



WOMEN *for* WOMEN  
International

## Afghanistan Learning Brief

### Engaging Men as Allies to Promote Women's Empowerment

#### Introduction

Since 2002, Women for Women International (WfWI) has worked at the grassroots level to advance the rights of women in Afghanistan. Marginalized by decades of conflict and bound by religious and cultural traditions that restrict freedom of movement and reinforce rigid gender norms, Afghan women often receive no education, lack access to health care, have limited opportunities to be economically self-sufficient, and endure physical and emotional violence. For the many women living in rural and isolated communities, these challenges are even greater.

WfWI's 12-month training programme helps these women build the skills that promote social and economic empowerment. Participants learn how to earn and save money, protect their health and well-being, influence decisions that affect their families and communities, and build social networks to increase their access to information, resources, and support.

More than 49,000 Afghan women have completed WfWI's core training programme. Yet, their progress is often challenged by male peers, family members, community members and leaders, who often adhere to patriarchal attitudes and norms. Afghan women cannot fully engage in trainings such as ours and exercise their broader rights in society without support from the men in their families and communities.

#### Summary of Learnings from the 2015 WfWI Men's Engagement Programme in Afghanistan, conducted with support from the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office.

Staff member with Women for Women International's Men's Engagement Programme in Afghanistan. Credit: Millie Harvey, 2015.



## WfWI's Women's Programme Participants in Afghanistan

- 94% have no formal education
- 87% have no basic numeracy skills
- \$3.84 average personal earnings per month (current USD)

Source: Baseline data from sample of 2014 graduates of WfWI's women's training programme (1,759 respondents)

WfWI graduate knitting. Photo credit: Rada Akbar, 2014.



## Context

WfWI's Men's Engagement Programme (MEP) in Afghanistan began at the request of Afghan women, who told WfWI they needed the men in their lives to learn about women's rights in order to participate in WfWI programmes and begin to exercise their rights in their homes and communities.

The MEP in Afghanistan was designed to help reduce resistance and gain buy-in among men to enable WfWI's core work with women. Based on similar programmes used to train over 8,000 men in Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and South Sudan, the MEP aims to recruit men as allies in Afghan women's empowerment by increasing their knowledge about the social and economic issues that affect women, changing their attitudes, and motivating positive behaviour to improve women's lives.

## The Intervention

From April 2015 to January 2016, with support from the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO), WfWI provided direct MEP training to 576 male religious and community leaders in the rural Afghan provinces of Nangarhar and Parwan. The programme enrolled 151 more beneficiaries than originally planned. Training was provided in three cohorts over nine months, with groups of 25 participants completing 24 bi-weekly 90-minute sessions over a three-month period.

Of the 560 MEP participants who completed training, 40 men were selected to take part in a "Training of Trainers," to learn how to share information about men's engagement with other men in their communities. These new trainers then individually led eight "step-down" discussion groups, extending the reach of the programme to 400 additional male community members.

In addition, WfWI produced posters, banners, and radio messages that were further used to spread messages relating to women's rights within the target communities.

**"Violence or beating women is prohibited in Islam and no one is allowed to beat his wife or any family member."**

*WfWI focus group participant, Meerak Bila*

## Enhancing the MEP in Afghanistan

Building upon learning from MEP programmes in Nigeria and the DRC, the MEP in Afghanistan was adapted to reflect the needs of the women WfWI trains in Afghanistan and to align with the local religious and cultural context. Participatory pedagogical techniques were used to promote discussion of topics ranging from women's legal right to own, inherit, and will property; women's rights within the family; violence against women and related negative customs such as forced and early marriage; women's right to work and gain employment; political rights; and rights to education. Reflecting the importance of Islam in Afghanistan, the curriculum was underpinned with verses from the Qur'an that underscore specific aspects of women's rights.

Whilst WfWI began implementing the MEP in Afghanistan in 2007, the support provided by the FCO enabled WfWI to amend and test improvements to the programme:

- A focus was placed on training local religious leaders, who can disseminate information about women's rights during Friday prayers and use their influence to help protect women in their communities and promote justice in disputes.
- A "Cascading Training Model" was introduced that trains selected religious and community leaders directly, and then provides "Training of Trainers" for MEP graduates who lead step-down discussion groups about women's rights with men in their communities.
- A new participant handbook was introduced during the third training session in November 2015, with less text and more illustrations to engage participants with limited literacy skills.
- The Gender Equitable Men (GEM) Scale, a standardized instrument, was pilot tested with a sample of 50 participants to more rigorously measure changes in attitudes before and after the training.
- To reinforce learning and prompt community discussion, WfWI broadcast radio spots and hung banners and posters citing passages from the Qur'an that challenge traditional gender roles and support women's rights.
- Focus group discussions were held with MEP graduates to gather feedback and recommendations on the curriculum and programme structure, discern what participants learned and how that knowledge changed their attitudes and behaviour, and get suggestions for future improvements to the MEP.

## Expected Benefits of Men's Engagement

**Fill gaps in WfWI's approach to women's empowerment.** Most Afghan women need the consent of men to participate in WfWI's programmes and apply what they learn at home and in their communities. Engaging men as partners and allies helps pave the way for women to more fully exercise their rights.

**Promote gender equality in decision-making in the home.** Men and women can better negotiate and make decisions about shared actions and behaviors, like unpaid care work and investment in children's education.

**Motivate men to accelerate women's success.** Educating men about the repercussions of patriarchal behavior on women's well-being can motivate them to help promote and enable women's participation and success in business and civic life.

**Spread positive messages.** Men who participate in engagement activities may talk to other men, spreading information, increasing knowledge, and prompting changes in attitudes.

**Improve outcomes for men.** Results from Promundo's 2014 International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) found that men who show more equitable views towards women are happier. They experience less violence and stress, exhibit fewer mental health problems, and are more likely to want to address issues affecting their communities, like HIV and gender-based violence.

**"All decisions should be made by men and women together."**

*WfWI focus group participant, Pole Matak*

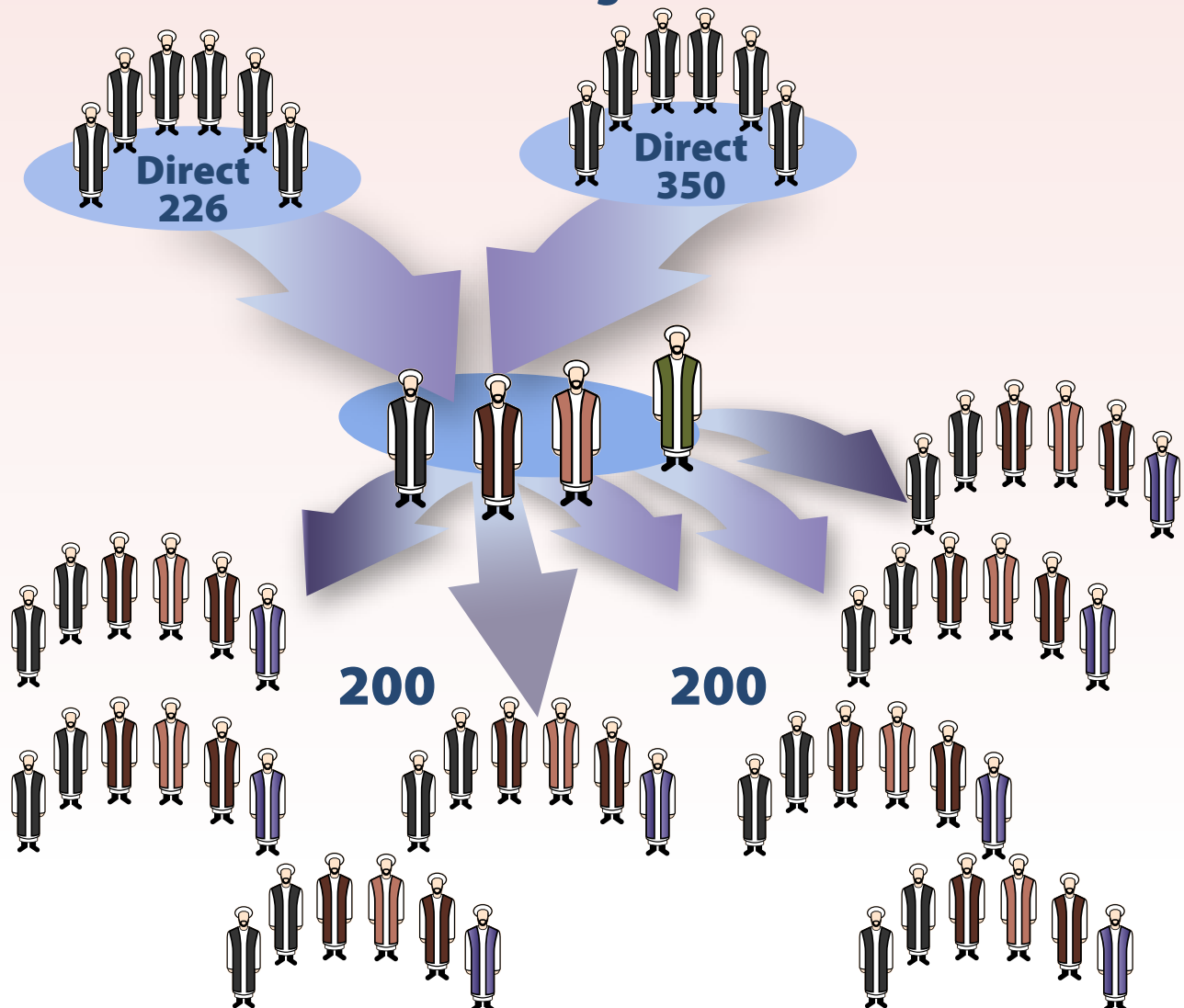
# The Cascading Training Approach

First tested in the DRC, WfWI's Cascading Training Model is designed to share information about women's rights throughout communities and extend the value and impact of MEP training.

1. The "direct" 3-month training programme targets male community and religious leaders who can use their influence to challenge prevailing social norms, build acceptance for WfWI's women's programme, and create an environment that encourages more gender-equal attitudes and behaviors.
2. Selected graduates of this core MEP then complete an additional month-long "Training of Trainers," which teaches men how to share their new knowledge with other men in the community and integrate information about women's rights into local decision-making and dispute resolution.
3. Each of these new community trainers commits to organizing a "step-down" discussion group with 10 local men to discuss issues around women's rights, gender-based violence, and positive concepts of masculinity. This multiplies the reach of the initial MEP training.

## Parwan Province

## Nangarhar Province



## Results

Participants in the direct MEP training completed pre- and post-training surveys to assess changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour around women's rights and gender norms. Post-training focus group discussions helped gather additional qualitative data and gauge the effectiveness of community-based messages.

MEP graduates in Afghanistan who went through the programme in 2015 demonstrated substantial improvements in knowledge, as well as changed attitudes and anticipated behaviours, suggesting an enhanced understanding of and appreciation for the rights of women. Results in Afghanistan exceeded expectations on all measures, with nearly all graduates demonstrating positive changes on several indicators.

- Focus group discussions revealed that men regarded the training very positively, and found the knowledge on women's rights worthy of sharing with family, friends, and the broader community.

- A prominent theme that emerged from each focus group was a change in men's attitude towards women's inheritance, with several participants stating that they intended to provide an inheritance to their wife and/or daughters as a result of their MEP training.
- Focus group participants exposed to the radio programmes provided consistently positive feedback, citing the clarity, thoughtfulness, and informative nature of the programmes.
- Given the credibility of religious leaders in their respective communities, focus group participants agreed that the mosque would be an appropriate place in which to share information related to women's rights, through the imams leading Friday prayers.

## Knowledge-Related Indicators

### Knowledge of women's rights

Self-reported "medium," "high" or "very high" on a scale of "no knowledge" to "high knowledge."

**Enrollment 9%**  
576 respondents

**Graduation 98%**  
560 respondents

### Knowledge of what constitutes violence against women

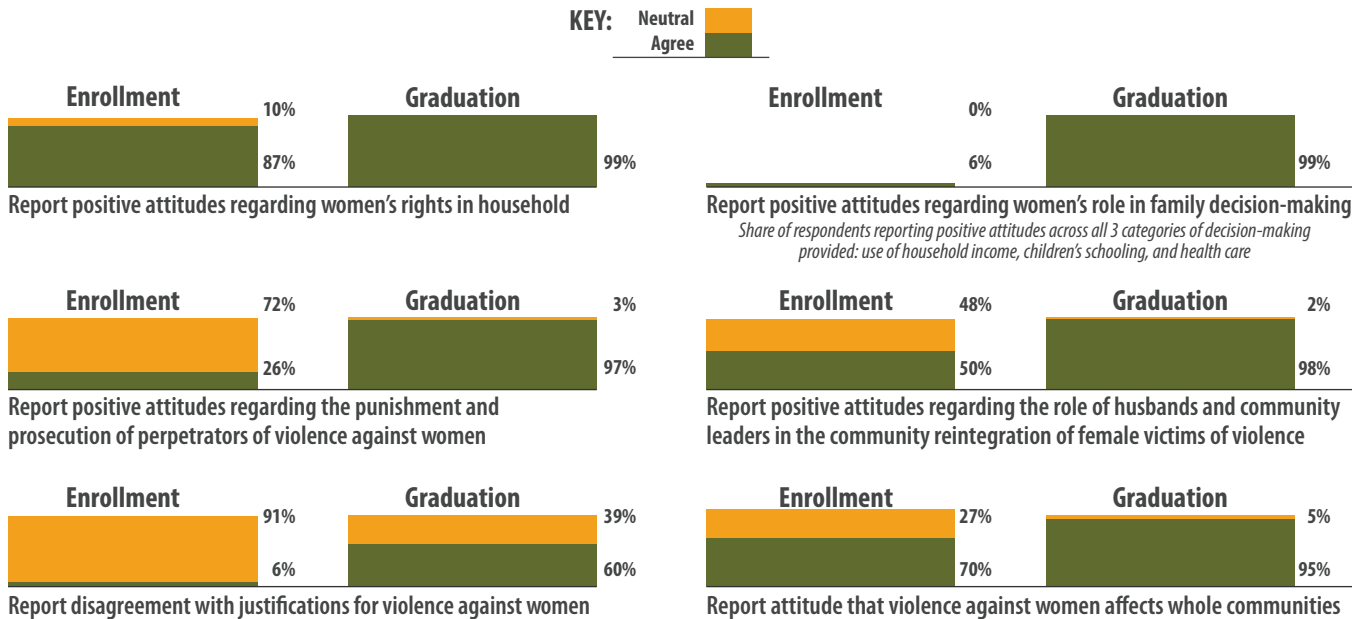
Share of respondents who selected all four definitions presented as violence against women: "abuse to a woman's emotional well-being," "physical beating," "rape," and "withholding money or income."

**Enrollment 1%**  
576 respondents

**Graduation 53%**  
560 respondents

Training Sessions		Parwan Province	Nangarhar Province	Men Trained*	
Session 1 <i>1st April–30th June 2015</i> <i>1st–30th July 2015</i>	Direct	126	0	126	
	Step-Down	100	0		100
Session 2 <i>1st July–30th Sept. 2015</i> <i>1st–30th December 2015</i>	Direct	0	100	100	
	Step-Down	0	50		50
Session 3 <i>1st Nov. 2015–30th Jan. 2016</i> <i>1st–25th February 2016</i>	Direct	100	250	350	
	Step-Down	100	150		250
<b>Total Men Direct Trained</b>				<b>576</b>	
<b>Total Men Step-Down Trained</b>				<b>400</b>	
					<b>98% Graduation Rate</b>
					<b>Grand Total Men Trained 976</b>

## Changes in Attitude

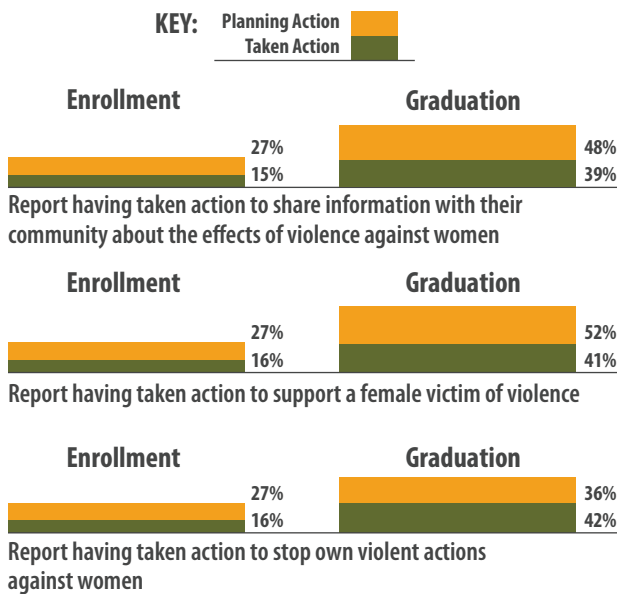


576 Enrollment Respondents; 560 Graduation Respondents  
Response options were Agree, Neutral, Disagree, therefore figures will not total 100%

**“Before, we did not give inheritance to daughters or wife, but now we have learned that they are also part of our inheritance.”**

*WfWI focus group participant, Khalazayee*

## Behaviour Change



576 Enrollment Respondents; 560 Graduation Respondents

## Percent of Men Who Agree or Partially Agree with Select GEM Scale Items

*Low percentages represent high support for gender-equitable norms*

### Woman's most important role is to take care of her home & cook



### A man should have the final word about decisions in his home



### A woman should tolerate violence in order to keep her family together



50 Enrollment and Graduation Respondents

*We present comparisons between pre-training and post-training participant data here, which reveal interesting changes. We do not collect routine monitoring data from a valid comparison group to allow for causal inference.*

## Key Findings

**Conduct the MEP before implementing the core women's programme.** Before we can begin working with local women in many Afghan villages, we must gain the support and approval of the local men, particularly religious leaders. As one leader told WfWI, "If I do not approve of what you are doing, no one will attend your training." Trust must be continually earned. Implementing the MEP before the women's programme enables WfWI to introduce our approach, expose religious and community leaders to the Qur'an-based curriculum, and assure men that the content and conduct of the training will not run counter to their beliefs or customs. Getting men on board from the beginning paves the way for more women to participate, and minimizes confusion and resistance when the women bring home what they are learning.

**Ground the curriculum in teachings from Islam.** The influence of Islam and the role of religious leaders in changing attitudes and behaviour toward women in Afghan villages cannot be underestimated. Underpinning the MEP curriculum in Islam gives the content validity. As one participant said, "In my whole life, this is the first time that I am studying these verses from the holy Qur'an about women's rights to inheritance, women's rights to choose." Another participant was brought to tears, saying he wished he had known earlier what the Qur'an says about violence against women. "I would have treated my sister and my wife better."

In every focus group, participants indicated they get their information from religious leaders. "The best way for passing the messages to people is religious scholar speeches on Friday prayers."

**Localize the curriculum at the community level.** While the MEP curriculum is standardized across the country, understanding which issues are most salient in a particular community can provide the "hook" that engages men in discussion around women's rights. Training sessions should be held at times and in locations that are convenient for local men, adjusting the schedule when necessary, such as during planting and harvest seasons. Given the low literacy levels, including illustrations in curricular materials engages participants, who can debate "what is happening" in the pictures. Men come to feel greater ownership of the content, because they have interpreted it themselves. Broadcasting radio messages and hanging posters and banners in the community that reinforce what the Qur'an says about women's rights and roles helps continue the discussion beyond the classroom. As one WfWI staff member put it, "Before, the trainer was the teacher talking. Now the men are talking."

**"Boys and girls have the rights of education. Women have the rights to spend money for household and for her children needs and for her own needs."**

*WfWI focus group participant, Bar Arbaban*

**Measure effectiveness rigorously.** Improving assessment of the MEP and comparing results across programmes and countries requires using standardized, validated, reliable instruments and indicators to measure changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour. While both the GEM Scale and WfWI's current questionnaire measured substantial changes in attitudes, the GEM Scale results were not as extreme. WfWI continues to invest in adapting the most accurate and rigorous measures to assess the changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour, enhance monitoring and evaluation, and enable learning within and across regions.

**Continue to gather and leverage learning from other WfWI country offices and NGOs.** This MEP leveraged learning from earlier men's engagement programmes in Afghanistan, as well as MEP programmes conducted by WfWI in Nigeria, the DRC, and South Sudan, as well as other NGOs working in the region. This led to innovations, including the new curriculum, Cascading Training Model, and use of community-based media, as well as potential improvements, such as using the GEM scale and incorporating focus groups. By continuing to share knowledge and resources, we can avoid duplication of effort, rapidly accelerate innovation, drive continuous improvement, and begin to standardize the MEP while maintaining flexibility and local adaptation.



MEP graduate Said Merwais and trainer Said Rafuliah.  
Photo credit: Rada Akbar, 2014.

## Next Steps

With continued support, WfWI will implement and expand the MEP to reach more men in Afghanistan, building on the findings from this project.

**Further study the effectiveness of the Cascading Training Model.** The cascading training approach was tested in Afghanistan for two reasons: to leverage the influence of local leaders in changing men's attitudes and behaviour and to expand the programme's reach to more men in the community. The model did increase the reach of this MEP to an additional 400 men. However, the impact of this approach needs to be assessed, in terms of quality and effectiveness. Are local men disseminating accurate information in their community discussions? Are these discussions producing measurable changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour?

**Turn learning into action through Community Protection Committees (CPCs).** The MEP aims to achieve three goals: increase men's knowledge about women's rights in Islam, change men's attitudes towards women's rights, and enable men to take action to prevent violence against women and promote women's economic and social empowerment. WfWI has proposed

creating Community Protection Committees that will enable MEP graduates to take action based on their new understanding of women's rights. Similar committees have been piloted in other countries that could provide guidance in testing CPCs in Afghanistan. The CPCs could parallel the structure and function of local Jirga, or councils, that resolve disputes based on the teachings of Islam. CPC members – including women and religious and community leaders who have completed the MEP – would advise families and help resolve disputes with a focus on protecting and promoting the rights of women.

### Women for Women International – Afghanistan



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