out of necessity - the first two because they go beyond women's accepted domestic chores and entail involvement in the male-dominated public sphere, and the third because it involves relations of servitude and inferiority and thus is socially degrading.

Gender Wage Gaps

Almost no economy pays equal wages to men and women, even for the same work, and Afghanistan is no exception. In agriculture, women receive a fraction of the wages that men do, ranging from 50% to 60% for specific tasks. The *NRVA* provides very useful information in this regard. These wage gaps are indicative of the value placed on women's work and on the social context of female poverty, e.g. in case of female-headed households.

The *NRVA* survey results show that the wage ratios (women/men) are 51% for planting, 61% for harvesting, and 50% for other farm work. In the case of non-farm occupations, the wage paid to women for making handicrafts is 41% of the male salary, and for weaving the ratio is 53% - men being paid US\$1.17 per day for weaving while women receive only \$0.62 per day. A woman gathering wood fetches 53% of the male pay - US\$0.81 per day as compared to her male

Table 15: Daily Wages for Men, Women and Children (US\$/day)

	Planting	Harvest	Other farm work	Handicrafts	Weaving	Gathering wood
Men	1.69	2.08	1.86	1.63	1.17	1.54
Women	0.86	1.26	0.93	0.66	0.62	0.81
Children (6-14 yrs)	1.22	1.05	0.90	0.84	0.81	0.72

Source: Maletta, 2003

Table 16: Non-Agricultural Wages for Women, 2003 (US\$/day)

	Dom. work	Handi craft	Weaving	Embroidery	Tailoring	Gathering		work
						Wood	Other	
Afghanistan	0.59	0.66	0.62	0.84	0.91	0.81	0.66	0.41
North	0.44	0.52	0.62	0.64	0.62	0.43	...	0.22
Northeast	0.68	0.86	0.82	0.92	1.13	1.53	...	...
West	0.38	0.40	0.47	0.28	0.59	...	0.76	...
West Central	0.32	...	0.40	...	0.71	...	...	...
Central	...	1.28	1.20	1.28	1.53	...	...	...
South	...	...	...	...	1.75	1.03	...	...
East	1.19	...	...	...	...	1.06	...	...
Southwest	...	0.58	0.42	0.59	0.63			

Source: Maletta, 2003

counterpart who is paid US\$1.54 per day. In the case of domestic work, women are even paid less than children - an average of US\$0.59 per day, while a child doing the same work earns US\$0.74. There is no obvious explanation for this gap - but may perhaps relate to fact that children are subject to fewer social restrictions on their mobility than women. A woman employed in domestic work for others earns 28% of a male construction worker's and 41% of a male shepherd's wage.

Property Rights and Control over Resources

High labor force participation rates do not automatically grant women control over resources nor access to property rights, as seen in many mountainous villages, for example in Laghman¹²³ Women's economic activities in the village can be divided into those which contribute to the household economy but where the income is controlled by the men (activities where women contribute basically their labor), and those activities which generate income and the income is controlled by the women themselves. The use of income, if any, from agricultural produce is in

¹²³ See for example Kerr-Wilson and Pain, 2003 and Klinnert 1997a, 1997b

most families controlled by men. Afghanistan's studies from Badakhshan mention that in spite of men and women's equal time spent on agriculture and livestock, the control of expenditures is the men's prerogative. The same applies to the income generated through the sale of wood which was the second most important source of income recorded from studies in mountain villages in Laghman. Likewise, livestock was also being owned either by the household (i.e. owned jointly between men and women) or by men. Only chickens were specifically reported as being owned exclusively and de facto by women.¹²⁴

Local custom regarding women's inheritance rights differs between ethnic groups and regions. In a study of land relations in Faryab province,¹²⁵ Wily notes that while cases of female inheritance were recorded particularly among Tajiks, no instances of widows inheriting land or houses were found among the Arab and Pashtun communities. Female land ownership is not common among Uzbeks, either. On the other hand, in Laghman female landowners are quite common, as reported from the study of three villages in Alingar.¹²⁶ About 50% of reported landowners were female, apparently acquiring land through inheritance. In reality, the women seemed to have little control over the land: The de jure position is that women do own land, while the de facto position is that they rarely exercise their right to land as they stand to lose too much if they do so, a situation which seems largely similar to communities in North Afghanistan.¹²⁷ Wily noted from Bamiyan¹²⁸ that "(W)omen's land ownership is not a live issue". In a survey of 15 villages only ten cases (2.5%) of women owning land were recorded. While not all of the female landowners were widows, a common trend seemed to be that sisters surrendered the land inherited from their father to a brother. One woman explained the rationale as follows:

"Girls must get land to meet the requirements of Islam, but they are not expected to keep it. If they keep it, they cannot expect their brothers to care for them if they face problems. My brother took my sister presents. He bought her a sheep and clothes. He praised her. At the same time he called us and the elders to witness in writing that she had passed the land over to him."

¹²⁴ Kerr-Wilson and Paine, 2003, p.14, Klinnert, 1997, 1997b

¹²⁵ Wily, 2004

¹²⁶ Kerr-Wilson and Paine, 2003

¹²⁷ Own observation from around Tashqurghan/Khulm area, in the 1970s

¹²⁸ Wily, 2004, p.70

Urban Employment

In urban areas women's employment outside the domestic sphere has always been limited and subject to severe restrictions. In 1975-76 approximately 5.6% of government employees were female, while in the industrial sector only 1,536 out of a total 36,875 employees were women. The fertilizer and electricity establishment in Mazar-i Sharif employed the largest number of women; in addition factories which processed foods and beverages or produced cotton cloth also had considerable numbers of female workers.¹²⁹ During the PDPA government, the female labor force in the cities increased and women were employed in all major government departments, in addition to the police force, the army, business and industry. Women taught, studied and acted as judges in the Family Court, dealing with issues relating to divorce, custody of children and other family matters. When the Taliban assumed power and initially prohibited all female employment, it was estimated that in Kabul city there were some 40,000 women in public service. They accounted for 70% of all the teachers in Kabul, about 50% of civil servants and an estimated 40% of medical doctors.¹³⁰

Professions such as medical doctors, teachers and any office bound work such as administration or engineering design were generally considered 'appropriate' for women in the urban context and could be seen as an extension of women's roles as mothers and care givers in the home.¹³¹ But the Taliban initiated wholesale dismissal of female government employees - resulting in international protest in 1996; a compromise was reached whereby women could draw their salaries without working. However, in 1999 the Report of the UN Secretary General on the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan noted reports of the widespread dismissal of female civil servants in a move to cut government spending. The Special Advisor on Gender Issues and Advancement noted that by mid-2000, there were a total of 5,874 Afghan women employed by the international assistance community in Afghanistan (including 1,020 doctors and health workers, 2,066 traditional birth attendants, and 900 WFP bakery staff in Mazar-i Sharif and Jalalabad).¹³² There are only limited data available on the post-Taliban representation of women in the civil service. According to 2003 data from the Central Statistics Office, 21% of all permanent government employees were

¹²⁹ Hunte, 1978, p.34-38

¹³⁰ E/CN.4/1997/59.Final Report on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan submitted by Mr. Choong-Hyun Paik, Special Rapporteur, in accordance with Commission of Human Rights resolution 1996/75, para 71 and para 77

¹³¹ Azarbaijani-Moghadam, 2002, p. 11

¹³² Barakat & Wardell, 2001, p.17-24

women.¹³³ The available evidence on educational qualifications suggests that these women are significantly less educated than male civil servants.¹³⁴

Current labor market opportunities for women are very limited in urban areas, and this contributes significantly to urban poverty. Typical employment for unskilled women is domestic work. In the female-headed households surveyed, 52% of women had been working infrequently in Kabul and elsewhere, sewing, embroidering or washing clothes for others. In the 48% of female-headed households where women were not working themselves, their young sons (under 15) were working sporadically as daily wage labor for minimal returns. In 27% of the male-headed households, women were working as well as men.¹³⁵

Women's access to the urban labor market is constrained by historical circumstances, low skills, limited opportunities, stringent cultural norms, occupational sex segregation and a number of demographic factors of which availability of childcare is an important part. According to an IRC survey, up to 40% of interviewed women referred to lack of child care as a constraint to their participation in the labor market. Kindergardens were first introduced in 1980 as part of the Soviet-inspired Early Childhood Development Program, where facilities attached to schools, government offices or factories provided nursery care, preschool, and kindergarden for children (3 months to 7 years). By 1990 there were more than 270 preschools and 2,300 teachers caring for over 21,000 children, mainly in Kabul.¹³⁶ Like other institutions, the Kindergardens closed down during the turmoil of the 1990s following the withdrawal of women from the labor market. In response to complaints from women in government service, Kindergardens have been reintroduced in a number of ministries. In response to complaints from women in government service, Kindergartens have been reintroduced in a number of ministries during the past several years.

In addition to some opportunities in wage employment, women in the urban economy tend to be employed in the informal sector. A recent market survey of micro-entrepreneurs¹³⁷ in

¹³³ E/CN.6/2005/5. The situation of women and girls in Afghanistan. Report of the Secretary-General, 2004

¹³⁴ World Bank, 2004

¹³⁵ Grace, 2003, p. 12-13, 31

¹³⁶ Asian Development Bank, 2003. USAID Assistance to Afghanistan, June 2004, www.house.gov/international_relations/108/

¹³⁷ Horus Banque et Finance, 2002

Mazar-i Sharif, Pul-i Khumri, Bamiyan, Herat and Kandahar showed that women are more present in services (beauty parlor, tailoring etc.) and production (carpet weaving mainly) than men. Few women work as middlemen or traders, since that would require that they be in contract with strangers. On average, the women entrepreneurs surveyed employ 4.8 employees while male entrepreneurs employ 2.3 persons, since female dominated activities such as tailoring and carpet weaving tend to be more labor-intensive. Most employees are family members. Women's activities are small-scale compared to men's, with an investment and working capital 15%-20% of that of men and monthly turnover around 25% of men's. Instability and insecurity were rated by both men and women as obstacles to growth, but women mentioned lack of skills and lack of demand more frequently than men did, as well as 'no good suppliers'. Among both men and women lack of funds was the highest rated obstacle.

A study of businesswomen in Kabul¹³⁸ concluded that while women are active in the urban economy, among the women surveyed there was relatively low vocational capacity in areas outside of handicrafts and other 'traditional' sectors. This was underlined by the fact that interviewees with no education constituted the majority of participants at 54%, while 11% had attended primary school, 6% secondary school, 16% high school, and 13% had an advanced education. These Kabul businesswomen thus have a comparatively better educational background than the average woman. The constraints raised by these business women were (a) access to market, (b) difficulty in meeting shopkeepers and making arrangements to buy and sell, and (c) reliance on male relatives to manage the non-production aspects of their businesses.

Location of work for the female entrepreneurs who participated in a credit survey was overwhelmingly (99%) in the home, and as an extension of this, women tended not to view their enterprises as formal businesses. Nearly half of the women entrepreneurs indicated that they control their income, and 40% of women would be able to take a loan without permission from a male relative. Interestingly, in the focus groups the women who were most actively engaged in the public portions of their businesses (input acquisition, market assessment, negotiation with retailers) were those with well-educated husbands (12th class or higher). Women who cited their largest business constraints as their families' prohibition against their going to the market and engaging in the public portions of business also reported that their male relatives were uneducated, or had only one or two years of education.

¹³⁸ Matney: 2002. A total of 87 female entrepreneurs were interviewed

Female Headed Households and Vulnerability

In the 1970s, before the conflict, in spite of the high rate of widowhood for women (13.2% as compared to 4.5% for men), female headed households were very rare - 1.1% in urban and 1.2% in rural areas.¹³⁹ By contrast, in 1996 it was estimated that there were some 45,000 war widows in Kabul, each supporting an average of six dependants.¹⁴⁰ Current estimates of the prevalence of female headed households (FHH) in Afghanistan range from around 16% in Kabul (Caritas)¹⁴¹ to between 4% and 20% in three districts in Badakhshan (Afghanaid).¹⁴² The current high frequency of female-headed households reflects how the prevailing poverty and years of conflict have undermined social networks and traditional mechanisms of mutual social support.

The *NRVA* documents that female-headed households are poorer than average. The proportion of female-headed households in the two poorest quintiles (9.3%) is more than double the level in the highest quintile (3.9%). Per capita expenditures in households headed by a female are 14 percentage points lower than those in households headed by a male. The *NRVA* data also reveal that a higher than average proportion of landless are female headed (15%, nearly double the ratio for the sample as a whole), which may reflect the loss of formal asset entitlements by women to male relatives after the loss of a husband. This phenomenon

Box 9: Widowhood and Destitution: Consequences of Conflict and War

In a study on land relations in Faryab, Wily (2004) has focused on the plight of widows, which are estimated to number up to 30 000 in Faryab province alone. While village elders and arbabs claimed to do their best for the widows, widows spoke bitterly of their lack of property and of discrimination against them. Loss of the earning male household head typically plunges poorer widows into destitution, as support may have been provided through their husband's employment as a farm worker. Remarriage is often their best chance of securing shelter and food for themselves and their children. On the other hand, urban widows seemed to find it somewhat easier to cope, and of the 27 widows interviewed by Wily in Maimana (mainly war widows), around half worked as domestics while others worked in bakeries or did embroidery piecework from shops.

¹³⁹ Hunte, 1978, p. 11

¹⁴⁰ E/CN.4/1997/59.Final Report on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan submitted by Mr. Choong-Hyun Paik, Special Rapporteur, in accordance with Commission of Human Rights resolution 1996/75, para 71

¹⁴¹ Caritas International, 2003

¹⁴² Afghanaid, 2001

highlights a key aspect of the gender dimension of Afghanistan's development challenge and most probably reflects that female-headed households in many cases have lost or do not have a very important human asset (working-age male) and the restrictions against women working outside the household in many rural areas, as well as women's lower human capital (particularly education). In view of the destitution experienced by most widows, the need to expand women's income-generating opportunities is urgent.

Policy Implications

The striking feature of Afghanistan's economic structure is the dominance of the informal sector. Although it is inherently difficult to estimate the size of the informal economy, it is clear that some 80-90% of economic activity in Afghanistan occurs in the informal sector, which has been largely responsible for the recent economic recovery and dynamism. Exchange services between households are widespread, and women perform a major part of this non-monetized work.¹⁴³

However, the traditional role of women in Afghanistan is a constraint to their more equitable participation in economic activities, which is especially hard on the large number of female-headed households, for whom eking out an existence without a male breadwinner is very difficult. In particular, female wage labor is still viewed as a solution of last resort for households in desperate straits, and their wage rates are normally only half the level of men's or less. Women have few marketable skills and generally poor education, with an estimated female literacy rate of 21%. But other constraints should not be underestimated. With high fertility and infant and maternal mortality rates, reproduction and related health issues occupy much of women's time. The absence of many services and the need to produce agricultural products for subsistence also imposes an opportunity cost for women who want to join the labor market. Women often lack ownership, control, and access to productive assets such as land, equipment, and materials, and their legal right to inheritance is usually bypassed. The lack of working capital (and shortage of credit) reduces opportunities to start activities that require an initial investment.

Agriculture and related activities will also in the future be a major vehicle for women's participation in the economy. As part of a demand-driven and community-based approach, women should be explicitly targeted which will reap major benefits in terms of agricultural production and incomes.

¹⁴³ World Bank, 2004

Within the informal sector women's participation and income-earning possibilities should be increased, while increased female employment in the public sector should be ensured:

- ✓ strengthen women's involvement in agricultural and livestock production in the form of extension and training, credit facilities and expanding marketing opportunities. Applied research and focused policies that target women as producers in agricultural and livestock production
- ✓ development of socially acceptable skilled and unskilled employment opportunities for women in the urban sector in response to the high level of poor female-headed households
- ✓ formation of cooperation among groups of women involved in informal activities and support in the form of guidance on market acceptability, product handling techniques, marketing methods, and calculation of marketing costs
- ✓ secure women's inheritance and property rights, to promote their potential as producers and to address important aspects of rural vulnerability
- ✓ accelerate implementation of micro-credit schemes (MISFA), with particular focus on women. Integrate skills enhancement training and vocational training with provision of micro-credit, supported by market surveys and training in account keeping
- ✓ improve targeting of poverty-alleviation programs to provide minimal safety net to the most vulnerable groups such as female-headed households
- ✓ technological skills upgrading in the traditional handicrafts sectors to increase its income earning and export potential
- ✓ support to businesswomen through access to credit, raw materials, training and markets
- ✓ substantial strengthening of women's employment in the health and education sectors, which will have direct positive effects on girls' school enrollment, women's access to health services, maternal mortality and general child and family health
- ✓ collection of adequate sex-disaggregated data across all sectors to document women's and men's involvement and to enable monitoring of future developments and effects of investments