
WORKING WITH RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN AFGHANISTAN

The process of working with the *ulema* to support women's representation

As part of the DFID-funded Within and Without the State (WWS) programme, Oxfam piloted an innovative approach in Afghanistan's Kunduz province. The programme aimed to mobilize members of the *ulema* (body of Islamic scholars) to support women's representation in community *shuras* (councils), which are important community-level dispute resolution mechanisms across much of Afghanistan. This case study documents that work, highlights some successes, discusses challenges, and identifies some lessons learned about engaging with the *ulema* to further women's participation and rights.

Within and Without the State is a five-year global initiative (2011–2016) funded by DFID's Conflict, Humanitarian and Security programme. This has enabled Oxfam to pilot a variety of approaches to working with civil society to promote more accountable governance in conflict-affected and fragile contexts. Oxfam is committed to go beyond humanitarian service delivery to work on strengthening governance in order to tackle the underlying causes of fragility. Outside agencies may have technical quick fixes, but active and organized citizens are the ones who must oversee the long-term changes which will transform society. Gathering evidence of how to make this transformation happen so lessons are captured and learned is a key aspect of WWS.

1 INTRODUCTION

Community *shuras* are important mechanisms in many parts of Afghanistan for managing family or other local conflicts. In some instances a *shura* can refer to an official structure registered with the government, but for the majority they are informal consultative bodies recognized by local communities. For a number of reasons, including but not limited to cultural tradition, many people prefer to present their cases to local *shuras* before approaching formal legal institutions such as the police or family law departments. This is especially true in rural communities. Usually, the members of these *shuras* are exclusively male and include community elders, landlords, religious leaders, and local paramilitary commanders. Along with tribal customs, local interpretations of Islamic principles heavily influence the judgements of community *shuras*.

In many Afghan communities, interpretations and applications of traditions, customs and religious beliefs based on patriarchal social norms regulate the behaviour of both men and women. Women are frequently seen as second class citizens, and not usually allowed to participate in community *shuras*. Consequently, women are unable to directly represent their interests and expectations in these bodies and many cases are resolved in ways which are harmful to women (for instance, forced marriage, sanctioned honour killings, or '*baad*' – the practice of gifting girls as compensation to resolve disputes).

Although there are multiple factors at work, culturally constructed interpretation of religion has a strong role in shaping the behaviours and attitudes of community members towards women. If community elders believe religious, cultural or traditional taboos prohibit women from social participation, this both obstructs women from participating in *shuras* and influences the judgements those *shuras* reach. In addition, such religious interpretations, which can change over time, also strengthen patriarchal attitudes in women themselves, who may accept their lack of social participation as part of the social norm and even reinforce these attitudes in other women.

In order to help women in rural areas begin to participate in and influence the judgements of these *shuras* – and so contribute to improved gender justice – Oxfam wanted to engage with local members of the *ulema* (Islamic scholars) to discuss different interpretations of Koranic verses and what they mean for the role of women in society. The *ulema* are significant in this because they have privileged legitimacy to consider religious issues, which are very sensitive in Afghan communities, and are able to exert considerable influence with community elders.



ENGAGING ULEMA MEMBERS AS ADVOCATES

Oxfam and Afghan partner the Empowerment Centre for Women (ECW)¹ organized a conference for 60 members of the *ulema* and 60 prominent female leaders from Kunduz and three other provinces in northern Afghanistan to discuss the issue of women's participation in community *shuras*, and particularly their contribution to dispute resolution. ECW had a pre-existing relationship with some *ulema* members and these relationships were leveraged to invite a range of influential *ulema* members who held a range of differing views on women's participation.

Having this mix of views was important as it allowed different interpretations of Islamic norms on women's role in public life among respected Islamic scholars. The event was the first time in Kunduz that *ulema* members had sat and talked with women about their issues and concerns.

PREPARATION WITH KEY INFLUENCERS

Oxfam and ECW had done some preparation with *ulema* members before the conference, meeting with more moderate individuals to describe some of the severe challenges facing women in Afghanistan and encourage them to see themselves as having key roles in tackling these challenges. In these pre-meetings, Oxfam's programme manager spoke about all the times they had heard national level women's leaders, parliamentarians and officials emphasise the key role of the *ulema* in working for women's rights.

A key part of the conference was bringing together *ulema* members and women from different backgrounds (such as teachers, government officials, university students and members of women's groups) to sit together and engage in smaller group discussions. This was achieved through asking mixed groups to nominate a facilitator within their group who could moderate the small-group discussions constructively and were respectful of engaging women in the conversations. In all, this method seemed to boost women's confidence by providing an opportunity to work directly with men to discuss their role in social affairs. The groups' discussions explored the various barriers that prevent women from participating in community *shuras*.

The issue was very sensitive and the conference debate often heated, requiring close and careful monitoring from national Oxfam staff and ECW. The facilitators nominated from each group framed discussion around an examination of Koranic principles and doctrines and asked *ulema* members and female participants to discuss what they meant for women's mobility and social participation in Afghanistan. In this way, the facilitators were able to open up space for recognizing the need for women's increased participation in public life which was firmly located within the beliefs and perceptions of the *ulema* members.

The skill, knowledge and – crucially – legitimacy of the facilitators (having been nominated both by *ulema* members and the women involved) to engage in these culturally sensitive discussions was a key success factor, as the following reflection from one of the facilitators illustrates:

Nabila,² one of the facilitators, said: *'I was a facilitator during this sensitive discussion where we talked about Koranic lessons on the role of women in public life. I encouraged participants to categorize different kinds of male behaviour towards women as "Islamic" or "non-Islamic" and then asked participants to judge "who are those men who commit violence against women and don't permit women to access their rights?" A consensus began to emerge that men who are against women's participation are not following Islamic principles. This was a wonderful technique that worked well as an antidote to people's prejudgement that Islam is against women's social role or participation.'*

ALLOWING ULEMA MEMBERS TO BE SEEN AS CHAMPIONS

Some *ulema* members in Afghanistan report feeling isolated from contemporary social debates and that expectation about their role in public life are to some extent limited to giving traditional local prayers and Friday sermons. By speaking to *ulema* members' desire for recognition and a more active role in society – along with framing women's rights in relation to Islamic principles – the conference empowered *ulema* members to imagine a new role for themselves and move from being potential blockers of women's participation to influential champions within communities.

The conference also helped boost the participating women's self esteem and made them more confident to speak out about their concerns and rights.

THE ULEMA AND CSOS WORK TOGETHER TO INFLUENCE COMMUNITY LEADERS

Following the conference, members of the *ulema* in nine communities of Kunduz province began to work closely with 'women peace promoters' in each community who had previously undertaken conflict resolution and dispute resolution training offered by ECW. The *ulema* members and women peace promoters were aiming to gain the support of community elders and other influential actors for the participation of women in community *shuras*.

In all, around 120 conversations were held between the *ulema* members, local women and community elders. The role of the well respected *ulema* members was important in convincing community leaders to accept the participation of women in community *shuras*.

ECW was also able to mobilize the 46-member Kunduz Civil Society Network to support these women peace promoters. The network (also supported by the WWS programme) was established to improve coordination and collaboration between CSOs in Kunduz. The network acts as a connecting mechanism with its various members being able to facilitate meetings for the women peace promoters with local authority figures throughout the province, including the provincial governor. Cumulatively, these meetings were another important part of building the legitimacy and wider recognition of the women peace promoters.

ECW also organized a series of local TV and radio debates with panels of civil society representatives, academics, Islamic scholars and prominent women's rights activists. There is some evidence that these activities helped to increase government commitment and responsiveness towards women's issues.

BUILDING THE CAPACITY OF WOMEN TO PARTICIPATE IN SHURAS

It is not enough just to create opportunities for women to be able to participate in community *shuras*. If women's participation is to meaningfully impact on the quality of the judgements *shuras* reach, those women also need to be supported to engage *effectively*.

Oxfam's partner ECW ran a series of trainings and workshops to help equip the women who would be participating in the *shuras* with skills around conflict analysis, mediation and arbitration, communications and advocacy. This capacity building was important to enable female *shura* members to be able to assess the backgrounds of conflicts brought before them and find ways of proceeding with dispute settlement. This training was also offered to men in the community who are working with the women peace promoters in the conflict resolution *shuras* – important for building their capacity and also reinforcing ideas of cooperation between male and female *shura* members.

Fatima, a participant in the ECW training: *'This programme had a very big effect on us. In the past, I couldn't discuss community issues with men or talk and stand in front of them, but now I can discuss and talk with them and ask for our rights.'*

WHAT SUCCESSES HAVE WE HAD?

Mobilizing the *ulema* as advocates for women's participation in community *shuras*

In many Afghan communities the *ulema* is very influential in shaping public opinion and local understandings of *sharia* – which in turn lays the foundations for social and attitudinal norms and behaviours, including those relating to the role of women.

This is not about asking *ulema* members' 'consent' for women's rights and social participation, but is it about winning their support for them. Working with the grain of Afghan society in this way supports efforts to promote women's rights with additional legitimacy based on the inherent faith teachings and values that support women's active participation.

In all nine communities, the *ulema* members we worked with succeeded in convincing community leaders (*maliks*, *khans*, landlords and paramilitary elements) to begin to accept women's participation. We have observed these men sitting with women and discussing community challenges. In one village we saw the local *mullah* telling his congregation that there is no restriction for women to work with men in community peace building efforts.

***Shuras* begin to resolve cases with increased gender justice**

Ultimately of course, the impact Oxfam wanted to see from this work is an improvement to the justice women are able to access through community *shuras*. In many cases, women's participation in *shuras* has directly helped improve the gender justice of resolutions to conflicts before the *shura*. As many cases brought to *shuras* have a direct impact on women – either in terms of the dispute itself or the way it is resolved – it is important to have confident and capable female *shura* members to look out for women's interests (although this is not to overlook the fact that in a small number of cases women's influence on other women's cases may not always uphold their rights).

Oxfam has received around 20 reports from its partners of cases brought before *shuras* which women participated in resolving, including family disputes involving women's issues and conflict over resources.

It seems that the women were able to apply many of the skills developed through their capacity building training in the resolution of these cases. We have also had reports that they are exercising these new skills to better mediate disagreements within their families and sharing these skills with their brothers, husbands and fathers – perhaps making a wider contribution to community-level conflict management (though this contribution would need further evaluation).

Women empowered to play a bigger role in community life

Through this pilot project, an enabling environment was created where women gained the confidence to contribute their new skills and capacities to their communities' resolution of family disputes and conflicts – an important part of community social life.

Sadiqa, who had participated in the ECW training: *'I am a woman and I can understand women's problems better than men, and I know the conditions they face. I always did solve problems in my family and for other people, but after the ECW training, I was more effective. I had studied in the past, but I didn't have much information about how to resolve cases. Now I accept that as a woman it is my responsibility to help solve and be involved in women's cases. I got information about dispute resolution and how to ask for our rights. I want to see changes to the situation of women in our society and think more women should be in leadership in our province.'*

Tahmina, one of the community peace mediators in Kunduz said: *'A man was always beating his wife in our neighbourhood. When I wanted to mediate in the conflict, my friends in the locality told me that the man who beats his wife is mad and not to try and mediate in this case. One day when he was out of the house, I went to his house and met his wife where I asked her the reasons behind violence against her. She narrated the story of her life, adding that her husband is addicted to drugs. I immediately contacted a doctor in the drug addiction hospital. We succeeded in getting him admitted to a treatment programme. He is being treated there now and his family is happy. I will continue to follow up the case up to end.'*

Beginning to extend the project

We were able to discuss the work of the *ulema* in promoting women's participation in community *shuras* during coordination meetings between the provincial governor, Human Rights Commission and civil society – all of whom acknowledged the constructive role the *ulema* members had been playing.

This recognition from provincial level actors has helped deepen the commitment of many *ulema* members to the work and they have been calling for an expansion of the project. After talking to the *ulema* members involved in the project, many others have also announced their willingness to support women's increased social participation. Oxfam is now looking at how best this work can be extended to other parts of Afghanistan.

WHAT CHALLENGES DID WE FACE?

Issues related to the role of women in Afghan society are often intimately connected to perceptions of *namoos*, or honour, particularly in men. This can make challenging the marginalization of women in public life – a sensitive and complex issue, especially given how deeply rooted such perceptions are. Without the support of influential advocates such as *ulema* members, who are highly trusted by many in rural Afghan communities, it would have been extremely difficult for Oxfam to challenge the attitudes – held by both men and women – that prevent women from playing more of a role in public life. However, even with the support of the *ulema*, a project such as this can only do so much, and there is still a long way to go before women in the communities Oxfam is working with are able to enjoy their full rights. For male community members and elders to be sitting together with women to discuss community problems is a start, but more needs to be done.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM THIS PROCESS?

***Ulema* members are powerful and legitimate change agents in rural Afghan society**

In many Afghan communities, the role of the *ulema* is tremendously important in terms of making progress on the sensitive issue of women's rights. Conversely, ignoring or sidelining the *ulema* may undermine efforts to promote gender justice. During our consultations, many *ulema* members said they had thought international actors in Afghanistan were working against Islamic principles and trying to change the people's religious perceptions. Being able to engage these sorts of actors to reach common understanding using faith as the driver for change, and to mobilize them as supporters, is both important and requires having staff or partners who know the cultural context and enjoy the legitimacy needed to have those conversations. ECW also has religious scholars on their staff team who have studied *sharia*, religious studies and law.

***Ulema* members' motivations to become advocates for women's rights**

The past decade in Afghanistan has seen a change in the role of religious actors in Afghanistan for a number of reasons. Some members of the *ulema* we worked with thought they were not valued by international organizations and felt their potential is overlooked or underestimated. They told us that being involved in this project had helped give them back a feeling of value and has increased their sense of reputation and importance in the community. This recognition of their work lifted their self esteem and provided an important reported motivation to be involved in the work.

Three of the most well-known Islamic scholars were initially paid a monthly salary by the project so that they could work full-time in advocating with other *mullahs*

(religious leaders). However, most *ulema* members are not paid to avoid undermining the chance for their genuine commitment to promoting women's social participation. In the nine target communities, all the *mullahs* are working with the women peace promoters on a voluntary basis.

The role of women in community peace building

Afghan mothers have a very important role in influencing their children's attitudes towards the use of violence and insurgent groups. When mothers have more confidence in their role in society and ability to meaningfully participate in public life, this transforms family attitudes towards women. We have also seen women who received training as part of the project passing on important mediation and conflict resolution skills to male family members. Demonstrating these roles to community elders is an important part of gaining their support for women's participation in social life.

Gaining the support of other influential figures

The successful advocacy efforts of ECW and the Kunduz Civil Society Network to gain the support of the Governor of Kunduz was significant. At the provincial level, governors control all local government administrations and entities and are empowered to make provincial level decisions on behalf of the government. His support for the initiative was therefore an important part of securing the support of local community leaders – if he had blocked the initiative, community leaders would have been very likely to follow suit.

Importance of regularly updating gender- and conflict - sensitive power analysis

ECW conducted this in Kunduz province with representatives from the Governorate office, headquarters, Department of Women's Affairs, Ulema Council, Court, and High Peace Council. Unexpected insecurity postponed the activities, but it was completed as planned. As well as providing valuable data, it allowed staff to introduce the project to them. This analysis identified power holders at the community and government levels as well as helping to understand why people preferred using the informal justice system. It identified gaps in the participation of women and youths in peace building as well as shaping future programming priorities.

NOTES

- 1 ECW is a women-led organization that has been working for over 15 years for women's rights in Afghanistan. ECW is a well-recognized WRO, particularly in Kunduz province, and has undertaken work across nine provinces in the north of Afghanistan. ECW has a strong relationship with government bodies and formal and informal institutions in Kunduz, being known for building solidarity between civil society and ulema in Kunduz. This was a key reason for Oxfam to choose ECW for this work.
- 2 Names have been changed throughout

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please e-mail rchilvers1@oxfam.org.uk or visit www.oxfam.org.uk/www

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