Afghanistan: Leadership Development
A Comparison between Men and Women Managers

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study investigates the leadership styles of Afghan men and women managers as practiced in Afghanistan, originally prepared as background research to developing their leadership skills in the context of a public sector organization receiving extensive international donor funding. The case includes a detailed study of the barriers that women managers face in Afghanistan. The research revealed that compared with men, Afghan women managers are more balanced in terms of being people-oriented and task-oriented and practice a mix of transformational and transactional leadership styles (rather than mostly transactional). To overcome the existing barriers that prevent Afghan women from reaching senior leadership positions in Afghanistan, the case concludes that Afghan women need more access to higher education and need more training in management skills. Increased awareness of women's leadership talents by men, requiring the need to change male attitudes towards female participation in leadership, may help improve the situation. This process may need greater mobility in workplaces in Afghanistan.

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

The case is based on a public sector organization (the Ministry of Agriculture Irrigation and Livestock [MAIL] mentioned above) which is receiving extensive international donor funding, to be used for leadership development purposes. Future leadership development is very important for Afghanistan, often seen as a fragile or failed state. All organizations eventually need to use some of their resources for research on the development of leadership to enhance the productivity and effectiveness of the organization – especially when organizations are trying to operate in conflict zones. The survival of a business or public organization in any country depends on having good leaders directing and guiding them in the right direction. As a result, prosperity and growth is then improved. Afghanistan is operating from a very low base and has a desperate need for leaders. At this point, only half the population is available for these leadership roles – the situation in terms of gender equality in the country is still far behind most countries in the world.

As discussed above, the author/researcher noticed that women's participation rate in leader roles was very poor, and that women were facing problems making progress in the workplace; probably due to Afghanistan being a male-dominant culture, and the existence of old traditions not allowing women to work outside the home. However, there were a small number of Afghan women working in these ministries despite the barriers hindering their presence caused by the social and political environment.

SETTING THE STAGE

The future leadership development and role of Afghan women as leaders and managers in Afghanistan was seen as very important under the current circumstances of reconstruction, peace-building, and developing the economy of the country. After the fall of the Taliban at the end of 2001, a new government, formed based on an agreement at the Bonn conference, allowed Afghan women to gain more opportunities to enter the workforce and participate in the decision-making process of organizations. However, more than a decade has passed from the end of the Taliban regime as this case is researched, but still the presence of Afghan women at managerial and leadership levels is low. Clearly, cultural barriers, lack of management training skills, and lack of education are challenges for Afghan women. At the beginning of the process of the civilization and development of the country, it is widely recognized that the role of Afghan women managers and leaders needs to be further strengthened. As

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