



global witness

Extractive sector abuses and women's rights in Afghanistan



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Above: In Herat, Afghanistan, women line up to collect bags of split chick pea, wheat, and cooking oil being distributed by the UN World Food Programme (WFP). 05/07/2012. © UN Photo / Eric Kanalstein.

Cover image: A burqa clad woman walks past a row of gravestones, on sale at the side of a street. © Seamus Murphy / Panos

Abuses and bad management around Afghanistan's extractive industries (mining, oil and gas) are a threat to the stability and prosperity of the whole country – but they disproportionately harm the position of women. This harm has three key elements:

- **Extractives directly sustain conflict – arguably the greatest driver of harm for Afghan women. They fund armed groups and political actors who undermine stability in general and the position of women in particular, and who directly carry out abuses against them.**
- **Abuses and corruption around mining divert the revenues which might fund social investments like education, infrastructure and health, which are disproportionately important to the position of women, to the private pockets of political actors and armed groups.**
- **Extractives create direct social and environmental impacts which disproportionately affect women, such as water pollution, out-migration of men, and increased criminality.**

Increased transparency, accountability and community engagement not only offer a realistic prospect of reducing this danger, but can also, if done right, empower women and give them a greater voice in the use of these rich resources. Community monitoring of mining, and crucially provision for communities to have a fair share in the revenues they generate, are especially important in this respect.

Mining is a major driver of conflict, which does massive and disproportionate harm to women

Mining in Afghanistan is thought to be the second largest source of income for the Taliban after narcotics.¹ In Helmand for example, marble is thought to have provided the insurgency with millions of dollars of funding.² There is evidence that the Islamic State have a particular strategic interest in the extractive sector,³ and preliminary Global Witness research indicates that they derive significant funding from mining.⁴ Illegal mining is empowering armed groups who have been at the root of some of the worst abuses against women in Afghanistan.

But mining also funds supposedly 'pro-government' armed groups who themselves chronically undermine stability. A strong example is Badakhshan, where competition between two nominally 'pro-government' actors over lapis mines took an entire district out of government hands and was behind many armed clashes. Their actions greatly undermined the integrity of the local government and hence its effectiveness and ability to provide services such as healthcare and education. It also created a fertile environment for the Taliban, whose presence in the province has greatly increased – directly threatening the position of women living there. Global Witness research also suggests that the Taliban also made around \$4m from the lapis mines in 2015.

And the conflict and weak rule of law which mining has done so much to fuel has been at the root of much of the disproportionate suffering of women in Afghanistan in the past 35 years. "Afghan women were the ones who lost most from the war and militarization," as Horia Mosadiq of Amnesty International put it.⁵ One NGO working in the sector estimated that prior to the Soviet occupation and Taliban takeover, Afghan women comprised 50% of government workers, 70% of schoolteachers, and 40%

of doctors in Kabul: "However, the effects of war and the Taliban regime quickly effaced the rights of women in public life and relegated them solely to the domestic domain (...). Under the Taliban, women were forced to wear an all-encompassing burqa in public and barred from working outside the home. They were also banned from attending schools, riding bicycles, wearing brightly colored clothes, or laughing loudly. As many as 1 million women have been widowed by Afghanistan's wars and left with few options for supporting themselves and their families."⁶

Around the world, conflict has a particular negative effect on women, as the *World Development Report* documented. The global review of fifty countries found that women and children make up almost 80% of refugees and displaced persons, and documented significant increases in gender-based violence after a major conflict, both from violence against women as a direct weapon of war and from the breakdown in overall social and moral order. Women also tend to face higher levels of domestic violence.⁷

Abuses around extractives means their benefits go to strongmen and not services or communities

Instead of supporting the Afghan budget or local communities in way which might benefit the position of women and empower their voices, the national treasure of Afghanistan's mineral wealth is going to the pockets of strongmen.

The potential of extractives is sometimes exaggerated, but there is no doubt they should be a major source of tax revenue and economic progress. In fact, IMF projections for Afghan growth explicitly rely on the development of the sector.⁸ But this potential is being stolen, at massive cost to the ability of the government to provide services and security and to its own legitimacy and stability. In

Badakhshan, for example, an estimated \$100m in revenue has been lost since 2001, and business investments in the area which might have greatly increased the quality and quantity of mining have been frustrated.⁹ The government declared overall revenues from the entire sector in 2013 of just \$20m, about what armed groups and the Taliban are estimated to have made in 2014 from lapis mining alone. If just some of the revenue from mines stayed in the local area or was directly given to local communities, it could have benefitted the local economy and services essential to improving the position of women.

But where there is a local voice in mining, at present it often fails to reflect the voices of women. In the case of Qara Zaghan and Hajigak for example, the heavy reliance on tribal elders in dispute resolution tended to result in bias against women's desired outcomes. Moreover, in surveys of people living around Hajigak and Qara Zaghan mining areas, a higher percentage of women than men felt that women had no role in community monitoring.¹⁰ To fix this, the government must mandate, and enforce, mechanisms that expressly include women.

Women disproportionately suffer the negative social and environmental impacts of mining

Around the world, the extractive industries (EI) affect women in different ways than men. As the World Bank has reported, "Men have the most access to the benefits, which consist primarily of employment and income, while women and the families they care for are more vulnerable to the risks created by EI, which consist of mostly harmful social and environmental impacts."¹¹



United Nations-backed nationwide television and radio debates, marking the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and the "16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence," have spotlighted the critical importance of protecting Afghan women and girls from violence, as well as the requirement for authorities to meet their legal obligations. © Tem Peg / UNAMA

Employment

Mining in Afghanistan has a major economic importance, even if most of its potential is wasted. Because the formal sector is under-developed (with several highly-publicized, multi-billion dollar mining projects in Afghanistan failing to deliver), there is often a mistaken belief that the extractive industries are insignificant. But a 2015 report commissioned by the German aid agency GIZ estimated that as many as 200,000 to 450,000 people are involved in various upstream and downstream businesses related to artisanal and small scale mining (ASM), or about 3 to 6 percent of the labor force.¹²

Women have a stake in this activity, but they see less of the benefit than men, and in current circumstances are less likely to benefit from its development. That is not to say they have no role: while they are generally not a part of actual mining operations, they take part in processing and production of low value gemstones and jewelry making in their homes and villages.¹³ It is estimated that 2,690 villages scattered throughout all provinces take part in some form of rough stone processing or jewelry making, a remarkable 15 percent of all Afghan villages.¹⁴ This employment is all the more important given the scarcity of viable alternatives.

But the bulk of benefit from mining still goes to men, and the development of the sector may do little to change this. The World Bank has assessed that while 10-20,000 new jobs could be created in a more formal mining sector by the 2020s, very little benefit would be received by either women or the poor.¹⁵ As women are already only 19 percent of the labor force (and only 11 percent of non-agricultural jobs), these are troubling statistics.¹⁶ While mining companies and host governments are encouraged to support women,¹⁷ in Afghanistan the social mores against women working outside the home (or even leaving the home at all) mean that access to microloans, capacity building, and affirmative action for jobs may have a negligible impact. For more informal artisanal and small scale mining, women face problems related to the roles open to them, unequal pay, and specific health and safety risks.¹⁸

Migration

Meanwhile, the more negative social impacts of mining tend to affect women more than men. Out-migration of men for extractive industry jobs can leave women even more vulnerable to shocks while carrying greater burdens. The World Bank has documented how male migration can empower women by making them heads of households, but in Afghanistan, being left behind has tended to make women more vulnerable to shocks, but with fewer coping strategies.¹⁹

Security

Personal security is also an issue. A study conducted by the leading Afghan governance NGO Integrity Watch Afghanistan (IWA) and the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), focusing on the three major mining areas of Mes Aynak, Hajigak and Qara Zaghan, found that security for women was perceived to degrade from the presence of militias of and men from outside communities. As a result, women's mobility, which is already very limited in these areas, fell even further. Security concerns can also mean that new infrastructure associated with extractive projects has a limited benefit: for example a road that could improve women's access to medical clinics or attend schools may bring security problems that limit women's ability to actually access these services.²⁰ Criminality near extractive sites is a common problem around the world, including violence against women: these problems can be expected to increase in Afghanistan as mining develops if protections are not in place.²¹ Violence against Afghan women is already pervasive and rising.²²

Near the Aynak copper mine, women displaced by the project experienced significant impacts on their social relations because of changes in the routes within and between villages. They found their ability to attend social gathering and events, as well as even walking in the village, to be further hampered. Similar concerns were raised by the case of the gold mine at Qara Zaghan, although the evidence was less clear.²³

Environmental impacts

The environmental impacts of mining highlighted by the joint IWA and USIP study were also severe, especially in relation to water. In the case of Mes Aynak, communities claimed the water table had already fallen due to drilling in the area, making water collection more difficult. As women and girls were nearly entirely responsible for collecting water, the difficulty accessing water and the need for longer round trips fell especially hard on them. Fears of the decline of water quality and contamination were also major concerns. Likewise, any reduction in irrigated land or pollution could change the agricultural system or lower food security, which has especially significant impact on women both in their substantial involvement in agriculture²⁴ and because food insecurity tends to affect women and girls more than males because women are expected to cut back on food or other expenditures more.²⁵

Basic policy changes can reduce abuses around extractives – and empower women

Corruption and conflict around extractives are a major challenge, but they are not intractable – and the right reforms can especially strengthen the voice of women. Empowering women in turn supports efforts to ensure the extractive sector benefits all of society.

Global Witness and Integrity Watch Afghanistan, working in collaboration with other Afghan and international CSOs and a range of experts, have developed a limited set of six key reforms, designed to be both effective and realistic in the environment of Afghanistan.

Key Extractives Policy Asks:

Transparency

Amend Afghan law to:

- **Require the publication of project-level payment and production figures** – a basic but immensely powerful tool for the Afghan media and public to uncover abuses.
- **Establish a single, transparent account, to be for all natural resource revenues and payments as a condition of their receipt** – removing the problem of complex, opaque national and local accounts for extractive sector revenue, and guaranteeing that tax avoidance and other abuses are visible.
- **Make publication of natural resource contracts a condition for their validity** – providing a fool-proof guarantee that either a contract is public, or it is illegal – a much stronger mechanism than simply requiring contract publication.
- **Require publication of the beneficial ownership of extractive companies** – supporting the government's welcome commitment to create a public register of beneficial ownership.

Security

- Make significant mining areas across Afghanistan an explicit focus for security policy, to ensure appropriate protection against the exploitation of the mines by armed groups. Make the professionalism, independence and oversight of forces near mining areas a priority. Consider creating a dedicated national Mining Protection Force, but only on condition it is subject to special training and accountability.

Communities

- Develop an inclusive program for community monitoring of mining. As part of this, allocate a fair percentage of the legal revenue or profits of a mine directly to communities, to help incentivise legal extraction. Give communities a greater stake and say in mining through stronger dispute resolution, consultation and local employment requirements. Ensure that women and other vulnerable groups are fully represented on community decision making and reporting councils.



Women's Self Help Group in Badkashan, where some of Afghanistan's greatest mineral treasures are mined. © Aga Khan Foundation: Sandra Calligaro

The role of community monitoring and community benefit is especially important. There are established structures which make this more feasible and provide some precedents. First, community monitoring of both aid and mining has been piloted by Integrity Watch Afghanistan, with generally positive results. Secondly, there is a model for how a community share in mining might be managed in the Community Development Councils (CDCs) created under Afghanistan's National Solidarity Program (NSP).²⁶ The program is notable in that village councils are in principle gender balanced and elected via secret ballot and through universal suffrage. These councils already draft community development plans and propose village-level development projects to be funded with NSP block grants: they are a logical channel to handle further funds from extractives.²⁷

The CDCs have had faced some issues, and not all of them meet the fifty percent female quota.²⁸ But the quotas have helped amplifying women's voices and highlight their needs and priorities – and there is evidence the CDCs have had a positive impact on women's access to education, health care, and counselling services.²⁹ NSP participation also seemed to lead to some increase in men being more accepting of women participating in political activity and local governance as well as the overall participation in village leadership.³⁰ The use of CDCs themselves or some similar program could be an important avenue to help mitigate the “male only” political space in regards to extractive industries.

Integrity Watch Afghanistan have highlighted other, less high-level measures, including collecting and disaggregating data based on gender within social and environmental impact assessments, conducting separate needs assessments for women and men, and building in social protection and safety nets and training and job opportunities for women and girls within extractive sector projects.³¹

Finally, Afghanistan's international partners need to commit to providing technical, material and political support for these reforms, with a particular focus on increasing oversight and management capabilities in the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum (MOMP), and Afghan actions to increase security and strengthen rule of law in natural resource areas. They should also put in place supply chain controls and exercise oversight over their own companies. But the key test of their seriousness on this issue will be the extent to which they have high-level political engagement with the Afghan government, and integrate it into mutual accountability benchmarks – like those agreed at the Brussels conference.

Global Witness and IWA have also developed wider recommendations for reforms ranging from accounting requirements to conflict resolution. For more details, see the sources below, www.globalwitness.org, and www.iwaweb.org.

A neglected challenge

Improving the position of women in Afghanistan is an enormous task, with many different elements – but addressing abuses and mismanagement around the extractive industries has to be a part of the puzzle. So far, both the Afghan government and its international partners have failed to make this a priority (although the government has recently made some positive commitments, notably on increasing transparency). The strategic mistake is all the greater given the scale of the threat extractives pose not just to women but to the country as a whole. There is a real risk of a prolonged, resource-driven conflict like the one that has been so devastating to women – and to the stability of a whole region – in the Democratic Republic of Congo. If the government and its supporters are serious about supporting women in Afghanistan, they need address this danger, and with a much greater urgency.

Notes and sources

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- 31 Jobs for women at EI sites need to be identified that take into account the current social restrictions and security concerns they face, along with other income generating activities in extractive areas. Additionally, companies can offer skills training for women, including jobs that can be done in the home, perhaps while helping women find access to seed capital and resources. Ibid., pp 11–12



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