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Breaking barriers: Afghan women's struggle and contribution to Sustainable Development Goals

ABSTRACT

How do the challenges women face in Afghanistan shape their contributions to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, and what role do they play in driving progress despite systemic barriers? This research examined the challenges Afghan women face and the role they play in accomplishing the Sustainable Development Goals, such as poverty, economic growth, renewable energy, education, peace, and hunger. The research used qualitative research methods. The literature was sourced from online repositories, such as Google Scholar and Scopus. Content analysis was used to analyse the data. The findings were that women experience gender-based violence, are unable to register businesses, banned from employment, deprived of access to education opportunities, and lack financial resources. It was also established that women in Afghanistan participate in areas, such as peacekeeping and security, creating employment, and are involved in the renewable energy sector, food production and food security, and reducing gender-based violence. Regarding policy recommendations, it was suggested that social security programmes, improved governance, and educational support are essential for supporting women and girls in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Economic development; poverty; religion; sustainable development goals; women

Introduction

Afghanistan has a population of 40 million people (World Bank 2023a) of which 49.5% are women. The country's religious tendency is predominantly Islamic, but others on a lesser scale are Christianity and Hinduism (Lombard 2022). According to the supreme law of Afghanistan, Islam is the nation's religion followed by 99.7% of the total population (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2022). The country was affected by a war that spanned 20 years from 2001-2021 (Witte 2024) and caused more than 4 million people to be internally displaced (Amnesty International 2020). The war created many macro- and micro-economic challenges, such as high poverty levels, poor infrastructure, low levels of economic growth, political instability, and internal and external displacement (Galdo, Lopez-Acevedo, and Rama 2020).

The article draws attention to the widespread violation of women's and girls' human rights, especially after the establishment of the second Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which began in August 2021 (Maizland 2023). Most of these infractions are connected; if a government substantially underperforms in one Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), it will hinder its ability to meet other SDGs. The author's premise is that Afghan women face 'challenges' in contributing to Afghanistan's achievement of the SDGs, partly because of the harsh and discriminatory conditions imposed by the current government on peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16). The recommendation is to repeal these policies so that women can contribute to the country's social, economic, political, and cultural development (Haqpana and Tsouroufli 2023; United Nations 2024a). The research questions are:

1. What do women contribute to attaining Afghanistan's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?
2. What challenges hinder women's active participation in achieving the SDGs in Afghanistan?
3. How can these challenges be addressed to enhance women's contributions to the SDGs in Afghanistan?

Abbasy (2024) found how gender inequality in Afghanistan has severely harmed economic resilience and how to overcome this situation. Gender equality needs to be pursued to ensure high economic growth. The study is silent on the challenges that hinder women's active participation in

achieving the SDGs in Afghanistan. Dalaman (2024) examined undocumented Afghan women's experiences in Istanbul's Zeytinburnu by using the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal's framework. The key challenges that Afghan women face are social exclusion, limited access to education and patriarchal norms enforced by society (Dalaman 2024). Dalaman's (2024) research focused only on Afghan women in Istanbul and excluded the challenges faced by others in the country, resulting in a research gap. Karmania, Weiss, and Nazari (2023) explored strategies for enabling Afghan women to access higher education despite the numerous barriers imposed by the Taliban regime. The study unpacked the diverse barriers affecting women's ability to experience education. The limitation of Karmania, Weiss, and Nazari's (2023) research is their focus on SDG 1 (education). What is unknown is how women can assist in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Afghanistan. The challenges these women face and the possible solutions need to be addressed to overcome the different obstacles. The novelty of the current study lies in exploring the interconnectedness of key issues, namely women's participation in SDGs, the challenges they face and the solutions required. The study specifically includes the six (6) SDGs of poverty (1), economic growth (8), renewable energy (7), education (4), peace (16), and hunger (2).

This research is crucial to influence policy to help decrease gender inequality and achieve the various listed (above) SDGs in a non-deterministic manner. In addition, the study adds value to the existing literature on gender-related issues, especially advancing the attainment of certain sustainable development goals. On a global scale, some economies with a high female labour force have benefited because of reduced poverty and increased sustainable economic growth, just to mention these two (Gebre 2023).

From a global perspective, a high participation of females in the labour force is essential for attaining high economic growth (Pimkina and de la Flor 2020). China is an example of a country with a high participation rate (60,54%) of female labour and the economy has channeled the skills of women and men into the production sector to achieve a highly industrialised economy with low levels of poverty (Textor 2024; World Bank 2023b). Therefore, if other economies, such as China, have benefited from women's skills which have helped attain some SDGs, Afghanistan can tap into their experiences to rebuild its economy.

According to the World Bank in 2019, Afghanistan had 22% female labour but dropped to 16% in 2020 (World Bank 2023c). This drop implies that many women are not active in the labour market. In 2017, in Afghanistan's manufacturing sector, a total of 64.4% were women; 33% were in agriculture; 9.6% were in the community and social service sector; 1.8% were in the wholesale and retail sector, and 0.1% were in the construction sector (Junussova et al. 2019). These statistics suggest that Afghan women are still underrepresented in the labour market. Therefore, there is a need for lasting solutions to address these labour market anomalies, such as women's productivity to increase economic growth (SDG 8).

For women's empowerment, Afghanistan targeted 35% of learning institutions' intake to be women (World Trade Organization 2005). Despite such targets, the nation had a low female literacy rate of 21% at the end of 2021 (World Bank 2023e). More needs to be done to empower Afghan women from an educational perspective. This is essential to attain the Sustainable Development Goal 4, access to education (United Nations 2024b).

This research document is structured as follows: Sections 2.1 and 2.2 are based on a theoretical and empirical literature review, namely the human capital theory and the liberal feminist theory. The research methodology, results and discussion, policy recommendations, and conclusion are presented in Sections 3, 4, 5 and 6, respectively.

Theoretical literature review

This section presents a theoretical literature review. First, the theoretical framework is introduced, followed by an explanation based on the human capital- and liberal feminism theories to support the study topic.

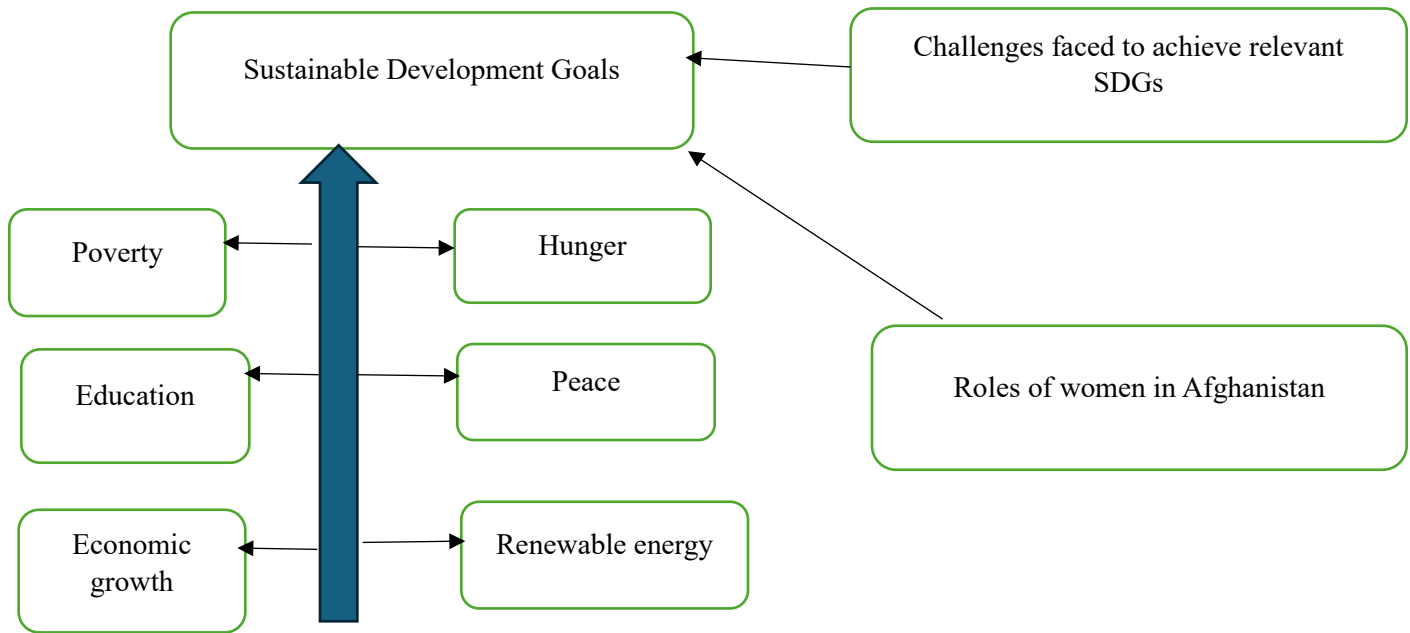


Figure 1: Theoretical framework

Source: Researcher's construct (2023)

Figure 1 indicates the six SDGs used in the study, focusing on the role of women attaining these. In addition, there is a discussion of the challenges the Afghan women face achieving some of these SDGs.

Human capital theory

According to the human capital theory (Blundell et al. 1999; Khaykin, Lapniskas, and Korchegina 2020; Wuttaphan 2017), investing in education is vital to gaining knowledge and experience, which ultimately improves personal wealth. These abilities boost one's efficiency at work according to Tan (2014). Noted by Robinson and Pope (2023), productivity determines a person's wage in the perfect labour market, therefore, this enhanced productivity may result in a higher salary for the individual.

This theory hinges on access to education (Noel and Finocchio 2022); to be effective in addressing global challenges, such as poverty, education is important. In the context of this study, women who lack education may not be fully capacitated to help attain the SDGs. For example, without

meaningful education, such as a diploma or degree, it may be difficult to be employed with a decent salary. Without a job, one may not be able to contribute to economic activities affecting future economic growth levels.

Those who have acquired a certain level of education must be given control of resources and positions that enable them to address key issues affecting the global village. In Afghanistan, females with a low literacy rate are not considered for educational opportunities; as a result, there are no job opportunities in the private and public sectors where they could make an impact and contribute to policy issues relating to the SDGs (Lyons 2023; Mashwani 2017). Afghanistan must fulfil its commitment to achieving the SDGs by ensuring that women also have access to education and employment opportunities. If they are deprived of such opportunities, Afghanistan's commitment to attaining the SDGs by 2030 is only an empty promise and the country may take longer to achieve its goal.

Liberal feminism theory

According to liberal feminism, women's disadvantaged position in society is a result of their lack of equal access to opportunities and separated from men (Enyew and Alemeneh 2018; Wolf 2007). Eliminating gender inequality is a key component of feminist ideology. Thus, the theory advocates equal opportunities for women and men. This theory centres on SDG 5 on gender equality (Kim 2017).

The liberal feminist theory is also based on the notion that because all members of society are equal, everyone must have the same rights (Wolf 2007). This theory is crucial to this study because Bailey (2016), Mohajan (2022) and Shayan (2015) found that Afghanistan has taken steps to address gender inequality, however, if the educationally empowered women in Afghanistan are not given the platform for nation-building, gender inequality may continue to be high.

Empirical literature review

This section presents the empirical literature review focusing on the analysis of recent scholarly works on the sub-themes related to Afghanistan: poverty dynamics, perspectives of women

empowerment, women and governance issues, access to education, gender inequality, and women's participation in the energy sector, innovation and climate change.

Poverty dynamics in Afghanistan

Poverty is multidimensional and encompasses key issues, such as access to health, education, water and sanitation, a good living standard, peace, and access to nutritious food (Agboola and Balcilar 2012, 1; Alkire et al. 2023). Access to any of these aspects has been a challenge for the Afghan people. Afghanistan's quickly evolving political, social, and security environments impact population nutrition directly and indirectly, particularly for women and children (Akseer et al. 2018). Therefore, the repercussions of war on the economy impact negatively on achieving the SDGs.

For the past 20 years, this oil-rich country has struggled with poor leadership and political instability (Thier and Worden 2017). Due to the civil war, which affected the economy of Afghanistan, more than 1.2 million Afghans were internally displaced in 2016 and lived in abject poverty (Noorzoy 2017). The cost of the war in Afghanistan is estimated at US\$3 billion (Barret 2018). This indicates that more needs to be done by the Afghan government to rebuild the nation. Therefore, the repercussions of war on the economy impact negatively on achieving the SDGs.

Poverty affects Afghanistan, which received a score of 0.51 on the human development index (HDI) published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2021, placing it at position 119 out of 195 nations. However, in 2022, the nation had an HDI index of 0.47 and moved to position 180 globally (UNDP 2023). The indication is that the country is not performing very well regarding education, healthcare, life expectancy, and gross income per capita. In other words, Afghanistan's people experience high poverty levels. This is justified by the low HDI levels, which imply a high poverty rate (Amaluddin et al. 2018). In addition, these statistics demonstrate that the economy is becoming more impoverished due to the fall in value of the HDI which is used as a proxy for poverty measurement.

Perspectives of empowerment of Afghan women

Williamson (2019) researched the role of Afghan women in nation-building. According to research findings, major efforts have been undertaken to increase the number of women in the Afghan National Police (ANP) and to raise the general standard of human rights education for all the police officers (Williamson 2019). It was also discovered that over four years (2005–2008), the ANP family grew from 1 to 24. This shows an increase in the number of police officers. In addition, certain police officers received small-group instruction in literacy, report writing, computer proficiency, and training for emergency midwives.

These research findings reflect that the nation is addressing gender inequality as more women are included in decision-making related to SDG 5 (Gender equality). In addition, human rights, education and the inclusion of women in the police force help to ensure peace and stability (SDG 16). Furthermore, it was realised that cases of violence on women continue to be reported and that some government officials in Afghanistan are reluctant to solve them (Williamson 2019). This violence is caused by political issues or the war that has been affecting the economy (Shawki 2011).

Women's employment, especially in the informal sector, is crucial for poverty alleviation. Junussova et al. (2021) support this comment and mention that women deserve equal opportunities with access to resources to participate in different economic activities, such as entrepreneurship. As women's businesses flourish, they can employ more people allowing them to support their families and earn a living (Hunter, Patel, and Sugiyajama, 2020). However, this is dependent on the success of their business. Junussova et al. (2019) support the above sentiments and established that women own just 3% of the companies listed by the Afghanistan Investment Support Agency (AISA) (World Bank 2024d). Most businesswomen (98%) are in urban areas and 80% have a higher education or attended college. These research findings are on par with the views of Najib and Maclachlan (2023), who suggest that a lack of peace and tranquility led to internal and external displacement and affected women's and girls' access to educational services. Thus, the war, as well as some of the policies implemented by the Taliban were stumbling blocks for women in accessing educational services in Afghanistan.

It was further established that of these women, 78% own and operate microbusinesses with one to ten employees (Junussova et al. 2019). These research findings illustrate that those women involved in entrepreneurship earn a living and employ others. This helps with poverty reduction and contributes to the economic growth of Afghanistan; SDGs 1 and 8, respectively (United Nations 2024a).

However, most women-led businesses need to be officially registered so that the state earns tax revenue from them to be used for the reconstruction of the economy after the just-ended war. Apart from tax revenue, the business will also benefit from accessing lines of credit, allowing them to be competitive locally and tap into foreign markets. It is important to note that there is a need for the government to support the different policies that are pro-women empowerment. Junussova et al. (2021) established a weak implementation of women-centred policies in Afghanistan, limiting success in business and other spheres of life.

Women and governance issues in Afghanistan

Afghanistan, now under the control of the Taliban, implemented a ban in December 2022 on Afghan women working in non-government organisations (NGO); a total of 6165 women were affected (United Nations 2023). This forced women into poverty as they did not have an income due to job losses. Such moves by the Taliban government reduced any gains achieved in reducing poverty (SDG 1). To add, the gender inequality gap increased as more women were forced from the labour market, contrary to the Afghanistan National Development Strategy implemented in 2008.

The government and the international community must proactively promote women's access to leadership positions and meaningful engagement. Ghafoori (2020) agrees with the above statement that focused on the role of women in peacebuilding in Afghanistan. According to Ghafoori (2020), women must participate in efforts to maintain peace in Afghanistan. Women's participation in peace efforts and conflict resolution, particularly in cases involving family violence, violence against women, and other family issues, was a key tactic used by women in Afghanistan (Ghafoori 2020). Other key strategies included direct talks with anti-government elements, the creation of non-governmental local councils for peace, and raising awareness about peace.

To encourage women's engagement in national peace efforts, women's rights activists and civil society organisations held a variety of workshops, conferences, and advocacy programmes (Ghafoori 2020). These initiatives helped to promote peace in Afghanistan. The study did find that there were still obstacles that prevent women from participating in peace efforts. The main obstacles to women's political participation was the widespread gender-based violence against them, the ideological and cultural norms that actively exclude them from political and social roles, the male-established and male-dominated political and social structures that limit them to symbolic roles, the insecurity that negatively affects women's freedom of movement, and more conventional obstacles like low literacy rates and poverty (Ghafoori 2020). If these obstacles are addressed, Afghanistan has a good chance of achieving the required level of peace and justice.

Educational access and gender inequality in Afghanistan

Access to education is a human right for every person but it is sad to note that this has not been the case, especially for women in Afghanistan (Ohlig and Timm 2024). This is supported by Ghulami and Naqawi (2022) who indicated that under Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001, female students were denied access to education opportunities. Ghulami and Naqawi (2022) revealed that although the Afghanistan government improved its financial resources dedicated to educational support, women continued to suffer challenges, such as a lack of qualified teachers and family support, early marriages, and poverty. These research findings indicate that the government needs to address these challenges so that women and girls can access educational opportunities and the economy can support a quality educational service (SDG 4).

Gender equality is one of the SDG goals, and in Afghanistan it has been noted that women do not have equal opportunities compared to men (Lindvall 2023; Taylor 2020). The country ranked 154 out of 159 on the gender inequality index in 2015 (UNDP 2017), indicating that the country is not performing well in addressing gender inequality. With initiatives, such as the National Solidarity Program, the nation has made significant strides over the past ten years in creating a comprehensive framework to end gender inequality and social exclusion but problems with policy implementation regarding human rights, gender equality, and equity in healthcare still exist (Angelou and Ray 2019). Ahmadi and Sultan (2023) reasoned that under Taliban rule, women were banned from enrolling in journalism and engineering courses, making gender inequality high in the educational

sector. Apart from that, it lowers the literacy rates with the possibility that the nation may take longer than 2030 to achieve educational access (SDG 4).

Women's participation in the energy sector

Afghanistan has the lowest rate of electricity or energy usage; people primarily depend on charcoal, gas, paraffin, and wood (Fahim and Upham 2017). The renewable energy sector (SDG7) in Afghanistan is dominated by men with only 3.1% active women (World Bank 2023d) contributing their skills and knowledge. Therefore, more needs to be done to improve women's access to being active in the renewable energy sector. This will help to improve the economy's capacity to tap into renewable energy for use in the industrial and non-industrial sectors.

Similarly, access to a regular energy supply is critical to improve the welfare of the Afghan population and support different industries. According to Polansky and Laldjebaev (2021), households in grid-supplied villages in Afghanistan experience greater immunisation rates, better access to antenatal care, and reduced incidences of disease. However, because they cook indoors, they also experience a higher incidence of respiratory ailments. When the economy prioritises access to energy for all, it will achieve several benefits, including a healthy population. In addition, these research findings indicate that the SDGs are interconnected, for example, renewable energy provision (SDG 7) enables people to access health (SDG 3) (United Nations 2023).

Innovation and climate change

Innovation in the agriculture sector is essential for addressing food security and dealing with hunger. According to Tsegaye, Drucza, and Subhatu (2018), Afghanistan's agricultural output has improved thanks to technological innovation. However, research found that women ranked financial difficulties and or poverty as the main obstacle to innovation, followed by a lack of knowledge, distrust, and insecurity (Tsegaye, Drucza, and Subhatu 2018). The use of technology is, therefore, essential for improving production in the agriculture sector. The challenges women face in harnessing modern technology in different sectors must be addressed to ensure the economy achieves food security and eliminates hunger.

Climate change is a global challenge; every economy is mandated to adopt climate-friendly policies and initiatives. According to Masood et al. (2022), Afghanistan has recently taken action to combat climate change by developing water systems in remote areas, greenhouses for female farmers, early warning systems for natural disasters, and funding programmes for growing premium eco-friendly crops, such as saffron, together with spreading knowledge and educating communities about climate change. These initiatives can be useful in solving climate-related challenges that affect the Afghan populace.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative design. Data were sourced from electronic repositories, as shown in the databases and keywords in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Databases and keywords

Database	Keywords
Science Direct Scopus Web of Science Google Scholar	Sustainable development goals, women, Afghanistan, education, gender equality, poverty, health, economic development, religion, economic growth, renewable energy, peace, and hunger.

Source: Researcher's construct (2024)

Science Direct, Google Scholar, Web of Science and Scopus were used to gather secondary sources (Table 1). The research focused on the selected SDGs, namely poverty, hunger, education, peace, economic growth, and renewable energy.

Table 2 below shows the inclusion and exclusion criteria used in the selection of research articles from the online repositories.

Table 2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	Eligibility	Exclusion
Type of literature	Editorials, journals, conference papers	Book chapters, commentaries
Language	English	If not reported in English
Publication dates of research articles	Articles published between 2012-2024	Articles published before 2012
Country	Afghanistan	All other countries except Afghanistan
Title and abstract	Articles which focused on the challenges faced by Afghan women about the Sustainable Development Goals	Articles that did not focus on the challenges faced by Afghan women about the Sustainable Development Goals
Full screening of research articles	Includes information on roles played by women in the attainment of SDG goals, challenges faced by Afghan women concerning the Sustainable Development Goals	If the research articles excluded information on roles played by women in the attainment of SDG goals, challenges faced by Afghan women concerning the Sustainable Development Goals

Source: Researcher's construct (2024)

Table 2 reflects that editorials, journals, and conference papers written in English and published between 2012 and 2024 included in the study. This was essential to capture the true picture of Afghanistan during and after the war. Articles older than 5 years were used in the study because they contained classic information. All the articles focused only on Afghanistan, were selected according to the title and abstract criteria, and those that focused on challenges faced by Afghan women concerning the Sustainable Development Goals. The full screening of the articles included information on the roles played by Afghan women to achieve the SDG goals and the challenges they faced.

To meet the requirements of Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA), 80 publications were retrieved from various databases. Of these, 12 duplicates were

eliminated, 68 papers were evaluated to ensure they met the requisite inclusion criteria, 18 papers were deleted following screening, leaving 50 articles for analysis. Documentary analysis was used for the data analysis in this research paper.

Results and discussion

This section presents the research findings. From the study it was realised that women in Afghanistan face several challenges and play a key role in the attainment of the selected SDGs. These results are presented in Figure 2 below.

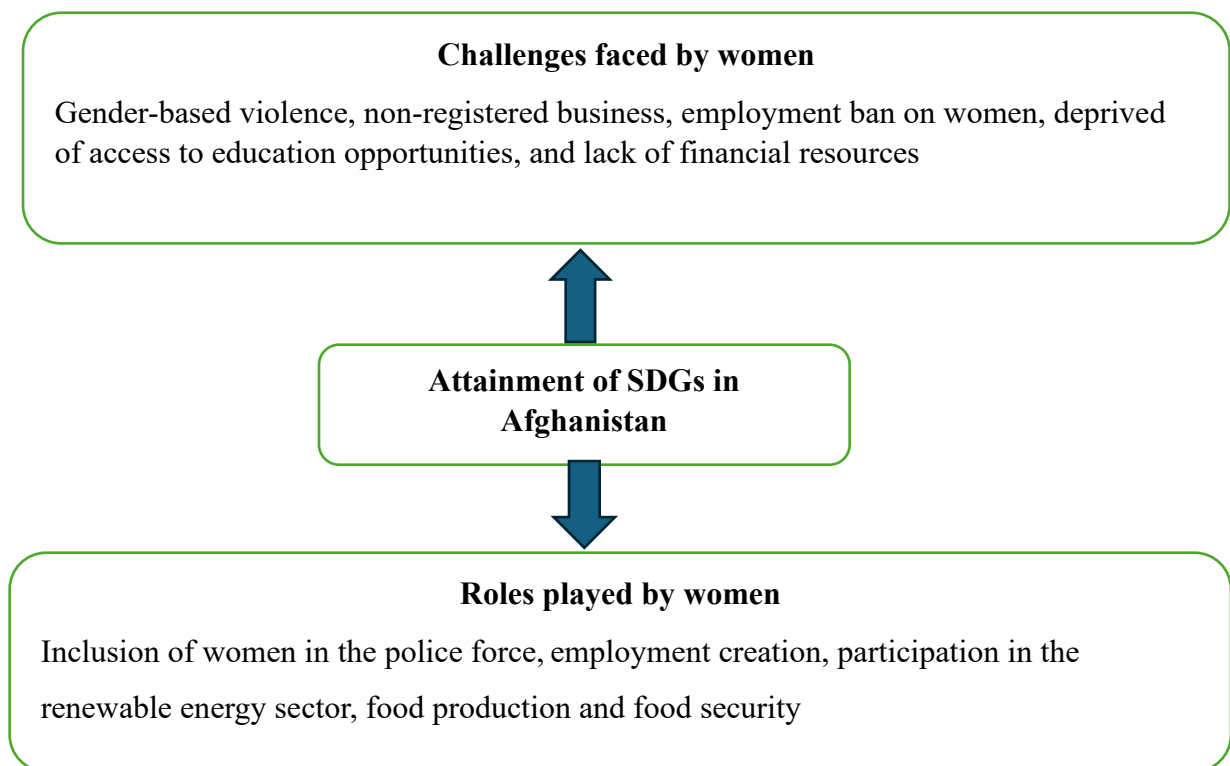


Figure 2: Challenges of Afghan women in the attainment of SDGs

Source: Researcher's construct (2023)

These findings are discussed below:

Challenges of Afghan women in the attainment of the SDGs

Concerning gender-based violence, it was established that some women are exposed to violence which affects their emotional wellbeing (Ma et al. 2023; United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 2023). Therefore, the increased number of cases of domestic violence among some women in Afghanistan implies there is no peace at the household level. Yes, the US troops withdrew from Afghanistan but peace should be enjoyed at the household and national levels by women and men.

As a result, it is concluded that the attainment of the SDG 16 on peace and justice may not be achieved if nothing is done to address the gender-based violence faced by women in Afghanistan. This also limits women's ability to be influential in participating in peace and justice issues because they are presently victims. These research findings are in line with that of the World Health Organization (2015) and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (2023) which submitted that almost 90% of women in Afghanistan have experienced at least one form of domestic violence, 17% have experienced sexual violence, and 52% physical violence. These statistics are worrisome, advising that something must be done to address gender-based violence.

This research found that some women in Afghanistan are running non-registered businesses (Junussova et al. 2019). These businesses are, therefore, limited in their operations and affect the local and international markets. The inability of women to formalise their businesses due to the prevailing environment implies that little is contributed to the economy and the creation of fulltime employment (SDG 8). Afghanistan Investment Support Agency (2018) and Sahib, Nasri, and Shams (2018) agree with the above research findings and add that some women-run businesses are not registered and do not operate viably.

Furthermore, research findings indicated that the harsh Taliban rules have banned women from being employed (Ghulami and Naqawi 2022; Jan et al. 2022); this is a challenge for them and the entire economy. **The** loss of employment is a loss of income, which affects even the extended family who often depend on the employed people. As these are the SDGs: 1(no poverty), 2 (zero hunger) and 8 (decent work and economic growth), the challenge of the harsh rules cripples Afghanistan's capacity to attain these goals. These women were not given alternative employment by the government, confirming the high level of women's oppression. These research findings support the views of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2023). Vale,

Margolin, and Akbari (2023) suggested that Taliban-rule suppresses women's rights, resulting in the need to address the governance issues affecting the economy.

In the study, it was established that some women and girls in Afghanistan are deprived of access to education opportunities (Utsumi 2022). Access to education is a fundamental human right (SDG 4). When women lack access to education, they cannot access job opportunities and cannot be effective with policy issues. In addition, the deprivation of women's access to education leads to increased gender inequality as males continue to access educational opportunities. These research findings are similar to those of the International Labor Organization (2023) and Inayatullah (2022), which propose that the restrictions on women's and girls' access to education limits their future participation in the labour market.

Another challenge affecting women's ability to be valuable in the agricultural sector, and the craft and textile sectors is the lack of finance to harness technological innovation (Tsegaye et al. 2018). Technology enables mass production and production efficiency but if Afghan women lack the financial resources to buy modern machinery, they will continue to operate on a small scale. This also limits the growth of women-led industries, and this adversely affects the stimulation to grow entrepreneurship. These research findings support the views of Ali and Rajabi (2017) and Ahmed, Tasmin, and Ibrahim (2022), who found that using technology in the craft industry is essential for producing products and even using digital platforms for marketing.

Role of Afghan women to achieve the SDGs

Despite the challenges faced by women in Afghanistan, it was established that these women play a key role in the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals. These roles are discussed below:

It was established that women play key roles in attaining the SDGs through the inclusion of women in the police force, employment creation, participation in the renewable energy sector, food production, and food security (Williamson 2019). Research findings by Williamson (2019) indicated that women in the police force help to achieve gender equality and peace in Afghanistan. From the study, it was also realised that women in the police force were able to address some of the challenges of gender-based violence that women face.

However, because few women have been recruited into the police force, their effect is insignificant. Thus, recruiting more women will help increase the chances of attaining peace and justice (SDG 16), resulting in a positive impact on the economy. In addition, this will help to ensure that the gender inequality gap is lessened as women take on key roles in governmental issues. Women's participation in peace efforts was established as a key role in this study. Women's rights activists and civil society organisations held a variety of workshops, conferences, and advocacy programmes in a bid to ensure that peace and justice prevail in the nation (Ghafoori 2020).

Research findings described how women's informal employment helps create recognised employment, which ultimately aids in reducing poverty and hunger (United Nations Development Programme 2022). The female-led informal businesses and other entrepreneurial businesses employ many people, reducing poverty as people earn an income necessary for survival. So, women help reduce unemployment, poverty, and hunger. Poverty reduction and addressing hunger are the SDGs 1 and 2, respectively. These findings demonstrate that women play an important role in the attainment of the SDG goals in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, the study findings proved that women play a vital role, especially when participating in the renewable energy sector (World Bank 2023c) by influencing policies on energy usage. However, the number of women in the energy sector is very small, requiring more to be done to ensure that additional women are included. This will help achieve SDG 7.

In the current research, it was established that women were active in food production and the agricultural sector, assisting to achieve food security (Tsegaye et al. 2018). However, the country still faces food shortages, together with the need for women to be fully empowered to be effective in the agricultural sector and produce increased outputs. Regular food supplies ensure food security and help reduce poverty and hunger.

Policy recommendations

This section presents policy recommendations. Afghanistan must address the current challenges to achieve some of the selected SDGs.

Educational empowerment

There is a need for the current government of Afghanistan to repeal all policies that prohibit women and girls from accessing educational opportunities. This should be from the grassroots level, i.e. primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Funding opportunities should be provided, as well as targeting less privileged women and girls from marginalised communities. This will ensure that more women have access to education.

Technological innovation

For the economy to grow, it is recommended that partnerships with the private sector and the international stakeholders be established to harness modern technology. This will assist women in agriculture, crafts and textiles, and those running different informal businesses. The government should provide financial resources ring-fenced to harness modern technology and support women with robust technological policies.

Improved governance systems

The current rules and policies of the Taliban limit the capacity of women to be fully active in the attainment of the SDGs. Governance systems must be updated to allow women to be fully active in the different sectors of the economy. The governance policies should be revised to ensure that the current challenges faced by women are addressed.

Employment policies

The current labour market is pro-men with women not fully included in employment opportunities. The government must address this by ensuring that women with desirable qualifications and skills are appointed in jobs in the different sectors of the economy. The focus should be on the top government posts being reserved for women. This will reduce gender inequality and ensure that women can influence decisions that have a positive effect on the welfare of other Afghan women.

Social security programmes

The government needs to increase social security programmes to cater for the less privileged community members. These programmes should be centred on health provision, water and sanitation, cash grants and other welfare issues, focusing on women and girls and other members of society.

Conclusion

This research aimed to examine the challenges faced by Afghan women in the attainment of the SDGs. The study also examined the role women play in reducing poverty and hunger among other SDGs. Research findings described how women suffer from violence, unequal representation in the labour market, and the harsh rules meted out by the current government in Afghanistan. The role women play is critical as they help in employment creation and poverty alleviation. Several policies were recommended to address the challenges faced by Afghan women.

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