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Common Strategies for Women in Transition Countries

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Summary

- Ongoing dialogues and forums on nations in transition reinforce the commonality of challenges related to women's rights and roles in society, especially leadership in government.
- Women leaders in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Arab Spring countries face major challenges, including heightened insecurity and the risk of women's rights being rolled back significantly.
- Steps to address these challenges are to build coalitions across internal divides, engage male religious leaders and other men to support women's rights, reach out to youth, develop gender-based budgeting, and underscore the importance of women's economic empowerment.
- Keys to progress in these areas include obtaining grassroots support and taking a long-term strategic focus in international programs.

The Situation in 2013

In December 2012, an expert dialogue on women in transition countries brought together 14 women leaders from Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Tunisia to work together to identify issues specific to each country and to determine common challenges.

Afghan participants emphasized that the international community needs to see Afghan women as leaders, not victims. They also noted that after Taliban rule, many institutions—including schools, hospitals, and parliament—had to be built again from the ground up. Illiteracy and poverty have taken a particular toll on women, nearly 90 percent and more than 50 percent respectively. Violence against women is also on the upswing, with some of the worst atrocities committed by the Afghan police. It has been particularly difficult to bring women into the police force because sexual harassment from male members is prevalent from the training stage onward.

Iraqi participants noted that despite some progress since 2003—such as an increase from seven to more than 70 female judges and prosecutors—women's rights have stagnated. Pushback from men and a large number of women has been considerable. Women do serve in the parliament, but primarily because of the 25 percent quotas. Few have risen to leadership positions in any of Iraq's political parties, which play a dominant role in national governance. Moreover, women in parliament have yet to form an effective women's caucus.

Libyan participants emphasized that though women were in the forefront of the revolution, they have since been pushed to the background in virtually all areas and excluded from leadership. Personal security remains an overriding concern. On the more positive side, Libya for the first time now has political parties, which have engaged women from the start. As a result, 17.5 percent of seats in the new parliament are now held by women.

Tunisian participants stressed the political and socioeconomic empowerment of women as their highest priorities. Holding only two of 45 ministries, women are vastly underrepresented in the executive branch of the national government. Tunisia's electoral commission adopted a gender parity law in April 2011, requiring that 50 percent of national assembly candidates are women. Women make up 27 percent of the national assembly, but are having great difficulty advancing to the leadership level. They now focus largely on drafting the constitution. Women in politics generally are also having difficulty reaching out to the media. And there are concerns about the lack of independence of the Tunisian justice system and the effect this could have on women. Across countries, lack of security for women leaders and their families is an overriding concern. Women also fear a major rollback of their rights, have been largely excluded from reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts, and still see significant walls between government and civil society. Many men and women in these four countries remain unaware of the rights women already have. Moreover, enforcement of laws that protect the rights of women is weak.

All participants stressed the need to bring men into activist efforts. Men, they explained, need to be assured that women leaders are not fighting to usurp men's place in society, but instead simply seeking equal rights and opportunity to contribute to their transitional societies. Similarly, men need to be persuaded that it is not in their interest to exclude women from political and social leadership. Messaging is critical: for example, national GDP goes up as women become more empowered, and educating women contributes to the success of society at large. At the same time, such messages need to affirm the importance of women's economic empowerment and its connection with women's political empowerment. Another consensus was on the failure to engage youth as a shortcoming, that young people had been in the front lines of the revolutions but were largely excluded afterward, and that better efforts to reach out and meaningfully engage youth are imperatives.

Common Strategies

Participants in the Antalya expert dialogue covered several thematic areas in examining strategies for moving women into leadership positions in their countries.

They turned first to the need for building strong coalitions to advance the rights of women. An Iraqi participant said effective coalitions are one of the best tools but building them is the most difficult part of her work, especially in trying to bridge the divide between religious and secular women leaders. Religious and secular women are not likely to agree on issues such as personal status laws, but if women are to advance, coalitions across sectarian and secular-religious divides are vital. Otherwise, women across the spectrum will suffer from the resulting discriminatory laws.

An Afghan participant observed that broad coalitions depend on identifying key common issues, such as girls' access to education. An Iraqi colleague noted, by way of example, the struggle in Iraq for a 25 percent representation quota for women in provincial legislatures—a campaign that saw some success thanks to joint efforts by women NGO leaders and women elected to the Council of Representatives (national parliament)—and a draft law on domestic violence.

Libyan and Tunisian participants agreed that persuading women from all walks of life to work together is essential to creating safe spaces, such as a dedicated center for women's empowerment training. Such venues can then be used over time for a variety of efforts, whether coalition building or training women at the grassroots level to reach out to others without involvement of the international community.

Nonetheless, as participants noted, there is no clear path for advancing women's rights. The forms of discrimination against women in each of these countries can differ. It is good to focus on building coalitions and networks, but essential to identify both the strengths and the weaknesses in such efforts.

Another consensus was on the importance of *engaging men to support the rights of women*. One Afghan expert described specific NGO initiatives designed to establish a dialogue with male religious leaders and to seek their support for women's rights within the country. As a result of these programs, more citizens have become aware of women's rights in Islam and several highly respected and influential senior religious leaders and scholars have begun for the first time to advocate the protection of women's rights. In some cases, Afghan media—particularly radio call-in shows but also television—were successfully used to get the word out.

Such efforts were far from easy and in many cases took some time. At one point, when a male religious leader at a dialogue in Afghanistan spoke out, a female participant asked why religious leaders had not advocated earlier for women's rights. "Society," he responded, "was not ready for it."

This Afghan expert at the Antalya dialogue stated that dealing with the Taliban is also a major challenge. In the program for which she was responsible, this has been surmounted in some areas by casting the program literature in an Islamic framework and in terminology familiar to Taliban members, and offset in other areas by support from local religious leadership for women's rights.

Even after five years of various programs, however, engaging Afghan men on women's rights remains problematic. Bolstering awareness and confidence among Afghan women also remains difficult, as does gaining access to the many Afghan women who remain homebound or otherwise limited in mobility. Both require creating a supportive environment that encourages women to ask for their rights.

An Iraqi expert added that reaching out to men sometimes needs to start simply, with friends, colleagues, and former classmates. Her organization often began training programs with an overall human rights approach and had men and women take the same training, which turned out to be a strong point as both women and men began to put gender issues on the table.

Participants agreed on the importance of *reaching out to young people*, across all divides, to support women's rights. This was a particular challenge in Tunisia, where more established women leaders did not trust the younger generation and were reluctant to include them in their organizations, which in turn led some of the younger generation to feel disenchanting with the existing women's movement.

To overcome these divides, a Tunisian women's NGO established a program to engage young women between 18 and 32. Trainers were careful not to address broader themes—such as democracy and human rights principles—rather than women's rights. The most successful dialogues were organized outside of regular work and study hours, making these sessions highly interactive, and asking youth to draw on their personal experiences. Follow-up training and coaching were essential to keep young women engaged and to encourage them to apply what they had learned. A Libyan participant explained how her organization had brought youth activists together with

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Over the past two years, the Center for Gender and Peacebuilding at the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) has brought together a community of practice to aggregate lessons learned from conflict and post conflict programs supporting women in countries undergoing transition. This report summarizes the key challenges and ways forward identified at the most recent dialogue, held in December 2012 in Antalya, Turkey, bringing together women leaders from Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Tunisia.

older women leaders, political party representatives, and media representatives in three-day focus groups to write policy briefs offering recommendations for the committee charged with redrafting the Libyan constitution. The organization also protested against the existing Libyan electoral law and identified gender-sensitive legal experts, both female and male, to work on redrafting the law. One result is that several Libyan ministries now have gender-sensitive legal experts on staff.

Building on legal advocacy successes, some Iraqi women's organizations are now turning their attention to *developing gender-based budgeting initiatives*. Although Iraq is a relatively affluent country, few government resources have been allocated to the needs of women. Gender-based budgeting remains a goal that might take a few years to realize, but the issue at least can now be raised by female members of the Council of Representatives.

An Afghan expert noted that gender mainstreaming in her country occurs only in the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Although doing so in all ministries is called for in the government-approved National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan, it is not being implemented in all ministries. Furthermore, where it has been implemented, the gender unit sometimes has appeared to be in competition with the rest of the ministry.

Discussants agreed that furthering women's economic empowerment is vital, both in its own right and as a step toward social and political success. One Afghan participant called for greater efforts to bring the private sector into peacebuilding. At present, Afghan businesswomen are largely at the small and mid-size enterprise level. Their training in the post-Taliban period began mostly with developing skills. Funding has come largely from the United States Agency for International Development, as have successful microfinance projects. Afghanistan as a whole benefits because these businesswomen have largely kept their profits in the country. Furthermore, women in business seem far less prone to corruption than their male counterparts. Donors must nonetheless be cautious that trainings to empower women may create tensions among men in the community. If these tensions are not adequately managed, these efforts may lead to increased violence, including that against women.

Moving Forward

Follow-up action ideas included dialogue participants drafting a series of policy briefs, building and maintaining networks, and sharing resources.

Participants were unanimous in asking that women from other countries be brought into future dialogues. All agreed on the need to engage Egyptian women leaders, and there were suggestions to bring in women activists from Pakistan, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Algeria. Libyan participants expressed particular interest in working with women from Afghanistan and Yemen, due to the common need to rebuild national institutions in the three countries.

In the meantime, USIP will continue convening related forums to focus not only on empowering women but also on the need to engage men to support the rights of women in conflict and post-conflict countries.



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