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# Lessons from Gender-focused International Aid in Post-Conflict Afghanistan ...

... Learned?

**GENDER**  
**in International**  
**COOPERATION**

7



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## Executive Summary

Twenty-three years of conflict – Soviet occupation, civil war, the Taliban, and finally the US-led bombing campaign – have taken a toll on women in Afghanistan. Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Afghan women have been the focus of much international attention and the cornerstone of the largest gender-focused aid intervention. Yet today, many people in Afghanistan believe that there is less funding for women and for gender programs than there was three years ago “because we think we have solved the problem,” a senior gender advisor stated.

Afghan women are used as the barometer to measure social change in Afghanistan. A woman head of an international organization explained that the general conclusion was that the ousting of the Taliban would bring freedom for society, “but that came from our lack of understanding of the society. And now we are slowly discovering what it is about... three years later”. An Afghan man explained that “there is a negative idea among the people” regarding gender programs. Most Afghans – and even expatriates – interviewed shared this view. It is clear that we must manage our own expectations, and that of the communities we serve. “In three years it is very difficult to fix something that was destroyed in over twenty years,” an Afghan woman leader explained.

There was consensus on the idea that gender programs manifest themselves as women’s programs and that men were neglected in gender programming. Most of those interviewed did not know of any successful experiences in working with both women and men. Although those interviewed felt that many mistakes have been made, the general consensus was that the-

re is still hope. “It’s never too late. It has only been three years. We have a long way to go,” an Afghan woman head of NGO said.

The following themes will be addressed in this report:

- The continued politicization of women’s rights
- Neglect of men in gender programming
- Perceptions of ‘gender’ as a negative term and an external construct
- Lessons that have not been learned

### FES und Gender

**The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) is a political foundation dedicated to principles of social democracy. FES works to promote peace, democracy and social justice. The organization addresses gender issues because of its commitment to the promotion of democracy in the broadest sense of the term. For FES, democracy includes not only individual rights, but also social, economic, and participatory human rights. The FES ‘gender approach’ works to improve the “general socio-political conditions with the aim of enabling women and men to participate equally in the economic, political and social development of their countries” (Walter and Bowe 2003: 8)<sup>1</sup>.**

<sup>1</sup> For more information on FES see [www.fes.de/asien](http://www.fes.de/asien)



## Summary of Lessons-to-be-Learned

- There are no quick fixes to development concerns, gender issues, and over 20 years of conflict in Afghanistan. This is a long-term effort. Programs – and funding – must demonstrate their commitment to Afghanistan. This also entails building trust with Afghan communities before intervening.
- Post-conflict contexts bring opportunities for new roles for women and men. Gender roles could change while gender relations might remain the same. Projects that promote strategic interests could contribute to changes, while those meeting practical needs might not necessarily impact the status quo.
- A gender focus entails men as well as women. Projects for women should coexist with gender initiatives, but there should be clarity between the two and care that neither group feels marginalized. A rights-based approach could work to address both women and men.
- Gender mainstreaming should be combined with a focus on women so that ‘mainstreaming’ retains a gender perspective and that women may still benefit from increased opportunities with a view to equity.
- Development concepts (such as gender, civil society, democracy) might exist in Afghanistan even though the terms are new. These terms will be better rooted in existing local contexts and processes.
- The aid community should work to better coordinate efforts – especially with gender programs. This will facilitate coordination for local gender and women’s groups and mitigate trends for competition and corruption.
- Local organizations need further capacity building, and international groups could benefit from genuine transitions to Afghan leadership.
- Afghan women and men have agency and are able to articulate their needs and interests – when given the opportunity.
- Aid interventions need a more thorough understanding of the historical, social, and cultural contexts, and gender identities within those contexts. This will prevent the proliferation of facile analyses and the use of images and stereotypes.
- If we fail to learn the lessons above, there may be negative externalities of development interventions, including backlashes and increased violence against women.

## I. Background and History

A great deal has been written on women in Afghanistan in recent years. The case of Afghan women illustrates the “nexus between women’s rights and international peace and security” (UNIFEM 2004: 1). Since the onset of the reconstruction process, Afghanistan has witnessed the proliferation of aid agencies with lofty goals such as empowerment and liberation of women and gender mainstreaming across sectors<sup>2</sup>.

Such efforts have also inspired myriad articles, reports, and lessons learned documents on what the aid community does, what it could/should do, and how to do it all better next time<sup>3</sup>. Many authors, researchers, and development practitioners have noted Afghans’ increasing disappointment and disillusion with the aid community, particularly regarding women’s issues.

### Research Methodology

This study was conducted through research in Afghanistan using firsthand sources as well as documents, articles, reports. Data collection consisted of interviews, questionnaires, and focus group discussions in Kabul over a two-month period. Interviews were conducted with approximately 50 gender policymakers and practitioners, both Afghan and expatriate. These women and men are heads of international agencies, gender focal points, gender program implementers, heads of Afghan women’s NGOs, and others.

#### Another Research to Weigh Down the Shelves?

**The purpose of this report is not just to add to our list of things to read or to weigh down the shelves of research on Afghan women. An Afghan man human rights activist lamented that “most of the research and studies done by internationals are in an international language. Feedback from the research does not reach the people. It lays in libraries until another researcher uses it for the purposes of writing another paper”. To that end, FES and the author aspire to translate and disseminate the report widely, sharing it with their Afghanistan and international networks. Further, workshops and discussions will be organized around the themes.**

Many Afghan women and men who are participants in development programs were also interviewed<sup>4</sup>. This is part of an ongoing process to gather feedback and to better understand perceptions of women and men and to inform programs. All names have been withheld.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this study, gender refers to women and men in their socially constructed roles. Gender varies between and within cultures – and between different types of women and men. As socially constructed concepts, gender and gender roles are dynamic. UNDP. 2001. „Gender Approaches in Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations.“ in Gender Approach in Emergency, Conflict, and Post-Conflict Situations. Rome: United Nations. Gender relations represent interactions between women and men within social processes, introducing questions of power, control of resources, and conflict. Harrison, Elizabeth. 1997. „Fish, Feminists and the FAO: Translating ‚Gender‘ Through Different Institutions in the Development Process.“ in Getting Institutions Right for Women in Development, edited by A. M. Goetz. London: Zed Books. Gender mainstreaming means “bringing the experience, knowledge, and interest of women and men to bear on the development agenda... [so that] both women and men can influence, participate in and benefit from development processes”. UNDP. 2001. „Gender Approaches in Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations.“ in Gender Approach in Emergency, Conflict, and Post-Conflict Situations. Rome: United Nations.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this study, aid community refers to the donors, international organizations (multilateral and bilateral), local and international NGOs, but not private companies. I use “we” and “our” to place the author in the context of the aid community, as opposed to a passive observer.

<sup>4</sup> For this study, I use the term ‘participants’ to represent those who might be more commonly known as ‘beneficiaries’ of development programs. The designation ‘beneficiary’ is passive and falls short as it does not fully convey the depth and complexity of the relationship between actors.

**Short Chronology of Political Events in Afghanistan<sup>5</sup>**

1963 – 1973	“Decade of Democracy”
1978	Saur (April) Revolution
1979	Soviet invasion of Afghanistan
1979 – 1989	Soviet occupation, Proxy war, Support of Mujaheddin by West
1989 – 1992	Communist regime
1992 – 1996	Civil war between various Mujaheddin factions
1996	Taliban assumes power
2001	Defeat of Taliban, Bonn Agreement
2001	Loya Jirga to approve interim government
2004	Constitutional Loya Jirga, Presidential elections
2005	Parliamentary election

**Brief History of Women in Afghanistan**

Afghan history repeatedly demonstrates that revolutionary change, state-building, and women’s rights operate hand-in-hand (Moghadam 1994: 97). An understanding of Afghan women’s history could begin in the 1880s, when Afghan rulers launched one of the earliest attempts at emancipation and social reform in the Muslim world. However, these rulers also proclaimed men as the guardians of women, marking the beginning of a non-linear pattern of social change. Women’s emancipation began to play a prominent role in the nationalist ideology of modernization (Hans 2004). During the 1920s, King Amanullah sought to drastically transform gender relations by enforcing Western norms for women<sup>6</sup>. These reforms were met with violent opposition, and Amanullah’s modernizations were replaced by more conservative measures. During King Nadir Shah’s brief reign (1929-33), girls’ schools were closed, and veiling and women’s segregation were revived. King Zahir Shah and King Daud also attempted to enforce social changes, but once again these were resisted. Despite incremental changes, women’s rights vacillated between enforced modernization and conservative backlash.

The Saur (April) Revolution of 1978 introduced an aggressive program for social change. “The [Communist] regime’s determination to forcibly apply reforms<sup>7</sup>

contributed to the birth of the Afghan resistance movement” (Hans 2004: 235). Afghan women once again found themselves at the center of a conflict between Western concepts of modernization and Afghan codes of culture (Hans 2004: 235). Opposition to Soviet reforms for women fueled the fundamentalist movement that took hold in refugee camps. This in turn served as the grounds for the Mujaheddin opposition to expel the Soviets and regain control both of women and Afghanistan<sup>8</sup>.

The aid community and the Western media hardly took notice of the situation until the fall of Kabul on 27 September 1996. It was the Taliban who, ironically, drew world attention to Afghanistan and Afghan women. During the Taliban period, Afghan women were portrayed as victims of violence and oppression by the international media. Yet the situation of women in Afghanistan is not simply a product of Taliban policies. The international shock at the Taliban’s treatment of women took place in a historical vacuum, with little attention paid to pre-Taliban abuses (Benjamin 2000). Much has been written on women’s abuses during this period. For these purposes, it is sufficient to say that women suffered under many regimes in Afghanistan, but women’s space under the Taliban was virtually annihilated. Since the capture of Kabul by the Taliban, women in Afghanistan have found themselves on the top of development and media agendas.

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from [www.fes.org.af](http://www.fes.org.af)

<sup>6</sup> Amanullah was influenced and inspired by Western notions of modernity and progress. He sought to model Afghanistan after Western nations and saw the liberation of women as integral to this agenda. Examples of Amanullah’s enforced emancipation include abolition of the veil and purdah (seclusion of women).

<sup>7</sup> Such as women’s right to work, serve in the army, and chose their spouse.

<sup>8</sup> The Mujaheddin period is known for its violence towards women in the form of rapes, abductions, and restrictions on mobility.

## II. The Reconstruction Process

### The Bonn Process

The process of reconstruction is guided by a political timetable determined by international donors in Bonn, Germany in December 2001. The Bonn Agreement<sup>9</sup> decreed that Afghanistan would begin a three-stage journey towards democracy including electing a transitional authority, adopting a new constitution, and electing a representative government. The Constitution was adopted in January 2004. Hamid Karzai was elected President in October 2004. The final steps in this process are the Parliamentary and District-level elections. The Bonn Agreement can be regarded as the “first official position of the international community’s good intentions towards developing gender equality. In reality... the good intentions [have] not been matched by adequate achievements” (UN Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality, OECD/DAC Network on Gender Equality, and UN Division for the Advancement of Women 2003: 7).

### Afghan Women and Politics

For women, the political process has been ambiguous. The new Constitution – modeled after the Afghan Constitution of 1964 – aimed for inclusion and gender sensitivity, yet appears to fall short for women. Analysts and experts have identified loopholes where women’s rights might be lost<sup>10</sup>. “Afghanistan is filled with laws,” an Afghan woman NGO leader articulated, “and now it has a Constitution. But enforcing those laws – for women and men – that hasn’t happened. God knows when that will really happen”. Establishing legal rights for women is only the first step in being able to practice them.



Many Afghan women noted that the rhetoric of consultations that characterized the political process was largely hollow. One-third of the participants in the Constitutional Loya Jirga were women, and yet these women bemoaned that they were silenced during the event and harassed before and afterwards. In the months leading up to the presidential election, women were herded into registration and prepared for their first election. Women complained that they were under significant pressure to vote for their husband’s preferred candidate. He, in turn, was under pressure to vote for a certain warlord’s preferred candidate. “The com-

<sup>9</sup> [www.afhangovernment.com/AfghanAgreementBonn.htm](http://www.afhangovernment.com/AfghanAgreementBonn.htm)

<sup>10</sup> For more information, see the interview with Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghadam at [www.developmentgateway.org](http://www.developmentgateway.org).

mitment to stick to the timeframe stipulated in the Bonn Agreement overrode all other concerns and undermined the legitimacy and quality of the process... [as if it was simply a matter of checking things off] the to-do list of nation-building in Afghanistan” (Oates and Helal 2004: 13). The agreement itself is not entirely to blame, however. The challenge was to implement it in a way that is sustainable and meets the needs of Afghans themselves.

## Parliamentary Elections and Quotas for Women

At the time of writing, Afghanistan prepares to elect a representative parliament. The parliamentary elections, initially scheduled for April 2005, have since been postponed to September 2005. There are suspicions that the elections will be delayed further. This potential delay bodes well with those who are training parliamentary candidates and running civic education programs. The pervasive sense is that the country is just not ready. Moreover, completing this last step of the Bonn Process could lead some of the aid community to begin plotting an Afghanistan exit strategy. Afghanistan needs many years of continuous international support. Plans for a premature exit of the aid community could destabilize – and most likely collapse – the country’s tenuous foundation<sup>11</sup>.

According to Afghanistan’s Constitution, 25% of the parliamentary seats are reserved for women. This quota is very progressive when compared to other countries. However, while this may seem impressive at first, skeptics are concerned that women are once again being used as window-dressing and that this progressive quota serves to appease international donors at the expense of laying a foundation for genuine participation. Quotas have been used both for the Emergency and Constitutional Loya Jirgas to ensure women’s participation in the political process. This might have been a good start, but it has been accused of being tokenistic. “Right now our women are all over the

place, being used for politics, used like dolls,” an Afghan woman lamented. “Every event they are in front of the TV, the camera. They are being used just to show that women were there”. At worst, quotas and external pressure for a male/female balance could run the risk of generating a community backlash. In fact, examples from other countries “suggest that this may be more in response to the perception that these affirmative action measures are externally imposed rather than due solely to resistance from men who feel threatened by a weakening of their power or the undermining of traditional norms and social values” (Bouta, Frerks, and Bannon 2005: 131-2).

FES research and training for women active in politics has revealed concerns that the limitations to women’s political participation have not yet been addressed. These include lack of security, warlords, and a sense that politics is men’s domain. In addition, it has been argued that “the mere presence of women in the parliament will not automatically give them their share of influence on decision-making” (Boege 2004). Injecting women into all aspects of the reconstruction process does not necessarily solve the problem. Women’s participation should be for a purpose, not to appease international donors or to satisfy the aid community. That numbers might not mean equitable participation is not a novel concept. Looking beyond the numbers and addressing issues of power when measuring participation is far more challenging.

## Afghan Women and Men Today

“In 2001, after the fall of the Taliban, improving the rights of Afghan women was at the top of the international agenda; in 2004, despite many well-intended programs for women, women’s human rights appears to be more of an afterthought” (Human Rights Watch 2004: 4). Evidence from Afghanistan’s Human Development Report 2004 shows that social indicators for women in Afghanistan are among the worst in the world.

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10 For more information see Wieland-Karimi, Almut. 2005. „Afghanistan: Looking Back on 2004, Looking Forward to 2005.“ Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Kabul.



**Social Indicators for Afghan Women and Men<sup>12</sup>****Population**

<b>Total population:</b>	<b>23.85 million</b>
<b>Urban:</b>	<b>28.8% (Kabul population 2002: 1.7 million, 2003: 3 million)</b>
<b>Rural:</b>	<b>71.2%</b>
<b>Population growth:</b>	<b>2.5%/year</b>

**Health and Mortality**

<b>Life expectancy:</b>	<b>44.5 years</b>
<b>Healthy life expectancy:</b>	<b>33.4 years</b>
<b>Maternal mortality:</b>	<b>1600 out of 100,000</b> <b>(1 woman dies every 30 minutes from pregnancy-related causes, highest maternal mortality in the world)</b>
<b>Population without access to health services:</b>	<b>81%</b> <b>150-300 landmine injuries/deaths per month</b> <b>(10 million landmines in Afghanistan)</b>

**Education**

<b>Primary education:</b>	<b>36%</b>
<b>Girls:</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>Boys:</b>	<b>51%</b>
<b>Adult literacy:</b>	<b>28.7%</b>
<b>Women:</b>	<b>12.7%</b>

**Poverty and Refugees**

<b>Level of poverty:</b>	<b>53%</b>
<b>Level of hunger:</b>	<b>48%</b>
<b>Population without access to safe drinking water:</b>	<b>87%</b> <b>50,000 widows in Kabul</b>
<b>Refugees returned since 2002:</b>	<b>2.5 million Refugees remaining outside: 3.4 million</b>

**Human Development Index**

<b>Measures average achievements:</b>	<b>life expectancy, education, standard of living (GDP)</b>
<b>Afghanistan's rank:</b>	<b>173 out of 178</b>

**Gender Development Index**

<b>Measures gender discrepancy between men and women for HDI indicators:</b>	<b>life expectancy, education, standard of living (GDP)</b>
<b>Afghanistan's rank:</b>	<b>3.00 (3rd lowest rank, slightly above Niger and Burkina Faso, significantly lower than neighboring countries)</b>

11 Adapted from 2004. „Afghanistan National Human Development Report 2004.“ United Nations Development Programme Afghanistan, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Kabul.

### III. Gender in Post-Conflict Contexts

There are three stages, or ‘generations’ of aid strategy following a conflict. A first generation of humanitarian relief, a second generation of developmental relief and rehabilitation, and finally a third generation of peace-building and human rights (Goodhand 2002: 841). In practice, the transition from relief to development and eventually to peace-building in so-called post-conflict is far from smooth. In fact, post-conflict contexts are often circuitous and relapses into violence are not unusual.

#### Conflict Creates Space for Women

There is a burgeoning literature on women’s roles in conflict/post-conflict. In this context, an examination of gender roles and relations is particularly relevant as Afghan society is undergoing a process of transformation, one result of which is the fluctuation of gender identities. No consensus exists on whether these new roles are advantageous to women or sustainable in the long term. Conflict can stimulate a shift in gender roles while simultaneously provoking a retreat to conservative notions of masculinity and femininity (Meintjes, Pillay, and Turshen 2001: 152). A woman working with an Afghan woman’s NGO explained: “Conflict certainly seemed to create some opportunities for women in a position to work, but I’m not sure to what extent it created op-

portunities outside the sphere of work – especially within the household where it seems the real power is”.

While these changes in gender identities are largely indigenous, they can be supported or hindered by external interventions, in this case development policies and programs. There is little consensus on how to sustain positive changes. This is particularly relevant in the context of Afghanistan, “where you open doors for women, showing them another reality. And if you don’t also work with men, and if you don’t have continuous work, you close the doors again and she goes back home and probably is less satisfied and less compliant than she was before,” a senior gender advisor explained. A change in gender roles, however, might not necessarily instigate a change in gender relations.

#### Guidelines and Declarations

Our understanding of the importance of gender in post-conflict contexts has evolved in recent years. It has now become clear that there is a need for combined gender and conflict expertise and analysis. This is gradually emerging in practice. The Windhoek Declaration, followed by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, offers a good starting point.

#### FES in Post-Conflict

FES’s approach towards Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA) supports the implementation of conflict-sensitive activities and enables the monitoring of their impact. This tool is used to assess the actual impact of external interventions in a conflict context. “FES understands the impact as the consequence and product of an intervention, which always includes effects that go beyond the planned results and cannot be separated from the wider social, political, institutional and cultural context”

([http://fesportal.fes.de/pls/portal30/docs/FOLDER/EPO/content/contentText/conflict/conflict\\_prevention.htm](http://fesportal.fes.de/pls/portal30/docs/FOLDER/EPO/content/contentText/conflict/conflict_prevention.htm)).

Monitoring these impacts can mitigate negative effects. For FES, gender and conflict sensitivity are crosscutting themes that apply throughout the organization’s work.



The Windhoek Declaration, adopted in Windhoek, Namibia on 31 May 2000, is the outcome of the seminar on ‘Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective in Multidimensional Peace Support Operations’ and starts from the premise that women have been denied their full role in peace support efforts. With a view to addressing the gender dimension in peace processes, the Windhoek Declaration strives for a situation where “women and men play an equal part in the political, economic and social development of their country” (Windhoek Declaration 2000). Following the Windhoek Declaration, in October 2000 the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1325<sup>13</sup> on Women, Peace, and Security, ensuring the full inclusion of women in all aspects of international peace and security processes. The most comprehensive UN resolution to date on the role of women in peace-building activities, Resolution 1325 recognizes that women are among those most negatively affected by war and conflict and that this constitutes a threat to peace and security. The resolution also acknowledges the critical role women can play in preventing and resolving conflicts and in building peace.

### What Does This Mean in Practice?

The above guidelines are useful as benchmarks, but bringing gender programs to fruition in the context of post-conflict is challenging. In fact, concerns have been raised regarding Resolution 1325 due to difficulty in implementing the guidelines and an inability to apply the concepts to the field. Despite years of theories and practice, the field of post-conflict still lacks a robust understanding of the term “gender” and its progeny – gender mainstreaming, gender analysis, etc. Such terms are still elusive to us, despite myriad attempts to implement gender perspectives in post-conflict work throughout the world. At a minimum, working in such contexts requires a gender-aware approach that addresses how policies affect women and men differently, if at all. If yes, the policymaker’s task is to find ways to prevent disadvantage to one or the other (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development 2005: 237).

13 Adapted from <http://www.womenwagingpeace.net/content/articles/0318a.html>

Most of the work on gender and conflict suffers from a reductionist view of gender, focusing mainly on women and women's roles. This could perhaps be due to the haste in which programs are implemented in conflict/post-conflict. Or perhaps attributed to our narrow understanding of gender, our inability to ground it in the local context, or our failure to convey its meaning accurately. For whatever reason, this research reinforces previous work arguing that we need a more encompassing concept of gender that includes understanding of how the process of "gendering" works in reality and how policies and projects become "gendered" in their context (UN Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality, OECD/DAC Network on Gender Equality, and UN Division for the Advancement of Women 2003). "For my organization, gender was conflated with women," a representative of an Afghan women's NGO said. "I wondered whether [we] used the term gender because it was the term used most often by donors".

## Practical Needs and Strategic Interests

Practical needs address conditions of daily life (Molyneux 1985), while strategic interests respond to existing unequal power relationships between men and women, aiming to correct these imbalances (Walter and Bowe 2003: 15). Practical needs and strategic interests are not in opposition to each other. In fact, practical needs can be the platform to launch a restructuring of gender relations, although they do not necessarily set out to do so. Interventions must therefore take into consideration both women's practical needs and strategic interests – and the possible consequences of prioritizing one over the other. Frequently, there is no clarity on whether programs approach practical needs or strategic interests, or both. This is particularly challenging in post-conflict contexts where immediate humanitarian needs supercede longer-term development priorities. Research in such situations has revealed that interventions can often inadvertently increase the vulnerabilities of the communities they

aim to serve through misguided policies that neglect to take longer-term strategic interests into account. An understanding of the distinction could prevent us from aiming to fulfill strategic promises with practical actions.

## Gender Mainstreaming or Women Highlighting?<sup>14</sup>

Conflict and post-conflict situations are complex, entailing myriad interlocking factors that are often difficult to separate. Addressing different sectors or development priorities in silos makes coordination an increasingly difficult task. A sectoral approach also denies that events and programs in one sector might have an impact on another. Gender issues in post-conflict should be viewed and addressed holistically, using a crosscutting approach. We might refer to this as 'mainstreaming', and yet even this word has been appropriated by development lingo. In the 'mainstreaming' of gender, gender tends to get lost in an everyone-must-do-it-but-no-one-will-do-it vacuum.

### A Good Example

**The UNDP 2004 National Human Development Report for Afghanistan – the first of its kind for the country – is a good example of the effort to view the context holistically. The report uses a lens of human security in a broader definition, beyond freedom from violence, to examine the ability of the Afghan people to access basic and strategic needs in a comprehensive manner. The concept of equity permeates the report as a policy objective. Further, the report recognizes the agency of the Afghan people and aims to support their ability to act on their own behalf.**

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14 From an interview with a senior gender advisor.

## IV. Gender in Afghanistan



### What Does Gender Mean in Afghanistan?

Gender is a contemporary development buzzword that peppers our reports, policies, and program plans. In a discussion of the term ‘civil society’, Almut Wieland-Karimi aptly states: “The inflating use of the term dates back to the influx of internationals that followed the defeat of the Taliban... in 2001. It has become a vogue word used among international donors and agencies and their respective Afghan partners”<sup>15</sup>. She could have easily been talking about gender. Wieland-Karimi elaborates that Afghans quickly learned that this term would guarantee them international support, regard-

less of their understanding of the term itself and what it might take to bring the concept to fruition. An Afghan woman leader continued: “What I see,” she said, “is that most people translate things from other languages and bring these things to Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, no one asked what gender means. This word, it is different everywhere. For us, it’s important to know and to find out for ourselves what gender means in Afghanistan”.

Our experiences reveal that gender in Afghanistan translates, de facto, into women. Despite ambitions, gender is not often mainstreamed in post-conflict recovery activities. Rather, women as a category are singled out in isolation from their wider social, cultural and family contexts. An Afghan woman head of an NGO explained that people have been working for women yet talking about gender. “This is not gender equality”, she said. “It has created a big problem in Afghan society. Men were already sensitive to women’s issues. And now the international community is trying to talk about women, women’s rights. These things will again make men sensitive”. Such “Western-originated approaches... have more to do with international politics and the agendas of external agencies than they do with meeting the felt and expressed needs of the majority of Afghan women” (Barakat and Wardell 2004: 109). Another Afghan woman explained that we should “give the same rights to men and women as human beings... not to separate them. People are trying to separate them”. A dangerous outcome of talking gender and doing women is that it fuels men’s perception that ‘gender’ is a negative word. To them, gender has become synonymous with women’s power over men. An Afghan man explained: “Most people think that gender is about increasing the power of women while decreasing the power of men. Women over men. That’s what they think”.

<sup>15</sup> Please see <http://www.fes.org.af/Reports.html> for more information.

### What's in a Name?

A head of an international NGO was trying to demystify the concept of gender for a colleague. "I was trying to tell her that what she understands gender to be is wrong. That is not gender, it's promotion of women. If you call it 'promotion of women' then it's fine with me. I can definitely share in the need for that. But then don't call it gender. Of course it makes men angry. So at least try to be honest about it". "It has never been gender mainstreaming," an Afghan human rights activist explained, "it is gender segregation, just highlighting the differences between men and women. Dividing them, not bringing them together. We say this is the policy for women only, and this is the policy for everybody else. And that creates a reaction... It's the first thing internationals talk about, women, not gender".

"If we work for the rights of women, we should have the support of men," an Afghan woman urged. "These gender activities should be with both men and women". In conversations with Afghan women for this research, many felt that there was room to work in partnership with men. They preferred to work for advances in the context of the family and community – both women and men together. Most of those interviewed suggested that attempts be made to conduct gender programs focusing on the family, within the structure of Afghan communities, yet no one was aware of such efforts<sup>16</sup>. These women also expressed concern that they had been singled out because of the pervasive view from the aid community that they were victims in need of saving. Facile analyses of women as victims and men as perpetrators serve only to alienate those men who are supporters and who could be mobilized for women's participation.

## Afghan Women and Identity

Similar to other patriarchal societies, gender roles in Afghanistan are shaped by socio-cultural factors largely based on women's role as keepers of the family honor. "Women don't exist in isolation", an Afghan man explained. Attempts to separate women from family and community are met with strong resistance. Development for Afghan women is perceived in the context of interrelationships. However, many aid programs in Afghanistan have focused on women by excluding men, thereby perpetuating an environment that is unable to find roots in Afghan society.

Contextualizing the concept of gender in Afghanistan reveals that it is superceded by other social categories and identity markers. Women and men alike tend to define themselves within these social structures. In interviews with Afghan women and men, most of them did not identify themselves as women/men over other identity markers (such as nation, religion, class, lineage, tribe, clan, ethnic group, etc.). Further social analysis could reveal the important aspects of identity that shape women's and men's roles and relationships in the different phases pre/during/post-conflict – and if aid interventions have the power to change these roles and relations.

Some of those interviewed suggested that women-only interventions might be more beneficial in Afghanistan during this period. A spokesperson for an Afghan women's NGO elaborated: "A simple way to ensure that women don't get the resources they need is to put them in a situation where they or their families feel they may face threats. It is imperative that women feel comfortable and safe as they rebuild their lives. This is only possible in women-only settings, especially in Afghanistan". A senior gender advisor explained: "I don't think it is necessarily wrong [to focus on women]. I started off thinking that gender should be the way to go, but in the long-run I think you have to empower the women first... Having a woman-only organization can be a better way for advancing women's interests".

<sup>16</sup> This is not to suggest that Afghans are a homogenous group. "All the people, in the media, everywhere, say 'Afghan community' as if it is one body," an NGO worker said. In fact, very few generalizations can be made about Afghans or Afghan women as a whole.

## Historical and Social Context

“The international community has to do its homework first before going into a country,” an Afghan woman activist explained. “Do homework, and then bring in the project”. The importance of contextualizing our work cannot be overstated. A socially and historically informed analysis could guide us in how to proceed – and how not to proceed – in order to achieve gains for women and men in Afghanistan. ‘Gender entry points’ may present a good starting point. This takes into account that gender is defined differently in each conflict, and bases gender mainstreaming efforts on gendered analyses of context.

Doing our homework entails not only learning about the communities we will work in, but also giving time for the communities to become acquainted with us, to build trust. “If they don’t know where you are from or what you are doing and you set up your office with your flag and you tell them what to do, you’ll see what happens,” an Afghan woman leader said. “It’s not about what you do, it’s about your strategy,” a head of an international agency elaborated. “There are certain assumptions... they decrease the impact of programs. They delay programs. They frustrate the communities. That is why understanding the structure is very important”. “We appreciate the international community,” an Afghan woman said, “but it has been very disappointing. Disappointing in the sense that there is no follow-up. You have to have a process”.

An understanding of the Afghan socio-cultural context entails a recognition of the value and significance of religion in the lives of Afghans. Every Afghan – woman or man – interviewed highlighted the importance of achieving gains within the context of Islam. An Afghan woman NGO leader urged that we consider Afghan culture. “We should do everything with respect to Afghan and Islamic culture”. “Though [the] interpretation [of Islam] is often contested, it remains vital both to the way society functions and how most [Afghans] see themselves” (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 28). An inability to engage meaningfully with Islam will prevent social change from penetrating the surface, particularly when dealing with gender issues. Many Afghan women have argued that the traditional division between public and private worlds does not necessarily

mean that they have no decision-making power. These women prefer to view changes within the context of their traditions and religion. Researchers have noted, however, that there might be a cultural dissonance between changes within the context and values advocated by Western aid (Barakat and Wardell 2004: 110-1).

An understanding of Afghan history, as previously illustrated, demonstrates that backlashes are not a new phenomenon. History demonstrates that forced attempts on issues of women’s rights has resulted in strong backlashes against women. We have learned little from previous attempts to enforce and expedite social change. In light of the above, an understanding of the Afghan historical trajectory – particularly regarding gender politics – could illuminate patterns and problems that might pose obstacles in present attempts to restructure gender relations. “There is no short-cut to a historically and sociologically informed analysis of the socio-economic transformations and institutional context of Afghan society as a backdrop for gender analysis” (Kandiyoti 2003: 4-5). More profound analyses of and engagement with Afghan society could prevent women from being addressed in a social and historical vacuum, thereby creating programs that complement women’s realities.

## Importing Democracy and Gender

**For example democracy. We bring democracy. You can bring experts and you can organize the elections. And you might have mechanisms for the institution, for the building of democracy. But institutionalizing it is going to take 100 years. We know that from other countries’ experiences.**

**Head of an international organization**

In recent years, development agencies have imported terms that correspond to the latest development trends. Democracy, civil society, empowerment, and gender are but a few that are used liberally in Afghanistan. While the concepts exist in Afghanistan, the terms appear to be the recent additions to a succession of ideo-

logical frameworks as models for change, providing a pretext for conflict rather than a focus for unity (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 63). This helps to explain why Afghans are reluctant to embrace what appears to be Western imported and imposed ideals.

**In Afghan history, we have imported policies from other places. This is why it doesn't work. If we want democracy, we have to go step by step, starting from the beginning, and not running. If we run, we will fall down. We should walk slowly and look around us in order to be successful. Again today, just like before, Afghans are running, running after democracy, running after gender. And when we fall down no one will be able to rescue us. Not even the international community.**

**Afghan NGO leader**

The push for democracy is not unlike the pressures for gender equality. The terms are used, but without meaning. Women's organizations criticize "the way in which many men frequently bandy the word 'democracy' in a meaningless manner, without implementing these democratic principles within their own families" (Wieland-Karimi 2005: 6). An Afghan man explained that the word 'democracy' carries with it much negative baggage. No one has taken the time to explain what democracy means. He sees 'gender' as moving in the same direction. In a discussion about empowerment, a senior gender advisor said "Increasingly all these words are being appropriated. It's a bit like gender isn't it?". Nowhere is this more the case than in discussions of women's rights. As Afghan history demonstrates, there is a link between attempts at modernization and social change for women and perceptions that this forms part of an agenda of foreign interference.

#### **A Democratic and Gender-Sensitive State?**

**We are now three years into the making of Afghanistan as a gender-sensitive state, an NGO leader explained. "Many men are the victims of too much gender training," the head of an international NGO elaborated. "And now they just make fun of it. It's the same development we have seen in Western societies. If you push too hard, you turn it into something which is politically correct but not accepted and understood by the people".**

### **Women's Agency: Myth and Reality**

We must be conscious of the use of terms, symbols, images, and stereotypes in explaining the situation of women in Afghanistan. Terms such as 'liberation' and 'empowerment' often carry with them the connotation that we – the international aid community – have come to do the 'liberating' and 'empowering'. Rhetoric on Afghan women is inundated with contradictory images of survivor/victim, empowerment/vulnerability, dependent aid/independent change (Bouta, Frerks, and Bannon 2005: 143). It is often sensationalized and fails to do justice to the complexities involved. This high profile – coupled with the image that Afghan women need to be saved - did not come without controversy. Afghan women were not comfortable with the high international visibility and felt that they were not consulted on campaigns on their behalf (Benjamin 2000). An Afghan man explained: "for us to judge Afghanistan as a backward society where women have no say is totally wrong". Many Afghan women are still struggling to find the space within which they can rectify this image.

The most clear example of such an image is that of the Afghan woman beneath the *bourka*<sup>17</sup>. This garment initially brought much (largely Western) attention to Afghanistan, and continues to play a prominent role for Western media, producing myriad documentaries, articles, and photographs claiming to offer a glimpse behind/ under/ beneath the *bourka* (Abirafeh 2004).

<sup>17</sup> In fact, *bourka* is the Arabic/Urdu term. In Afghanistan the Persian/Dari term *chaddari* is more widely used. From Barakat, Sultan. 2004. „Setting the Scene for Afghanistan's Reconstruction: The Challenges and Critical Dilemmas.“ in *Reconstructing War-Torn Societies: Afghanistan*, edited by S. Barakat. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.



This unconstructive image of Afghan women serves only to feed stereotypes and deny Afghan women's agency. The excessive focus on the burka "simplifies the complex situation of gendered identities and roles within Afghan culture," a representative of an Afghan NGO explained. "It is too simplistic to suggest that once women remove their burkas they are free and everything has been made right". A gender advisor continued: "Aid agencies have a huge responsibility as they – as opposed to [the international media] – have the knowledge and capacity to act against discriminatory images".

It is problematic to assume that Afghan women need to be liberated, developed, and empowered. Images of Afghan women as victims tell little about women's realities, serving only to dislocate them as historical and political actors. Further, it becomes increasingly difficult for women to demonstrate agency in a context of pre-determined international opinion about the status of women in Islam. Afghan women have struggled and negotiated the various fluctuations in their social status throughout history, and will continue to do so. Attempts at engineering a social transformation will continue to have serious repercussions for women as long as their agency is denied in the process.

## Social Change and Transformation

An agenda of social change and transformation is problematic, particularly when coupled with the perception that it is externally enforced. We would do better to proceed cautiously and build on local momentum to ensure a solid foundation and sustainability. "Afghan people do not accept things by power or pressure on them," an Afghan woman leader explained. "If our aim is to change Afghanistan's situation, to

**We live through symbols, through assumptions. Because it is too difficult to understand. The assumption is that a woman who is more Western in terms of dress is empowered. That will take you to a conclusion that all European women are empowered, which is not correct. It will also take you to a conclusion that there is gender equality if there is no burka.**

**Head of an international organization**

change the things that people don't like, we have different ways to reach this goal. We should gain the support of the Afghan communities". An Afghan man emphasized the importance of a moderate approach: "Through force [the Afghan people] won't accept anything. They will fight and they will resist. But if you approach well, people will listen". A gender expert continued: "I think we do Afghans a disservice if we assume they do not want change. What matters is how things are negotiated and presented. You can do a lot if you understand the cultural ways of negotiation".

In order to be sustainable, social change must come from within. It may seem that our initial agendas pushed for social change for Afghan women, but this was not really our job. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to remain humble and neither overstate our roles nor impose our worldviews. Interventions must assess local demand and support for transformation, without which externally-driven change can be neither effective nor sustainable. At the onset of development interventions, we fell short in taking account of Afghan women's perspectives. The haste of the post-conflict period and the hype surrounding Afghan women prevented many organizations from taking the time to learn about Afghan women first, before intervening.

We also need to recognize that our presence alone – as a diverse community of international women and men – has a social impact. The influx of expatriates from different countries brings different customs and traditions, many of which might appear to be threatening or challenging to the Afghan way of life. Further, the perception is that the influx of kharijis ('foreigners' in Dari) tends to travel hand in hand with alcohol, parties, and pornography. We are witnessing the "interaction of cultures," an international gender advisor explained. "It has an impact on women and men. Maybe it increases fear in men, thinking Is that what it means to be empowered? And it raises questions in women like Do I want to be like that?". Afghan men are at the same time increasingly influenced – and increasingly threatened – by this new environment. And Afghan women may suffer decreased mobility – either imposed or preferred – as a result. It is difficult – and in fact counter-productive – to lay blame, but many women are concerned that this new (largely urban) dynamic has led to increased harassment on the street. "On one level such sexual aggression is almost the inevitable product

of the Taliban years... on another level it is clearly a statement of what many Afghans think about the takeover of their capital by foreigners.” (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 23).

## Violence Against Women in Post-Conflict

We have now come to recognize that increased violence against women accompanies a country’s transition from conflict to so-called post-conflict. Those interviewed highlighted domestic violence, trafficking, and rape as prevalent forms of violence. Reports of increased domestic violence are emerging in Afghanistan, for reasons that include the continued availability of weapons, violence that male family members have experienced or meted out, trauma, frustration, and inability to access trainings and economic opportunities. Violence against women in Afghanistan must first be viewed as part of a larger landscape that has been shaped by Afghan history. The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) explains that “attacks on women’s newly assumed rights and behaviors constitute what frequently amounts to a postwar backlash against women” (2005: 233). Afghanistan is cited as a case in point. An Afghan woman working on gender issues with an international organization explained: “I think that the communities are not ready to accept the new changes in women’s situation. They think women expect too much. One way to not give [women] what they want is to use violence against them”.

In conflict/post-conflict, gender roles are changing and gender relations may be renegotiated. The space created for women may bring resentment and backlash, manifesting in a shift from public to private violence.

**The international community came here and want to work only for women. And they don’t want to improve the status of Afghan men. Therefore Afghan men start making problems for their sister, their mother, their wife. They start making problems.**

**Afghan man**

“Coupled with the lack of any improvement in their own lives, it is not surprising that there is, as so often, a displacement of the anger people feel over something they have no power to control, on to the place where they feel they have dominance – their relations with women” (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 23). An Afghan woman elaborated: “the men, they have become more angry, more violent. Much more violent”.

In Afghanistan, women are being increasingly castigated for being “Western-influenced”. Strong pushes for women’s rights should proceed cautiously “because the impression of foreign heteronomy would be counter-productive” (Glatzer 2002). We need to recognize the role that development aid and development rhetoric might play. The notion that there may be unintended consequences of interventions is beginning to be addressed. However, identification of these unintended, negative gender consequences will not automatically bring a solution to the problem. A leader of an international agency for women suggested that we should work with Afghan women to help them to be aware of possible negative implications and to see “whether they are prepared to take on that fight. At the end, if they are not prepared, nothing is going to happen”.

What is needed is increased sensitivity to our programs, our promises, and the impact our presence has. There has been a dramatic increase in violence against women at the time of writing this report. In May 2005, three Afghan women were found raped and strangled in Baghlan Province. It is believed that these women were murdered for their involvement with international non-governmental organizations and “whoredom”. Another woman was stoned in Badakhshan Province. This prompted a reaction from Afghan women resulting in the Declaration of Afghan Women’s NGOs of 5 May 2005 urging for investigations that will bring the perpetrators to justice and asking for increased security<sup>19</sup> for all Afghan citizens. Researcher Jonathan Goodhand explains that “we still know very little about the interactions between aid and the dynamics of violence. The more ambitious the objectives the more difficult they are to measure and the more ambiguous and open to challenge they are” (2002: 840). He could have been talking about violence against women in Afghanistan.

<sup>18</sup> Afghanistan is not unique in this case. Most of the reports of increased violence against women in post-conflict context emerged from Bosnia.

<sup>19</sup> Security remains precarious in Afghanistan. Nearly every document, speech, and report on Afghanistan - by Afghan and international alike – has highlighted the need for improved security. No political or social process can be successful or sustainable without a genuine commitment to provide security in Afghanistan. There is no need to belabor this point. Many have said it, yet it continues to fall on deaf ears.



## V. The Aid Business: Towards Better Gender Programming

A lot of what happens on the ground – and how it happens – has to do with the time pressure and the need for quick results and political agendas and timetables. You can definitely see a pattern in post-conflict reconstruction in that the first couple of years are always pretty crazy and the cowboys come and go and the money gets thrown around. What’s interesting is when the money stops, more or less, because then it’s much more in the hands of the people.

Senior gender advisor

### The Post-Conflict Challenge

In post-conflict contexts, unprecedented amounts of funding become available, with external pressure to support women and women’s organizations. These pressures leave little time for local women to identify particular strategies and priorities. The challenge is, therefore, to “relate donor-supported gender agendas and women’s needs to local cultures and practices, avoiding the perception that they are externally imposed” (Bouta, Frerks, and Bannon 2005: 144) while simultaneously capitalizing on the funding and momentum that post-conflict presents.

But we know that there are no quick fixes. There is a “fundamental contradiction between the prescriptive time-limited interventions of the international aid community, geared to producing rapid visible transformation, and the need for time, open-ended dialogue, experimentation and learning that are required in the

process of restoring the institutional lives” of Afghans (Barakat and Chard 2004: 33-4). “The international community should recognize that short-term solutions are not the most helpful for Afghanistan. If anything, they are going to make the problem worse,” an Afghan man articulated. What is needed, therefore, is space for solutions to emerge and evolve as people recover their confidence and become reacquainted with their new circumstances. They can then better identify possible courses of action and make more informed choices about what they would like to do and how the aid community can best support them.

### The Usual Gender Suspects

There has been criticism about high-profile interventions that support few women – and frequently the same women – for press-friendly events that offer little in the long run. These women appear to be shuttled off to various countries for publicity disguised as training. Upon their return, they are not able to share what they have learned with those who were unable to participate. It has been said that it would be better to use the funding to offer more women access to the training – in Afghanistan. The so-called Usual Gender Suspects are sent from one international event to another – training, conference, workshop. “Certain individuals get a lot of coverage,” a gender advisor explained. “Women in general are portrayed either as long lines of bourkas waiting to vote or as the occasional young emancipated woman”. Repeatedly promoting the same few women does little to change this perception.

“The evidence would seem to suggest that, as an assistance community, our actions are predicated on what is familiar and what we know best, rather than on what is actually needed” (Barakat 2004: 9). It has been argued that the supply-driven, linear “tool-box” approaches focus insufficiently on local needs and perspectives, resulting in fragmentation and a mismatch with local priorities and capacities. In this sense there are many parallels between the gender

and conflict discourses. “We reinvent the wheel once a year,” a gender advisor explained. “People leave and new people come in... I don’t know how useful it is to have these groups of internationals moving from one country to the next”. They lose the ability to connect with people in the communities because “they expect that they already know everything”. The proliferation of ‘gender advisors’ is a welcome sign reflecting a much-needed focus on women and men in their social roles. But it runs the risk also of promoting template solutions that fail to adequately take account of the local social and cultural context (Barakat and Wardell 2004: 110). “They think they know,” an Afghan woman leader said, “because they have experience in Bosnia or somewhere. But every country is different”. “These foreigners, they change them all the time... and they are the policy-makers... the ones who should know Afghanistan”.

### From Policy to Practice

Policy often tends to be an abstraction that does not necessarily translate into practice. Plans, benchmarks, and toolkits should be based on local context and free of development jargon, leaving room for indigenous understandings and interpretations of development concepts. There are many such resources in existence in Afghanistan, but they are often not widely shared. There remains a need for practical applications of development trends and imported concepts that can be shared. Many organizations produce – and reproduce – their own workbooks, guidebooks, handbooks, and manuals without taking into consideration what has already been done.

Also lacking is room within programs to make adjustments along the way, based on participant feedback – or perhaps because of unexpected externalities that emerge. We are hardly ever as flexible as we would like to be with our programs. A gender advisor for an international organization noted the “lack of indicators and lack of quantitative and qualitative tools for measuring change and progress”. She carried on to say that Afghan women were not sufficiently consulted prior to interventions and that aid agencies were not sufficiently accountable to women. There was also much criticism of budgets and the short, fixed term structure coupled with accountability to donors. Evaluations to determine if money spent has had a lasting benefit

have not been conducted. Very often we recognize what needs to change, but are powerless to do it because of edicts issued from above and donor requirements. It is better, therefore that we proceed with relative caution and care. If something is done wrong, it is much harder to undo. In this case, employing an ‘anticipatory methodology’ or PCIA will help to anticipate exigencies. “The inevitability of some kind of difficulty (or opposition) should be anticipated. [For example,] opposition to women’s increased participation or a backlash to the improved effectiveness of women’s organizations” (Canadian International Development Agency 2000).

How do we measure if an intervention has been successful – or not? An Afghan activist explained that “the donor community has to do certain things in order to write their reports at the end of the year saying we’ve done this and that for women and all of a sudden everything is OK. And it may look good on their report. But the question is what sort of impact will it have on Afghan society? I would say none.” Another Afghan woman continued: “There is no quality training. It is a mass production type of thing. To do the reports, the studies, and then say it’s complete and take a few pictures. That’s it”. A head of an international agency elaborated: “It was more a political discourse that [needed] to prove that Afghanistan is a success story. And there was a big push to do this. But when you push, the change doesn’t come very quickly. What happens is a very superficial change”.

**I felt that the pace of change desired by the women was much slower than perhaps the donors may have wanted. There seemed to be an internal struggle for many women between wanting to broaden the role they played in society and their desire to be proud Afghan and Muslim women and good wives and mothers. It sometimes felt as if they interpreted the push for gendered change in Afghanistan as a criticism of their culture – which in many cases it was.**

**Expatriate woman working for a local women’s NGO**

There was consensus on the idea that the international community raised expectations – and also had excessively high expectations themselves. An international head of agency explained that we should have understood – and communicated – how much can be done in a certain time. “Even if you don’t give expectations,” she continued, “the population will probably have them anyway. To be able to manage that expectation is very important. And managing those expectations comes with lowering your own expectations, I think”. We could also be a little more humble. In our work with gender issues in post-conflict contexts, we tend to overestimate the potential empowering effects our programs will have. Aid is not a magic pill to solve all the world’s problems. And we are not the only pharmacist in the neighborhood. Aid can do damage.

### **‘Let’ Them Lead**

It is dangerous to assume that the current levels of international political support and commitment will continue indefinitely, or even long enough to assure the internal political process. Evidence from previous crises elsewhere demonstrates that the media spotlight and funding pledges move on quickly, often prematurely. It goes without saying, therefore, that local organizations should take the lead in determining development priorities. And we say it often. The challenge is not simply to let local organizations participate, but to actively engage with those who have intimate understanding of the situation and have been working to address it. These organizations were here before – and will remain long after – the funding and the attention fade away.

It is impossible to demand that these organizations have the capacity we expect to implement work. This will take more time, and significant effort on our part. However, “the torrent of proposals now being fielded for Afghanistan tends to reflect the thinking of outsiders sitting half the world away, telling the Afghans what they ‘should do’ instead of looking at what they ‘can do’” (Dupree 2004: 187). While attention is focused on Afghanistan, we can do better to make things easier for local groups to take the lead. This entails genuine communication, cooperation, capacity, inclusion – all of which has been lacking to date. Representatives of both local and international organizations

### Partnering with the Ministry of Women's Affairs

Many gender advisors, experts, and heads of agencies interviewed expressed concern with the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA), explaining that it needs greater capacity building, time, and resources. There was consensus that MoWA had not received adequate funding to carry out its work. "A lot of effort has been put into MoWA, but it's still fairly dysfunctional. This could be because you have five donors coming in and putting their mark on the institution and not doing so in a coordinated manner," a senior gender advisor explained. MoWA suffers from an identity crisis, an Afghan activist stated. "Its role is not building women's centers to house sewing machines. It should develop policies".

The Ministry, however, is ready to take the lead in working with other organizations to bring changes to fruition for women. "We are ready to work in partnership. It's not money that we want. It's partners who are willing to support the Ministry and help it to fulfill its advocacy role," the Minister of Women's Affairs said. "What is needed is better coordination. Together we can do good things for women".

felt that lip service had been paid to local organizations, but genuine inclusion is still a long way off. "Let people work for themselves and think for themselves, not others," an Afghan woman argued. "Then change will be easily adopted by the community". Even among international organizations, coordination on gender programs has not been achieved. While it might not

be realistic to create one coordinating body for all gender programming, we could do better to recognize and engage the other groups. The Advisory Group on Gender could make efforts to include the marginalized Gender Sector Group (operating out of ACBAR) as well as the ANCB Gender Group, and others<sup>20</sup>.

### Vocational Training: Lesson NOT Learned

Ideally, interventions providing vocational training should be based on market research and gender analysis. Often, vocational training programs prefer 'quick fix' solutions that reinforce traditional skills for women and focus on low-paid gender stereotyped occupations (such as tailoring, embroidery, and handicrafts). These initiatives and their corresponding trainings are too short, too small-scale, and too little profit-oriented. "Anytime you need to do something for women," a head of an international organization explained, "it was all about handicrafts and tailoring... In a way it reinforced the social construction of women's roles... as if there is no other thing that women can do". The market in Kabul is saturated with women tailors who are unable to find employment. "You cannot just have classes and pour in millions of dollars and then have the women go back home. There is no follow-up," an Afghan woman leader stated. Vocational training programs did not take the time to ask women if they actually want to work – or if they were doing it because there is nothing available for men. "You have women who want to be employed," a head of an international agency explained, "and you have women who say they want their husbands to work instead. It is not always that women are being prevented from such things. It depends".

<sup>20</sup> ACBAR is the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief. ANCB is the Afghan NGO Coordination Bureau. These are the two main coordinating bodies for assistance to Afghanistan. Many local organizations – and fewer international organizations – are included in their membership. For more information, see [www.acbar.org](http://www.acbar.org).

The aid community has had fragmented engagement with Afghanistan for several decades, reflecting in a “mutual lack of understanding and knowledge between the international institutions and the surviving Afghan institutions. A serious learning process is needed and requires space and time” (Barakat and Chard 2004: 33). Shifting donor priorities and stringent requirements make it difficult for local groups to pursue their own objectives. Local organizations race to benefit from passing development fads and trends perpetuated by donors, often at the expense of their own programs and further constraining their capacity and limited funding. The request from local organizations is to work more closely with local partners – and not just the usual suspects that receive a disproportionate

amount of funding and attention. There is also much room to build on progress and momentum of local organizations – and much we can learn from listening to their experiences and efforts. Yet as some success stories have shown, it is possible to build capacity and transition to genuine local leadership. Many of those interviewed – mostly Afghan – believed that the international community had not created space or the opportunity for Afghans to share their ideas. It is still possible to foster an environment that is open to ideas by establishing a central body to receive ideas from Afghans as well as outside experts and donors. It is important for Afghan authorities to be managing their own strategy and for people to believe that this is possible (Dupree 2004: 187).



## VI. More Lessons: But Have We Learned?

'Lessons learned' is a peculiar piece of development lingo. We know the lessons, but we neither learn nor apply them. The idea of lessons learned is therefore a misnomer. "More studies will not help us," many have said. "We know the lessons; we have difficulties implementing them" (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 213). Others have hoped that we can do-no-harm, or perhaps do-less-harm by learning from past efforts. "Since we cannot, after so much discussion, attribute this state of affairs to ignorance, we must look for other expla-

nations for the consistent failure to apply the lessons learned from practice" (Barakat and Chard 2004: 18). Sadly, even when interventions are described as 'unsuccessful', the resulting consensus on what ought to be done has not led to change. "We don't learn, we just repeat," an Afghan human rights activist explained. "When we talk about women in Afghanistan, there is a list of important things showing what we did wrong. And we are still doing it. And we have not learned... yet".

**In conducting research for this report, I came across its predecessor; a report entitled "Gender and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Lessons Learned from Afghanistan" emerging from a conference of the same name held in Paris in July 2003<sup>21</sup>. I decided to use this document as a test case. Had anyone heard of it? Had anyone provided input to it? Were the lessons translated? Disseminated? Applied? The answer was a resounding No.**

**This report serves as a good starting point to measure the lessons cited compared with those that have emerged from discussions two years later. What lessons have we learned? Below are select recommendations from the report that have been raised again in discussions in 2005 as lessons-to-be-learned:**

- **Improve security first**
- **Promote long-term efforts and commitment to social transformation – shift from welfare-orientation to long-term strategic perspectives**
- **Avoid top-down, donor, 'office' perspectives – and donor pressure to focus only on results**
- **Build partnerships and alliances with men – and provide incentives for men to support women's full participation**
- **Understand historical, social, and cultural identities, local efforts for human rights, local realities, and rhythm of local processes of change – allow for change to come from within**
- **Take into account how women and men view themselves, their own hierarchies and values – link human rights to local understandings of human value, self-worth, dignity**
- **Work together in synergy as an aid community and coordinate efforts – be reflexive about our own assumptions and perspectives**

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21 Adapted from UN Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality, OECD/DAC Network on Gender Equality, and Department of Economic and Social Affairs UN Division for the Advancement of Women. 2003. „Gender and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Lessons Learned from Afghanistan.“ in Gender and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Lessons Learned from Afghanistan. Paris.



*This report has highlighted all of the above points as lessons-to-be-learned, including many more. Below is a brief summary:*

#### **Conflict/post-conflict brings both opportunities and vulnerabilities to women**

A combined gender and conflict analyses needs to include an understanding of the context and both women's and men's roles.

#### **Recognize the distinction between practical needs and strategic interests**

Understanding the distinction means that we are more sensitive to making strategic promises and trying to fulfill them with practical solutions.

#### **Build on indigenous structures and success**

We need to recognize and support existing (perhaps informal) institutions that operated before we arrived and will continue after we leave. We should work more actively to build local ownership and capacity in a way that shows Afghans that we believe they can do it.

#### **Match rhetoric with political will – and adequate funding**

“Put your money where your mouth is” is an oft-used American expression. This entails demonstrating your oral commitments through financial commitments. If we talk about women and gender, the budgets should reflect that.

#### **Think sustainable**

“Let's be clear about how much attention you can give to a certain subject and how much commitment you can make. If you say this and it doesn't translate into action in your policies, that is not acceptable,” an international head of agency explained.

#### **“Building Trust Takes Performance”**

... an Afghan woman leader explained. Most of those interviewed agreed that there is no gender strategy, per se. And again, they agreed that the approach has been haphazard and clumsy. In order to be accountable to participants, we need to improve our approach and results. This is where a solid strategy could help.

#### **Symbols and stereotypes simplify – and damage**

“Women's position unfortunately was all about symbols... it was all about burka,” a head of an international agency explained. Such constructions reduce women to victims and denies their agency and diverse identities.

#### **Afghan women and men have agency**

Although they clearly know what they want... A senior gender advisor explained that “Afghans generally, not just women, have not been allowed to self-determine”. Afghans need to be allowed the space to identify their own needs and interests.

#### **There are externalities of development interventions**

We should stay the course of reconstruction/rehabilitation, a woman working with Afghan women explained. “Trying to revolutionize society on top of the other changes that are in place right now will tip the balance and definitely create a backlash”.

#### **Will we ever get along?**

“It's almost embarrassing to say,” a senior gender advisor lamented, “but there is no coordination. There is very little capacity for coordination. There is so much infighting between institutions. The institutions that are here and that are supposed to have a shared goal – they don't get along. And the [existing] coordination is based on individual relationships, so it gets lost when people leave”.

**If you use the image of an apple... you have the apple itself, and you have the peel of the apple. Everywhere on the peel it says democracy, peace, gender, freedom. Many people take for granted that the peel is the apple. But if you remove the peel a bit, you will feel the raw stuff in it. There is no freedom. There is no democracy. Yet. Whatever people show, it's not inside. That will take a generation. Anything less would be brainwashing.**

**Head of an international NGO**

#### **Couch development lingo in local contexts and processes**

Referring to the new Constitution, Mariam Nawabi explained that “there is support in Afghanistan's culture and history for the protection of gender equality. When that support is cultivated from within, rather than imported from abroad, there is greater likelihood that [this] will lead to sustainable changes in the lives of Afghan women” (2003: 26). Nawabi recommends the framing of women's rights as one of human rights, thereby applicable to all Afghans – women and men.

#### **Women or Gender?**

It was generally agreed that both women's programs and gender programs should operate in Afghanistan. “It has to go hand in hand,” a gender advisor stated. We should avoid targeting women alone “because then it is treated as a ghetto. And gender mainstreaming alone is a much longer process”. The danger lies in neglecting men in gender programs.

#### **Gender means men too**

An Afghan woman head of an NGO advised that we should “talk in general about Afghan people – not woman and man. This brings people together instead of dividing them. We are already divided in too many parts. And now we are further separating men and women. This will be another division that will create more problems. Instead let us work for development of all Afghans and for Afghanistan”.

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