

SMART TACTICS FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

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Smart Tactics for Women's Empowerment in Afghanistan

Results and lessons from UCA's Pathways to Innovation Program

This case study showcases key lessons and impacts from the University of Central Asia (UCA)'s *Pathways to Innovation* (P2I) program, a three-year program to promote knowledge and analytical skills in mathematics, science, and economic policy in Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The program was funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Aga Khan Foundation Canada (AKFC).

Problem statement

Higher education in Afghanistan was restored after the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001. Since then, enrolment in secondary education has steadily increased, from 10% in 2005 to 55% in 2017, but generally remains below international benchmarks. Further, Afghanistan remains a male-dominated society, with deeply entrenched cultural norms limiting access to educational opportunities for girls and women. Only 40% of girls are enrolled in secondary school. At university, women make up only 20% of the student body and 14% of the university faculty on average nationally. This share is even lower in the STEM faculties targeted by UCA.

UCA's Response

Through the IDRC/AKFC- funded P2I, UCA set out in 2017 to implement a multi-pronged program involving vocational and academic research and training interventions to enhance knowledge and analytical skills of institutions and individuals, especially women, in mathematics, science, and economic policy, with Afghanistan being a key country of focus. The program has in turn achieved notable results in terms of women's empowerment, with important lessons on gender mainstreaming and programming.

Key lessons

Working within institutional gender constraints to identify workable opportunities to promote the inclusion of women in education. A key strategy pursued by UCA involved deploying a wide range of tactics to promote the participation of women in its program offerings, despite a limited enabling environment. Where possible, UCA promoted and favoured women's participation in its capacity building programs. For instance, while women represent 8% of the total Ministry of Finance (MoF) staff, the executive master on economic policy (EMEP) that was developed by UCA to cater specifically to the learning needs of staff at this ministry, saw around 1/3 of participants being women. However, when faced with a predominantly male faculty at the two partner universities it supported in the more conservative region of Northern Afghanistan, UCA was unable to involve women as leads in the research projects it supported or into its certificate program on natural resource management. This was due to no women occupying key positions in the agricultural faculties at these universities. However, the higher, if still limited, number of women enrolled as students at those faculties (see table 1 below), constituted an opportunity that UCA promptly seized, by associating a large number of women as co-researchers and support students in the research projects or by organizing national step-down training workshops that relayed

learning on topics related to natural resource management, research design and implementation, climate change and others covered in the CPNRM course, to a high number of female students (see table 2). Doing helped strengthen the capacity of female students in these universities including equipping them with skills needed to lead their own research in the future.

Table 1. Number and gender of faculty and students at UCA’s partner universities in Afghanistan

University	Total faculty #	% of women	Total student #	% of women
Badakhshan University	118	10%	5,124	32%
Bamyan University	159	6%	6,337	29%

Table 2. Number and percentage of women at Afghan partner universities involved in UCA’s program

University	Number & % of female co-researchers and research support students	Number & % of women participants in national courses
Badakhshan University	17 (35% of the total)	21 women (42% of total)
Bamyan University	21 (42% of the total)	10 Women (29% of total)

Going beyond talking about gender to promote a gender responsive learning environment (GRLE): One of UCA’s direct intervention on gender was the training of over a thousand teachers, students, and faculty at teacher training centres, universities and rural schools in North-Eastern Afghanistan to promote gender equality in education, through gender responsive pedagogy and gender responsive learning environments (i.e., gender aware lesson planning, learning materials, language, classroom set up and interaction, and gender responsive school management). Encouragingly, 59% of participants in GRLE courses were women. This served to increase awareness of those in current and future teaching positions of gender dynamics and how to best account for them, in order to give girls and women an equal opportunity in learning.

“I will continue to learn and develop further. This will enable me to work and bring extra income for my family. Knowledge is the power that one can apply to improve her life“

Ms. Royagul D/O Mah Hussain, Mental Maths program student

“It was important for women and girls in the classroom to see that a woman can be a teacher“.

Ms. Mawjigul Sultani, SPCE Mental Maths program instructor

Setting the example by elevating women to teaching

positions: When UCA hired teachers for one of its intervention, a “mental maths” program aimed at school teachers and pupils aged 7-14, it intended to recruit as many female instructors as possible. It succeeded in this goal and was able to recruit an all-female teaching body. This sent powerful signals in terms of the status and opportunities that women can aspire to, which acted as a tangible reinforcement to the gender responsive pedagogy component.

Leveraging modern and traditional forms of authority to gradually transform entrenched norms. Following their 2019 graduation, EMEP female graduates were invited by Rula Ghani, the First Lady

of Afghanistan, to a meeting in her office. They discussed the importance of women's inclusion in economic development, and the professional growth of women and advancement in the public service. In North-eastern Afghanistan, UCA noted that it was useful to have men as gender responsive pedagogy trainers as this helped UCA win over the more conservative elements of society. Further, one of UCA's instructors was a *mullah*, which helped the program gain traction and legitimacy within the highly religious communities it targeted in Darwaz.

Main-streaming gender in research: Where UCA could, it selected women to lead research on its new body of work on economic policy. Further, where possible, its research investigated the differential impacts of policies on men and women, to provide gender-sensitive sensitive and gender equality focused responses to policy makers. A notable case is a paper on the *Role of Women in the Economic Development of Afghanistan*.

Impacts

When given access to education opportunities, women performed as well as men. While the picture varies across the educational programs delivered under the P2I program, in general, data show that women performed on a par with men. For instance, average women's grades for the EMEP were slightly higher than those of their male counterparts, including in complex subjects such as statistics and quantitative methods. In the case of gender responsive learning training, data on learning suggests that women started with a lower average score than men and their average score almost caught up with that of men after the course, with women improving their average score by 43.71 points vs. the 40.12 points of men.

UCA's research produced by women is to date the most downloaded and cited. An analysis of publication specific data show that two women-led research papers – *Higher Education Policy in Central Asia and Afghanistan* and *The Role of Women in the Economic Development of Afghanistan* – saw a total of 1377 downloads, 54% of the total downloads registered for the totality of research on economic policy produced by UCA. Further, these two papers are the only ones that have been cited in research by others, with a total of 4 unique citations recorded on Google Scholar to date, two for each paper. The success of the *The Role of Women in the Economic Development of Afghanistan* may be ascribed to the high international profile accorded by the international community to gender issues in the country.

There are interesting anecdotes of changes in gender dynamics pointing to shifts in women's own attitudes as well as more supportive family and community environments. UCA informants shared that they observed tangible changes over the course of the program, in the North-eastern regions, including the most conservative region of Darwaz. For instance,

- The organizers were able to take pictures or film at the events in later stages of the program, after gradually overcoming reluctance by women to be filmed out of fear of retaliation from their families and winning the support and approval of communities they were working in. The program is currently running online sessions that see good participation from women, which was regarded as an achievement by informants.
- In the early stages of the program, female students of mental maths training would for the most part come dressed in *burkas* or wear dark sunglasses in Darwaz. After being exposed to GRLE training, and the example set by the women instructors, an increasing number of women in later classes began not to wear burkas or sunglasses in classrooms.

- During events, family members shared their appreciation to the organizers for the education given to them and their daughters. One informant reported how a father shared that he would encourage his daughter to take the university entry exam after being exposed to GRLE seminar.

Conclusions

While longitudinal analysis is needed to more comprehensively and rigorously capture the extent of changes on gender dynamics produced by UCA's P2I over the medium term, the program has identified smart and workable tactics that have produced, and can continue producing, changes in gender dynamics and women's access to education. Ultimately, reversing deeply entrenched cultural norms and giving women the equal opportunities they deserve, will require time and the collective sustained focus of key forces in Afghan society and those players, like UCA, that support them.