



Charting the Effects of Conflict and Poverty on the Lives of Afghan Women

A learning brief drawing from Life History Interviews with WfWI Program Graduates in Rural Afghanistan

Photo credit: Rada Akbar, 2017



Context

Marginalized by decades of conflict and bound by religious and cultural traditions, women in Afghanistan often receive no education, lack access to health care, have limited opportunities to be economically self-sufficient, and endure physical and emotional violence. Since 2002, Women for Women International (WfWI) has worked at the grassroots level to advance the rights of women in Afghanistan, and has served more than 115,000 women.

WfWI's 12-month training program provides women with the knowledge, skills, and resources to promote their 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.

This learning brief aims to identify factors that influence graduates' lives before and after their interaction with WfWI, using Life History Interviews (LHIs) as a qualitative research method. Using the LHI tool, we endeavor to gain deep insight to women's varied experiences, and how WfWI has intersected with key events in the lives of our target population. Across women of diverse backgrounds and differing current circumstances, we attempt to identify emergent themes and critical reflection points for organizational learning.

Life History Interviews

The life history interview (LHI) is a qualitative method of inquiring the systematic collection of testimony from people about their own experiences. This type of method allows researchers to examine "changes in the well-being of households and individuals in the context of wider events and changes in culture, norms, social relationships, public policy, and social provisioning."¹ LHIs can be used to "collect data about tangible facts, as well as perceptions, processes, perceived options/choices and decision-making processes"² and allow broader exploration of complex situations and relationships.

Using a semi-structured interview guide, researchers asked participants to describe key events in their lives, major changes, and factors they believe contributed to those changes. Participants were asked to plot key milestones on a timeline, rating their well-being at each point on a 1-10 scale in which 10 represented the highest level of well-being.

SELECTION CRITERIA

Chosen at random, the 13 women selected to participate in the life history interviews in Afghanistan are a mix of women who are married with children, married without children, and widowed. Importantly, this sample captures responses from women who report significant life change after completing WfWI's program, as well as those who continue to face substantial challenges.



Women for Women International—Afghanistan participants attend numeracy classes in Deh Khoaidad, Afghanistan as part of WfWI's 12-year training programme.

Photo credit: Rada Akbar, 2017

¹Bird, Kate. "Using life history research as part of a mixed methods strategy to explore resilience in conflict and post-conflict settings." http://www.chronicpoverty.org/uploads/publication_files/bird_mixed_methods.pdf

²Bird, Kate. "Reflections on using life history approaches" http://www.chronicpoverty.org/uploads/publication_files/3.2%20Using%20life%20history%20research%20-%20overcoming%20the%20challenges.pdf

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Interviewers asked each participant about their childhood, education, current family life, health and illness, occupational activities, material well-being before and after the training, impact of the training, support systems and crisis coping skills. When we refer to 'women' below, please note that we are referring to respondent women in these interviews.

Key Insights

Little to no education. Among the thirteen respondents, women's reports of poor, incomplete, or non-existent basic education are pervasive. Few completed primary education, but those who did were unable to complete secondary school due to worsening conflict in their communities. The country's intractable wars affected all respondents' education in some way, evidenced by women's descriptions of their general inability to read and write basic letters.

In the context of Afghanistan, this is no surprise; women's education is often compromised by war and de-prioritized in times of need. All respondents coupled their explanations of poor childhood educational opportunity with gratitude for WfWI's training – particularly, basic literacy and numeracy lessons. More so than in other countries where WfWI works, Afghan women's lack of basic education presents significant barriers to empowerment. Testimony from these women underscores the critical function that literacy and numeracy serve in conflict-affected countries.

Personal Loss. An inevitable theme observed across many women's interviews is the prevalence of significant personal loss prior to entering WfWI's program. Women report having lost young children in infancy, parents and siblings lost to conflict, and other relatives lost to disease or accidents. One respondent shared that a sister committed suicide to escape an abusive father. Some respondents have lost more than loved ones; one's home was destroyed by an earthquake before joining the program.

These personal stories illuminate the regularity and depth with which women are affected by conflict. The risk of significant personal loss is tangible, ever-present, and not at all uncommon. From childhood to adulthood, social norms often preclude women from discussing or seeking help for the deep emotional trauma they experience from a young age. Respondents' testimony demonstrates the lasting effects of this trauma, producing cascading effects across other dimensions of women's lives. Stories like these serve as a sharp reminder of how immediate, personal, and cross-cutting trauma is for women in conflict-affected communities.

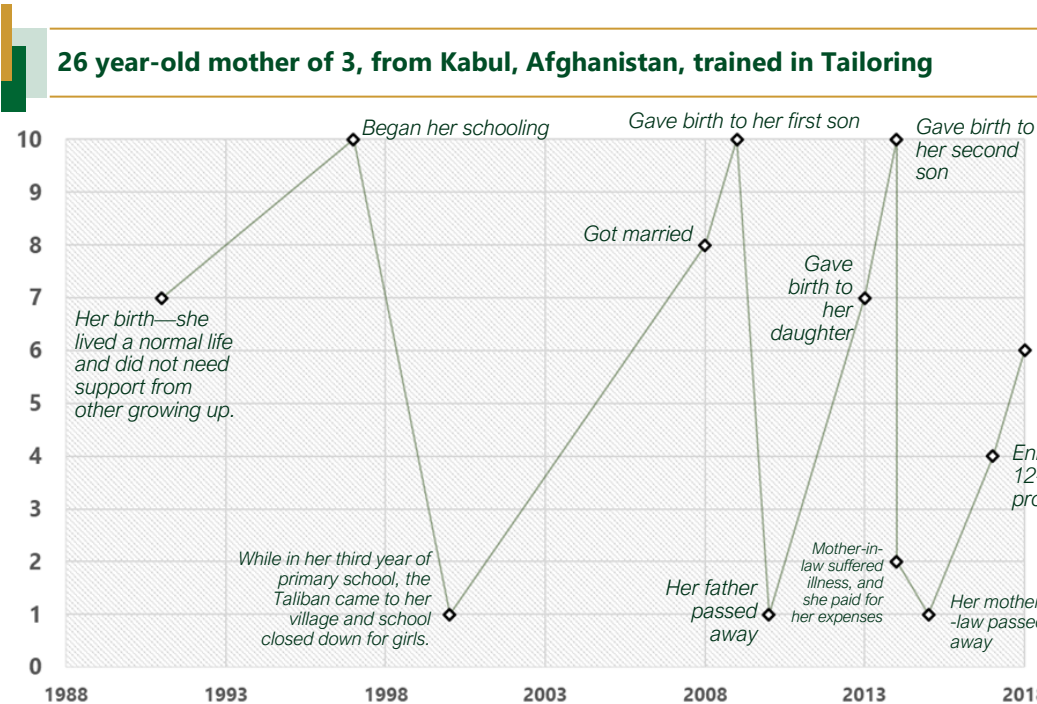
Household Responsibilities. All women were born into families in which mothers managed the household and child care, while fathers earned the family's income. A generation later, these roles remain relatively unchanged. Women's reports of household decision-making responsibility depend largely on household structure. Married women with children tell us that they take care of the home and children, and happily trust their husbands to make important decisions relevant to the household. Other women whose husbands are either drug addicts, mentally ill, or deceased, claim the responsibility of generating family income and making household decisions.

Women's interviews reveal the reality that household decision-making can be a complex phenomenon. We see that a woman's involvement in decision-making is not simply about having the power to decide, but also about wanting the power to decide, or having no alternative but to make decisions. In the context of Afghanistan, it is doubly important to consider potential family dynamics contributing to decision-making power in households; for example, women frequently mention in-laws as significant figures of influence in their households. Interviews like these highlight that decision-making may often be an intricate negotiation between household figures, social norms, and cultural pressures.

Health and Wellness. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, women share candid details of their struggles to maintain their mental and emotional wellbeing. Women's own mental health figures prominently throughout all interviews, as they report how the compounded effects of poverty, difficult household relationships, and social isolation generate symptoms of depression. One respondent even mentions having considered taking her own life due to her prolonged unhappiness. However, she, as well as all other respondents, attest to the support system gained from their fellow core program participants. By virtue of forming classrooms – and, ultimately, self-help groups – with other similar women, respondents expressed how they were able to discuss their lives, cultivate personal relationships, and find comfort in friends.

We see from women's firsthand accounts that twice weekly outings to attend WfWI's program provided the only opportunity for women to leave their homes, let alone to socialize. All women express gratitude for their newfound social network, which can offer critical emotional support and stability to women suffering from significant loss and difficult home lives. These women's testimony exemplifies the reasons WfWI does what it does: bringing women together to counter some of the most debilitating residual effects of conflict and trauma. Though challenges remain – one woman feels sad to have lost her classroom support system upon program completion – women are uplifted by the emotional solidarity shared with peers.

Income-generating Activities. All women interviewed are engaged in some sort of income generation activity stemming from the vocational track they chose during WfWI's core program. Respondents were trained in either tailoring, agriculture, or animal husbandry.



"Training is very useful from all my teachers and all the lessons are useful for my daily life. I wish to learn the tailoring in a better way to help educate my children. I am satisfied with this program"

WfWI Graduate from Kabul, Afghanistan

While all women report using their trained vocational skill post-graduation, few women report generating income from their activities. Women trained in tailoring share that they often do not sew to generate income, but instead to make or mend clothing for their families, which saves the household from additional purchases. Women trained in agriculture report mainly using their skills to grow food for their families' consumption. And while one woman trained in animal husbandry was able to purchase livestock from savings, she is not yet reaping the expected economic benefits; she explains that her cow is not currently producing milk, so she must look elsewhere for opportunities to help generate income.

From these reports, it is clear that there may be significant barriers to women successfully generating income from trained vocational skills. While all respondents express that the vocational training they received was useful, there are many factors that may preclude women from using their skill as a means toward achieving economic independence. For example, women in Afghanistan are still expected to manage their households after graduating, and many find it difficult to dedicate sufficient time to cultivating a skill for profit. Further, women's restricted mobility beyond their homes necessarily impacts income-generating opportunity. In spite of these challenges, some respondents persist in using their vocational skill to provide for the immediate needs of their families.

Future Outlook. In spite of women's difficult circumstances, all respondents share a positive future outlook. A particularly optimistic theme across respondents is the high aspirations they have for their children's education and future. Women appear determined not to allow their children to suffer from the same lack of education that affected them; women express wanting their children to leverage a solid education to become doctors or teachers to "serve their family and their country." One woman further shares a hope that her children will "implement men's and women's rights" in their marriages, verbalizing a hope for not just financial stability, but also improved social wellbeing.

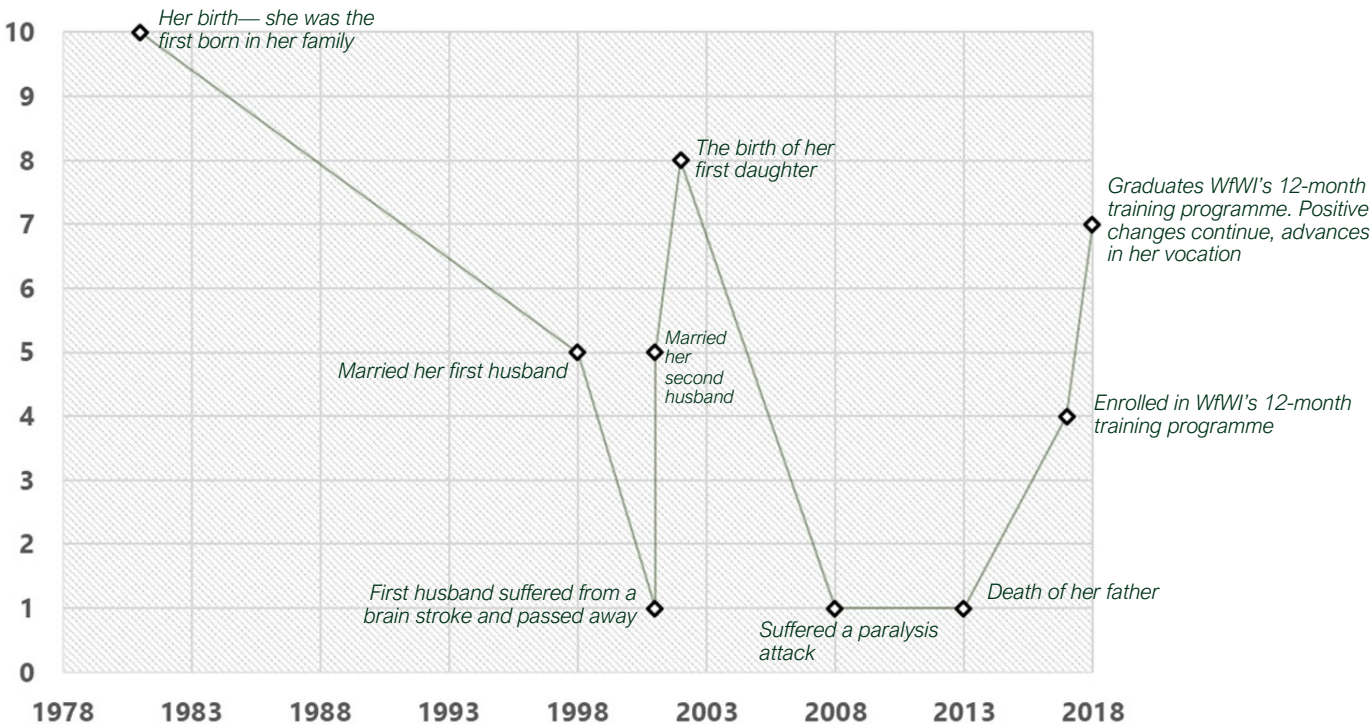
Women's high hopes for their next generation is a bright spot across all interviews. Acknowledging the struggles they personally faced, women clearly express the value they place on their children's education. These interviews reveal that while women have experienced incalculable loss and trauma throughout their lives, they have not lost the capacity to hope.



Women for Women International participants attend their tailoring class—Deh Khodaidad Area, of Kabul Province
Photo Credit: Rada Akbar, 2017

"Once I complete this program, I will be able to take advantage and engage myself in my field...I want to educate my children, because I and my husband, we are illiterate and do not want my children to face what we have faced for the last two decades"
WfWI Graduate from Kapisa, Afghanistan

35 year-old mother of 5 from Kapisa, Afghanistan, trained in Agriculture



“My capability and enthusiasm were the main causes for joining WfWI. I am and will always be thankful to the teachers who opened our eyes and taught us the real meaning of life”

WfWI Graduate from Nangarhar, Afghanistan—2017

Closing Insights

Note about trends in trajectories (graphs)

- From women's self-reported well-being ratings, we see that all women have been demonstrably affected by conflict for prolonged periods. The extreme vulnerability shown in women's graphs is also a testament to the volatility of life in rural Afghanistan. Ultimately, these charted life trajectories allow us to appreciate the unique life paths women have traversed on their way to WfWI program enrollment.

Importance of mental health and socialization

- In the context of Afghanistan, the need to combat social isolation cannot be understated. WfWI programming must consider women's exposure to trauma and loss in making additions or modifications to the program. Program should consider additional ways to support women's mental health, like supporting self-help groups post-graduation.

Decision-making is complex

- Dynamics surrounding household decisions are not straight-forward, and WfWI's programming must continue to sensitize on the value of their input in deciding the fate of their lives and families. Further, WfWI should continue to engage men in training of women's rights and positive masculinity that fosters the inclusion of women in household and community decision-making.

Barriers to income generation are real

- WfWI can consider leveraging the success of self-help groups for income generation, perhaps with vocational skills suitable for practice in group cooperatives. WfWI must also continue its work with men to encourage support for women's community mobility and economic participation.



Muzhda, 22, mother of three, laughs as she attends a numeracy classroom in Kabul, Afghanistan

Photo Credit: Rada Akbar, 2017



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