

Zahra Yousofi  
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Professor Picket  
Washington and Lee University

## **The UN Millennium Development Goals:** **Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality in Afghanistan**

In the spring of 2015, thousands of people marched in Kabul for weeks demanding justice for Farkhunda. It was one of the largest demonstrations in the history of women's rights in Afghanistan. Some demanded an ultimate penalty to the perpetrators others were chanting death for the killers. Among the infuriated marchers many men and women were appalled by the oppressive gender structure of the Afghan society. The clerics, who tried to justify the perpetrators were also largely condemned by the public. The marchers demanded to make her case a precedent for a legal system that would protect the rights of Afghan women.

Farkhunda was a 27-year-old woman who was publicly slain by a mob in Kabul on Mar. 19<sup>th</sup>, 2015. She was murdered after allegedly arguing with a religious cleric who had falsely accused her of burning the Quran. All that the religious cleric did to mobilize the mob was yell, "kill her, she burned the Quran!" None of the attackers hesitated to ask a question before rushing to feast on a hapless victim.<sup>1</sup>

The story of Farkhunda reveals how the systematic aggression, societal oppression, and injustices of the patriarchal society pose the biggest challenge towards women's empowerment. Most importantly, it also reveals how the deep roots of gender inequality are embedded in the thoughts and actions of some of the young ordinary citizens. The 2008 Global Rights report found that 87% of Afghan women had experienced some level of violence in their lives. In the Taliban populated areas like Kandahar and Helmand, the figure was above 90%.<sup>2</sup> Based on the *Afghanistan Ministry of Women's Affairs*, cases of violence against women peaked to 2000 cases

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<sup>1</sup> Alissa J. Rubin, "Flawed Justice After a Mob Killed an Afghan women", *The New York Times*, Dec. 2015  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/27/world/asia/flawed-justice-after-a-mob-killed-an-afghan-woman.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/27/world/asia/flawed-justice-after-a-mob-killed-an-afghan-woman.html?_r=0)

<sup>2</sup> Global Rights: Partners for Justice, A National report on Domestic Abuse, 2008

for the first seven months in 2014.<sup>3</sup> In the past fifteen years, many women's empowerment and gender equality projects have been implemented, but the statistics indicate that the trajectory of Afghan women's rights remains the same. The UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDG), which is one of the largest development projects, identified women's empowerment central to global poverty reduction. Hence, the third goal of MDG is dedicated to women's empowerment and it has been implemented worldwide. While the UN claims that the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) have been the most successful anti-poverty push in the history, I argue that MDG did not achieve its stated goals, it also did not set effective goals to truly empower women and reduce gender inequality and most importantly the goals have been ineffective in addressing the issues of the Afghan women. Structural oppression and violence are the two biggest challenges that Afghan women encounter; yet, none of them are included in the Millennium Development Goals. In addressing the issues of women, the resolutions of the oppressive social structure and prevalent violence are not only integral to women's empowerment but also to their human rights.

## **Background**

### **Millennium Development Goals**

In the year 2000, 186 countries together with 23 international organizations came together to establish the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). These goals were designed to cut extreme poverty by half in its many dimensions. Women's empowerment and the promotion of gender equality was seen an integral part of achieving this global anti-poverty goal. Therefore, the UN decided to also target women's empowerment and reduction of gender inequality in areas of education, employment, political representation and women's literacy in order to better eliminate global poverty. The Millennium Development Goals have been terminated in most other countries, as the goals were supposed to be achieved by 2015. However, Afghanistan, a country that was embroiled in war in the year 2000, formally adopted MDG in 2004. Therefore, Afghanistan has an extension until 2020 to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Evaluating and assessing the effectiveness of the MDG is not only relevant but also incredibly critical to the lives of Afghans, particularly, women.

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<sup>3</sup> Tolonews, Significant Rise in violence against women cases: MoWA, Nov. 2014

## Empowerment and Capabilities Approach

Many developmental projects such as MDG often use the phrase “women’s empowerment.” Before delving deeper in the analysis of the MDG and whether it has truly empowered Afghan women, it is crucial to discuss what the frequently used phrase “women’s empowerment” actually means and entails. Batliwala (1993) conceptualizes empowerment as the process of gaining control and power. She views power as having two central aspects -- control over resources (physical, human, intellectual, financial, and the self), and control over ideology (beliefs, values and attitudes). According to Batliwala, lack of power leads to lack of control over one’s life choices and when people are deprived of their powers to make those choices, they are disempowered. She proposes that having control over resources and ideology are the two quintessential features of empowerment.

Furthermore, the most frequently used definition for empowerment has the following three dimensions: agency, resources and achievement.<sup>4</sup> Agency is the process through which an agent makes choices and exercises them. The critical factor in agency is the existence of other alternative options and the freedom to choose between those options. Resources are the preconditions via which agency is exercised and are not limited to material assets such as money but also to laws, and societal norms. Moreover, achievements are the outcomes of exercising agency.<sup>5</sup> Based on this framework, in order for a woman to be empowered, not only should she be able to have the agency to make choices in her life but also the preconditions or the resources that would allow her to make those choices.

With the conceptual compatibility between empowerment and capability, it only makes sense to also analyze UN’s women’s empowerment targets through the moral framework of the capabilities approach. Nussbaum’s capabilities approach as a theory of justice (which is an extension of Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach) states that all humans have an inherent dignity and require life circumstances that are worthy of that dignity.<sup>6</sup> The core of her argument starts with the Aristotelian questions, “What activities characteristically performed by human beings are so central that they seem definitive of the life that is truly human?” and “What kinds of

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<sup>4</sup> Naila Kabeer, Resource, Agency, Achievement: Reflection on Measurement of Women’s Empowerment (1994) <https://www.utoronto.ca/~kmacd/IDSC10/Readings/research%20design/empowerment.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Anju, Sidney, Carol: Measuring Women’s Empowerment as a Variable in International Development, 2002 <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGENDER/Resources/MalhotraSchulerBoender.pdf>, [http://www.ieham.org/html/docs/Empowerment\\_as\\_an\\_approach\\_to\\_Poverty.pdf](http://www.ieham.org/html/docs/Empowerment_as_an_approach_to_Poverty.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Nussbaum, Beyond the Social Contract: Capability and Global Justice, 2004

activity must be there if we are going to acknowledge that a given life is human?" Or in short, "what is each person to do and to be?" Hence, the capabilities approach emphasizes the importance of "functioning" which is the realization of one or more capabilities. It emphasizes the idea that in order for people to live a dignified life, they ought to be given the opportunities to develop certain capabilities that would allow them to live a life that they are worthy of as humans. Nussbaum's capability approach is quite interdependent with the concept of empowerment. It emphasizes on the idea that developing certain capabilities and the exercise of those capabilities is an integral part of the process of empowerment. In other words, the development of different human capabilities gives people the agency to be empowered. Drawing on these conceptual and moral frameworks, I will analyze whether the Millennium Development has truly empowered women and reduced gender inequality in Afghanistan.

### **Analysis of The Millennium Development Goal 3**

The third goal of the MDG addresses women's empowerment and gender equality targeting four main areas: education, employment, political representation and women's access to justice. The targets are further refined to eliminating gender disparity in all levels of education, reducing gender disparity in economic areas, to increasing female participation in elected and appointed bodies at all levels of governance to 30% and to reducing gender disparity in access to justice. 50% of these targets were supposed to be achieved by 2015 and 100% by the end of 2020. A glimpse at the recently released MDG 3 report indicates that the progress has been incredibly slow and ineffective.

#### **Education**

The most recent Millennium Development Report 2013 released shows 10% increase in the ratio of girls to boys enrollment in all levels of education since 2008.<sup>7</sup> Such a significant progress particularly compared to the Taliban regime, when the girls were not allowed to go to schools, is admirable. However, more recent data highlights the challenges that significantly hinder the progress and sustainability of the stated MDG accomplishments. The Afghanistan's Ministry of Education affirmed that 7% of girls drop out each year due to issues related to

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<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Economy of Afghanistan, The Millennium Development Report, 2013

poverty, early marriages, transportation, lack of sufficient facilities, and security.<sup>8</sup> This leaves us with only 3% improvement in girls enrollment. Hence, we can infer from these data that the MDG's enrollment ratios are merely conducted at the beginning of the academic year and do not represent the accurate number of students present throughout the academic year. Moreover, since the goals were implemented in 2004, by 2013 the MDG was supposed to increase the ratio of girls to boys education by 50% which has clearly not happened. The data suggest that the MDG has not achieved its goal of reducing gender inequality even by its measure of "increasing the ratio of girls to boys at schools."

In addition, another problematic aspect of the MDG regarding the reduction of gender inequality is that it only focuses on enrollment. It is critical to note that the increased school enrollments neither ensures increased presence, nor the growth of students' capabilities. There is also no substantial gain in the UN's effort of reducing gender inequality when the quality of education provided is incredibly low and lack of resources pose obstacles to girls' education.<sup>9</sup> UNICEF suggests the following as a measure of quality education:

- Environments that are healthy, safe, protective and gender-sensitive, and provide adequate resources and facilities;
- Learners who are healthy, well-nourished and ready to participate and learn, and supported in learning by their families and communities;
- Content that is reflected in relevant curricula and materials for the acquisition of basic skills, especially in the areas of literacy, numeracy and skill for life,
- Outcomes that encompass knowledge, skill and attitude, and are linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society<sup>10</sup>

Reports on the quality and conditions of education in Afghanistan indicates that many schools fail to provide the minimum level of satisfactory quality education or cognitively stimulating and safe environments to support learning. Students lack the quintessential resources to learn and develop their capabilities. Data suggests that low numbers of qualified educators

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<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Education, Afghanistan National EFA 2015 Review Report  
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002327/232702e.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Outlook, "Poor Quality of Education in Afghanistan" 2014  
[http://outlookafghanistan.net/topics.php?post\\_id=11392](http://outlookafghanistan.net/topics.php?post_id=11392)

<sup>10</sup> UNICEF, *Defining Quality Education*, USA, 2000

pose great challenges. In rural areas, there are no female teachers in almost 80 districts (out of 364) districts, and there are no qualified female teachers in the majority of districts, particularly in the secondary grades, which is a key reason for girls' dropout.<sup>11</sup> The reason for the shortage of female teachers is the restricting patriarchal societal norms and the threats endured by female teachers. Furthermore, violence against girls schools is also a critical issue in rural and in the active battle zones. It prevented approximately five million students from attending schools in 2010.<sup>12</sup> Another data suggests that 55% of the country's school children's growth is hindered due to malnutrition.<sup>13</sup> Hence, these reports show that the schools fail to meet UNICEF's standard of quality education.

MDG claims to be reducing gender inequality and empowering women and girls. Empowerment entails the availability of critical and sufficient resources to nurture one's capabilities and functioning. However, quality education, not mere enrollment, is the way through which girls can develop their capabilities. When the MDG's focus on girls' education ends at the enrollment level, not only is there little hope for the eradication of poverty, the future prospects of these girls also seem bleak. What is more problematic is that during their most critical time, these girls lose the opportunity to develop necessary capabilities and functioning that could enable them to change the trajectory of their lives. The issues facing girls' education all across Afghanistan is diverse depending on their locations. For example, some are more prone to harsh violence than others. Though the solution to all of these problems are beyond the scope of the Millennium Development Goals considering that Afghanistan has had thirty years of civil war and the country's infrastructure was devastated. However, these challenges also indicate that MDG has to do more effective work to address the problems of gender disparity in education in Afghanistan. Resolving these problems require relentless effort and the MDG's narrow approach of assessing and halting progress at the enrollment level certainly is not effective. It also testifies that the MDGs is prone to failure in 2020 because achieving gender equality in education requires more qualitative work which is severely lacking in the Millennium Development Goals.

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<sup>11</sup> Catherine Putz, "Measuring Afghanistan's Education Problem", *The Diplomat*, 2016 <http://thediplomat.com/2016/01/measuring-afghanistans-education-problem/>

<sup>12</sup> Education in Crisis, Afghanistan, 2013  
<http://www.educationincrisis.net/country-profiles/asia-pacific/item/551-afghanistan>

<sup>13</sup> Emma Graham-Harrison, Half of Afghan children suffer irreversible harm from malnutrition, *Guardian* 2014

## Political Representation

One of the most touted positive statistics that is often repeated in the reports like MDG regarding Afghan women's political representation is the presence of women parliament members in Afghanistan. In 2005, for the first time in the Afghan history, women entered both houses of the Afghan parliament in large numbers. Since then, women's presence in the parliament has been consistently around 27- 28%. However, these statistics measure only the presence of the women in the Parliament, not their political effectiveness. The reality of the power dynamic between male and female MPs in the parliament is quite different. Fleschenberg in *Afghanistan's Parliament in the Making: Gendered Understandings and Practices of Politics in a Transitional Country* points how in Afghanistan's male-dominating society with influential conservative veto actors, lack of support for women among male MPs leaves the female MPs with limited agency and autonomy.<sup>14</sup> Since 2009, the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law, which was approved by the Former President Hamid Karzai has yet to be passed in the parliament despite women MPs relentless efforts.<sup>15</sup> A bill that is so vital for women's protection from different forms of domestic and societal oppression has taken almost 7 years and is yet to be passed and implemented. It demonstrates that there is a strong opposition to the protection of women's basic rights even among the MP's, each of whom are supposedly representing different provinces and 50% of whose constituents are women.

## Women's Access to Justice

The MDG regarding women's access to justice aims at two targets. 1). Adoption, review and amendment of legislation that protects the rights of women, particularly in employment, family rights, property and inheritance and in accordance with the Afghan Constitution. 2). Adoption of legislation that criminalizes all forms of gender and sexual-based violence. According to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, in the first nine months in 2015, 4250 cases of violence were reported.<sup>16</sup> Many acts of

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<sup>14</sup> Fleschenberg A., 2009, 'Afghanistan's Parliament in the Making: Gendered Understandings and Practices of Politics in a Transitional Country', Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung/UNIFEM, Berlin

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/01/where-afghan-law-fails-women-2015119256183362.html>

<sup>16</sup> Tolonews, 4250 Cases of violence against women, 2015

<http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/18240-4250-cases-of-violence-against-women-in-nine-months-aihr>

violence remains unreported due to the cultural issues such as fear of social stigmatization and social exclusion. In the most recent MDG report, no data related to the progress of women's access to justice has been reported. The consistent staggering reports of violence against women suggest that MDG has had little influence to increase women's access to justice. Farkhunda's case was a prime example of how the judicial system failed people's plea for sustaining justice. The outrage of demonstrators had initially impacted the judicial system to declare death sentences for the four killers. However, their later trial sentences were reviewed and reduced to only ten or twenty years of imprisonment. The policemen who did nothing to protect Farkhunda were sentenced to one year of prison and eight were acquitted.<sup>17</sup> The result outraged many Afghans.

## **Employment**

The ratio of female to male in government offices is reported at 27% in 2012. The World Bank reported the female to male ratio at 16% in 2014. Additionally, Afghan women also earn 49% lower than their male counterparts.<sup>18</sup> Given the current unemployment rate of 40%, no recent data has been released illuminating the details of its implication on the lives of the women. However, one can only imagine the struggles of unemployed women.<sup>19</sup> Based on the trend of the job market, we can infer that MDG's effort to reduce the employment disparity and alleviating women out of poverty has not been effective.

To sum up this section, one of the common patterns in the MDG reports is the underlying assumption that an increase in the ratio of girls and women presence be it in the educational, political or economic sectors equates empowerment and increased gender equality. Given all the problems mentioned above, we know that these assumptions are flawed, and that the MDG's approach in tackling the challenges of women in Afghanistan is very narrow-sighted. Empowerment is dependent on the development of capabilities. When the capabilities and functioning of individuals are not sufficiently developed, they are unable to live up to their potential. The complicated nature of gender requires a much

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<sup>17</sup> BBC, Afghan court quashes Farkhunda mob killing death sentence, 2015,

<sup>18</sup> Timea Kasa, "Assessing Women's Rights in Afghanistan in 2014", Heinrich Boll Stiftung

<sup>19</sup> Trading Economics, Afghanistan Unemployment Rate, 2016

more robust analysis and goal setting processes in which the important variables that have limited women and continue to limit women's participation in the social, economic, political spheres of their society be considered. In addition, despite its narrow goals, the Millennium Development Goals have also failed to achieve its stated goals.

## **The Limitations of the Millennium Development Goals**

The Millennium Development Goals' implementation has primarily been through a top-down approach in Afghanistan even though the UN emphasizes on the importance of civil society engagement in the implementation process. The only MDG annual progress reports are the ones published by the government. There are no data available to affirm the involvement of the Afghan civil society organizations. Moreover, Chuck Thiessen in *Local Ownership of Peacebuilding in Afghanistan* reports that a large percentage of the international funding to the Afghan government remains beyond the control of the government and is pre-assigned for certain international priorities. There are also complains that the MDG goals are more tailored to the reporting and evaluation requirements of the donors rather than the actual needs of the community members. The Afghan policy analysts concluded that the reason why MDG and many other aid projects fail in Afghanistan is because the goals are not context specific.<sup>20</sup> Because the very essence of the goals such as MDG is to resolve the existing problems in a community, it only makes sense to address community's problems and find effective ways to resolve them otherwise the entire effort is futile.

Another problematic aspect of the MDG is that even from its inception at the goal setting process, the UN adopted a top-down approach and only included governments to determine the ingredients of Millennium Development Goals. The civil society organizations who are mostly involved at the grassroots level and are aware of the problems in their communities, were not involved at all. Therefore, the biggest and most obvious challenges facing women worldwide such as violence and oppressive structures were not addressed in any of the MDGs. These two interconnected phenomena also constitute the core of the Afghan women's challenges. Part of the reason why the current

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<sup>20</sup> Thiessen, Chuck. *Local Ownership of Peacebuilding in Afghanistan: Shouldering Responsibility for Sustainable Peace and Development*.

Millennium Development Goals are not achieved is also because these larger, more prevalent issues are left unchallenged. To understand why these are the two roadblocks to women's empowerment entails a brief awareness about some of the critical cultural and historical events related to women in Afghanistan.

## **Historical Background on Women's Rights**

Understanding gender issues in Afghanistan derives from an understanding of the country's multi-ethnic, multilingual and traditional society, which has been governed along tribal lines and by weak states. The gender roles have been impacted and determined by different interpretations of Islam along with tribal laws and cultural practices. Women have always been perceived as the receptacles of "honor," and they have always been expected to engage only in the domestic sphere.<sup>21</sup> The incident of Farkhunda clearly mirrors the misogynistic mentality of the male assassins that have been inspired by the traditional norms and definitions of women's role. On the other hand, thousands of demonstrators show the other side of the Afghan society that have often defied the oppressive structures. Both give an overview of the different groups of Afghans and the complexity of gender discourses in Afghanistan. The history of women's rights has not always been the way it is today.

Two epochs have significantly shaped gender dynamics and women's roles in Afghanistan. The first period is during the reign of Amanullah in 1923, which included rapid reforms to improve women's lives and women's positions in the family. He was relentless in modernizing Afghanistan. His modernizing agenda included the liberation of women from tribal cultural norms. Amanullah publicly campaigned against the veil, against polygamy, and encouraged education of girls not just in Kabul but also in the countryside. He also said that Islam did not require women to cover their bodies or wear any special kind of veil. His wife tore off her veil in public and the wives of the officials also followed her. His approach was radical and adversely impacted the perception of women's empowerment and equality among the local conservatives. Girl's education equated the removal of veil in their minds. The cultural symbolism associated with the veil equates piety and modesty- the virtues that women are supposed to adopt. Therefore, abrupt removal of the veil was a cultural and religious threat that led to widespread protest and contributed to the ultimate demise of Amanullah's reign.

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<sup>21</sup> For a good historical overview on women in Afghanistan see Huma Ahmed- Ghosh, "A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future Or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan," *Journal of International Women's Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2003 <http://www.iiav.nl/eazines/web/JournalofInternationalWomensStudies/2003/Vol4Nr3May/Afghanistan.pdf>.

The second period occurred under the leadership of the communist-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in 1970s. The leadership forced an agenda of social change to empower women that led to the ten year war between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union, the birth of Mujahideen and the decline of women's status. During this era, there was a rise in women's education, faculty in the university and representatives in the Parliament. The legislated inclusion of women into education was perceived by some as "unbearable interference in domestic life. Such revolutionary social change caused concern among the religious clerics and tribal chiefs. They viewed it against tradition, anti-religious and a challenge to male authority. Most importantly the Soviet occupation and the Soviet backed Afghan government gave the tribal religious leaders more reason to despise women's empowerment.

It is important to note that all of these revolutionary women's empowerment movements were happening mostly in the bigger cities such as Kabul. The rural areas were the breeding grounds for the "freedom fighters" who opposed the reformists. There was a growing fear that the traditional culture and most importantly the religion was being threatened by the reformists in the cities. Their outcry for independence and the ousting of the Soviets out of Afghanistan was to preserve religion and culture. When the Soviets left Afghanistan, the conservatives reversed all the new policies and practices. Women and girls were not allowed to go to schools or their jobs. The country fell apart and the women's situation worsened to a point that they were expected to cover up with burqas and the only time they went outside was when they needed to buy food during the Taliban regime.

What we can conclude from these historical episodes is that women's rights have not always been the way it is today. The Afghan society has had periods, when women received their highest degrees, participated in the social, political, economic spheres and had equal rights. We can also conclude that the reason both of these periods were unsuccessful, unsustainable, and even worse led to violent fundamentalist backlash was because the reform was only implemented from a top-down approach without resolving the prevalent conservative mentality about women's rights at the community level. Women who had always been traditionally covered up and allowed only in the domestic sphere were wearing mini-skirts and attained high quality education. The rule of law had only temporarily suppressed the societal norms in larger cities. The religious clerics played a strong role in preaching and mobilizing public to rise against the reformists in altering the policies and practices.

These historical events are particularly relevant to the current status of women. The traditional Afghans who perceived women's empowerment a threat to the culture and used religion to silence women are still using the same tactics to silence women today. The current need of the Afghan women (besides the effective accomplishment of the current four MDG) is also the resolution of the obstacle of the patriarchal social structure. The staggering violence against women is the manifestation of the underlying unjust social structure. Therefore, the UN can try to fund the government to build as many schools as possible but when the mentality of the people are left unchanged, those efforts will not lead girls to attend schools and it will not change the reality of women's lives in Afghanistan. The resolution to Afghan women's challenges requires effective work both from the top-down and bottom up.

## **Intervention**

The Millennium Development Goals is important initiative in addressing global poverty. However, a more effective eradication of poverty and women's empowerment would require amendment of the current goals with an emphasis on quality instead of quantity, inclusive democracy particularly in the implementation process (a balance of top-down & bottom up) as well as context specificity of the goals to best address the issues of the community. As stated earlier, the biggest obstacle to women's empowerment is the patriarchal social structure in the society. Therefore, aggressive reform targeted at changing people's mentality at the community level is integral to accomplishing gender equality and women's empowerment. A few ways to challenge the current patriarchal social structure would be by targeting the local influencers (religious clerics), launching mass awareness campaigns through media, and including gender studies courses in the education system.

Part of the reason that there is a strong resistance towards women's participation in the public sphere is the underlying cynicism regarding the concept of democracy and women's rights. The local conservatives view it as western imposed ideology that is incompatible with their traditional mindset and ways of life. The religious leaders mostly promote this ideology to the local people. On the other hand, they are also the traditional gatekeepers for making final decision regarding women's rights particularly in rural areas where the government has less control. The high illiteracy rates between men and women make the religious leaders much more influential and prominent figures. However, this is exactly why it is crucial to work with these local influencers "religious clerics" to change the traditional perceptions of women's roles and

initiate discourses about women's rights. In order not to repeat history, it is pivotal, however, to present human rights in Islamic terminology and rhetoric.

While one might question the compatibility of Islam and democracy and argue that the promotion of human rights is futile because people do not agree on the concept of human rights. The answer to the question of Islam's compatibility with democracy requires an in-depth analysis of and a distinction between the theological and historical Islam, which are beyond the scope of this paper. However, discourses of the experts regarding the compatibility of Islam and human rights gives a brief helpful overview. Much of the ongoing debate among the ethicists and religious experts regarding the compatibility of Islam and human rights revolves around different interpretations of Islam. This is due to the fact that there is no original document that explicitly supports or rejects human rights in Islam. Various discourses regarding Islam's compatibility with human rights led to the following five approaches:

1. The political approach: Ann Elizabeth Mayer suggests that one way to closely examine the Islamic ethics and Islam's compatibility with human rights is through examining the political and cultural practices of actual Muslims and actual "Islamic states".<sup>22</sup> Mayer states that many Islamic states on the political level agree and have endorsed the universality of human rights among the International legal community.
2. The legal approach: Mashood Baderin's *International Human Rights and Islamic Law* (2003) discusses that Islamic laws have always been amenable to the historical reinterpretation.<sup>23</sup> He is proposing that Islamic law, particularly Shair'a, can be (and should be) amended to best suffice the needs of the modern Islamic communities.
3. The ethical approach: Oh's *The Right of God: Islam, Human Rights, and Comparative Ethics* (2010) argues that because some of the Islamic ethicists endorse human rights, and impact the thoughts and practices of other Muslims, they give us a window into the way a vast number of Muslims might think. Hence, we can infer that Islam is at a certain degree compatible with human rights.<sup>24</sup>
4. The rational approach: Abdulkarim Souroush in his book *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam* (2000) argues that reliance on reason is appropriate in the ethical

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<sup>22</sup> Though Mayer's work, as already indicated, tends to focus on the political decisions and practices of powerful elites, it also makes way importantly for the similarly politico-ethnographic approach that focuses on the rhetoric and activity of non-elites. Benjamin MacQueen, to take just one recent example, analyzes the work of actual Muslim reformers in Iraq. By analyzing the political activity of these actual Muslims, MacQueen is able to tell us a bit better about the complex compatibility between human rights and "Islam." See "Islamic reformism and human rights in Iraq: gender equality and religious freedom" from *Islam and Human Rights in Practice: Perspectives across the Ummah*, eds. Shahram Akbarzede and Benjamin MacQueen (London: Routledge 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Mashood Baderin, *International Human Rights and Islamic Law* (Oxford UP 2003), 6, emphasis added.

<sup>24</sup> Irene Oh, *The Rights of God: Islam, Human Rights, and Comparative Ethics* (Georgetown UP), 68.

deliberation. He proposes appeal to reason in determining the rights of individuals in Islam.<sup>25</sup>

5. The scriptural approach: Abdulaziz Sachedina in his book *Islam and the challenge of human rights* highlights that in determining whether Islam is compatible with human rights one ought to assess the scripture or the source, Quran, that influences millions of Muslims rather than Mayer's approach of assessing Muslims, themselves.<sup>26</sup>

All of these approaches confirm that there is compatibility between Islam and human rights<sup>27</sup> and that it is the matter of the different interpretations of the sources that has resulted in different variations in practicing Islam. Furthermore, Islam, just like many other religions, has been adjusted to people's cultural practices, values and beliefs. The cultures that are more male-dominated use religion to justify and sustain their power. But since culture is not static, it means that culture can be changed and the mentality of the conservative local Afghans can also be altered. Looking at the current improvements in women's status in the bigger cities like Kabul, it is hard not to realize how far the country has come since the downfall of Taliban. Furthermore, there is also evidence that the religious leaders and the community members are more willing to accept an idea when presented from the standpoint of the religion. Wazhma Frogh, a women's rights activist, who is well versed in the Islamic laws says,

"In a country where religion is so important to people, we need to understand the religion," she says. Arguments based on principles of universal human rights or on what international conventions say don't persuade many traditional Afghans to support reforms, she says. "My experience in the last 10 years suggests that only religious arguments hold sway." Wazhma Frogh<sup>28</sup>

Wazhma was able to open literacy courses for the local women after talking to the religious leaders of the community. Like her there are many other grassroots activists and non-profit organizations currently working to change the perceptions of local people about gender. Young Women For Change is another grassroots organization that addressed the issue of street

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<sup>25</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: The Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, eds. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (Oxford UP 2000), 126.

<sup>26</sup> Abdulaziz Sachedina, *Islam and the Challenge of Human Rights* (Oxford UP 2009),

<sup>27</sup> Pickett, Howard, *Islam and Human Rights*, June 2011-12

<sup>28</sup> Wazhma Frogh: "an Afghan uses her religion to press for women's rights", WUNRN [http://www.wunrn.org/news/2008/04\\_08/03\\_31\\_08/033108\\_afghansitan.htm](http://www.wunrn.org/news/2008/04_08/03_31_08/033108_afghansitan.htm)

harassment and worked at the grassroots level to raise awareness about women's rights. This organization mobilized men and women to demonstrate against street harassment. They also held projects at girls and boys schools to raise awareness about women's rights. Though street harassment is still an issue in Kabul, people are more actively condemning it and taking action to stop it. This suggests that working at the community level with a bottom up strategy can be effective though it might be a slow and gradual process.

Campaigns through mass media are other ways to influence people's mentality about women. Some of the current unconventional Afghan media have worked aggressively on this issue in the past decade and have successfully opened more space for women. Particularly after the downfall of Taliban, seeing women deliver news, debate about the political, social and economic issues or even compete at the singing contests in the Afghan Star (American Idol) impacted the local people's perception to once again embrace women's activism and participation. Tolo also has organized many awareness programs about women's rights. Hence, there are many grassroots organizations, media outlets, educational institutions that are already working on this issue. The UN should support these groups more because misogyny starts with a simple thought process. The more the mentality of ordinary people are challenged, the less social obstacles will women face. Given the history of the women's oppression, changing people's perception regarding a norm that is so ingrained in the culture will be a long term and gradual process which will require persistent effort.

Moreover, though Farkhunda's case is an extreme and exceptionally rare case in the capital; and violence against women persists at varying degrees in different parts of the country at the community level. The fact that thousands of people marched on Kabul streets claiming justice for Farkhunda and denouncing the barbaric and inhumane act, and the fact that many grassroots are currently working on the issue of women is an indication that human rights is universal concept and that the acts of a few is not representative of the ethical beliefs of the majority. With their presence and demonstration, the person showed that what happened to Farkhunda is never acceptable. However, the fact that it still happened indicates that the local activists cannot alone tackle this challenge and the role of the UN in supporting these groups and effective MDG implementation are crucial factors to address the issues of women.

# Why should UN do more to empower Afghan women?

## Human Rights Argument

The increasing rates of violence against women and the consistent track record of government's failure in sustaining justice for women at different social, economic and political levels is indicative of government's inability to protect the basic rights of Afghan women. The UN's Declaration of Human Rights proclaims the protection of human rights. Through its different developmental programs such as the MDG, the UN has taken many important steps to address the critical issues of the world including issues related to women in poverty. However, the improvement of Afghan women's situation requires better strategies, longer and more consistent effort, and the achievement of the promised goals. Particularly in the case of a failed or fragile state, which cannot protect the rights of its citizens, it is imperative for the UN to ensure that human rights be sustained, ensured, honored, and protected. It is important to note that the protection of rights does not have to only be through a top-down approach. The UN should adopt other means to ensure the protection of rights including changing oppressive and traditional mindsets because they threaten the liberty, rights, and opportunities of women.

## Capability Argument

Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach can also be used to illuminate why the UN ought to do more to empower Afghan women. Her theory of justice states that all humans have an inherent dignity and deserve life circumstances that are worthy of that dignity.<sup>29</sup> In order to be able to live a dignified life, Nussbaum proposes that certain capabilities ought to be developed. Many of the capabilities she lists as essentially basic capabilities are severely lacking for most Afghan women. For example, bodily integrity which she further develops as the ability to move freely from place to place; being able to secure against any types of assault. In short, feeling safe and protected. The dominance of the structural oppression undermines the women's opportunity to feel safe regardless of the laws. Nussbaum does not consider it a capability when law proscribes capabilities but society hinders the realization and the development of these capabilities. Furthermore, since the development of human capabilities is influenced by the

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<sup>29</sup> Nussbaum, *Beyond the Social Contract: Capability and Global Justice*, 2004

external conditions, the external factors that hinder its growth should be eliminated because they violate human's right. As stated earlier, women's empowerment requires the development of certain important capabilities that would allow her to grow to her full potential. The Millennium Development Goals ought to be designed in such a way that truly empowers women and promotes the development of women's capabilities.

### **Utilitarian Argument (Economic Benefit)**

In the past fifteen years, the UN has spent millions of dollars to rebuild Afghanistan. However, the budget spent on women's empowerment programs has been incredibly insignificant and used ineffectively. Afghan women are the untapped talent pool that is underutilized, investing on them will not only alleviate them out of poverty but also improve the economy. Based on the utilitarian argument, women's empowerment maximizes the utility of the women and the society as a whole. Empowered women can create a ripple effect influencing millions of young women to enter into the workforce and thereby strengthen the economy in the future. Educated, empowered women will also create better and stronger communities. It is no wonder that societies in which women's rights are violated are also struggling with their economy. The importance of empowering Afghan women particularly given the current unemployment rate being at 40% is crucial and even a vital step. In the alleviation of poverty, effective investment on women always leads to maximum marginal return.

### **Conclusion**

Afghan women's empowerment has been a much politicized yet underinvested and unresolved issue in the past fifteen years. Unfortunately the MDG shares severe inadequacies with other aid projects in addressing the needs of the Afghan women. Looking at the reports enables one to realize that MDG is unrealistic and, destined to remain an underachieved target for women's empowerment and gender equality. For example, the Millennium Development requires the government to accomplish the goals by 2020, which is not only impractical but also idealistic given its implementation strategy and the current state of the Afghan government. Sadly, it would also be delusional to expect the achievement of all of these goals in the near future from Afghanistan. However, adjusting and amending the goals to best address and resolve the issues of women is critical because it is well past the time to terminate oppression against women. And in order to achieve that goal, the UN should not resort to minimalistic efforts.

Addressing women's issues is vital not only because of the utilitarian argument of economic benefit, but because women have tolerated inequality for far too long and their rights have been violated for far too long, it is time to stop sexism, misogyny and any form of gender oppression. It is also time to effectively address the issues of women in aid programs like MDG and truly commit to resolve those issues by tackling them from multiple approaches.

