



Women and natural resources in Afghanistan



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Afghan women are close to the Earth

Afghanistan is a beautiful country with a rich history. Today it faces enormous challenges.

Afghanistan's terrain is mountainous, dry, and subject to extreme droughts and devastating floods. Decades of conflict coupled with abuse, overexploitation and mismanagement of its natural resources have decimated its forests, degraded its rangelands and wetlands, and greatly compromised its future prosperity.

While this environmental devastation affects all Afghans, women and children are particularly vulnerable.



Women are protectors and providers

In Afghanistan, women are involved in providing for their families on a daily basis:

- they grow and harvest food;
- they collect water;
- they ensure household sanitation;
- they gather fuel for cooking and heating;
- they collect provisions from nature, such as medicinal plants;
- they generate family income from household products;
- they protect family health;
- they educate their children; and
- they safeguard the traditional knowledge required to manage and preserve natural resources.

And yet here, as elsewhere, women have traditionally been excluded from the decision-making processes that affect them, their husbands and children.

Of necessity, this is now changing, and Afghanistan has begun to recognize the need for harnessing women's energy and skills as the country recovers from years of upheaval and environmental degradation.

The country's environmental recovery will largely depend on its women, who – in common with women around the world – are close to the Earth and directly connected to the natural ecosystems on which their societies depend.



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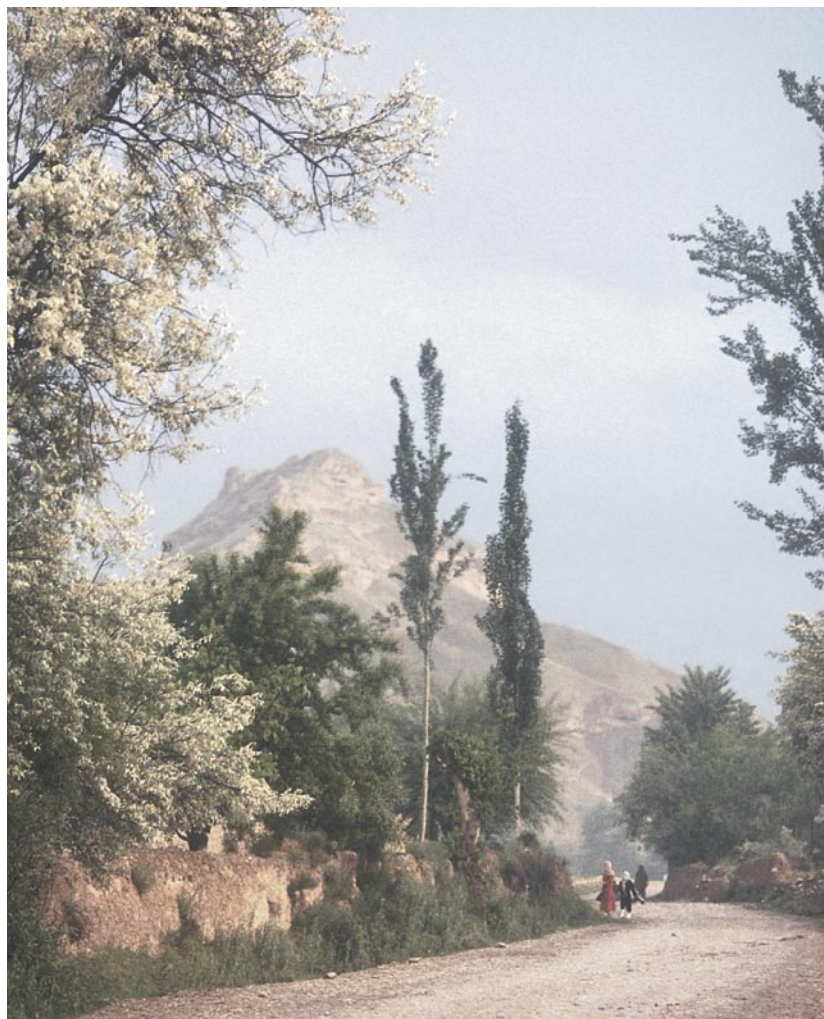
Women maintain biodiversity and ecosystem services

Women – especially those living in rural areas – often have a particularly deep understanding of local ecosystems stemming from daily practical experience. In this way, they keep their hands on the pulse of the environment and may be the first to see any signs of declining health.

This closeness to nature gives women an essential role to play in protecting Afghanistan's ecosystems and the many services they offer: from protecting biodiversity and habitats to supplying people with water, food, timber, fertile soils and a sustainable future.

Biodiversity is one of the most essential resources that nature provides to human societies, giving ecosystems the adaptability to withstand environmental change. It is closely linked to other ecosystem services such as air and water purification, prevention of erosion, and the supply of energy, food, and traditional medicines. It is crucial for Afghanistan's people, and especially for the poor who depend most directly on healthy ecosystems for their survival, food security and livelihoods.

The wild relatives of crops can harbour genes for resilience and resistance to disease. Afghanistan has an advantage in this realm, as it is thought to harbour more native varieties of wheat than anywhere else in the world.



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The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) recognizes the “...vital role of women in the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity” and affirms “the need for the full participation of women at all levels of policy-making and implementation for biological diversity conservation.”

In 2008 the CBD Secretariat developed a Gender Plan of Action to promote the consideration of gender in all decisions related to biodiversity conservation and management decisions, such as access to land and other natural resources, land use, conflict resolution, and household food security.

Women manage natural resources

Afghanistan's women contribute enormously to the management of the country's natural resources, and therefore to sustaining both rural and urban livelihoods. They fulfill several roles, from providing agricultural labour, cultivating fruit and rearing livestock, to collecting wood and maintaining the family unit through cooking, cleaning and child care.

Wood collection represents an important seasonal activity in mountain villages, and men and women participate in gathering wood for both fuel and timber use. In some villages, able women walk a distance to find and collect dry wood and to carry it back to the village in heavy baskets. While women collect wood for firewood and chop it up in the forest, their male counterparts collect larger pieces of timber for doors, windows and furniture.



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Women's participation in various gainful activities in 2002-03 (in percent)

	Any work	Harvest	Other farm work	Embroidery	Handicraft	Weaving	Tailoring	Domestic service	Gathering 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, Women at Work: Gender, Wealth, Wages and Employment in Rural Afghanistan 2002-2003, Referenced in World Bank, 2004 Afghanistan: Role of Women in Afghanistan's Future.

Women fight desertification and adapt to climate change

Afghanistan's arid climate is a major constraint to environmental rehabilitation and the renewal of ecosystem services. Climate change combined with overgrazing and deforestation threatens the country's rangelands, forests and wetlands with creeping desertification. Farmers compete with herders for the most productive areas, which increases local-level conflict and instability.

Drylands are among the most risk-prone ecosystems, yet they can be surprisingly rich repositories of genetic

and species diversity, generating vigorous and resilient species of animals and plants.

Throughout the world, women have demonstrated how to manage marginal lands for food, fuel and shelter, according to traditional, reliable and time-tested methods. In spite of their subordinate social position, they are on the front lines of the struggle for survival as climate change threatens further desertification and land degradation. In Afghanistan this threat is very real.



Women provide food

The Asian Development Bank estimates that 85 percent of Afghanistan's population is engaged in the rural economy. However, only about 15 percent of Afghanistan's land is suitable for farming, and most of that requires irrigation.

Agriculture has traditionally been the largest source of economic output in Afghanistan, with men, women and children sharing responsibility for crop production, horticulture, and the rearing of livestock.

Some 30 percent of Afghanistan's agricultural workers are women. In many parts of the developing world, however, the proportion is much higher, with women often responsible for most food production.

In rural areas men and women have distinct roles and agricultural responsibilities. According to the World

Bank (2004), surveys focusing on Laghman, Ghazni, Badakhshan, Bamiyan, Paktia, Helmand, Faryab and Saripul provinces showed that women and girls in these villages were involved in an array of farm-based activities ranging from seed bed preparation, weeding, horticulture and fruit cultivation to a number of post-harvest crop processing activities such as cleaning and drying vegetables, fruits and nuts for domestic use and for marketing.

While the situation varies throughout the country, women in a number of tribes in northern and western Afghanistan play a significant role in agricultural production. A survey conducted in Ishkashim, Warduj and Argu districts by Actionaid (2001) demonstrated that women and men in Badakhshan contributed similar time to agricultural activities, with men focusing on land preparation, planting/sowing, and fertilizer application





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while women were involved more in recurrent daily activities, like weeding, from seed planting to harvest. In addition, following the harvest women in Badakhshan were instrumental in drying, cleaning and preserving crops. Although the work that women traditionally carry out is less visible than that of men, it is just as important in the overall picture.

The involvement of women in crop cultivation is largely dependent on the nature of the cropping pattern in different areas. Grain production typically necessitates the least female involvement while horticulture (vegetables, melons, etc.), fruits and nuts in general require significant work by women.

In Deh Hamza in Ghazni Province, for instance, the *Aloobukhara* (plum) is grown by 94 percent of farmers, and following the harvest, a number of women and older

girls work through the season to peel the plums in addition to their other household tasks. Similarly, pre-conflict state initiatives in the Northern plains involving the growth of pistachio trees on government land greatly assisted with rural livelihoods in the region. At harvest time, men and young boys would be tasked with pistachio collection, following which women and children would shell the pistachios to ready them for sale.

Women usually oversee food production close to home, managing home gardens where they can improve and adapt plant varieties and thereby increase the genetic diversity available to them in times of ecological stress. In Afghanistan, kitchen gardening is considered a good way to increase household income, improve food security and ensure family nutrition. Women are also the primary producers of poultry products, for home consumption and sale.



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Women manage livestock

Men are traditionally responsible for hunting and herding livestock in Afghanistan. However, women often work at their sides.

Many rural households in Afghanistan keep livestock for domestic use and sale, giving women an important ‘caregiver’ role to play in livestock management. They nurture newborn and sick animals, do the milking, collect fodder and feed the stabled animals.

The critical role that women play in diagnosing and tending to sick animals was recognized in a FAO project that identified the capacities of rural women in animal management and as health ‘specialists’ and

singled them out for basic veterinary worker training. The project noted that women are often best placed to provide the diagnosis for a sick animal through their intimate knowledge and observation on a daily basis.

In some of the northeastern mountainous areas in Panjshir and Badakhshan, women play a far wider role in livestock management and may even go to summer pastures without their families to tend animals and produce dairy products. The recognition of women’s expertise in livestock management has led to the successful incorporation and sustainable outcomes of women’s cooperatives based on livestock and poultry management.

Women protect water supplies

Water – particularly clean water – is in chronically short supply in Afghanistan. Water tables are shrinking and rivers and wetlands are drying up, depriving homes, farmland, livestock and wildlife of life's basic necessity. Poor sanitation and waste management coupled with pollution from industry and agriculture renders much of the available water unsafe, especially for poor families who rely on public sources.

In Afghanistan, as in most societies, women are responsible for raising small livestock, growing food, cooking, bathing, cleaning, and managing their children's health. Access to clean water is therefore a particular concern for women trying to prevent their children's exposure to water-borne diseases and pollution.

Safe water is provided by a clean and healthy environment, and particularly the forests, wetlands, rivers and flood plains which filter rain and runoff from the mountains. Protecting these sources is essential for maintaining human health and livelihoods as well as critical ecosystem services.

Although women must deal with these problems daily, their power to influence decisions relating to water supply and management and the conservation of critical ecosystems is severely limited in Afghanistan and throughout much of the world.



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Women provide education and health care

In their roles as mothers and caregivers in the home, women are responsible for the health, education and well-being of their children. Outside the home, they provide a vital service to Afghan society by serving the public as teachers and medical professionals. Indeed, before the Taliban, women accounted for 70 percent of all the teachers in Kabul and an estimated 40 percent of medical doctors.

With Afghan society emphasizing modesty in relations between men and women, only women can provide medical care for other women and serve an important role in this regard, particularly in the areas of gynaecology, pediatrics and midwifery.



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Safeguarding traditional knowledge

It is feared that during the years of conflict, much of the indigenous knowledge related to sustainable agricultural and pastoral practices were lost. What remains in the minds of men and women must be preserved and recorded.

With knowledge passed down through many generations, women frequently acquire a profound understanding of their environment and of biodiversity in particular, yet their contributions to conservation go unrecognized.

Biodiversity loss now endangers their knowledge and resources, including through the erosion of their diverse resource base. Lack of ownership and control over land and resources, along with limited access to education and services, impose major constraints.

Women can transform the opium economy

Afghanistan's reliance on income from the illicit growing of opium is considered one of the country's major obstacles to recovery and growth, and a source of crime and addiction.

Although Afghanistan's reliance on income from opium is of critical concern, the role that women play in the cultivation of opium poppy in both the northern and eastern regions of Afghanistan illustrates their potential to use these skills in the cultivation of other crops. Women are involved at the different 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.

As Afghanistan's agriculture base is rebuilt, the Ministry of Agriculture, encouraged and aided by the international community, is attempting to replace poppy cultivation with products such as:

- saffron (*Crocus sativus*), a high-value crop primarily harvested and processed by trained women and girls;
- pomegranates, a popular fruit for Afghans and in growing demand in the west owing to its high levels of antioxidants;
- melons, including honeydews and watermelons;
- commercial gum from plants of the genus *Astragalus*;
- nuts including almonds, walnuts, pistachios and pine nuts;
- morels, or black mushrooms from Afghanistan's temperate forests; and
- medicinal plants.



The International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) estimates that at least 65 of the medicinal and aromatic plant species that grow in Afghanistan could be exploited commercially. These include: mint oil and water (*Mentha* spp.), used worldwide for digestive problems; *Ferrula asafoetida*, a digestive aid used in Indian cooking; cumin, a common spice useful against nausea; jujube berries (*Zizyphus* spp.) known for healing effects, and liquorice (*Glycyrrhiza* spp.), a treatment for respiratory infections.

Talents wasted, rights denied, needs overlooked

We have seen how important women are to the health of Afghanistan's environment, economy and families. Yet, like women around the world, they are too often marginalized.

- The majority of the world's women farmers do not have secure land rights, without which they have difficulty ensuring their families' livelihoods, accessing credit, or maintaining a measure of economic independence should they be widowed.
- Women's productive assets are generally of lesser value than those of men, which increases their vulnerability in the face of emergencies, such as sudden shortages in food supplies, loss of income, crop failures, natural disasters, etc.
- Women in rural areas worldwide have lower educational levels than rural men, reducing their ability to earn wages.
- Women's participation in farmers organizations and commercial networks tend to be mediated through male relations, which can lead to their needs being neglected or overruled.
- It is difficult for poor rural women to access financial services, inhibiting their ability to create new employment opportunities or adjust to the impact of conflict, natural disasters and climate change.
- In general, women and men do not participate on an equal basis in community organizations, leading to an imbalance in decision-making for the management of common natural resources, such as water, forests and fallow areas.



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The world is changing

The important role of women in sustainable development and natural resource management has gained steady recognition over the last several decades.

- The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development recognized women as a “major group” in sustainable development. Rio Principle 20 reads: “Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential in achieving sustainable development.”
- The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo acknowledged that women’s empowerment, autonomy, equality and equity are essential for sustainable development.
- The 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing asserted that “women have an essential role to play in the development of sustainable and ecologically sound consumption and production patterns and approaches to natural resource management.”
- The Beijing+5 conference in 2000 recognized several emerging critical issues for women and girls, including work-related rights, gender-based violence, reproductive and sexual rights, education and social security, and access to productive resources.
- In 2000 all 189 United Nations Member States adopted the Millennium Declaration, promising “to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable.” The Millennium Development Goals – in particular Goals 1, 3 and 7 – call for the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger,

promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women, and ensuring environmental sustainability.

- The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development affirmed the need for gender mainstreaming in all sustainable development efforts, and the recognition of women’s land rights.



“Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance.”

– Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, at the Beijing International Conference on Women and Desertification (2006)

New roles, new rights

The challenges faced by many women across the world are echoed in Afghanistan. Social upheavals and conflict have made their situation worse, and for much of the twentieth century, Afghan women were excluded from public life and all political and economic decision-making.

The outlook began to change with the advent of a new democracy in 2001. The Bonn Agreement of 2001 committed the country to a “broad based, gender sensitive, multi-ethnic and fully representative government.” It recognized women’s rights as a key issue of peacebuilding and reconstruction, and was followed by a Presidential statement supporting equality between women and men.

The Afghanistan Government has since made significant progress relating to women’s roles in society:

- Provisions on gender equality were incorporated into the Afghanistan National Development Strategy.
- In 2003, Afghanistan ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.
- A National Action Plan for Women was established to implement its commitments to women constituents over the next ten years, and fully integrate women into the Government.
- Government institutions like the Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MOWA) and the Office of the State Minister for Women’s Affairs were established.
- Women currently represent 27 percent of the National Assembly and account for a quarter of all civil servants.

In spite of these new legal frameworks and the strong interest and involvement of international organizations and NGOs, progress on the ground has not kept pace with the promise of gender equality, especially in rural areas still plagued by conflict.

Women still face prejudice in a patriarchal society, and most remain marginalized from political and economic decision-making. They still lack equal rights and access to land and other natural resources. Their education remains neglected and their livelihoods restricted.

The main threat to progress remains the lack of security throughout the country.

Dawn of a new day

Too long marginalized and deprived of power, women are now seeking a new voice and role in Afghan society. This is a particularly crucial step for Afghanistan, which faces enormous challenges relating to its environment and natural resources.

Women are not the only Afghans who benefit from this transformation. Men enjoy a new level of help and support from their wives. Children have more opportunities to enjoy a full, healthy and safe life.

Moreover, continuing progress in the realm of gender equality will allow Afghanistan to play a more prominent and respected role in the community of nations, and fulfill its commitments to international standards of human rights.

Women have a right – and a duty – to participate fully in the rehabilitation of war-ravaged Afghanistan, and in its successful rebirth as a productive, peaceful and prosperous nation.



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For more on UNEP's gender policy, see UNEP, Gender and the Environment (website)

http://www.unep.org/gender_env/About/index.asp

*UNEP's objective in Afghanistan
is long-term: to create a
truly lasting foundation for
environmental management and
sustainable development.*

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