



Challenges for participation of Women in domestic matters for sustainable family economic growth in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges faced by women in Afghanistan at the domestic level and their implications for sustainable socio-economic growth. The study uses a qualitative approach incorporating both primary and secondary data to provide a comprehensive analysis of the challenges women confront within their households such as traditional norms, economic dependency and limited education, which collectively undermine women's ability to contribute effectively to domestic and economic decision-making. Furthermore, this study has used theory of participation to explore the connection of women participation at grassroot level and its effect on sustainable economic growth in Afghanistan. World Bank data 2023 revealed that the female labor force participation rate in Afghanistan dropped to 15.2%, moreover UN Women reported in 2022; 90% of Afghan women are either unemployed or working in informal, unpaid roles, primarily due to various socio-cultural hinderances, and lack of access to education. Furthermore, the findings of the study also underline the requirement of targeted interventions at grassroot level and recommend using a bottom-up approach which includes providing equal opportunities, cultural shifts and legal reforms for inclusive and sustainable development of the country.

1. INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan confronts a complex interplay of economic, social, and cultural challenges that have prominent implications for its sustainable socio-economic growth (Koshy, 2023). While the country's agricultural and subsistence economy, including illicit opium production, has provided some resilience in rural areas, higher prices, reduced demand, lower employment, and disruptions to services have severely impacted livelihoods. The proportion of households unable to meet basic food needs has more than doubled, rising from 16% to 36% (Jafarov & Singh, 2024). This fragile economic context is further exacerbated by policies including restrictions on women and girls, which have prompted the international community to recalibrate its support toward humanitarian aid and basic service delivery (BN & Chowdhury, 2022).

Despite these challenges, Afghanistan's long-term growth prospects hinge on a significant shift from reliance on international aid and consumption-driven growth to a more resilient, private sector-led economy. Strategic investments in agriculture, irrigation infrastructure, land tenure security, and human capital development are essential to realize the country's potential and create sustainable opportunities. However, these efforts must be complemented by enabling women's participation in domestic and economic decision-making, which remains severely restricted by socio-cultural barriers and entrenched patriarchal norms (Essar et, al. 2023).

Women's participation in domestic matters is not only a matter of gender equity but also a critical driver of national economic growth and sustainable development. When women actively engage in decisions related to financial management, education, healthcare, and resource allocation within households, the benefits extend beyond individual families to contribute significantly to community resilience and broader socio-economic progress (Yar, Zahid, & Miakhil, 2025). However, in Afghanistan, restrictions on women's rights, limited access to education, and pervasive gender inequality hinder their potential to contribute meaningfully to the country's recovery and growth (Najibi & McLachlan, 2023).

This study explores the challenges women face in participating in domestic matters

in Afghanistan and their interconnection with sustainable socio-economic growth. By examining the socio-cultural and economic barriers, this research highlights the importance of empowering women at the household level to address structural vulnerabilities in Afghanistan's economy and foster long-term development and resilience.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Women's participation in domestic decision-making has long been recognized as a cornerstone of gender equity and socio-economic development especially in conservative communities. The socio-cultural context of rural Afghanistan poses significant barriers to development, particularly in terms of gender equality and inclusion. Deep-rooted traditions and cultural norms severely restrict the participation of women and marginalized groups in economic activities, perpetuating inequality and limiting the potential for socio-economic growth. Furthermore, rural-to-urban migration exacerbates these challenges by contributing to an aging rural population and the erosion of traditional social structures that once supported community resilience (Yar, Zahid, & Miakhil, 2025). These factors collectively hinder efforts to empower women and marginalized groups, highlighting the critical need for targeted interventions to address socio-cultural barriers and foster inclusive development in Afghanistan (Mazhar, & Goraya 2021).

The role of women in household decision-making, particularly in areas such as economic matters, education, healthcare, and resource allocation, is pertinent for family well-being and community development (Simatupang, 2022). However, in countries like Afghanistan, engraved patriarchal norms and socio-cultural barriers restrict women's agency, limiting their ability to contribute meaningfully to both household and national development.

A case study of rural Ghana highlights how socio-cultural barriers, and restrictive norms significantly limit women's participation in community development processes (Gyan, Malik & Siddique 2022). The study has emphasized the need for targeted interventions to address these barriers, which parallels similar challenges faced by women in rural Afghanistan.

The theory of participation underscores the importance of involving marginalized groups in decision-making processes to foster equity and inclusive development (Luft, 2023). While this theory has been widely applied in governance and community development, its application in exploring the intersection of women's domestic participation and sustainable national growth remains limited (Ashraf, 2022). Furthermore, the studies have also revealed that the factors such as age, education, income, and marital status influence women's participation in microfinance programs. Women's decisions are often constrained by socio-economic limitations, cultural norms, and a lack of access to information. The literature also highlights the need for tailored interventions that address these constraints, providing a framework to improve women's participation in financial and economic activities—an approach that holds relevance for addressing similar barriers in Afghanistan's socio-cultural context. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by utilizing the theory of participation to analyze how women's involvement at the household level can act as a catalyst for broader socio-economic transformation in Afghanistan.

There are several barriers to women's participation in Afghanistan, including cultural practices, inadequate education, restricted mobility, and limited access to resources (Afrouz, Crisp, & Taket, 2023). These barriers not only marginalize women but also impede the socio-economic growth of the country, as half of the population remains underutilized in decision-making and productivity (World Bank, 2022).

Several studies suggest that empowering women at the household level leads to improved outcomes in education, healthcare, and resource management, which are critical for national development (UNDP, 2015). For Afghanistan, where agriculture and subsistence economies dominate, women's active participation in domestic decision-making could significantly improve productivity and household welfare, ultimately contributing to sustainable economic recovery and growth (Hanmer et al., 2024). Sustainable development relies on inclusive growth that integrates marginalized groups, particularly women, into decision-making processes at all levels (Ojo, 2022).

2.1. Significance of the Study

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of the barriers, impacts, and strategies related to women's empowerment in Afghanistan, particularly in domestic decision-making processes. By utilizing detailed, constructively documented data and global perspectives, the study offers an evidence-based framework to link women's participation in areas like household financial management, education, and resource allocation to sustainable socio-economic growth. It highlights various cultural, socio-economic, and political barriers hindering women's involvement. Furthermore, it explores how the exclusion of women perpetuates gender inequality and hampers sustainable development. Lastly, the findings of this study aim to empower women at the domestic level, improve their family welfare, enhance economic productivity, and contribute to sustainable development, gender equity, and social stability in Afghanistan's cultural context.

2.2. Research Gap

In Afghanistan, participation of women in domestic matters remains limited due to engraved patriarchal structures, cultural barriers, and legal restrictions. Previous studies focused on women's economic inequalities in public spheres or labor markets, while this study focuses on domestic level exclusions where there is a lot can be done for women empowerment. The study examines how women participation has been restricted within their own households, this research highlights the deep-rooted barriers to sustainable socio-economic growth. Using the theory of participation, the study explores the connection between women's involvement in domestic matters with broader national development—offering a bottom-up perspective that differs from the more policy-centered or macroeconomic approaches found in earlier studies.

Furthermore, there is little to no research that comprehensively examines this linkage through the lens of the theory of participation. Existing studies primarily focus on women's broader socio-economic roles or gender inequality but fail to address how empowering women at the household level can contribute directly to national development. This gap underscores the need for research that integrates the theory of participation to explore the nexus between women's domestic involvement and

Afghanistan's sustainable growth, providing a clear understanding of the barriers and opportunities in this context.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study has utilized a qualitative approach based on secondary data analysis to explore the socio-cultural barriers in inclusion of women's participation in household economic matters. Moreover, the content analysis has been used to explore the impact of women empowerment in sustainable socio-economic growth at domestic and as well as national level. The relational analysis has been performed using theory of participation and the secondary data to build a framework which integrates women participation in household economic matters with the sustainable socio-economic growth of Afghanistan.

Secondary data analysis has been performed using 25 academic literature journal articles from the time of 2020 to 2024. Reports from International Organizations such as UNHRC, UN Women, UNDP and World Bank has been used to learn the socio-economic progress of Afghanistan. Case studies on gender equality and women's role in domestic socio-economic matters has been studied. The government reports and policies has helped to gather evidence on barriers women experience while participating in socio-economic matters.

3.1. Data Analysis Methods

Qualitative data has been analysed by identifying themes and patterns regarding barriers, cultural practices, gender roles and policies. The themes in figure 1.0 were derived from barriers to participation of women and its nexus with socio-economic growth of Afghanistan. Further content analysis (figure 1.1) has been conducted to explore the gaps and implications to promote the participation of Afghan women in economic and domestic decision-making.

3.2. Theoretical Framework

Relational analysis has been performed using theory of participation (figure 1.2) participation to examine the interconnected dynamics of women's involvement in domestic decision-making and its implications for sustainable socio-economic growth in

Afghanistan. The framework reveals prominent socio-cultural barriers, including patriarchal norms, deterring gender roles, and restricted access to education and resources, which create hinderances for women to participate in household decision-making. These barriers promote gender inequality and impact their contribution to family and community welfare. The framework further highlights a firm nexus between women’s involvement in domestic matters and national economic growth and sustainable development. Empowered women who can make decisions related to financial management, education, healthcare, and resource allocation create ripple effects that strengthen family well-being, economic productivity, and promote community resilience. Therefore, addressing these barriers and promoting women’s participation at the domestic level are pertinent for achieving gender equity and sustainable development of Afghanistan.

(Figures are provided below)

3.3 Thematic Analysis

Variable	Description	Source
Cultural Norms	Traditions or practices restricting women’s roles in household decision-making	Reports by UN Women, World Bank, or Afghanistan government studies
Gender Roles	Socially assigned roles limiting women’s economic participation	Case studies, journal articles on gender roles in Afghan society
Educational Attainment	Level of women’s education impacting their domestic and economic roles	National statistics, NGO reports, and education surveys
Patriarchal Practices	Male-dominated decision-making within households	Policy documents, ethnographic studies, and cultural analyses
Legal and Policy Barriers	Laws and policies restricting gender equality in domestic matters	Afghan legal frameworks, international human rights reports

figure 1.1

3.4 Content Analysis

Employment Rate of Women	Percentage of women engaged in formal/informal employment	Afghanistan's labor force participation surveys
Household Income Growth	Impact of women's financial participation on household income	NGO case studies, household economic surveys
Impact on Children's Education	Relationship between empowered mothers and children's education	Studies by UNICEF, educational reports
National Socio-Economic Indicators	Metrics such as GDP growth, poverty reduction, and literacy rates tied to women's roles	Afghanistan economic and development reports

Linking women's participation in household economic matters to sustainable socio-economic growth using the theory of participation.

Variable	Description	Source
Theory of Participation	Core principles applied to explain women's role in economic matters	Academic literature and theoretical papers
Household Decision-Making	Degree of women's inclusion in domestic financial decisions	Surveys, policy reports, and academic journals
Policy Interventions	Existing policies promoting women's participation in economic matters	Afghanistan's national policies, international gender equality programs
Barriers to Implementation	Challenges in implementing gender-inclusive policies	Policy reports, NGO feedback, and case studies
Proposed Framework Components	Variables used to build the integration model	Derived from analysis of barriers, strategies, and socio-economic data

figure 1.2

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This current study's thematic analysis brings forward that socio-cultural barriers continue to be the key constraints on the participation of women in the household economy of Afghanistan. These obstacles encompassing deeply held cultural beliefs, gender roles, educational disparities, patriarchal customary practices, and limiting legal statutes systematically keep women excluded from significant participatory roles both in domestic-level decision-making processes and in general economic activity.

Cultural expectations and gender norms proved to be highly restrictive. In rural areas, 85% of women are limited to domestic duties, with only 12% participating in household money matters (World Bank, 2022). According to UN Women (2023), 76% of Afghan women face high social pressure to value caregiving occupations more than earning work. Such expectations are usually supported by family and societal systems that perceive economic involvement by women as inappropriately or even not needed.

Educational disparity worsens this marginalization. UNICEF (2021) discloses that a mere 17% of rural Afghan women are literate, while 52% of men are literate, and only 8% of women in conservative provinces enjoy vocational training (Afghan Ministry of Education, 2020). Consequently, a significant percentage of women are not prepared to participate in economic activities or seek employment opportunities that demand basic education or skills training.

Patriarchal family arrangements further constrain women's agency. In 93% of rural households, economic control is in the hands of male family members (World Bank Gender Data Portal, 2023), and 62% of the women surveyed said they require men's permission to find work (AREU, 2022). Such norms are frequently practiced as traditional or religious custom and therefore harder to shift. The legal framework, while slowly improving, still reflects these imbalances. For instance, a paltry 22% of women are the legal owners of property, while only 15% of the loans provided under microfinance go to women-led businesses (UNDP, 2023).

In spite of such barriers, women's empowerment in household economic functions has tangible benefits. The research establishes that households enjoy a 27% increase in income on average when women participate in household financial decision-making

(World Bank, 2023). According to UNICEF (2022), economically active mothers' children are three times more likely to be enrolled in school, underlining the intergenerational impacts of female empowerment. On the country's level, IMF (2021) has calculated that raising the female participation in the workforce by 10% would add a further \$2.4 billion a year to the GDP of Afghanistan.

The relational approach based on participation theory highlights the imperative for broader changes. Now, only 18% of women take part in household financial decisions, but increasing this to 50% by 2030 has been estimated to significantly improve household welfare as well as national economic performance. The correlation between every 1% increase in women's participation and 0.5% GDP rise reflects the macroeconomic importance of closing such gaps. However, policy implementation is still uneven, with the gender-sensitive economic policies being adopted by just four out of Afghanistan's 34 provinces (AREU, 2023).

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research suggests specific grassroots interventions like community education initiatives documented to have a 40% take-up in pilot projects in Kabul (2022) and the implementation of quotas for women in local economic councils, which have resulted in a 30% rise in female participation in Balkh Province. These programs provide promising blueprints for scaling up inclusive development approaches.

The study shows that gender equity at the family level is not only an issue of social justice but a pre-requisite to long-term socio-economic development. Women's inclusion in the economic decision-making processes within the household increases family income, educational levels, and overall standard of living, as well as tapping into billions of economic potentials within the country. Eliminating socio-cultural constraints and making gender-inclusive policies institutionalized can therefore revolutionize Afghan society socially and economically by empowering its most under-exploited resource: women.

Furthermore, the findings highlight a need for extensive policy reforms with regard to granting more opportunities for participation of women in economic decisions. Strengthening legal frameworks, enhancing women's access to education, and

addressing patriarchal practices will help women become empowered to participate in domestic decision-making. Targeted interventions in overcoming socio-cultural barriers and enhancing women's empowerment can contribute to sustainable socio-economic growth in Afghanistan.

Therefore, the significance of women empowerment at the grassroots level is highlighted through this study in relation to the socio-economic development of Afghanistan. It is equipped with the evidence-based framework for policymakers, NGOs, and community leaders based on international perspectives and their elaborate data that will be incorporated into designing effective intervention. This will open doors for Afghanistan toward gender equity, economic productivity, and long-term development by removing structural barriers for women's participation.

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